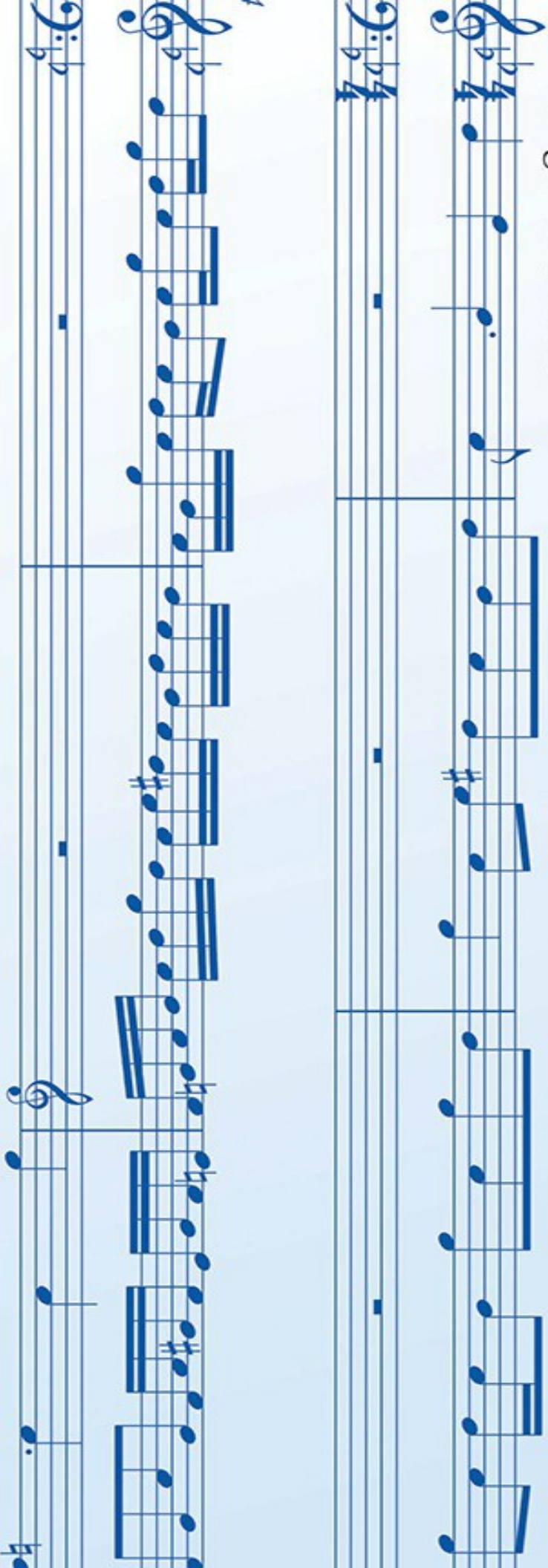


LIFE ON THE RUN

A NOVEL

MIRELA ROZNOVEANU

Fugue in G Minor



Life On the Run

A Novel



Translated from the Romanian by the author

Mirela Roznoveanu

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PART I

CHAPTER ONE

LEANING SLIGHTLY AGAINST a pillar holding up the ceiling, Angela Kaminski pulled the handle of a heavy cabinet, rushed her fingers through the files separated by dividers, and grabbing one of them, placed on top of it the last court paper she had in hand, wrapped a rubber band around the folder, and as quickly pushed back the drawer.

She allowed herself to take a deep breath, the file under her arm.

Like a steel belt embracing the walls, the crammed filing cabinets sparkled in the merciless light. The office's frosty air, the hum of electronic devices heightened by the whine of blood vessels inside the body, the unnatural brightness, gave the place the air of a high-tech laboratory where, to her dismay, the defenders of the law worked feverishly not so much to reveal the culpability of the guilty, the innocence of the innocent, or just the truth, but to find best recipes for financial profit.

As if washed out by magic, the high level of noise had ended. Lawyers, secretaries, couriers, receptionists, investigators, clients, and even the office manager, always there until late evening, were gone. She took a deep breath. At five past five p.m., even the telephones were quiet on that Friday before the Fourth of July weekend. And the only thing giving her the strength to stand up at that moment was the image of her crouched body resting in God's arms.

It was unpleasant to be the last, but it had been her turn to close the firm's office. She left the file bound to the court paper on a nearby table with the book of cases scheduled in court. All around, piles of no-fault lawsuits flooded chairs, couches, secretaries' cubicles, every inch of partners' offices and of the library where binders filled to the brim competed with shelves of Federal Supplements, Digests, Court Reports, legal dictionaries, and full garbage bins. In a side room, a heap of files on the floor was part of a special settlement with Aetna Insurance adjusters. Through the windows above them, the colossal shadow of 26 Federal Plaza, the building of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, sent out a somber reminder: her life was at its mercy.

Computers and electric typewriters had been turned off, except for one, still on the Westlaw federal case database. She logged it out, and then jumped over a path between cubicles to reach for a few unstamped envelopes. An open drawer scratched the skin through her stocking, but she was too rushed to feel the pain of her bleeding leg. With precise movements, she disconnected the copy machines, transferred the telephone lines over to the weekend message service, and picked up more files listed on Tuesday morning's court docket. In the receptionists' room, she gathered all stamped mail to be delivered to the postal box; on her way out she glanced at the African masks grinning through Jonathan's open office door. Those objects hanging on the walls didn't convey anything metaphysical; they accurately signified the mad pressure under which people worked and lived on the third floor of

297 Broadway.

For the first time that day she allowed her body to rest in an armchair. Short gulps from the coffee bought during lunch hour made her shiver. If it were true that after death souls were reincarnated, she had one single wish that evening: to be allowed to rest forever, this life to be the last.

If someone looked at Angela taking a break in that armchair, it would be difficult to tell if she was tall or short, but she was still attractive in her late thirties. With a sigh of relief, she shifted to rest her legs on one of the armchair's arms; glossy and long, they displayed not only grace but also the innate vigor of a purebred animal. The comfortable pair of shoes from Arche, a French store with goods renowned for their comfort and flexibility, had proved a lifesaver (except for the high price), for sneakers were forbidden in the office. Elastic stockings from Strawberry swathed her knees in metallic reflections. She sank further into the armchair, letting her softly waved shoulder-length hair hide her face and neck like a thick veil with brown and reddish tints. She was dressed simply according to the law firm's dress code, in a black silk skirt and a cream silky blouse with little black dots. The jacket of the same black fabric, with a V cut in front and sleeves rolled to the elbows, highlighted a long neck and delicate wrists. Restless fingers scratched the skin of her neck, as always when she was far away in thoughts.

Angela's heart and blood slowed down from the day's high rhythm. But then, unexpectedly, her heart throbbed madly, as if whipped. It was the memory that haunted her: the year of 1990; the unfinished reportage; the report. Again she felt the weight of guilt; she had betrayed not only herself but those on the streets ready to die for freedom. Why? Probably because at the time she could do nothing to expose the deception that infected the post-Revolution events.

About two years had passed since that winter night. She had still been in the newspaper offices with all the telephone lines lit up; the students gathering in the center of the capital had turned suddenly into a massive anti-government rally. Without much hesitation she had jumped into one of the newspaper's cars, taking along Paul, the only photo reporter left at that late hour. Along the road the city looked empty while in University Plaza thousands of people shouted slogans against those who had installed themselves in power. Everybody in the Plaza felt betrayed. The Revolution had overthrown Ceausescu and his communist nomenclature; it followed a bloody counterrevolution in which the accomplices of those who had been overthrown took over the country.

They stopped on the stairs leading to Hotel Intercontinental and the National Theater building to better see what was happening in the thronged University Plaza. When police cars arrived and the policemen began beating the mass of demonstrators, she got close to a group of foreign journalists as her only protection. Police batons smashed wildly, but no one left; then soldiers appeared and shot first into the air, and soon into the crowd. A group of policemen reached the foreign journalists gathered by the Intercontinental Hotel facing the Plaza.

“Are you taking pictures? To hell with you!”

They snatched recording devices, seized rolls of film and tape recordings, and crushed them into the ground with their boots. Someone shouted: “*C'est illegal! Je suis journaliste!*” A punch in the head silenced that voice.

In those moments of panic, she and Paul took refuge in the lobby of the hotel facing the Plaza, by

now empty except for unconscious bodies on the ground. From her observation point, she saw policemen and soldiers searching those inert bodies, taking their IDs, and then loading them into vans. She thought the destination could be a jail or a military hospital.

“Let’s follow them!”

She did not think twice. Paul drove carefully; his tall, skinny body, still that of an adolescent, merged with the steering wheel. He had let his beard grow to look more mature. A few weeks before, when he had been arrested in a demonstration, the police had not believed he was a photojournalist until someone from the newspaper’s editorial board went to the Ministry of Interior to have him released. The trail of wounds from that event showed on his forehead.

They crossed the city and then left it behind. The road coiling through the northern suburb of the capital was deserted. At a turn, the speeding police vans headed to one of the new cemeteries and rushed through the wide-open gates. Paul parked the car near one of the cemetery’s walls, ending in cornfields. The thin rain turned into snowflakes. They jumped over the concrete wall, trying to get a sense of direction, and then a strong beam of light shone from somewhere on the left side of the cemetery. Creeping among graves sodden with water, they stopped behind a vault a short distance from that reflector. From there they saw a freshly dug hole into which heaps of bodies from the vans were thrown. Everything happened with lightning speed. The policemen covered the hole quickly, turned off the reflector, and vanished with the same haste with which they had come.

“Now we know where the anti-government protesters disappear.” Paul tried a professional tone to cover his emotion, as if what he was seeing did not surprise him. During the past weeks’ anti-government meetings, many people had vanished, and the police were giving the same answer to families and journalists: “Those individuals left the country!”

“Even if this grave is discovered, nobody will be able to identify anybody in a few months. We could end up in there too.” It was spoken with respect for her as a senior columnist for the newspaper. Paul feared for her life. However, his warning had already crossed her mind. She remembered their run along the cemetery’s alleys, slipping in icy mud, trying to find the way back. Paul helped her jump over the wall and land in the cornfield; his hands had been wet with the sweat of fear. They were happy to see their car still there. Her heart triphammered back then after their narrow escape, and now, while remembering, with tachycardia. Again she felt surrounded by that wall of steel, against which she hurled her life helplessly.

“Let this incident remain just between the two of us,” she heard Paul say as he found the nitroglycerin pills in her purse. “I don’t trust anybody.” They both knew that whatever happened in the newspaper’s headquarters was heard outside; that the political regime had access to everything they said, wrote, and decided. Even the content of their articles was known long before they were published. Angela could still feel the intensity of that moment. The awful danger of holding such information, and her helplessness to prevent or reveal what was happening. *And why should I?* Angela asked herself. *Why me?*

One of her sources warned that she was once again on the list of undesirable journalists; this time, on the blacklist of the newly established committee for media control, the one that continued the legacy of the former Department of Media of the Central Communist Party. Things became worse

after a fight with the director of Romanian television. She had forced him one night to broadcast a lengthy report about the anticommunist and anti-government demonstrations. Joined by a group of protesters, she passed through the cordons of armed soldiers that surrounded the television broadcasting tower. She had threatened him in his office that he would give account for his acts in the face of history. He was a historian, and her plea got to him. But the price of that victory was high. Two years later, there on Broadway, in the heart of New York City, her vivid memory made her live each detail one more time. Angela asked herself again, as she had many times before, if those events had been real, or just a hallucination of those months of confusion and frustration.

She heard the main door of the office open. Nobody was supposed to come in at that hour. She jumped from the armchair. A solid, black-haired man, with a face pitted by smallpox, wearing a leather jacket over his shoulders, stood by the entrance.

“May I help you?” It was the question that began any conversation with clients or newcomers to the office.

“Where is Leslie?” The man asked with insolence in his voice.

“She’s gone for the day.”

She thought he was a late client upset that his case, still in progress, had no chance to come to an end. Sometimes anxious clients came a few days in advance, before their trials, unable to figure out how to answer the judge’s questions, or which questions they were not supposed to answer at all.

“Where are you from?” he asked, wrinkling his forehead. Obviously her accent did not remind him of anything he knew.

“I am from Europe,” she answered vaguely, bored by this question; in fact, this question got on her nerves. It was always followed by “How did you get here? Tell me your story!” It was the last thing she wanted to hear at that moment.

“Poland? Yugoslavia? Italy? Hungary?” The visitor tried to guess.

“Somewhere around there,” she shrugged. She hated the heavy accent that betrayed her whenever she opened her mouth.

“Which one is Leslie’s desk?”

Angela sighted with relief. The visitor gave up paying attention to her. She pointed with courtesy to an elegant cubicle on the other side of the office and tried to stop him from moving farther in.

“Who are you?”

“Her husband, doll!”

Who in the office had not heard about the crazy Colombian? He had fought in Vietnam, been declared “a mental case,” and the marriage with Leslie had ended in a divorce he did not want to accept.

He took an amused peek at the file cabinets all around, the cubicles of secretaries, the armchairs, stylish leather sofas, small tables for customers, and computers as if he was looking for something. With his back to Angela, he swung from one foot to the other, and after a few moments began firing at Leslie’s desk. He shot the computer, the chair, the typewriter on a table behind the computer, the lamp, the printer, and even the calendar on the wall where she had inscribed a few coming events. He continued with her jacket left on the back of the chair, and shelves with professional books. As if that

weren't enough, he took a vase from a desk, hit it on a sharp corner, and holding it like a knife, turned to Angela with a cheerful face.

"Tell her that with this I'm going to fix her lovely face."

Angela did not move. She looked straight into his eyes. She knew she would be in deep danger if she showed weakness.

Leslie's ex-husband threw the shard on the floor. He placed his gun in the leather holster strapped across his chest and moved towards the exit. He hit the entrance door with his fist.

"She is a whore!" he screamed, turning to Angela as if trying to find understanding and compassion. "I swear on my Colombian honor that I'll get her! And I'll also take care of these lawyers who protect this bitch if they don't stop!"

He was almost out the door, but he did not get the chance to make it. A policeman, followed by a lawyer from another law firm on the same floor, forced him back. Several other policemen pushed the Colombian to the middle of the law office. They handcuffed him without a word and dragged him out: a silent ritual, performed with the fatigue of boredom.

"Are you hurt?" A policeman stared at Angela, waiting for an answer. She shook her head "no," pointing to the damage. The policeman wrote a report, signed it, and gave a copy to Angela. Only then did she feel panic. She wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

"I know this crazy man," the young lawyer from the firm next door said before leaving. "Nothing is going to happen to him; he is under psychiatric treatment and medication; this is not his first time here. He will be freed in one hour. And nothing can stop him from doing it again. Don't leave the door unlocked when you are here alone."

Angela closed the doors of the partners' rooms, turned off the air conditioning and lights, changed her shoes, grabbed the purse and all envelopes to be mailed, locked the law firm's main door, and crossed the ghostly hallway. She remembered recent statistics about women attacked after five p.m. in hallways, restrooms, and elevators of empty office buildings. In the elevator's mirror she glanced at her tired face; it looked awful, but she had three days on her own ahead of her to recover. Before the elevators doors opened, she managed to put on some makeup and lipstick; to go out in New York City without makeup was equivalent to walking barefoot. She greeted the doorman with a quick "Have a nice weekend" and let herself be engulfed by the nervous crowd of Broadway.

It was awfully hot and humid; a normal afternoon in July in Manhattan. Taken over by weekend fever, a human anthill swarmed for subway entrances, underground garages, restaurants, and stores, as the supreme pleasure of any woman who cashed her check on Friday was to have fun shopping. Angela made an effort to calm down after the encounter with the Colombian. She had come close to death in her former country. And she had taken refuge in America because she wanted to stay alive.

Two lovely black ladies, probably working at City Hall, stumbled against her in front of a Duane Reade drugstore. They apologized. Angela waited for the stoplights to change at the intersection with Thomas Street, then Chambers, in a tremendous crowd. On both sides of Broadway sellers from around the world were offering the passersby everything on earth at the cheapest prices. Curious women blocked the booths; the human stream slipped with difficulty through those stands filled with reproductions, books, silver jewelry, paintings, panties, socks, shirts, perfumes, masterfully crafted

brass vases, ivory ornaments, Indian saris, sweaters with Peruvian design, Colombian rugs, summer dresses from Brazil, electronic devices from Taiwan, hats and toys from China.

She sensed a familiar face. When she turned around it disappeared in the crowd, but just in front of the Chemical Bank she saw it again. Making a path through the crowd with her elbows, she crossed Broadway. Pausing a moment on Duane Street in front of the Hit and Miss store, she saw that the guy wearing a gray shirt and jeans was now closer. She walked on Center Street, the artery of courts and of the Supreme Court, switched over to Lafayette, and went down the City Hall subway stairs. Waiting for the train in the steamy underground, her stockings were on fire. She managed to enter the overcrowded number 5 express going uptown. Inside it was frigid. Coming from the Wall Street, the train was full as always with clerks, beginner stockbrokers, lawyers on their first trials, and secretaries protecting their briefcases jam-packed with confidential papers and weekly or monthly checks. An erotic and lively air heated that young crowd hungry to grasp and digest a piece of life. They were at the beginning of the long weekend, the time dedicated to pleasure and relaxation. All around flew sentences such as “Enjoy,” “Be happy,” “Don’t worry, it will be fine,” “If you don’t like it, give it up and you’ll find something better, you deserve it.” As for her, she did not know how it was to be told that everything will be fine. Worse, she did not have any idea how one could give up something hurtful; she had never had the chance to learn or to witness anything like that. People in the world she came from were trained to comply with whatever was presented to them. They were driven by resigned acceptance: obey orders, grow stupid, and kill any kind of individual thinking. In time she learned, on her own and with much pain, how to refuse to be part of a system nurtured by hatred as a way of social existence, a hatred that produced only self-destruction. Infused into the demonic society, class hate—discrimination on the basis of social class, against those classified by the communists as bourgeoisie—had as its goal the dissolution of any seed of privacy, individuality, and independence.

Getting off the train at Lexington Avenue and 59th Street, she noticed the same unshaven guy in a gray shirt on the subway platform. She had a “tail”; but who could place a tail on her in New York City? And why? The instinct of the hunted animal, developed in the struggle for survival, was still alive and proved true. The stalker turned to avoid her gaze. Angela headed for the Bloomingdale’s exit. She did not take the stairs to the street, but entered the store, rushing up to the first floor at the Saint-Laurent department, where she hid behind a bunch of evening dresses. The unshaven man reappeared, searched the surroundings, asked an associate a question, then walked slowly toward the escalators leading to the upper floors. She managed to sneak back down the stairs. Once on 59th Street and Lexington she rushed toward Madison Avenue. On her way, she was struck as always by the too-hard concrete pavement. It was so rigid, stiff; she felt it in her teeth and bones, and the humid air was too thick to force down her windpipe. White clouds running in a painfully blue sky, the brightness of the green leaves stinging the eyes, brought to mind in contrast the softness of the European earth, its dry air with aromas of hay. For a moment she yearned for the sweet slowness of the old continent, for its temporal rhythm. Hours flowed smoothly there. In the East, time sometimes even became sleepy. And suddenly that laziness of the soul, as well as the contemplative state of indefinitely postponed action—she had disliked them so much in the past! —were revealed as deeply dug into her being, as

part of the aesthetic animal within that indulged in cultural reveries, subtle introspection, and theoretical refinements.

Close to Park Avenue, a shop window on 59th Street briefly mirrored her body. It had changed in those two years of America; it had become thinner, as if adapting to a new anthropological ecology. Her eyes and hair had altered their color, her voice had become different, for the words she uttered started from somewhere in her upper palate, on higher and even more melodious notes. It seemed that the gigantic North American continent had been a sort of energy field that conveyed an unknown vigor, absorbing her vital strength in exchange. This was happening with everything around her. The energy exchange gave birth to a new rhythm; everything had a higher speed, as if the entire world threatened to break loose and spin out of control. Sometimes she even feared she would burst, filled with that sort of dynamism. Even when she felt depleted from too much work, her exhaustion was temporary, because her being was spontaneously fed by something mysterious which had nothing in common with food. Flesh suffered, threatening to break, but at the same time the body felt unusual and the mind was thinking with clarity unknown before. Also, she perceived everything around her in an inexplicable way, even the feelings and thoughts of those walking past at that moment on 59th Street. Mind and heart were throbbing at every change, merging with that island on which the most splendid architecture ever conceived on this scale by human beings had been erected. She was herself and also everything else. In that maddening feeling coexisted the contempt of the skyscrapers, the orderly chaos of Manhattan, the aspirations and the disappointments of millions of souls gravitating around a single narrow street: Wall Street, the place of money, and of this world's biggest chunk of wealth.

Making sure that no one was tailing her, she entered a building between 54th and 55th Streets on Park Avenue. The cold, dry air in the lobby, decorated as if in a fairy tale, was heavenly. The doorman bowed with a smile, pointing to the elevator door that led to the 20th floor and Fred's apartment. Soft music seemed from another time and another realm, completely different from everything outside. When the elevator doors opened, a confused, smiling Fred appeared in front of her. He held his electric shaver in embarrassment. He was not ready yet, but she was welcome to have coffee, take a shower, and make herself comfortable.

Without a word, Angela left her purse on the cream carpet and threw off her sandals. Reflecting sunlight from the window as it played over the green of sofas and armchairs, the crystal mirrors emphasized her pallor.

"You look like a dead fish," Fred whispered.

She took off the silver earrings, Fred's gift, and relaxed a little on the sofa, gulping the dry, cold air. Outside the living room's glass doors, which looked out on the terrace, trees and flowers agonized in the heat. With a sigh of relief, she saw on the round crystal table drinks and chocolate pastries from one of Fred's favorite French pastry shops. She sipped the cappuccino with ice cream and savored its cinnamon flavor, enjoying being barefoot. Then she tasted a pastry. More and more, in the evenings she craved something sweet.

"Don't spoil your appetite with sweets!"

Fred came out of the bedroom. He wore a cool silk shirt, creamy pants, and summer shoes made from fine leather. He was an athletic man, around sixty, medium height, on the fat side for his stature.

His brown hair, gray at the temples, had been parted on one side and then thoroughly sprayed. He quickly turned on the TV set in front of the couch. The other TVs in the apartment—kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom—were already on the same channel, for he did not want to miss anything that happened on the stock market, especially the latest news of the values of NASDAQ and NYSE at the closing. As always, Wall Street entered the holiday a bit late. The two strips down the screen listing the values of stocks took him over. She knew that at such moments she was nonexistent for Fred.

She went into the bedroom, left her clothes on a chair and entered the large bathroom. In the mirror as big as one wall, she watched her young and healthy body bathing in the water jets, her steam-moistened face, the sudsy hair whitening her shoulders, the still teenage breasts. Soon freshness replaced her face's fatigue, her mouth regained its smile, and her eyes softened in the sweet shadows of thick eyelashes. Wow, did she still like herself!

"Would you like a sip of wine?" Fred asked from the open door, his eyes glued on the TV screen. Hiding her body with the shower curtain, Angela reached for the glass, sipped from the wine and gave the glass back to Fred.

Fred vanished and, wrapped in a fluffy white towel, she piled her wet hair on top of her head and went into the bedroom, stepping with delight on the soft carpet. She was so relaxed that she even had the feeling that she was the master of that bedroom, superbly designed as if for her taste. As she stretched out on the large, comfortable bed, her mind began to work. Although she had never before in her life seen the man who'd tailed her, he had a familiar air.

She helped Fred with a shirt button, not stopping to repeat in her mind the same nagging question. And Fred stood there, silent, completely absorbed in the TV screen's glow, watching the business channel over her shoulder, far away from the world's problems. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, eyes fixed on the string of numbers displayed on the TV screen, he made an effort not to seem rude. Investing in the stock market had been, for him, the supreme entertainment of his life.

"The "baby stock" is doing unexpectedly well!" A company recently went public, and the value of its shares grew fast.

Fred made positive remarks only in highly favorable situations. He carefully wrapped Angela in the golden blanket that matched everything in the bedroom. He knew that she hated cold. If outside temperatures reached 101°F, in Fred's apartment the temperature approached that of the street in winter. Three powerful room air conditioners, boosting the building's own central air conditioning, worked at full blast.

"I knew it would go in this direction," Fred continued, proud of himself, as he laid on the bed a few charts published in the latest issues of *Barron's* and *The Wall Street Journal*. He pointed to a few indices.

"How is your baby boy doing?" Angela asked politely, trying to make conversation. It was Fred's favorite stock. He'd discovered it when it was worth less than two dollars per share; it had increased its value nearly twenty times and was still growing.

"Excellent," Fred paused to light a cigar. "I should have bought a few thousand more shares back then, but I didn't trust my intuition. This is what always happens when I contradict my inner feeling."

He said the last words in a fury, as if he was a different person.

“Did you perhaps buy it secretly?” He stared at Angela with suspicion.

“With what money? From my weekly paycheck?”

Fred had always avoided this kind of conversation; he was interested in her only on weekends, for a few hours, as a companion. He did not want to ruin his reputation among his peers by having dinner alone on Friday and Saturday evenings. Between Angela and him there was a clear understanding: he introduced her to the New York City life, to expensive restaurants and Broadway shows, while she kept him company during weekend dinners and organized his countless collections.

Fred’s mind launched into the Wall Street weekly analysis: details, predictions, value of shares, and the trade volume of commodities. He was able to evaluate stocks with unbeatable intuition; he had verified his estimates on the scale of months and even years. For example, a stock bought a year before announced excellent dividends and increased its value twelve times. Stock market volume was very low on the eve of the great Fourth of July weekend. It was a bad sign. Usually it was the other way around. However, Fred’s forecast predicted considerable stock market gains in the next six months.

“How high was today’s volume?”

“Don’t interrupt me,” he snapped. “Look for yourself!”

Angela felt sleepy. She’d had a tough week; translations for Haitians into French, for Italians from Little Italy, for Russians from Brooklyn. At one point she had felt close to a heart attack. They had prepared a file for EBT—Examination before Trial—for a malpractice case. At first, she did not understand exactly what the Russian client was saying—scared by Jonathan’s thorough questioning and especially by his harsh tone—but she finally understood by a sort of a divine inspiration. Jonathan roared so wildly at her that she had felt the sweat running down her spine to her legs.

With one arm under the soft pillow, and sheltered by the thick blanket, Angela did her best to keep her eyes open. She didn’t want a fight with Fred. “The sleepiness of the cloudy evening” rolled in her mind as a possible beginning for a poem.

“You didn’t come here to sleep!” Fred nervously put out his cigarette in one of the crystal ashtrays by the gigantic headboard. The venetian blinds and lacy curtains filtered the changing light of the evening. Shadows moved across the walls covered with original paintings by Impressionists and Surrealists; as Fred said, “a good investment.”

“I am trying to rest a little,” she defended herself in a small voice.

“You don’t do that when I am talking about important matters,” he replied.

Fred had slept the entire week. This was a normal habit after many nights of insomnia: maddened by fatigue, he would swallow strong doses of sleeping pills. In fact, his 24-hour routine was odd. Fred liked to wake up around ten or eleven at night and go to sleep after watching his favorite stock market shows in the early morning. During the day he slept with his face toward the TV screen by the bed, where the stock market values were permanently displayed. Once in a while he woke up from the profound sleep, but only for a few seconds, just to read what was on the TV screen. Even his financial transactions were made while he was half immersed in sleep. During the night he spent his time wandering, eating, and drinking in Manhattan’s luxurious restaurants.

The only one allowed to really wake him up during the day had been his stock market broker, and

only in force majeure situations. Angela's duty during the week was to call him every day to make sure he had not died in his sleep, because Fred's biggest worry was that if something like that happened, nobody would discover it. This panic magnified after his last heart attack. In New York City there were a lot of stories about people who died alone and nobody noticed it for weeks or even months. However, if Fred refused to wake up during the week, then he must be up from his deep sleep, at all costs, on Fridays by 3:00 p.m. Friday and Saturday evenings they dined, talked, and had, as he said, a form of social life.

The downside was that after many days of uninterrupted sleep, Fred became too nervous. He hated himself for sleeping so long. She had tried to convince him to give up the strong sleeping pills and walk during the day; a few times they went to the nearby Central Park, which he had not visited in the past fifteen years. Fred's psychiatrist harshly scolded her and forbade any initiatives of this kind.

On that occasion the doctor's office witnessed a full-blown argument. While Fred, sitting on a chair, listened to his doctor like a faithful dog, Angela confronted Freud's apprentice, telling him that she found those restrictions downright illogical. Why could Fred wander in Manhattan during the nights but not in the daytime? The doctor seemed interested in keeping Fred dependent on consultations and drugs and reluctant to try any other medical measures. The psychiatrist, however, did not hold a grudge against her; it appeared that he even liked her so much that he praised Angela to Fred's mother. The doctor suggested, talking with Fred in private, that he marry her despite his mother's opposition.

"It's impossible, she'll disinherit me," Fred mumbled, scared.

"Then have a morganatic marriage," the doctor said, trying to convince him that this marriage could be part of his psychiatric therapy.

She finished the cappuccino and chatted with Fred about the weather. By the time he went into the living room to call his broker, the shadows of the evening had taken over the terrace. Somewhere on Park Avenue ambulances and fire trucks' sirens screamed hysterically. In the upstairs apartment a barking dog expressed its anxiety. There were so few children around!

As she nestled in the fine sheets, her sleepy sight stopped on Fred's youthful photo on the wall. His current features had nothing in common with that handsome boy. Time, stress, and disease had transformed him devastatingly. She had met Fred a year ago through Tim, who had an art business in Manhattan and a placement agency for immigrants in Queens. Her name was not unknown to Tim. By that time the paperwork for getting her a work permit was stuck somewhere in the bureaucratic maze of Immigration. Tim recommended her to Fred, who had bought a painting from him at a good price. On that occasion, Fred asked Tim if he knew someone trustworthy who could put his numerous collections in order. Angela accepted the job when she learned that Fred knew French. Back then she spoke English so poorly that the French language had been her only way to communicate.

Meeting Fred, she was surprised, for she had imagined him much older and a scholar. She expected to find books in his house, and a collection of art, not shoes and knives! In his turn, Fred was stunned when he learned why she had left her country. For months in a row she had endlessly told him the story of her life until he got bored with those accounts, sometimes incredible to him, sometimes

barbaric.

In Fred's apartment mess was paramount. Paintings were mixed up with collections of ties, watches, shoes, shirts, and knives. Slowly she put everything in order, and in the process she found out the secret of his life. Fred had been an outstanding senior analyst on Wall Street; his prestige had risen quickly. Sometimes the financial investments he ran during a week reached hundreds of millions of dollars. Although born into a wealthy Jewish family in Boston who sent him to study at Princeton, he had built his life in his own way in the most American style. His grandfather, a multimillionaire who had made a fortune in real estate during the Great Depression and built his empire from scratch, was very proud of him. The Jewish refugee, who had fled Russia in 1917, recognized himself in his nephew. Once he had graduated from college and been hired by a five-star company, Fred married a rich and smart girl. Only then did he realize that he did not belong to himself, nor to his wife, but to his mother.

When Amy divorced Fred's father, she embarked on a successful financial career. She never remarried; she had many lovers who were expelled from her life one by one because she thought they were after her money. And when Fred realized he was in his mother's possession, a murky Oedipal complex, not obvious until then, shook his life. Added to it were the stress of his job, the death of a child at birth, the violent arguments between his mother and his wife Barbara. One day he experienced his first panic attack. After the second one, which happened on the street, he was hospitalized. He woke up three days later in the pavilion for aggressive, truly mad patients. Perhaps overzealous, or trying to charge as much as possible to his health insurance, the doctors had come up with a treatment that caused irreversible brain damage. He did not sue for malpractice. He could not do that in his high position. But the fact was that, once he returned to work, the Dreyfus board did not trust his judgment anymore. The hospital department where Fred was admitted and treated had forever compromised his professional career.

Soon he had been moved 'laterally' within the company, to a mostly honorary position. Hurt—he was one of the founding partners of Dreyfus! —Fred resigned. He began going a few times a week to the psychiatrist, who knew how to make him addicted for life. A divorce followed, and a heart attack, and severe diabetes. A *stretto*, as they say in music. Amy promised to take care of him, providing a fabulous monthly income. After all, he was her only son! Disgusted with the entire world, frightened of what was happening to him, and alone, Fred voluntarily entered the gilded cage of an apartment which actually took up an entire floor of a building in Manhattan. He was supposed to do nothing but please his mother.

Fred shouted. It was late; they had to get out as fast as possible. He was actually panicked that Amy, with her diabolical intuition, would call that very moment from Las Vegas. It was her pleasure to ruin his weekend evenings. She liked to keep him on the phone for hours, jealous that he was not alone, complaining of all sorts of imaginary pains and sicknesses, then falling into hysterical crises. Fred needed hours to reassure her of his love, endlessly repeating: "Mom, you are the best; you are the only woman I love in this world!"

Angela appeared in the living room door. She wore only a sheath of white satin. With elastic steps

she retrieved her purse from the floor and took out her makeup kit. Fred looked at her reflection in the crystal mirror above the Chinese chest. His gaze lingered over the long thick hair reaching her shoulders, the delicate forehead, slightly vaulted showing stubbornness, the long neck and thin legs that seemed longer than her body, the breasts apart, shaped in the Egyptian form of *thateb*, and the round buttocks, a little naughty, visible through the sheath's transparency. His ex-wife Barbara was different. The only other one who reminded him of what he was seeing, that mixture of chastity, lust and sensuality, was Honey, his girlfriend during college years. They had parted because Amy did not like her. It had been a misunderstanding at that family dinner at Café Pierre; Amy actually disliked Honey's mother, a woman who displayed the glow of happiness. Fred sighed. Nothing equaled Honey, his first love. In one of the Chinese chest drawers he still kept Honey's gray blazer from college days, which he touched from time to time like a precious relic.

Departing from the image of his ex-girlfriend, he counted the parts of Angela's body that attracted him. He found that there were seven.

"It would not hurt to give a name to each of them," Fred mused aloud from his favorite spot on the couch, near the ashtray, the cup of coffee, and thirteen netsuke miniatures carved in ivory representing erotic scenes from the Kama Sutra.

"Names? To whom?" Angela sent him a confused smile while combing her hair in the mirror.

"To the seven girls who are in you."

Unexpectedly energized, Fred came close and gently kissed her neck.

"For example, the neck—with this aristocratic line starting from behind the ear—will from now on be called Florence, *la belle Florence*. The two breasts will be named Josie and Phiny."

"How many girls are there?"

"Seven. And all are one, they all surround me dancing, they are gorgeous, different, but still resemble each other."

Fred was in an unexpectedly poetic state of mind. After such moments the reversal came abruptly; that's why Angela played along.

"As in Botticelli's *Allegory of Spring*?" She frowned as if trying to remember how many girls were dancing in that picture.

"Of course," he approved. "All those girls are representing the parts of the only one whose name is *La Primavera. La Primavera Angelicata*."

Angela pirouetted around Fred. Sometimes, yes, he was good at flattering; he actually knew she liked that. What woman did not like it? And more, for her, the moments of pleasant, sane conversation with Fred were the only oasis of fresh air in the harshness of everyday life.

"I wonder where the little devils of your mind are hiding," he said, amused, paternally stroking her cheeks. "This very moment I cannot see any trace of Jeanne d'Arc in you!"

They chose Rosie O'Grady's for dinner. Despite heavy traffic, they arrived quickly in Fred's two-seater car, a Lamborghini that Amy gave him on his birthday. Broadway shone with all its lights on in the crowd's commotion. Near Rosie O'Grady's, the flags of Carnegie Hall were waving. Angela would have preferred to go across the street, but Fred did not like it.

A few couples revolved on the restaurant's dance floor to a live orchestra's ballroom repertoire.

As always, Fred ordered an abundant menu: caviar, shrimp cocktail, lobster, steaks, baked potatoes with butter and mayonnaise, Italian salads, ice cream, wine, brandy and fruit. He insisted at length on the thickness of the steaks, the cooking time and the length of the lobster. It was one of his pleasures, to tease the waiters to exasperation. Although the wine was perfect, Fred snorted. He even complained to the restaurant's manager.

"Don't let them know that you really like something," he explained, prudently leaning over the table. "Next time they will not be as perfect as today." He was serious, and Angela took his words as a new lesson about that world in which she had lived for only a short period of time. She tried though, to tell him that what he did to the coffee waitress was not right. That girl who had brought them coffee left with tears in her eyes. Fred accused her of being sloppy, screwing up the right proportions of his mixture made of regular coffee, decaf, and half-and-half—half whole milk and half cream.

"*Ce soir tu parles un mauvais anglais. Concentrez-toi!*" Fred reprimanded Angela's interference in his affairs. He did not like to be contradicted. Worst, sometimes he displayed an immense pleasure in humiliating her, even tormenting her, as a kind of revenge for his sexual inhibition.

Angela felt the fatigue of the foreign language, of the foreign personality. The loss of her mother tongue—a concrete part of her body, a very tangible organ—meant not only a biological injury but also great pain and frustration. How wonderful it would have been to rest in her Romanian for at least a few minutes! But it was, of course, impossible. Here she was in one of Manhattan's restaurants, in the heart of New York City, where she had fled to escape fear, hatred and intolerance. And she was still waiting for the right moment to get revenge. Meanwhile, she was desperately building the new "language organ." How much time will pass before it crossed the threshold of her being, becoming second nature? How long would it take? Years? Decades? The mother tongue, her working tool, made bilingualism heartbreaking. In her workplace or talking with Fred it was as if she wore an artificial heart. Would she ever have a true English "heart"? The difference between what she was as a human being and the poor language with which she was forced to express herself gave birth to the most grueling of fatigues: the fatigue of being silenced, the fatigue of not being able to communicate, the fatigue of not fully understanding what was said, the fatigue of not being understood, the fatigue of fierce attention to every spoken English sentence, and the fatigue of all these fatigues together.

Fred devoured big chunks from all the dishes in front of him, enough to feed an entire family. He muttered something, seeing Angela's still-full plates, and called the waiter. Everything that was left on the table had to go into the doggy bag. It wasn't about wasting food, but about wasting money. Money was not to be thrown away! Over the next days Fred would discard that food, but right now he staged his show of power.

However, Fred's request was humiliating to the new immigrant at his table. In the impoverished world she came from, Fred's demand would be classified as a lack of elegance, and the crazy abundance of what he had ordered for dinner, as pure waste. Angela refrained from saying anything. She was just trying to understand. When the waiter left the bill on the table, she fought back her tears. It was almost the same amount of money she received for forty hours of hard work per week.

Living in anonymity after years of public life had been a relief at the beginning. In time, however, the loss of identity brought a new depression, so different from the ones she had experienced before.

Friends, her articles' admirers, phone calls, the freshly printed morning newspaper in which she had read with mixed fear and curiosity her own articles, were dearly missed. As if that were not enough, she had moved into new venues for testing the strength of her mental state. One of them was the relationship with Fred, a completely platonic one and highly tormented, because he poured out on her the venom stored during years of loneliness and frustration. But in this way she learned, as in an intensive training course, not only the art of living in America, but also the art of being American.

"I explained to my neighbor Marcel, the one who lives on the top floor of my apartment building, that if I had as a companion an American-born lady with your education and beauty, it would cost me a lot of money." Fred sipped from his second coffee, adding up something in his head. "To tell you the truth, being with you means huge savings."

Diary

July 1992

Manhattan during the night; the pyramidal skyscrapers' penthouses displaying full gardens seem to me a new Babylon. I am thinking of ziggurats and Semiramide's hanging gardens. Fred blew me off, saying that there are no pyramids here, just rectangles of concrete; however, I think differently. I think that each civilization at its peak moves to the pyramid, the most stable shape and structure in the universe. Some civilizations have buried their dead in them. We live in them. Is there a hidden meaning? What connects them all?

At midnight we admired Manhattan from the Brooklyn Bridge. Then we went to the South Street Seaport (the threatening ocean licking the overcivilized shores, the enchantingly lit fish market, boats, museum, and cafés). The shore at Pier 17—old ships, petrified fir trees. Next, we went to Chinatown—so animated that I was shocked. Around one o'clock in the morning we ate something tasty, with hot peppers, in a basement restaurant, full of Chinese people and European tourists. From here we crossed to Little Italy. Everything was written in Italian, even the street names, just as they had been in Chinese in Chinatown. Here nobody cares. In Romania or any other country in Eastern Europe, something like this would bring civil war.

During evenings, children and the elderly gather in my neighborhood park in Queens. A Russian woman, about eighty years old, urged me to go back to Romania. "America is not a paradise," she told me. "For an immigrant to work in the US and to succeed it is imperative for this immigrant to be better in all senses than the true-born Americans."

A Polish beautician decided to go back home for good after twenty years in America. She sold everything. She complained of loneliness, of the fact that Americans do not accept new immigrants into their circles, about the linguistic handicap, the hard work to keep her job, high taxes, and the difficulty of having a family. "Everything here is about gain, about business, and shallow smiles all around. What a fucking world," she said. "Only after the hard work in this world leaves you in shambles do you realize that." I remembered Spengler's theory of the West's decadence and those pages where he talks about the civilization of fellah population – the residue of a declining civilization. I find that in my

time humanity leaves under two contradictories commandments; one comes from human species and I call it natural selection through wars, famine, diseases; the other one comes from God of Christianity and it is pity (mercy, human rights etc.). How would civilization deal with both of them?

Many others, on the contrary, consider America a paradise: those with masters' degrees and PhDs who work in big companies and universities. The idea of America depends on the workplace, the human group you relate with, and how much money you make.

I wanted to see a striptease show around midnight, after I met and ate with some friends at Golden Garden, a Korean restaurant near my place. At Gallagher's women in bikinis were dancing on a table. All around a bunch of horny men quietly sipped from their drinks. It was very civilized, even the erotic complicity between dancers and customers. I was thinking of the first and third centuries in Alexandria, and of the naked dancers from Byzantium's circuses described by Procopius of Caesarea writing in his History about Theodora, the Empress of the Eastern Roman Empire, a former stripper. No one is allowed now to touch them. In fact, although I feel the degradation of the human race in these Sodoms and Gomorrachs of the twentieth century the fact that there are people who entertain themselves with such performances shows that they satisfy a human need. Voyeurism? Is it so expensive here for a man to have his own woman?

Manhattan: the inner city as permanent temptation. Temptation = Dissolution? The energy to resist lures is huge. The general philosophy of life: live intensely, more carnally, go as deep as possible; *carpe diem*; creatures feel eternal, and each one wants new pleasures. I remember those years of living in desperation and fear back home, fighting not to be transformed into an animal by hunger and terrifying cold during winters in an apartment with no heat when outside it was minus 25 Celsius or minus 13 Fahrenheit. To read, to write, had been my only way of staying sane. My people were living at the poorest level of life, like bacteria; and the frustration of not having the freedom to decide for ourselves, rather than others for us, had deeply crushed our souls.

Paradise and the myth of Paradise. A confusion hovers in my mind between Hell and Heaven. Sartre measured hell by the "other" or "otherness." Had national hells created this Babylon—a necessary planetary dream?

I hallucinate as I walk on the streets, I hear people speaking Romanian. Today I went to *Niță's European Bakery* in Sunnyside on Greenpoint Ave and 40th Street full of delicious Romanians desserts, cakes, cookies and pastries, with my favorite strudel and walnut and poppy-seed *cozonaci*. Sometimes I even "see" people dear to me. Today I ran after a man who looked like Lawrence! Last night, on my way home, I sat down, as tired as any homeless person, on the steps of the subway station at Lexington Avenue.

CHAPTER TWO

“HURRY UP! WE’RE late!”

Timothy Munteanu, nicknamed Tim, was spinning the car’s keys on a finger, now and then banging them on the living room table. He’d had to stop on his way to Manhattan to pick Angela up and hadn’t expected that she would not be ready yet. The Queensboro Bridge was busy on Saturday evenings, especially on long weekends, when a lot of people from the suburbs or the neighboring states attended shows or dined in Manhattan. He was worried that the bridge’s exit ramp, between Manhattan’s 59th and 60th Streets, could be totally blocked at that hour.

Tim spoke loudly enough to be heard through the open door about a business deal that he hoped to bring to a close. He wore an elegant gray suit, which hid his fat, almost shapeless body. He was stressed out by his usual financial issues. It was not easy to be an art dealer in New York City.

“And I did not find a parking space, I left the car in the middle of the street,” Tim complained.

Angela came out of the bedroom. She wore a low-cut, sleeveless yellow short dress that emphasized her slender silhouette, giving her the appearance of a teenager. Surprised, Tim leaned back in his seat. “How the hell can she look like that after all she went through?” Something seemed wrong. It was as if a stranger stood in front of him. That elegant woman was totally different from the one he had seen years ago at a Black Sea resort in a group of writers; by that time, he had made his secret preparations to leave Romania for good. The person he remembered had thin lips, wore thick glasses, and had been totally unattractive. And the two women, the one who wrote books and the one in front of him, didn’t match the woman who had come more than a year ago to his placement agency in Forest Hills. That woman was somehow on the brink of suicide. He had read it in her face. She had been carelessly dressed, deep dark under eye circles marked her face, and her body showed signs of uncontrolled weight gain.

Tim shook off that image. Then those three shapes merged into one. It was as if three different people used the same biological body. Tim scrutinized the face of the one standing in front of him, trying to identify the traits of the other two. “She has the childish and sensual face of a perfect lover.” The phrase rang with clarity in his mind, leaving Tim slightly perplexed. Those were not his words!

“How far is it?”

“Not very, but we’ll be late.”

So we’ll spend less time there, Angela thought. Mihaela Banu, a rich doctor much attracted to gathering interesting people, was throwing a birthday celebration. Peter Brown, who had recently opened an advertising agency in Bucharest, was one of the guests. Also among the announced attendees were Manuela Klein, the friend of the famous Hector Romano, who was living in exile in

Paris, and the beloved Nicolette, the lover of the controversial Corbu (Romanian for “crow”), who had sought refuge in the United States years ago, formerly a member of the *nomenklatura*, and one of the intimates of the deceased dictator. Angela congratulated herself for managing to convince Fred to let her go that evening.

They arrived sooner than expected at the Peninsula Hotel, not far from Rockefeller Center. At the Restaurant Clement on the mezzanine level, tables set for forty guests sparkled with the whiteness of damask, cutlery and crystal glasses. At one end of the room, an open buffet offered caviar, shrimp, cocktails and champagne.

Angela exchanged a few conventional words with people at her table, glancing at the dance floor and the live orchestra. The starters had already been served. She helped herself to foie gras with Concord grapes, Japanese peppercorns, and brioche. Bogdan, her immigration lawyer, arrived from a nearby table to kiss her hand in the European style of politeness. Although they were the same age, Angela felt much younger than him. She harbored mixed feelings toward Bogdan. She disliked his way of flirting while talking about his past love affairs, one more extravagant than the next. She knew that Bogdan had been married many times, and now was involved at the same time with an old millionaire and a girl enrolled at City College. That night he had come alone. Angela admired him sidelong. He was indeed very attractive. His mouth was sensual, and the unusual scar on his temple emphasized an adventurous air. His beige suit matched his tanned skin. The broad shoulders and muscular body, his intelligent conversation, would charm any woman. But his way of bragging, his insistence on showing off, made her uneasy. It could come from timidity or cruelty, or both, but she had no time for psychological analysis, a luxury her present life did not afford her. They had discussed the fees for her immigration case. Theirs was supposed to be strictly a client-attorney relationship.

“It seems you’re not very well ...” Bogdan said, making a gesture as if summoning her to sit next to him. Angela understood that he had come for her.

“Thanks, I feel perfect,” she said in as conventional a tone as possible, and sipped from the brandy that Tim had poured into her glass.

“Do you have something special to tell me?” Bogdan turned his body toward her. Apparently he wanted to change his place at the table, but suggestions to his neighbors had not yielded results.

“Maybe you should tell me something,” Angela said, alluding to her case, which seemed dead.

“Nothing’s new. We’ll talk when I’ll drive you back home.”

“I came with Tim.” Angela cut short Bogdan’s invitation. Her entrée—halibut prepared with brown butter, *delicata* squash, and capers—had been served.

Tim looked so dusty, so out of shape, that he did not arouse Bogdan’s jealousy, but rather made him feel good. Tim, on Angela’s right at the dinner table, touched her shoulders as if helping her avoid a danger. Across the table, a blonde lady wearing excessive makeup was engaged in a conversation with Peter Brown. Angela presumed that the woman must be Nicolette, a former opera singer who had fled Romania together with her lover Corbu. She wore an outstanding piece around her neck, a strip of gold set with rubies and diamonds.

“I have money for the painting,” Nicolette said suddenly to Tim across the table, even though she

was surrounded by newcomers greeting her. Angela could not understand why Nicolette was so popular, but soon she would understand the meaning of the words Tim whispered in her ear: “Stay away from the Times Square witch!”

“That’s great,” Tim acknowledged.

“I couldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t buy it,” Nicolette replied.

“This is Angela,” Tim said in a dry voice.

“Hello, dear,” Nicolette said, smiling affably.

“She is a journalist. And she wants to have a talk with *him*.” Tim said “him” with great care, extending his short neck over the table.

Nicolette smiled brightly.

“I am sure he would like that, we’ll keep in touch through Tim.” And after a moment: “And what would be the subject of this conversation, dear?”

Angela put down her glass, tossed back a strand of hair and said simply: “The past. The communist dictatorship in Romania.”

Nicolette inhaled sharply.

“My dear, a communist dictatorship never existed. Dictatorship, yes, but not communist. . . Communism is an extraordinary social order unfortunately compromised in this century. I hope it will come true in the future.”

“Are you saying that I don’t know where I spent the major part of my life?” Angela was playing stupid, but obviously this kind of acting didn’t fit her well.

“Forget about politics, you can discuss it with her husband.” Tim didn’t like the turn the conversation was taking. “I was wondering if . . .”

Life has been good to her, Angela thought. Here and back there. Nicolette’s words brought back a brutal time: the year when the forced, under-the-gun socialist collectivization of agriculture had been completed. Any villagers who had not signed the paper attesting that they voluntarily gave up to the state all land, tractors, animals, and working tools that belonged to them—all their property—had been thrown in jail without trial; during the night, their houses were burned to the ground, their herds of cows or sheep scattered, and their wives savagely beaten. At that time she had liked playing with dolls in the courtyard under the canopy of the giant pear tree. One day she saw a black car stopping in front of their house. A few men dressed in black leather coats got out, leisurely followed by Corbu, a powerful party activist, a Bolshevik of the Communist Party who had promised he would collectivize the entire region of Dobruja in record time. Comrade Corbu, who at that time was called K, entered the gate, then the alley leading to the house, and opened the door of the house with an insolent gesture, as if it were his. Soon, her mother’s screams came from inside. The men in black coats dragged out her handcuffed father, and Corbu hit him on the head with his gun. Father was accused of treason and plotting against the popular democratic state. Then the men in black leather coats returned. More heartbreaking screams followed. Soon, Mother headed to the backyard of the house, to the apple orchard, with blood on her face, followed by those men. One of them dug at the root of a tree and removed her mother’s jewelry box and a few little wool bags filled with gold coins. Dating back to the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, they had been passed down in time for twenty-five

centuries, through the *armân* family's generations. They were the family's treasure, her Vlach mother's dowry; that treasure now belonged to "the people." During that night their home caught fire. They had to leave everything behind: their land, cattle, and wealth. Years of hardship had followed. The harshest were the winters in the city where they took refuge. Mother's frozen hands, purple-red from searching the ground for a piece of charcoal to bring some warmth to their cold room, appeared painfully on the immaculate white tablecloth in front of Angela. Someone had to pay for that, at least one of them!

"What do you think about the left-wing political movement here?" Peter tilted slightly back in his chair, as if to avoid Nicolette's line of sight. He struggled to keep his smile.

"Marx's dialectics seem to have been inherited by the feminist movement here, at least that's how it appears to me. I tried to find Plato's *Dialectic* one day, and my computer's search engine retrieved records about lesbians and feminism." Of course it was an exaggeration, meant as a slap at Nicolette, but Angela declared it with such confidence that nobody objected. There was only a snort from Peter, while Nicolette seemed exclusively concerned with her shrimp cocktail.

Angela looked over the guests. An ironic mood, adventurous and playful, had suddenly surfaced. Her inner nature, defiant of danger, revived from beneath the barrage of disguises imposed by the fight for survival. She throbbed as if awakened from a slumber. A solid blond guy drinking alone at the bar caught her attention. Glancing sideways at his movements, the way he was dressed, the way he looked at his surroundings, she bet herself that he was a professional working for a state agency. She wanted to find out which one. She stood up, left the table, and headed obliquely in his direction. On her way, she exchanged a few platitudes with Manuela, dressed in *haute couture*, and her new boyfriend, much younger, trying to guess how many years Manuela was celebrating that evening. After looking closely at her hands and neck, Angela stopped at forty.

"I'm Angela," she introduced herself directly to the man at the bar.

"Graham Marshall." They shook hands. He was perhaps the only one in the gathering without any apparent connection to Eastern Europe.

"How come you are here?" Angela wondered out loud.

"I am a friend of Manuela."

"Are you bored?"

Graham displayed his strong teeth.

"*Vreți un Scotch?*" Graham offered Angela a drink in her mother tongue. Graham spoke Romanian well enough. He told her he had spent two years in Bucharest, working at the U.S. Embassy there. Back then he had met Manuela and helped her escape to the West. They were friends, he stressed, nothing more. Presently he worked for a multinational corporation, but he loved art and had an innate talent for foreign languages. They drank and danced. Bogdan disappeared from the restaurant, and Angela tried to explain to herself the mixture of attraction and repulsion she felt toward Bogdan. It had always been the same: at first she felt good around him, but soon she wanted to run away, frightened by that mixture of rudeness and arrogance that meant that everything, absolutely everything, could be bought by him.

Like any new acquaintance in America, Graham showed an interest in her personal story. He

started with the same annoying questions, such as “When did you arrive here,?” and “Why did you leave your country?”. Angela answered briefly.

“You are a lucky girl,” Graham said, weighing her with his eyes. This was nothing new. Everyone was always telling her that she was a lucky girl, but she very much wanted to know in what consisted her good luck.

At one moment she complained of being too cold. “This is pure American madness,” she said. “During summers it is colder inside houses and restaurants and banks and offices than it is during winters on the streets.” Graham gallantly wrapped her shoulders in his jacket. After a while Angela excused herself, saying she wanted to fix her makeup. In the ladies’ lounge she searched Graham’s jacket, finding exactly what she had supposed: an FBI ID.

“I felt it in my bones,” Angela told herself with satisfaction in her voice. “I knew I would win the bet.”

CHAPTER THREE

“HURRY UP! RON’S calling you!”

Sharon’s hysterical voice trilled from the receptionists’ room. The intercom seemed to be down. The fifteen phone lines were blinking; a lot of clients were on hold. Someone was shouting in Eugene’s office: a client who’d had a car accident was unhappy with the money he received after the settlement. The insurance company had paid the injured a modest compensation, which was certainly not his fault but Eugene’s; sometimes he gave up his fight for a client, either out of boredom or because the insurance adjuster was a tough one, a bitch who would not accept his inflated claim. Annoyed by the scandal, Eugene ordered a check from his personal account to be written in the name of the client. It had been whispered around the office that a lot of Eugene’s money did not come from the law firm, but from one of the notorious characters in the New York Mafia, whose lawyer he was. It was interesting also that, while Eugene seemed not to care much about losing a case in court, Jonathan always made a big fuss. Such crises of anger betrayed the petty mentality of one who wanted to win at any price and in any situation. The ones who suffered most from Jonathan’s arrogance had always been the new secretaries and the young lawyers, the new associates. He’d fire them on the spot without a moment’s hesitation.

Sharon burst into the library holding a bottle spray like a weapon. Her eyes were ringed with yellow-blue shadows. She spread folders and books, cleared shelves, and thoroughly disinfected the space around Angela. A client who had talked with Eugene in the library before had been, in her mind, an evil presence. Everyone knew that Sharon, born in Puerto Rico, was obsessed with smells and spells. Her shiny black face, the spray shaken like a magical implement, the amulets around wrists and neck gave her a shamanic air, a shaman lost in a positivistic world that no longer needed magic. Jonathan unsettled her the most; between Sharon and the African art objects in Jonathan’s office there had grown over time a kind of tacit animosity or belligerence. The shamaness used to enter Jonathan’s room only after five in the afternoon, when the lawyers were gone; then she would watch those objects for a few seconds with an expression between fear and lust on her face, cross herself, and dash off with unintelligible giggles.

“It’s awful,” Sharon gasped for air. “Run to Ron. Where’s your head?” At which Ron screamed again. They both ran briskly to his office.

“Today all of you are working so slowly and sluttishly, you are a bunch of lazy, sloppy livestock!” Ron reproached angrily. He was in a bad mood. That morning he had failed to settle a big and long-drawn-out case, and the accountant had announced to him that he had to pay tens of thousands of dollars in taxes. The accountant was an idiot who had to be fired. But to do that Ron would have to

fight Eugene and Jonathan, who were on Bloomberg's side on the grounds that the accountant knew too much about the law firm's businesses.

"Open your eyes and don't bring me shit. Are you sleeping?"

Ron disgustedly threw a folder at Angela, a medical report that she had given him shortly before. Angela went to her knees to pick up the report from the floor.

"It's true to the original," she said, puzzled. Ron had never addressed her so harshly.

"Always check everything. Never trust anything or anybody. Never!"

Ron was also angry because of last night's insomnia, because his ex-wife was asking for money again, and the villa in Italy seemed impossible to get finished; a bottomless pit. All the women in his life only wanted money.

"Never?" She had come to America hoping that here she could build a life on the contrary.

"That's right; and bring everything back in order. Right now!"

Holding the pile of papers in her hands, Angela hesitated.

"I can't live like this," she mumbled. She knew that second of hesitation had been a luxury, and so had her reply.

"That's the real world. Get used to it," Ron advised in a low voice. And then he resumed his tone, shouting like a madman: "Move your ass! I have to go to court in ten minutes!"

Angela ran to one of the copy machines. On her way she stopped at Leslie's desk to ask the meaning of *ass*.

"Don't take it personally; he talks like that because of stress. He is a pain in the neck," Leslie said, then resumed typing at breakneck speed.

Around the copy machines were piles of folders, papers for court appearances, letters addressed to insurance companies, files of new cases called "baby files" which were waiting in line to be born. Angela lived with a vague feeling of anger, of wounded self-esteem and pride. A muscle on her face twitched so strongly that she was afraid she would remain hideous forever. In a normal world she would leave immediately, go to her desk, take her personal items and be out the door. Such scenes took place frequently in that office, almost weekly; very few secretaries survived more than a few months there. But she did not have the luxury of leaving or the strength; she had to endure, to wait, not out of fear but because of her instinct for self-preservation. She needed that job to survive.

It was the same instinct that had helped her in December 1989 in her former country, when it looked as if Santa had brought freedom to all of them. They were drunk with joy, believing that communism was gone, vanished, identifying communism merely with the dictator who released his grip on power and fled. Years would have to pass before the secrets of that morning of December 22 came to light. One of them had been that during those hours the Beloved Leader had obtained political asylum in China. Another was that the conspirators had damaged the presidential Boeing. Not having a plane, he departed by helicopter. On the same day, the planners of the coup d'état grabbed Ceausescu somewhere near Târgoviște. This was kept secret for forty-eight hours. It was assumed that it was the time the conspirators needed to force the captive to spell out all the details about his hundreds of millions, maybe even a billion dollars deposited in his personal accounts in Swiss banks. Then the poorly staged trial came, followed by the dictator's execution in a military unit's courtyard in the

countryside. The dictator's money had ensured the triumph of neo-communism and overnight made a few individuals wealthy beyond imagination. In the years that followed, the staged and bogus transition to the free market and democracy was a clever scam as long as the opposition had no political power and no money in their pockets.

The machine gun on the roof of the building was firing flurries of bullets at regular intervals on that morning of late December 1989. The so-called "terrorists"—the troops on the dictator's side or on the conspirators' side who wanted to create a diversion to take over power—kept the military unit under fire less than a mile from the apartment where she lived. The whole neighborhood was pelted with bullets. One of them hissed by her ear, entered the apartment—breaking a window—and stopped in the bedroom wall. Downtown, civilians from all over the country, together with soldiers, were fighting the same "terrorists" no one could catch—and if they were caught, rumor had it they were released or mysteriously disappeared. Tanks patrolled the boulevards. It was said that hundreds of people were killed in the fighting in the capital.

She sneaked out of the building she lived in, caught in the crossfire. At the first light she stopped a truck carrying cement. The driver, a young man on the side of the anticommunist revolution, picked her up and swung onto the belt road of the capital. The plan was to break through the army's line around the television building, where heavy fighting with terrorists was going on. The newspaper's editorial offices were located farther north, on the other side of the city.

A few stray bullets left holes in the truck's hood. In front of the massive Stalinist-style building of the media a few bodies were lying. Soldiers in combat positions were stationed around the building. It was unclear whose side they were on, but it was very possible that in that tense situation they could kill anyone who looked suspicious to the new power.

She managed to get to the newspaper's entrance, crossing the military lines; the armed warden did not dare to stop her, but he thoroughly searched her for weapons. Angela felt sorry that civilians had no guns in those days. Perhaps it was the only way to turn a coup—directed by the second echelon of the nomenklatura, which wanted only to snatch power from Ceausescu and implement Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika—into a true anticommunist revolution.

Remembering, she relived the free-from-censorship fever, the excitement of those first issues of the newspaper; drunk with freedom, with writing what she really thought, with being part of the most important and widely read newspaper in all of Eastern Europe; days when she had tried to find a new, direct language for the articles she was writing against the repressive political structure still in place, against former criminals and the new nomenklatura. One day she woke up from this freedom fever and discovered that nothing had changed, even at her newspaper. They, the few dissidents, were tolerated; they were allowed to write and publish what they wanted, for their articles served the new establishment, which claimed to enthrone freedom. And then, in time, they were pushed one by one to leave or to betray. Secret police informers remained in the same job positions; no one budged from his place. In the elections that followed, the communists were reelected, and the leaders accused the anticommunists of being traitors to the country.

Finally, she came to recognize that decades of communism, nearly half a century, had in fact given birth to the "new man": a collective character, devoid of memory, illiterate in terms of political and

religious discourse, whose speech had been replaced by templates of slogans and hatred of the other. It became dangerous to say that she worked for her newspaper. At night she blocked the entrances to her apartment—door and windows. The daily threatening letters had had their psychological effect.

During those days she had tried to explain to prominent members of the opposition that they were losing the ground under their feet. But the dissidents' group was fatally divided. They somehow replicated the totalitarian model. Each dissident wanted to be the most important dissident, atop the pyramid, from where he wanted to command; none wanted to execute, each one wanted to command. The more important a dissident had been in his opposition to the dictatorship, the less he communicated with any of the other dissidents. On the other hand, instead of organizing civil society and playing the hard card in the political structure, they abstained from voting in Parliament, left the stage of the political struggle as a form of protest, wrote theoretical articles without any practical effect, and talked on television in a language foreign to simple people. The secret police, still in place, untouched, had thrown into the battle against them new means of discrediting the anticommunist opposition such as fine-tuned articles full of lies, misinformation about their actions, and fake secret police files. And above all, the atmosphere of violence, fueled by the protests of those deceived in their hopes, had raged out of control. As if in a dream, she found herself in a crowd attacked by armed police. It was June 13, 1990. The next day at dawn, the miners called by the president of the country and led by agents of the secret police took over the capital, their goal being to finish once and for all with the anticommunist traitors.

Jonathan gave Leslie a few new tasks, passed in his stormy way through the receptionists' room, and called Angela into his office. He was more tense than usual. The "Brendon" trial was supposed to start in a few days. The client had become handicapped due to an elevator fire. Brendon had sued New York City for negligence and asked for \$2 million in compensation. Jonathan was convinced he could get one million, of which, of course, 35 percent would go to the law firm. If they won, Jonathan's case would create a precedent, taking into consideration the accident's circumstances. The case, once decided, was expected to be discussed in the famous *New York Law Journal*. Everything had actually been taken care of.

"As soon as you finish with Ron, go to the Fire Department in Brooklyn, 250 Livingstone Street, room 820. There you'll find Mr. Grafton. He will give you a book. Take the A train downtown to Hoyt-Schermerhorn Street, and after that rush back here."

Jonathan roared all those words. Angela wrote everything on a piece of paper, and then turned in runner's stride to the copy machine.

She instantly found herself again on that hot day in June, when armed troops had attacked the University Plaza. Several cars and buildings, including the Capital Police building, were in flames. Over the next days it was exposed that the police themselves had set them on fire; their aim had been to enrage the citizens of the capital against the anticommunist demonstrators, and so to create a legal reason for the repression that followed. Young combatants defended themselves by throwing stones at armed-to-the-teeth attackers. Policemen assaulted those who had taken refuge in the Institute of Architecture. One of them grabbed her arm, trying to push her into a van, but she managed to escape

and took refuge in the lobby of a hotel on Academy Street. From there she took a cab, perhaps the last one that dared to venture into the combat zone. In her editorial office she wrote the article “Death of Democracy,” published in the last issue out just before the coal miners took over the editorial offices. After a few hours the miners invaded the newspaper, the printers refused to print the newspaper on the grounds that they were traitors to the motherland, while the radio and television channels controlled by the government spoke of her editorial as a new political provocation.

Events replayed with lightning speed in Angela’s mind: the night at home alone waiting to be killed by the hordes who had invaded Bucharest. She had nowhere to hide, nowhere to go, to run, for all main roads, railway stations, airports were controlled by the miners and the secret police forces.

Her entire life there she had been like a racehorse with its legs tied up in the starting gate of a rigged race. At first the secret police informants had tried to take over the leadership of the newspaper but had failed; they had failed then, but she quickly realized that their failure was temporary; the restored repressive system was soon back in action. Hadn’t Zinoviev written, long before 1989, about communism’s “convulsions,” predicting that communism would try to revive and become stronger after all its diseases, that it would transform itself but not perish? But who cared about Zinoviev in those days?

The mud of the past mounted ominously higher inside the newspaper offices; those who opposed the return of the old power were fewer and fewer. One day she was pushed into an office across from hers; a group of angry colleagues openly scolded and threatened her.

“Be softer, dear. Be conciliatory,” one of those present said in a friendly tone.

“You are young and pretty. What if someone stabs you? It is not pleasant to have a knife stuck deep in your back.” The former head of the propaganda department touched her cheek.

“And do not forget that during the nights when you are on duty, any fool can come here to kill not only you, but everyone.” This time the one that showed sympathy for her was the head of the department of foreign policy.

She took a step back to avoid his touch, but she bumped into another one, who shoved her against the wall: one of the oldest and most loyal proletarian culture journalists. She had attacked him in an interview for French television. He was one of those to whom the new neocommunist leader had given the mission to take over the newspaper in the days when the miners arrived to “rescue” the president of the country from the alleged coup planned by the “fascist opposition.” He had failed because of her speech.

She was not afraid at that moment, but she felt fear once she understood that she had no way to defend herself. Censor herself again? It was out of the question. She would not be able to look at herself in the mirror. The former and the current regimes seemed the same. They had the whole system of repression on their side. She did not even have a gun. Here in New York, she bought one. It was like a retroactively soothing act. During free hours she had taken shooting instruction at a club in Manhattan.

Page by page Angela checked the medical report that Ron had given her to copy. Indeed, she discovered that a few pages were not in order. While fixing the report, she entertained herself with

the famous concept of the “velvet revolution.” It had certainly been good for Havel’s essays there in Czechoslovakia, but not for the concrete political reality of her native country. The concept of a “velvet revolution” and the slogan of “no violence” during the revolution of December 1989 were merely a trap, a secretion of the same system that had destroyed Romania for the past half a century. It became clear that a repressive system could not be replaced with backstage maneuvers. The so-called velvet revolutions condemned Eastern Europe to more decades of stagnation and suffering. Ah, how naive they had been, how inexperienced at politics! They were weak and blind ... they had no idea that laws could not be changed by hunger strikes, protest marches, petitions, articles, but only through fierce parliamentary battles, political organizations rooted in real life, strong leaders, and diplomacy. While she was still in her country she had not known any of this; she had even had no idea that there was a science of management that could have helped them organize; now she knew it all, but it was too late.

Diary

Thursday, June 21, 1990, 8 a.m.

I retrieve notes from June 13–18 written on scrap paper; I put away my personal papers, manuscripts, the diary in my neighbor’s apartment, worried that miners would invade my place, shatter it and kill me. Yesterday I attended a conference of union leaders at the *Republica* factory. Unfortunately they all have the same helpless psychology; they don’t know the laws, and don’t even think of seeking help from a lawyer; all they know is to send complaining letters to the President. They need a “daddy.” Their only strategy is the threat of a strike. More and more articles against me, dirty notes appear in the press, published under the communist and secret police mandate.

Saturday, June 23, 1990, 7 a.m.

I receive flowers from my readers and congratulatory phone calls from abroad. The newspaper’s editors are praised by the international community; the echo of our newspaper odyssey is astonishing. It looks like the interview I gave on Friday in the Romanian language to BBC was effective. I was told that we showed freedom from fear and this will help others. International organizations pledge to help us have a printing machine of our own, independent of government pressures.

The former agents are in place in the editorial offices, do not leave, nor can we fire them, for reasons that I cannot understand because in harsh times harsh measures should take precedence over the labor code; to this question I receive ambiguous answers. In fact, more agents seem to be employed now; some of them even write against our group of former dissidents in official papers, calling us “Nazis.” We are making heroic efforts to print each issue of the newspaper.

More and more people with advanced degrees are leaving the country, as if someone is interested in chasing them out, but I am convinced that things will not stay that way; however, it feels like a huge release of negative energies has taken place. Intellectuals are

divided: women would prefer to leave the country, but men show patriotic feelings. My women friends want to convince me that there is no way to remain here. Then I wonder who will be left to live in the country: the KGB agents? The terrorists?

Romania has passed through another phase of seizures triggered by the revolution. Members of Médecins Sans Frontières aid that what they witnessed in Bucharest on June 14 competes with similar scenes seen in Asia and Africa: miners beating the protesters with iron clubs while some of the capital residents stood around watching and applauding them from the sidelines. Even if the population was instigated against the demonstrators, why they were so brutal? Witnesses to those acts walked on gouged-out eyes, on torn-off limbs, they were carelessly walking through puddles of blood, while the wounded were piled in vans going no one knew where. For whom do I write? For those already dead or for those who cheered on the sidelines?

Thursday, June 28, 1990, 7:30 a.m.

Why are Romanians running out of the country? Would the prisoners of the Auschwitz camp live in it after they were freed? The horror of the concentration camp image is so strong that it is understandable. Nobody can live in a former concentration camp even if the barbed wire around it has disappeared. The concentration camp needs to be totally demolished and another world eventually rebuilt on its ground. Here the laws have remained the same. The streets, cities, people are built on the model of the communist camp. It looks like there's nothing to be done; everything secretes camp and communism. When the communists took over the country, they took over all its wealth and all gates to a decent life. And many of those who were considered "enemies of the people," such as ministers, professors, bankers, priests, and aristocrats with old roots, who had once been the pride of the country, were trying to save themselves. Some of them tried to cross the sealed borders and were caught; others even tried to pretend they were communists. But when they had to fulfill the communists' mission, they couldn't do it right. And they were murdered in jails and in the Danube-Black Sea Canal camp, the Bicz hydroelectric power plant camp, the Salva Vișeu camp, in the Bărăgan camp and many others, and during that time a few hundred thousand perished, perhaps more than a million.

Friday, September 28, 1990

The attacks on the newspaper are increasingly violent. We are being sued by the government for the second time. The crime? We dared to privatize the newspaper; it no longer belongs to the government, like any property of the former communist state. After the two job assignments in July-August (Strasbourg and Washington, DC), the smokescreen covering my eyes went away. We, the former group of dissidents who privatized the newspaper and made it inquisitive, are tolerated and at the same time blocked from bringing to life any concrete initiative; we are encouraged to travel, to accept invitations, and in this way to leave the stage empty. Some Western leaders believe that only the former communist

elites can rebuild the country. I understand that the future capitalist elite will be born from today's post-communist aristocracy, the only ones who have access to the business channels tied to European corporations.

Is fake privatization an original way of destroying independents like us and encouraging the communist elite? Real privatization would destroy this demagogic, regressive, opportunistic system just waiting for an occasion to become repressive. Officials from the National Bank and the Ministry of Finance who supported the privatization of the newspaper were transferred or retired, and those left are waiting to be fired. It is chaos; all around flood accusations of extremism. Each one rants using rhetoric full of words like collaborator, traitor, turncoat, sold to foreign interests.

Sunday, September 30, 1990, morning

We are accused by the government's newspapers of being multimillionaires, and that our newspaper was illegally privatized. It is said that we are paid in dollars by the CIA, by those who want to "destabilize" the country, etc., while I barely have money to pay for my food and cabs (I always come home very late from the editorial offices, I'm afraid to walk alone on the streets; I don't want to get hit in the head with a stone or be raped by a group of *Securitate* thugs).

The National Bank hesitates to give us an answer, though Decree 54 clearly shows the legality of our privatization. The trend is to have us financially strangled, scared, fucked. Every day dirtier attacks. Beginning with Tuesday we have no more paper to print the newspaper. The paper mills are owned by the government. The printing workers threaten that they will not work for us. The printing plant is also owned by the government.

During the evening, our group gathered for a short meeting; we see clearly now how the others work for our destruction. In fact, the neocommunist government wants to keep one of us and fire the rest of the group, after which the newspaper will have to head towards a fake and shameful independence from the government's policy. We tried to reorganize and make some decisions. Who would have thought that one of us made a pact with the president of the country and that his girlfriend is the connecting link between the two? But, I wonder, how did the one who brought us this news find out? Does he perhaps want to compromise the other one? And why? The reality is that we've come to suspect each other, I have anyone to trust again. I feel alone, without any sincere ally. On whom to rely, when it is rumored that the most incorruptible in our group has betrayed us? And yet ...

I came home at a quarter to nine at night; I was undressing when I felt a shudder: a new earthquake. Although I knew that it was a 6 on the Richter scale, I was too tired to run out of the building; I took a sleeping pill, but still I could not sleep. If we are defeated, I have no choice but to die or to leave the country. Yesterday, reporters from the BBC wanted to shoot

in the newspaper governing board's meeting room, but the sound did not come out well; they detected a jam. They discovered that in the room conference table was a hidden microphone. We are still under the surveillance of the government's secret agents. We know for a fact that the office phones and those at home are still being tapped.

Tuesday, October 2, 1990, early morning

Last night the TV's political news broadcast a statement from the government. This text characterized our newspaper as a tool to "destabilize the press of the whole country." During the same evening the newspaper was attacked twice on national TV, a way to set, to whet everybody against us. Also announced last night: the establishment of a parliamentary commission to investigate our newspaper, *Romania Libera* – Free Romania.

Recently, national television started to broadcast confessions and testimonies of some famous former communists, who tell us how much they opposed Ceausescu, why they were dissidents during Ceausescu's regime ... et cetera.

What if I am guilty for not conveying my message to readers? The word is the sublimate of a vast territory haunted by storms of vagueness: the inner thoughts of my soul, mind, consciousness and unconscious. How hard it is to choose particular sounds that become words, arranged in a morphology and syntax that might be understood by others! And to rearrange them in the language's written code, serving the interests of a configuration that has been called aesthetic! The vague amalgam packed in words listens to the writing code and syntax as such, as well as to aesthetic procedures; what of my inner self remains or passes to the reader after being packaged and repackaged so many times, after going through phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and aesthetic nodes? I am not sure anymore.

With all the paperwork in order, Angela ran to Ron's office. The three partners and Danny, one of the law firm's young associates, were discussing the Brendon case. On the desk, the floor, and the walls were spread papers, diagrams, and the accident's layouts. Angela hurried out of Ron's office; Leslie needed help for a client from Little Italy.

She had been interviewed at the law firm of Goldenberg, Goodman & Greenberg on Bogdan's recommendation. Known in lawyer circles not only in Queens but also in Manhattan, Bogdan was a friend of Eugene Goodman. The partners of the law firm were elite lawyers; they had garnered large awards for their plaintiff clients in past years.

"Why are you in New York City?" one of the partners asked.

"I fled from my country."

"Do you mean they kicked you out into exile?"

"I prefer to think that I condemned them to stay there."

The interview with Ron Goldenberg and Eugene Goodman was short. They needed someone who knew some Italian, French, and Russian. Angela had learned Russian in school, but she hated it

frantically, for she identified it with communism and the Soviet occupation. Now the language of Pushkin somehow saved her life. In addition, the fact that she knew a little Spanish was not bad. The secretaries were from Puerto Rico, Colombia, and Peru, and much office talk was in Spanish or in an English-Spanish called “Spanglish” that she had tried to understand.

From early on, she realized that she had to struggle not only with the novelty of work in a law firm on Broadway and with the English language, but also with the hostility of the Latina women, each of them a mixture of Spanish and aboriginal. They were annoyed by her presence, an educated European white woman. Therefore, they had decided to humiliate her, as if to retaliate on behalf of generations of South Americans oppressed by Europe’s conquerors. Every day they loaded her with more and more. At one point the pace of work became so inhuman that she would have given anything just to sit in a chair for only one minute to pull her soul together. It was like a torture technique: if she sat for a second one of the secretaries or a receptionist would say, “Are you tired? Too bad, you have to do this” or “go there immediately.” But hardest to endure had been the hatred; she had suffered under that intense hatred. She had read in medieval Japanese novels that hate could kill.

“I cannot do anymore what I am asked to do. I resign.” One day she’d stopped Ron in the middle of the main hall in which the seven secretaries had their cubicles and desks arranged in a semicircle. At the end of her physical resources, she was afraid she would fall down with each step. She had been ordered to organize thousands of files thrown into the building’s basement, in dust, damp, mold, pestilential smells. She’d fainted there, she could not breathe. When the secretaries and receptionists learned about this, they called her Cinderella in derision.

“Have I ever complained about you?” Ron was not blind, he knew very well what was happening, but he could not interfere. Outside his room, the office was the territory of the Latin American secretaries. He needed them not because they were irreplaceable, but because they were immigrants paid half of what a native-born American would get. And besides, three of them knew quite a lot about the firm’s not-so-clean business.

Angela gulped air as if it was her last breath. “I cannot handle the work given to me anymore.”

“Do you want to learn?” Ron asked almost in a whisper.

“I need a chance,” she had tried to defend herself. She felt dead. Her dream was to sit for a few seconds. In fact, she did not even have a chair; her place was somewhere under the rubble in the library undergoing renovation.

“Stay here and learn,” Ron raised his voice to be heard in the office. The phones rang, but no one picked up to answer; the receptionists had put all lines on hold. Each of those present wanted to witness the firing of the European woman, to savor and to remember every word.

“You were not hired here to work for others. Do what I say. Go on, move!” In the brief span of that discussion, Ron had been called by a bunch of lawyers, representatives of insurance companies, clients, detectives. One of the receptionists, eager to be closer to the action, handed to Ron a note listing everyone who’d called him. He gave it to Angela.

“Get them on the phone for me,” Ron ordered, and rushed to his office. She hesitated; she was forbidden to answer the phone, for her heavy accent and the way she spoke were not up to the standards of a law office in the heart of New York City.

“What are you doing?” she heard back then Ron shouting at her. And she understood that Ron had deciphered her message, and that she had won.

In the coming days, Lilian began to write words on bits of paper and clarify their pronunciation; Leslie explained the meanings of the mysterious abbreviations written on files, earning Angela a raise of \$25 per week; Rosemarie allowed Angela to use her computer after office hours to do homework for the class Angela attended twice a week. She quickly learned the formulas for the letters, message types, how to write an address and how to fold a letter in America. Actually, she began with what was natural for others: how to open a door or a window, how to dress for the office, lunch, or weekend, what to answer when she was asked, how to address friends on Friday and Monday, and so on.

“You are efficient, don’t kill yourself.” Leslie told her one day in a tone of reproach. Sometimes she was too fast, which affected the overall pace of work in the office. However, her task load was increasing. Sometimes she was so weary that she took refuge in the restful flow of her native tongue. This happened especially in her first weeks of work there. “Listen to what you are told! Where is your mind?” One day Leslie’s congested face brought her back to reality. “You don’t listen to what you are told, and you make mistakes,” Leslie shouted. “Listen and execute; are you ill? Go home!” This meant one day’s pay less on her weekly check.

She discovered she did not know how to listen. In the world she came from, everyone talked at the same time, no one listened carefully to what the other said; each one was listening to himself. It was a world of autism. So she practiced with patience “how to listen and pay attention to the other person’s words until the end of the message” without interrupting, regardless of what was said. She reserved the right to express her opinion at the end of the other’s message. And she was surprised to discover that she was intolerant and negativistic.

“All criminals should be executed!”

One morning those words came out of her mouth without much thought. The discussion had concerned the trial of a young man who had been accused of killing his parents, he actually killed them, and had been found not guilty. He was acquitted for lack of evidence. Everybody in the office was interested in this case.

“This outcome had been decided by the court and the grand jury. Here we do not have a European legal system, a civil law legal system where all facts of life are judged according to a code. In this country it’s the other way around: every person is tried in the context of the committed acts, and of precedent, of similarly committed acts and similar cases recorded by justice; this is called *stare decisis*, the foundation of the common-law legal system. The law is not above the individual, but vice versa,” replied Danny, one of the young lawyers.

Danny opened a book at a page displaying a sort of diagram: the political structure of the American state. It didn’t look like a pyramid with a president governing from the top; rather, different, separate powers, which helped each other and watched each other, gravitated around the Constitution. She read the fundamental law of the land with all its amendments and she could not believe her eyes: the document stipulated only rights, not interdictions! That huge country was governed by only a few pages!

“Don’t be stupid,” Danny brought her to reality. “Don’t be naive. Democracy means money and connections. If you don’t have them you are nobody.”

“Are you saying that it’s a sharks’ world?” It was what she had learned in school about capitalism.

“It’s not a heaven,” Danny snorted, going back to a big file, a case he won in court a few days later for a large sum.

When she first arrived in New York City she had wanted to tell everybody on the streets: “Be happy, you live in the most wonderful world on earth, you don’t know what unhappiness looks like!” But she saw people all around – in the office, on the streets, in supermarkets – with an expression of uncertainty and deep worry on their faces. Soon she found out that their stress was not related to phone calls listened to by the secret police, death threats, the stagnation of the totalitarian state, but to high taxes, money owed to banks, job uncertainty, retirement, and the price of doctors’ visits. How to get enough money for vacation or one million dollars in the bank for retirement—the amount an American needed to feel safe—were related issues.

Depressed and useless and insecure again; insomnia, the absence of friends, the difficulty of communicating herself to others, were the names of the new stress. She missed her former colleagues’ conversation. In the law office people talked only about weather, children, men, lovers. She had tried one morning to start a discussion with Jonathan about a new movie in the theaters, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, but it was rough. The boss was used to communicating with his employees only through commands; she was allowed to say only “O.K.,” “of course,” “yes,” “right away.”

And on top of it all, it was the poverty, the pressure of expensive English courses, and daily needs of life. A medical visit cost her pay check for a week of work. The law firm had a health benefit plan, but she was too insignificant to be a part of it. More and more often she had the feeling that she had become a character in a text she couldn’t understand. What had been written in the next chapter? No idea; but she was curious to find out as each day led to the next page. How many pages would she be able to withstand?

Gradually, she had come to understand that hardship, the objective degree of suffering and humiliation, did not determine the height of a personal experience, but rather the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of a person. In other words, the amplitude of the outward tragic was somehow not as central as that of the soul and the mind. Nevertheless, beyond a certain level of suffering, reflection became impossible. In the struggle for biological survival, the instinct for self-preservation gave up critical analysis. She went through this stage; during that time she lost the ability to analyze and to construe. Prayer had been the only savior of the numb mind in the harsh months of adapting to a new language, world, and job. The healing, switching back to the reflective, became possible first by the recovery of inner time, and then by the revival of her second inner voice, when the monologue had again become a dialog.

Ron called her name again. Fleeing to him, Angela stumbled on Leslie’s desk, but as usual she did not feel the blow. Ron’s voice was beyond any known tune.

“Where the hell is that damn report?”

Ron madly shook his head, clutching the handle of his stuffed briefcase in the middle of the office. He was truly convinced that everyone was working sloppily that day, and that no one feared him

anymore. Angela found the report in the chaos of papers and folders on his desk. He snatched it from her and vanished, slamming the door behind him.

“A crying baby,” Leslie branded him in cold blood. Although her bullet-riddled desk had not been changed yet, she behaved as if nothing was wrong, with an enviable indifference. She naturally defied everything, as if this was the essence of her being. Dressed so provocatively that Angela could not look at her without embarrassment, showing how hungry she was for a man, Leslie consciously displayed her charms and astonishing femininity; in Angela’s eyes, Leslie was in many ways close to Eula Varner, Faulkner’s character.

“A hole in the ass,” Rosemarie added in fractured English-Spanish.

“Stupid,” Leslie concluded. She threw back a tress of her rich, long hair. Everyone laughed. Suddenly, an air of freedom took over the office. Someone rushed to open a window for fresh air and warmth from outside to enter. All the attorneys were away, so each of them could have a peaceful lunch.

It had been a real luxury to be able to walk away at lunch break, for nobody could really take that time off. Lilian advised Angela to go to Brooklyn afterwards, and not to overdramatize Jonathan’s orders; he was not supposed to come back from court, although he was unpredictable. One of his sneaky pleasures was to eavesdrop, to listen from the outside to what happened and was discussed in the office.

Angela slipped into the street’s crowd. She called Peter to let him know they could meet today. Peter was still working nearby at City Hall, while preparing to leave America for good and return to Romania.

The hot and humid air struck a blow to the lungs, eyes, faces, and skins of all those who ventured out on Broadway at noon. On the sidewalk in front of Stark’s Restaurant a vendor sold books for a dollar. Around Sun’s Deli and Salad Bar the street smelled of perfumes and deodorant. Near McDonald’s, on the corner of Thomas Street, a Hindu man displayed a showcase of exotic perfumes and essences. At the other end, at the intersection with Worth Street, a tropical fruit stall was hardly hidden by a giant parasol. Lawyers, with heavy briefcases equipped with sophisticated locks, swarmed around the imposing building of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In front of Roy Rogers and Deli Agora, crowds of people were waiting in line to get in to have lunch. Angela moved toward Worth Street, then onto Church Street. Near the New York School of Law she turned left, came back onto Thomas, passed the AT & T Building, and entered the Rama Café. To save time, she ordered salad and coffee. She had already sipped from her coffee when Peter arrived. On his way to the table he asked the waiter for a plate of fish and shellfish.

“It’s on me,” he said. “You are my guest.” He was neat: fresh haircut, his face shaved, an elegant suit; the look of a man prepared for a business lunch. He placed the briefcase on his lap, to have it handy. Although he was of medium height and stocky Peter seemed tall. He kept his body straight, displaying the hardcore agility of a tennis player.

“Did you meet Corbu?” asked Peter.

Angela had the impression that Peter gave her an ironic look.

“Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow I’m meeting Nicolette.” She shook her shoulders elusively.

“He is in Manhattan today,” Peter said casually. “Tonight, around eight, he will attend a party at the Marriot Hotel downtown, it is a function of the United Nations and the State Department, something like that.”

“I thought you had his home address,” Angela replied, disappointed.

Peter opened an address book in front of her to a page with a street address in Chicago, which Angela copied. Meanwhile, the waiter brought their orders. Angela pushed a yellow envelope in front of Peter. He took it quietly, and searched its contents. There were letters, addresses, and phone numbers of the most trusted people Angela still counted on in her former country; Peter would see them or only talk to them on the phone while in Bucharest. He seemed pleased with what he found in the envelope and hid it in the leather briefcase still on his lap.

“Today you look hot,” he muttered, eating with great appetite.

The purple silk dress molded to her body gave Angela’s skin a shade of extra softness and youth. But she wasn’t dressed for Peter’s taste. He liked provocative women in skinny-leg pants and low-cut blouses, deep beneath which he could guess was black lace underwear. He actually wanted her as a business partner. From his point of view, Angela was wasting her time in New York on ridiculous things instead of thinking about how to make big money. Because Peter had left Romania during his childhood, he laughed off Angela’s stories about communism, far less real and alarming to him than his own failure to do anything serious in America. Eastern Europe now looked to him like a gold mine he wanted to exploit to the last lode.

“You don’t have a crush on me, do you?” Angela’s laughter came in a staccato burst. Her taste in men was different; she looked for an intelligent man, she did not pay much attention to physical beauty. Peter boasted incessantly about his athletic body and had always tried to appear smart, but he was only mediocre.

“Why not?” Peter fixed his colorless eyes on hers.

“Why would you?” Angela challenged Peter.

“To make you go back together with me to Romania.”

For many months Peter had repeated this sentence, a sort of message from those she believed he secretly worked for, who wanted her **there** and not **here**. It wasn’t anything new. During the first months after her arrival in the United States, those she considered friends who, as she learned later, worked more or less openly for the U.S. State Department or for the political regime of her former country advised her directly either to return or to commit suicide. However, to return had not been an option, but just another formula of committing suicide.

Diary

Monday, October 8, 1990

I don’t feel safe. Three earthquakes one after another shook Bucharest, and meantime the human misery all around, the feeling of futility, the lack of allies, the grand political battle just beginning, the inability to continue my book—all of these have alienated me from everything around me and from myself. I don’t know what I am or who I am. I just know that I have a duty to the time I live in, but the battle’s dimension scares me as well as its

slowness, the sluggishness of good things to happen, the new restrictions on the freedom won. Even the idea of revolution agonizes; as it's clearer than ever that we were the victims of an illusion. It was merely a coup. A government newspaper, *Dimineața* (the Morning), demands that one of our group should be jailed; this editorial was published in the Saturday and Sunday editions. The accusation of treason is based on the assumption that in one of his articles he disclosed many secrets of the former secret police!

Wednesday, October 10, 1990

The tone of articles in the newspaper has become softer. An entire page dedicated to "Mr." President of the country has been published. Even the government's print media did not do that! To keep a sort of balance, I published, on the last page of that issue, an article about how badly the progress of democracy in Romanian society is ranked in the West. Tia is boiling, too. We argue with Uncu now over almost every article. Petrică is soft, he gets inflamed quickly, but he gets over it quickly, he forgets to put decisions into practice, and I do not know why I suspect him of hurting Uncu. Is it possible that P. could be the true turncoat among us? The issue of who should be in charge of the department of foreign affairs stays unresolved. Florin prepares to go to Paris, and Petrică—visiting a country on I have no idea what continent—asks us to have patience.

Did Cunesu betray? I cannot believe it. But the Social Democratic Party betrayed the country in 1946, allying with the communists and the Soviet occupiers, so today's betrayal would have a precedent. But that's why I find this a false rumor: the SPD's leader cannot make the same error twice! Mihăiescu assured me that this is true, but I know him to be an old and loyal collaborator of the secret police, the *Securitate*. There is talk in town that the SDP wants to exclude Cunesu, as being bought and compromised by the National Salvation Front (NSF), the neocommunist governing party. I know that the NSF desperately needs the SPD to legitimize itself on the political stage. Is it possible that history would repeat itself to such a degree?

On Monday I received a blow to the head. I went to the printing house to see the cover of my new book in the printing stage, but even though the manuscript arrived there in July, it was not found, it wasn't even recorded anywhere. I smelled that something was wrong. Today I learned that linotype workers, who had come to the newspaper's editorial offices on June 14 to lynch us, refused to work on my book. They had even tried to destroy my manuscript, which was saved by the head of the department. However, they smashed all the pages already prepared for printing. An additional warning? The manuscript was transferred to the monotype department, where workers have a more conciliatory attitude. In other words, the workers refused to work on my book of literary criticism because I am writing against the communist nomenklatura?

Monday, October 15, 1990

As I supposed, Cunesu's issue is far more complicated. Obviously someone wants to

compromise him. It is not difficult to understand who, this is already happening to any outstanding personality from the opposition. My friend the senator, my eyes and ears in the Parliament, swears on the Bible for Cunescu. And I have to believe him; otherwise I do not know whom to trust.

For some reason, the newspaper's accountant did not want to reimburse me for the train tickets to Craiova, where I went to write about a strike. I came home as usual at seven in the evening. Water did not flow through the pipes for three days, so I carried a few buckets of water from the ground level to the ninth floor. I carried them up the stairs because the elevator was broken. I made a salad for myself. I then tried to sleep, but phone calls began. Ruxandra from Zurich tells me that the newspaper's articles are softer and that someone is betraying us, that behind CADA—a group of democratic military officers—lies General Militaru, involved in the coup of 1989; that NSF is doing all it can to persuade the opposition members to leave the country, and that we do not have to please them under any circumstances. I told her that we do not want to stupidly go out on a limb because the West wants us to act like dragons, and that when we can no longer resist, then each of us will decide what to do. She acted very upset. Actually, I am advised by a lot of people who call me from Washington, DC, New York, and Paris to be tough, uncompromising, to strike without mercy. Easy to say when you live in the United States, France, and Switzerland. We are doing even more than is humanly possible, but everyone outside the country tries to pull the chestnuts out of the fire with our hands.

Another scandal broke out in the newspaper offices: we found out that someone deletes anything offensive related to the president of the country from any article. This is done on the articles' way to the typesetter. The meeting of the Board of Directors lasted all afternoon, no concrete decisions taken. Exhausted, I could not stay till the end. I did not realize that the "others" who remained there were a majority, and took the opportunity to pass a silly decision on a clean vote.

I'm getting more and more letters that predict my physical disappearance, imprisonment, etc. Before I did not give them any importance, they even amused me, but now I am increasingly worried. I sleep with barred doors and windows, and walking on the street I feel insecure. My home phone rings hysterically at night, and I hear voices that emit incomprehensible sounds, or ask me if I am still alive. The editorial phones are flooded with curses and ugly threats.

Thursday, October 18, 1990

I am worried about the betrayal's growing proportions. Is death the change I hoped for? It seems that we damage everything, absolutely everything. Lady Moscovici from the Social Democrats called me; she was stunned by the amount of lies Sorin wrote in the newspaper. Some people suspect Sorin of being an agent infiltrated into our offices by the *Securitate*. Besides, the massive infiltration by the former secret police, right now found under a different name, SRI (Romanian Intelligence Service), is not just in our editorial offices, but

also in all the opposition parties. I warned Petrică about it long ago, but he asked me to shut up. We live a tragic confusion; a historical misfortune. We cannot put a stone on a stone. Did we forget how to build? I read and write about C. Rădulescu-Motru, the Romanian philosopher, psychologist, and sociologist who died in the '50s. Is it possible that we cannot connect in any way to Western civilization even in circumstances where history enables us to do it? And speaking of today, to what Western civilization? To the one of Common Market centralism, led by a small group of bureaucrats and politicians deciding over the heads of the national parliaments? Are we cursed to be a hybrid oscillating between East and West, unhappy on either of the two sides? At first we followed the models of the Orient with a sort of Balkanization, encouraging those who wanted to get rich through stealing, pilferage, deceptive strategies, lies, overindulging in booze, and foolish talk; and after that we diligently imitated the West; and then followed forty-five years of barbarian communism. What is the fate of a people who have been brainwashed for half a century?

October 21, 1990, Sunday evening at 9 p.m.

No running water again for the past four days, and the well down on the street has water only between certain hours. Everything smells, it is a nightmare of bad odors.

I cough; I cannot recover from the flu. Cold, cold, suddenly. Loneliness disorients me, I feel incapable and defeated. I asked Ruxandra from Zurich and others from the U.S.A. to help us send the children of the most politically at-risk abroad. Somewhere, to a boarding school, for a year, until things calm down here. But no one did anything. We fear for children's lives after an assassination attempt on my colleague Tia's boy. Meanwhile I read, I write. I am trying to survive. I do not understand why, but again I'm losing the meaning of life. And why fight? Do I have anything to fight for? It is as if I see the golden apple but I cannot reach for it because my hands are tied. I feel severely punished, I feel stupid, incapable, miserable. How long will this punishment last? I have nothing in life; only writing mornings at my desk; just me, I and myself.

I have completed all my editorial responsibilities; Friday I was on duty until midnight. During that evening Ms. Moscovici came to my office. She told me about disgusting hidden political maneuvers, about the greed for power of the opposition leaders, elders who want everything only for themselves, to devour everything! It is true that they suffered, some of them jailed in communist prisons, but that put a mark on them for life. We cannot count on them, they are biologically disqualified. Nobody wants a country's future decided by traumatized octogenarians. On top of it, everybody around sees only betrayal. Is it betrayal of all of us? Nothing connects to nothing in this universal suspicion. I do not understand what is happening, perhaps because I am too tired and depressed. I think I should start another path in my personal life. Apparently, everything I built is crooked. Stop writing? Sink into total anonymity? Become a manicurist, a cleaning lady, a taxi driver? Practice asceticism, and repress my true self, because I am as if in muddy water? What is the solution? Why do I not know what to do? I am thinking about my American experience during the summer, of my

published interviews that got a lot of feedback, but I actually feel as if I was a museum specimen, or a circus actor, I don't know how to take it. "Step right up, people, step right up to see the still-alive journalist from Eastern Europe!" Everyone wants information, but no one cares about what might happen to me here. And why would they care? Each one of them there is for himself in a sickening selfishness.

Wednesday, October 24, 1990

The former party activists of the media have leadership positions again; the descendants or followers of Ceaușescu's regime act in an indestructible unison. As far as I predict, the economy might take a tribal turn; it begins to be awarded slice by slice, in other words, it enters with official papers into the ownership of nomenklatura and secret police families. Privatization will be slow, mainly to give them time to buy more, more, and more. Personal interests and not national interests are interconnected in a solid, unwavering communist administrative network.

Yesterday I attended the meeting of the Romanian Television Union; babel of requests for houses and other favors from the government, nonsense. They ask the government to give them all of these while claiming absolute independence from the government's policy. I got angry and told them openly how ridiculous they are. The only normal issue was the union protest against the broadcast on the national channel two days ago of a lengthy series about the rehabilitation of the communist secret police.

Sunday, October 28, 1990

The anti-totalitarian forums gathered in Cluj discuss again the eighth issue of the *Proclamation from Timișoara*: whoever held political office before the Revolution should not have access to the political life of the country, thus asking for the resignation of the President of the country and many of his cabinet. Meanwhile, the new board of directors of Continental TV, where I am a member, has been approved. I know nothing about this, but I was elected, I have no idea why.

People again look submissive, they accept everything. The undercover secret police members in the editorial offices are more aggressive and try to hire more people of their own. The conflict with Bessarabia is boiling—Republic of Moldova—and the alleged Gagauz republic. I'm sure other similar conflicts will follow. I fear a political game aimed at Transylvania. In fact, nationalism is the best secret police diversion. Florin returned from France, and he told me that there they talk openly about the stagecraft to which we are subjected by the palace coup. Petrică returned from Italy with faxes and computers. As someone said, let's see who is going to use them ...

Monday, November 5, 1990

In University Plaza more antigovernment meetings that do not produce leaders take place. The opposition parties are weak; their protests, their parliamentary fights are insignificant

in the political balance of power.

Thursday, November 8, 1990

Last night, hundreds of policemen with shields, helmets, weapons patrolled University Plaza and the boulevards. At 10 p.m. the President spoke on the country's main television channel of "media which destabilize the country." The Parliament tried to vote against granting special powers to the government, but the vote was postponed until Monday. Meanwhile, the ruling party senators and deputies will be brainwashed. They feared a negative vote.

Tuesday, November 13, 1990

Lunch at the Israeli Embassy in Bucharest together with my newspaper's old friends and colleagues. "It is difficult to be a Romanian in Romania," the ambassador said. The ambassador is amazed that, despite the harsh political conditions, our newspaper continues to exist. He toasted us and the independent media. He invited us to visit Israel. After lunch, Florin invited me to assist in covering a Parliament session, but it was impossible to enter the building. My journalist ID and the fact that I was joining an accredited colleague from the same publication did not matter. The head of the Parliament security building did not allow me to enter. It had been easier to get into the U.S. Congress! However, today Parliament gave the Government special powers for six months. And another novelty that brings us to the concentration of power in one single hand: SRI (the continuation of the former secret police) is directly subordinated to the Presidential power.

Thursday, November 15, 1990

At 2:30 p.m. we met at Palace Plaza (now Revolution Plaza). After an hour, the protest march started: from Plaza Victoriei (where the building hosting the government was mute) along Magheru Boulevard to University Plaza, and from there back to Palace Plaza. There were more than two hundred thousand people. We shouted "Government out," "Communism out," slogans against the President and the Prime Minister. I found that some of the demonstrators were deeply shaken, while others seemed ironic, acting as if it was all a joke. Sometimes the atmosphere was as relaxed as a party. A huge crowd, perhaps more numerous than that of the 22nd of December, 1989. I arrived home with a broken heart. Basically, I don't see any political results. Braşov's meeting also incriminated the new dictatorship, the government ruling through decrees, the fact that the country is led by the second echelon of the nomenklatura in accord with the *Securitate* (the former repressive secret police). We talk in vain; we have nobody in the higher levels of the new political power structure, taken over by the communists. I am asking myself: What will be the solution? As for me, to keep on writing, knowing that nowhere in the world have writers and thinkers ever gained or given a thing by mixing into politics? Politics humiliated them, pulled them down. I continue writing my novel, a love story I work on snatching moments here and there for more than a

year; it's about an artist, a gifted opera singer in a totalitarian society. I'm afraid to talk about this project; my colleagues and my friends would consider me completely crazy.

Saturday, November 17, 1990

The general political atmosphere is negatively recharged. Phone calls and threatening letters are flowing in a tone of unprecedented violence. The Communist Party had been officially reestablished under the leadership of a prominent member of the former central committee, an intimate of the former dictator. A new protest march is suggested. For what?

Friday, November 23, 1990, 7 a.m.

Yesterday Virgil Măgureanu, the chief of SRI, acknowledged that our phones are tapped, our letters intercepted, against the law, but he said that he has no idea who is doing it! "We are trying to find the culprit," he declared, asking Parliament for support. How not to lose my temper hearing his cynical statement?

The 15-year-old boy who disappeared during the miner invasion is another case. His mother was told by a nurse that he had been admitted to the Jilava prison dispensary on the 14th of June. She insisted on looking for her disappeared son, and we helped her by publishing her desperate letters. She said she had received threatening phone calls: if she did not stop her quest, her other two children would disappear! Unfortunately I know how it is to become an "unidentified corpse."

I feel as if I am living in an obscure world, or worlds acting in parallel. Yesterday, one of the closest collaborators of the dictator, a recognized executioner of Romanian culture, came in asking our editorial board to publish a protest by the recently established Romanian Communist Party! When I saw him, I almost vomited. His place is in jail! For any normal mind, his place is in jail!

Friday, December 4, 1990

In crystal clear Stalinist language, SRI, the Security Intelligence Service, gave a statement last night to the news agency Rompres, stating that the newspaper *România Liberă*, "Free Romania," is misinforming the population, like foreign agents of espionage. The Romanian Intelligence Service accused us of being spies and traitors to the motherland; virtually from now on any one of us can be thrown in prison. It was a very serious and very long accusation. During the morning meeting of the board for tomorrow's issue, I suggested a counter-response to the SRI accusations, but Petrică was against it. I pressed, squeezed him with questions, but he did not want to tell us what he knows, why this decision. What *does* he know? During the same evening, on the main TV channel, the government spokesman attacked *România Liberă*. We were also crucified by the leader of one of the opposition parties, who, in an interview in France, described us as "intellectuals with a skin-deep cultural education and high political ambitions."

A furious wind of madness passes at Romanian television. The boos coming from the

studios were heard during the prime-time news. It was the technical workers' way of protesting because the board of TVR did not allow them to broadcast a video clip of the union leader on a hunger strike.

The rhetoric of change, I discover, is pure demagoguery, used mainly to convince the West that we are headed toward democracy, in order to get money from Western institutions. The reality is that we have only communist institutions; the administration is communist with a democratic appearance. The strikes, the only means of social protest, have a disastrous economic effect, and they actually enforce the outcome desired by the real power behind the scenes: to compromise even the idea of the free market by any means. The long strikes bring economic chaos and poverty. Freedom of the press could also be converted into a familiar saying about barking dogs and the unconcerned passerby ...

Friday, December 7, 1990

Cold, snow, I am hardly able to get home late evenings, the entire city lies between my office and my home. It takes me about one and a half hours one way, and waiting for the bus in the cold makes me sick. This is one of the punishments for being on the blacklist; the favorites of the former regime live close to the newspaper building, built in the Stalinist style and formerly called "The House of the Spark," now renamed the Press House.

We are provided with documents I would never publish; they look like counterfeits or simply provocations. Uncu and Băcanu do not want to disclose their sources. I feel we are being maneuvered by one side of the former secret police against the other side, or are they just playing with us? Everything looks mysterious, nobody assumes any responsibility. It outrages me to make public the secret file of an opponent of the communist regime by publishing his recorded conversations with his former lover, while his wife is alive and could have a stroke reading the newspaper. This is a way of compromising him, not praising him by proving that the secret police were listening to his conversations! Another case I had in my hands is the file of a famous supporter of the dictator, poet Adrian Păunescu, allegedly under secret police surveillance; this is a way of laundering his public image!

A distant acquaintance and friend of the newspaper arrived in my office and told me cynically, "You might make a beautiful corpse ..." All my friends call and urge me to "take care of myself." How?

The strike by drivers, doctors, teachers, students. The army issued a public statement against our newspaper.

In a magazine of the opposition an interview appeared with a politician from Washington, DC, who said that among the personalities who impressed the US Congress (the fourth person on his list) is myself.



A heterogeneous group crossed the hall and headed to one of the elevators. Angela followed them. The party Peter had told about at lunch was announced on a board in the lobby. To those who had seen

her waiting in the lobby of the Marriott Hotel, Angela seemed to be a businesswoman awaiting her business partner. She was dressed in a short-sleeved black suit made of a cool material. Her makeup was carefully done. She had chosen as accessories a necklace with matching bracelet and earrings, a gold-plated imitation, but one that looked real. In her purse she had a defensive Mace spray and a small camera. As a precaution, she told Fred where she was going, and why.

The two bodyguards at the entrance of the Astor Ballroom on the seventh floor stepped aside respectfully in front of the group. Angela thought she had gotten past the danger when suddenly one of the women in the group stopped her.

“Media,” Angela showed her international journalist’s ID.

“And your invitation?” The woman was carefully reading her identity card.

“Mr. Corbu invited me personally,” Angela said in the same neutral tone.

The place was full of guests. She was worrying that she would not get the chance to meet Corbu when a tall man approached the important woman and whispered in her ear. It seemed there was unpleasant news.

“I think you have to go to the oval room,” Angela heard. “They’re meeting there.”

The important woman and the tall man went away. She was directed to a side corridor that was entered through an archway. Crossing the restaurant, Angela felt a vertiginous loss of meaning. Through the huge windows, New York City shone magnificently. She was still not free to enjoy its beauty, obsessed with thoughts and plans that pulled her back toward *there*, although she knew that the time had come to forget, to seek forward, and to start a new life. She blamed herself for not being able to resist *over there*. And this feeling of guilt made her feel like a deserter from a dreamt-of, long-prepared war that had been lost because of events far beyond her will; as if something metaphysical, a sort of conspiracy of evil, opposed everything good over there. Conspiracies that must one day come to an end, because nothing can last forever, not even evil.

She stopped by a smoking area and lit a cigarette; when she was almost ready to give up, from a hidden corner of her mind stormed the strong desire to see the “Red Dog,” the man who, under the first dictator, had terrorized hundreds of thousands of people, looted wealth, sheltered monstrous crimes, organized the personal defense network of the second dictator, was Khrushchev’s friend, killed a significant portion of the political, cultural, religious, and military elite of the country in the labor camp of Dobruja, the region he governed. She was more convinced than ever that the real Corbu—nicknamed K—had died long ago and been replaced with a more efficient agent, to continue the work of destruction in a place where the balance between Eastern hatred and Western (American) egocentrism was more fragile than anyone imagined. Wasn’t it time to convince herself?

She put out the cigarette. Three doors led into the oval salon. She hesitated, then headed to the last door on the right, lined with a velvet curtain, a perfect hideout. In the middle of the room, at a table, were a few people; someone was talking about events in Haiti, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Through the open door the voice of the talkative one suggested that nobody would say one word if the U.S. invaded Haiti. And he was positive that the UN Security Council would not issue any kind of warning resolution.

“But Congress would react negatively,” another one interrupted. There was silence.

“Could you suggest another way?” She heard a question that was hard to answer. “Let’s move to the next subject on the agenda.”

From where she stood, she could not see Corbu, or at least not the man she knew; she guessed he could be one of the three men who stood with their backs to her. She noisily rapped the door, keeping the camera ready. The three men turned their heads, and for a split second she saw Corbu’s profile. It was enough; the camera had done its job. Angela rushed out toward the restaurant. She heard someone behind her, but she did not turn her head. Once in the restaurant she joined the first group she came across. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that the archway and the corridor leading to the oval room were blocked. She asked for a Scotch at the bar, and, holding the glass, she took the elevator up to “The View” on the forty-eighth floor.

The glass tower turned slowly, scanning the metropolis. She lingered a while in the restaurant, pretending to admire the city at night, then returned to the elevator. In the lobby she knew she was being tracked but did not care. She asked one of the porters for a cab. She directed the driver to drive randomly here and there through Manhattan for a while, and then she asked the cab driver to cross the Queens Bridge to Long Island City. The next day she had Corbu’s picture. He looked very young for his real age, it was him and it was not him, but why she felt that way she could not say.

After a few days, Tim came to Goldenberg, Goodman & Greenberg to drive Angela to meet Nicolette. He was surprised that Nicolette had agreed to meet Angela that evening; he was truly perplexed. On the other hand, he wanted to witness the moment when Nicolette had to answer Angela’s annoying questions. As for Angela, although she was concerned about Corbu’s presence in New York City, she had the hunch that Nicolette’s invitation could simply be a way of testing her. Corbu wasn’t easy to catch sight of. It was also possible that by now Corbu was aware of her presence in the Marriot Hotel oval room, which could complicate things.

Nicolette’s apartment was on the East Side, somewhere between Second and Third Avenues, not too far from Fred’s. The smell of willows, poplars’ fluff, the deep green of the street trees before the rain, reminded her, by a bizarre resemblance, of the undercover secret police’s homes in an exclusive borough of Bucharest. Once, walking on Fifty-Ninth Street with Fred—sometimes they ate at Serendipity—she noticed the quiet houses with drawn shutters. “FBI agents and international spies live in them,” Fred explained seriously when she said she would like to live in an apartment on that street.

Behind Tim, who was already ascending the very few stairs in front of Nicolette’s building, Angela had a moment of dizziness, which she credited to the anticipated impact with the past. For a split second she saw Nicolette wearing a red silk blouse, and giving her a robe of the same color. Then she saw herself in that robe, sitting in an armchair in front of a low table, on which stood a book which Nicolette seemed to be reading. Angela paid attention to that image only when she saw Nicolette opening the door. She had read about mental projections. Years ago, a doctor had even tried, during an interview, to take over her mind. First, he sent a sort of image to her mind while she was on her way to meet him—as had happened just now; then, at the end of that conversation, of which she remembered almost nothing—it was the only failed interview of her entire career, even the notes she

had written seemed inconsistent—that doctor confessed that, to his amazement, he could not handle her mentally. In this way, she found out that Comănescu (she had interviewed) had worked with a Russian research group hidden in a small town in Siberia, studying how to influence a person's will from thousands of miles away.

Nicolette's apartment was cold rather than cool, and Tim loudly declared himself happy. The air conditioning in his car was not working well, and he was ready to make the most of this blessed gift. Seated in the first armchair that caught his eye, Tim decided to relax. He did not care that his enormous body overflowed its margins; after all, even fat people had the right to live, huh? Only later, after cooling off, and armed with fresh energy, would he switch to business matters: the money that Nicolette had to pay for the recently sold painting.

“Do you want to cover your shoulders?”

Nicolette handed a red robe over to Angela as if expecting her to ask for it. On the low tray tables around were scattered zodiac charts, books about palm reading, tarot, numerology, and physiognomy.

“Nicolette is a specialist in palmistry and chiromancy,” Tim smacked in admiration, hands on belly, yawning and stretching in a not very polite way. “She is that famous ‘Madame Solange’ whose weekly ads you see in *The New York Times*. She has a cabinet of occult sciences on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, and her customers are only high-class millionaires, movie stars and businessmen.”

A servant brought in a tray with Turkish coffees, cookies and pastries, according to the Eastern European custom. Angela noticed particularly the fine taste of the coffee. Despite all her senses being in alert, she felt comfortable. They chatted about time, avoiding the purpose of the visit, exploring each other prudently, as in a fight in which neither of the combatants wants to act first.

“Would you like a look into your coffee grounds?” Nicolette tempted Angela.

“A great opportunity,” Tim snorted excitedly, “especially since it's free.”

The hesitant outside light, filtered by Venetian blinds, shaped a restful penumbra. All around, a feeling of sad peace, as before the end, embraced things and humans. It was perhaps the feeling of the season, coming from the leaves seared by the savage August sun, from the sky changing its color from purple-blue to topaz, and from the summer-wearied souls of men?

Angela was aware of danger if she allowed Nicolette to do what she'd suggested. The coffee grounds were a pretext to get into her mind and search for those thoughts that held an undeniable premonition of the future. Nicolette could – if she was an initiate for real – not only perceive them, but also change them. However, Angela agreed and prepared the coffee cup by the rules she'd learned in childhood, when her mother and her mother's lady friends had done the same. Once the grounds were swirled and the cup turned face down on a napkin, the coffee grounds running down the cup walls needed a few minutes to dry.

“In the meantime, I'll read the cards,” Nicolette proposed, sitting in an armchair by a low table, opposite Angela.

Angela cut the deck of cards, and after spreading them on the table Nicolette began to look at different arrangements. She talked about past and present, and mentioned a man belonging to a powerful group who knew about Angela, and that she would meet him. She said that floating around Angela were tangled dangers related to foreign events; soon, another significant person would invite

her on a long trip, where she would meet a man she did not know yet. This man would tell her a secret, and soon after he might die.

Nicolette left the cards aside and took the coffee cup with the dried grounds. Angela felt her trying to get into the core of her innermost thoughts, and soon it seemed as if the two of them were wrapped together in a cocoon of energy. She distinguished a sort of a halo around Nicolette's head, which changed color from reddish to violet. After a while she could no longer see anything but her eyes.

"The same things," Nicolette said, slowly moving the cup. "I can see death or something similar close to you. I assume that you'll have an accident, and you might die."

Nicolette's voice, stamped with a sweet, modulating timbre and the grave inflections of a trained mezzo-soprano, seemed to weave time. Angela had been a little girl when she'd first seen Nicolette on the opera stage singing, in *Samson and Delilah*, the poisonously beautiful aria "My heart opens itself to your voice ... " And she knew that if she allowed herself to be entangled in Nicolette's voice, that awful time it was describing would become her future.

She remembered words of Gena's, heard long ago in the middle of a summer, when they had climbed together to the top of the Piatra Craiului Mountain. A few days before, Gena's niece, Venera, the beauty of the village, had gone up that mountain with her husband to celebrate one year of marriage. They loved each other madly. Tired by hours of ascent, they had stopped to eat. Ion stretched out to reach the bottle of wine placed under some bushes to cool, and slipped into the abyss. Venera threw herself after him to catch Ion. He was crushed to pieces on the rocks of the cliff's bottom; the shepherds found him the next day. Venera's free fall instead was stopped by a small tree growing on the slope's rocks; her blue jeans' belt caught on the bush's branches, so she survived. After Ion was taken on his last journey, Aunt Gena knew they had also buried Venera; her soul had fallen apart. After getting to the top of Piatra Craiului, they went deep into the forest to pick herbs to help Venera's soul, and by noon they had arrived in a pristine place, near a cave. From under their feet thousands of springs welled, each one rolling from one waterfall to another, and then, dividing their streams or merging with other waters, they flowed down to the plains or simply disappeared underground again.

"The future is a waterfall followed by other waterfalls. You choose your path among the set of all pathways." Gena stood on a reddish stone, licked by the Dâmbovița River's springs. Now that voice resounded with a powerful clarity in Angela's mind, mixed with the whistling sound of waters rushing and sliding over rocks. But now she wanted to add something she did not know back then: that destiny is the path that somehow opens right in front of you and you're invited to step onto it, even though that path holds the hardest obstacles. What Nicolette was saying was about a path that had nothing to do with hers, and obviously she did not want to choose it. How could she forget Gena's charm for keeping away people like Nicolette? It was in one of her bedroom chests, and in that moment Angela had only one desire: to go home, take out the woven silk cord, and hang it around her neck.

As if tossed by a carousel's speed, Angela could barely distinguish the objects in Nicolette's living room. After a deep breath, she saw herself as a point of light which grew fast. Then everything returned to normal.

The makeup on Nicolette's face was shriveled, her eyes cloudy. She left aside the cup of coffee and

with long and agile fingers pulled a handful of corn from a green leather bag. The sorcerer grains had to invoke those spirits that would tell the future through the geometry of kernels thrown on the table.

During her teen years, when Angela had been initiated into the art of fortune-telling by Aunt Gena, she spent all her summer vacations in a village lost in the Rucăr Mountains, where her parents still had some relatives. It was said that Aunt Gena, whose age no one knew any longer, had been the apprentice of the famous Dokya, the unbeatable master of magic, who, it was said, still lived hidden in the mountains of the north. Back then Angela had played with some sorceries, but soon she noticed that her playful mood, guessing and deducing the futures of other people, brought her bad luck; only wicked things were coming into her life, as if negative energies were clinging to her. That was why she had sworn to forget everything she knew about magic.

The rows of corn kernels were arranged on the table, and Angela made an effort not to look at them. Nicolette was so absorbed by what she saw that Tim – fear inscribed on his face – struggled to hold his body on the armchair. Unconsciously he realized that what he was witnessing was somehow having an effect on him.

Angela had paid for her time of magic with grave mistakes and suffering. Back then she had known nothing about the fight between the positive and negative powers. When Gena showed her how to use quicksilver, mercury, to see and to “modify” the future, she had no idea of the circle into which she had entered. Gena had been so cruel! So careless! She had been only a little girl, trusting her aunt completely! Angela recapped other practices she had witnessed and even helped Gena with as an apprentice: a hen killed at midnight from whose blood they prepared an ointment that could kill any enemy; the hand of a dead person that immersed anyone in cataleptic sleep; the doll pricked with needles or the extract of hemlock heart to destroy an enemy; the elixir of love prepared with the woman in love’s menstrual blood, for the man who did not love her; tiny objects supposed to be hidden in the clothing of the one destined to be bewitched. Two spells were almost impossible to shatter: the extinction of twelve lighted candles in church, while uttering the name of the damned (she was sure this spell had been inflicted on her by the wife of a literary enemy), and the other one, more complicated, the ‘tying of the wedding wreath’, after which the person for whom it was intended could never marry. She suspected that Julie had inflicted it upon her out of sheer malice. She needed more than twenty-eight years of penance to get out from under that curse.

Julie, Gena’s apprentice, confessed how shamelessly she had used spells to marry the one she wanted. Julie was ugly, an obese kind of a monster with tangled hair, uncombed for months, and no teeth in her mouth. She had a smell one could sense when close to her, for she did not like to wash; her armpits had black spots of dirt and sweat, while her husband was handsome and smart, one of the village’s brightest men. And he had eyes only for that treacherous creature. From their marriage two retarded girls were born. Julie knew that it was the punishment for her spells, and she serenely accepted paying with her children’s lives for what she had done. Spells did not bring anything for free; they had always demanded human sacrifice.

Angela saw herself deep in time, while her restless fingers reached her shoulder and scratched it, as always when she was faraway in thoughts. She had not been more than twelve years old when she had accepted Julie’s invitation, unaware of the consequences. Actually, Aunt Gena had urged her not

to refuse Julie, for Julie was getting ready to do something unusual: spells to defeat other spells. A very sick woman from the village had asked them for help; Gena and Julie were convinced that the woman had been the victim of a curse that needed to be quickly removed.

Angela joined Julie in the forest that night, looking for a particular kind of worm that lived in the decaying trunks of trees. They had only a lantern with them. Angela remembered with clarity those white worm-shaped larvae, with myriads of legs and pliers around their jaws, running away from the lantern light so they had to catch them fast. Julie was able to quickly fill a little pouch with those grubs. On their way back home, they collected hemlock by the cemetery fence and grass from three graves. Then, in the summer kitchen in the courtyard, Julie crushed the worms in a bowl. She added herbs and a few drops of blood from a black cat that she killed behind the house. Julie suspected that a potion of mercury mixed with hemlock had been used against that woman. In the end, Julie poured the entire mixture from the bowl on the top of the sick woman's head and began to sing, swinging endlessly around her, mumbling words that were hard to understand.

The village slept in the summer night, and the stars shone with a foreign beauty. From somewhere, a screaming rooster struck midnight. It was cold, but Julie's song shaped a state of heavy heat and drowsiness. During the ceremony, Julie aged suddenly; she seemed almost as old as Gena. Angela could not remember anything else about that night; she had fallen asleep in the summer kitchen packed with magical concoctions, on a plank bed, with Aunt Gena's cats around. A few days after, the sick woman died. Julie's comment was that the woman had come to her too late; by that time no magic could counter those spells.

Angela made a cross on the roof of her mouth with her tongue. She hoped with all her heart that the vain curiosity of her youth had been forgiven. And all of a sudden she remembered more, remembered those crazy nights with Auntie Gena looking for treasures buried in the ground. They sifted ashes in those places where Gena thought she heard the treasure's rattle in the ground; they pressed their ears to stones and listened carefully, or searched the woven shadows in the darkness of night. At dawn, they went to see what was written on the ashes, which animal had left its footprint there; Gena sacrificed a similar animal on that spot, and then they began to dig. In the end, Gena had located a treasure. Angela too had heard the rattle of the chest of gold coins deep in the ground and had seen the flame that was known to appear at night on spots under which treasure was buried. After many plans and much postponement, Gena had decided not to try to get the chest full of gold—perhaps buried sometime during the Ottoman invasions—sunk so deep into the ground that it could not be brought to light by an old woman and a child. Gena asked Angela to swear that she would keep the secret and would dig for the treasure only when she was grown and strong enough to do it. But first she had to sacrifice a goat; this was the animal footprint they had found there. Otherwise Angela would become mute for life. Only that sacrifice could remove the curse, for any treasure buried in the ground was cursed by the one who hid it there.

Nicolette gathered and scattered the corn kernels with anger.

"I cannot see marriage and love, only hatred. Why do you have so much hate in you?"

Her voice became suddenly aggressive, threatening. Surprised by the turn of events, Tim seemed dumbstruck. He gripped the arms of his chair with both hands, as he was afraid he'd slide out of it.

Angela threw the red robe off her shoulders and, with a quick gesture, spread the corn kernels all over the table. Some of them fell on the floor.

“Can I meet Corbu?”

“How do I possibly know? I don’t see anything about it in the cards, coffee grounds, or beans,” Nicolette parried the question.

Angela perceived the true voice of Nicolette and her hidden thoughts as a deep sigh: “If you don’t stop, bitch, you’ll get hurt! Fuck you!”

Abandoning any semblance of politeness, Angela ran from the apartment as if she would die from lack of air. Tim followed without comment, while Nicolette angrily twisted the key in the door behind them. In the car, Tim seemed reluctant to start the engine; in his fingers he turned over and over the check that Nicolette had thrown at him, actually onto the floor, as he was on his way out. He’d almost had to get down on his knees to get it.

“This is a devilish full-fledged witch, I am sure now,” he said, panting, as a consolation for the humiliation he’d endured and an excuse for Angela’s behavior. “Fuck her! I cannot understand how this woman deceives everyone.”

During the following nights, horrible nightmares haunted Angela. She woke up more tired than before she had gone to sleep. A sequence invariably occurred: someone, behind whom she sensed the devil, asked her to solve a riddle; her life depended on the answer. She had always found the answer, but she could not say how. There were paradoxes, and illogical questions, and her interrogator, who in her last dream had been a ticket seller at a bus station, had always said, smiling, “We’ll see who wins next time.”

Another nightmare was that she went to visit her former country and they held her there and could not return to America. When she told Tim about that dream, Angela was surprised by his response: “All immigrants have that same nightmare. If you start dreaming like that, being stuck there, it means you are more relaxed, you are adapting well.”

The truth was that what had happened in Nicolette’s apartment - that mixture of magic with the violent attempt to break into the privacy of her inner thoughts - troubled Angela more than she wanted to admit. By a strange overlapping mechanism, Nicolette’s face called from a hidden drawer of memory the woman who had harassed her for many months back in time. The same short, curly, bleached-blond hair; the same red nails, unnatural makeup, everted lips, watery blue eyes, oblique glance, and snobbish elegance.

It had happened two years before 1989. Someone who introduced herself as “Comrade Floru” had called her office from the national passport bureau, saying they should see each other immediately. Angela had no passport business, so she refused to meet that woman; it did not make any sense. “And why do I have to meet you in a pastry shop and not at the passport offices on Nicolae Iorga Street?” That woman insisted in a voice of command, “I’ll explain,” and hung up. Lawrence’s advice was to meet her and see what it was all about. Lawrence was afraid that one of their letters sent to Radio Free Europe through someone of trust had been intercepted. They feared not only the agents around them but also those infiltrated in that radio station in Munich. The meeting was supposed to be at 6:00 p.m. in Scala pastry shop.

Trying to eat a tasteless cake, prepared according to the latest recipes for “rational nutrition” ordered by the Dictator, she understood pretty quickly that the petite woman who came to her table in the Scala pastry shop had the task of recruiting her for the foreign propaganda department of intelligence. “Comrade Floru” knew her entire life. Angela was advised to cooperate; otherwise she would be jobless and never publish a single word.

The only possible strategy under the circumstances was to postpone her answer. She told “Comrade Floru” – a false name, of course; an agent would never reveal her real name in the early stages of recruitment – that she would reflect on the invitation.

The woman summoned her to meet a few times a week. She knew how to intimidate, frighten. She blackmailed Angela with every weakness of her life: her love affair with Lawrence, relatives abroad, job security, friends who had betrayed her trust or were just about to. Comrade Floru also lured her with possible rewards while Angela tried to assure Floru that once she had finished the project she was working on, several years from now, they could resume the conversation. But she did not escape so easily.

“Why me?”

Floru explained that the high-ranking officials of the Communist Party were dissatisfied with the way Romania had been presented to the outside world – the country was increasingly criticized lately – so there was a need for credible people like Angela to build better relationships with the West. At the beginning, Angela would have to write articles on national issues, which would be translated and published by “them,” in Romanian magazines abroad directed at political circles. Later on, she would receive other tasks.

She knew how to resist the pressure and get Comrade Floru to let down her guards but she was afraid of the outcome. She had heard of secret police agents taking cruel revenge on those who resisted recruitment. After many months of irrelevant conversations, the winter came in full force and the secret police lady showed signs of high impatience. One frosty February evening they both left Cafeteria Scala and headed to the bus station. Angela could barely walk, keeping her balance only because of her winter boots. Usually Floru wore astonishing high heels and a car was waiting for her around the corner, but that evening Floru followed Angela to the bus station in front of the Scala movie theater. They waited for the bus for a long time, in a huge queue of frozen people in that cold of 5 degrees Fahrenheit. Due to ice and snow trampled by thousands of feet, the street and the bus station were as slick as an ice skating rink. Surprisingly, the secret police agent had been silent. Then a bus almost full of people arrived, and the crowd waiting on the street took it by storm. After trying several times to close the doors, from which clusters of bodies were hanging, the driver of the bus engaged the clutch. The engine’s noise remained etched forever in Angela’s mind. The next image she remembered was of the pipes under the bus and the huge wheel close to her face. Screams were heard all around. Someone rushed to pull her from under the bus, covered with frozen mud. She had barely been able to move on that ice, and the layers of warm clothes had slowed down any effort. The bus driver crossed himself. Others from the sidelines did the same when they saw her stand up, alive and unharmed. By some miracle, the driver had not yet stepped on the accelerator, or was it that the gearbox didn’t work? As for Comrade Floru, she had disappeared – not only from the bus stop, but

from Angela's life. Floru had pushed her under the wheels of the bus hoping to finish with Angela once and for all.

One afternoon, instead of taking the subway from the City Hall station, Angela walked on foot to Battery Park. Tired of bad dreams, hard work, and the concrete city, she needed some fresh air. Broadway led her toward the south end of the island; she did not enter the park, but leaned against the iron bars of the cliff that marked the last barrier between the land and the Atlantic Ocean. On the other side was Europe.

She had already accepted that her arrival on American soil had been a kind of death, after which she had to give birth to another self, piece by piece. It was the price of freedom, which not everyone was willing to pay, only the desperate. To be born again in adulthood, after killing yourself socially and spiritually by leaving your country and language; to rebuild yourself lucidly in another country and another time— she compared this process to surgery without anesthesia, performed by herself on her own open heart, slowly and over many years. A long and agonizing process, when she had licked death like a block of salt. Not all immigrants underwent such a transformation. Some of them reduced themselves to a larval niche of subsistence, some submerged into madness or returned to where they came from, and there lived the last stages of insanity. She had tried to write about it to a friend from Bucharest who had asked her for money to buy a villa. Like most Romanians, that friend had no notion of money; she did not know what it meant to earn a dollar honestly in America. The true value of the dollar was measured in the blood, sweat, and nerves of the one paid for the work. This was the tangible weight of the dollar. The answer Angela got back had been written in the same out-of-touch-with-reality tone, according to which all those coming to America ended up millionaires: “My dear, intelligent people with education arriving in America become rich in no time,” the friend from Bucharest wrote back. “My friends in America will suspect you of lies, and of anti-reality fanaticism.” Angela's reply was: “Why didn't you ask those acquaintances for money?”

Leaning against the iron bars that marked the last barrier between Manhattan and the Atlantic Ocean, Angela remembered an old folk song, often mumbled by her mother: a kind of curse cast upon those who would dare to deny their language, called “Parental Admonition.” According to the song, one who betrays or forgets his or her mother tongue will have a cursed house, his tongue will burn in flames, her life will be a living hell, he will not have children, she will not be able to marry and have a family, for God's grace will not be bestowed on them. The throes that song threatened were real; she had experienced some of them. “No one does it for pleasure, only out of desperation,” Angela protested, frightened of the enumerated horrors. “Why isn't a curse cast upon those who *make* people run away from their country and subsequently deny the language in which they were born?”

Again she experienced that drawing-out of time she had felt in Nicolette's home. Of course, there was not just one kind of time. In New York City, there was something altogether different, something she had tried to explain since the day of her arrival.

Not far from where she stood on the boardwalk, the fish market started to perk up on the left cliff of Battery Park. Loaded ships delivered the most incredible ocean creatures to the cosmopolitan and gourmet city. To the right, a Canadian circus dome attracted waves of people, while only a few tens of

yards back, Manhattan's skyscrapers ended their march on the last available inch of safe land. A few people strolled around; they were certainly tourists, because the locals had no time to waste. Time here, even the children knew, meant money.

Again Time.

It seemed that there had been given to life on the North American continent a sort of fifth or even sixth dimension, a mental feature born of action verbs such as **to do**, **to make**, and **to get**. The human being, the thought, and the accomplished artifact in reality were one.

With a short blast of its horn, the ferry left Manhattan's shore toward Staten Island. Waves from the depths of the ocean washed the pier, breaking down with precision. Cool, salty, and corrosive vapors with adhesive power slashed the slabs of the cliff's seafront.

As Angela tried to put into words and sentences the difference between the two continents, in an apparently unrelated thought she wondered what the pear tree was doing: her beloved tree in her childhood village lost in a valley of the Hercynian Mountains, the oldest land of Europe. Nearby was the ancient citadel of Histria or Istria, close to the Black Sea, and not too far away from that, the grave of Ovid, the Latin poet banished from Rome in 8 A.D. and sent in exile to Tomis (now Constanța) by Emperor Augustus. Her pear tree, under whose immense canopy she used to play with dolls, was the most fruitful, towering tree she had ever seen. She had never mocked it, not even in a joke, as the young Aurelius Augustine had done by robbing his neighbor's pear tree, as he described in the *Confessions*. The tree in flower, which, after she left the village, never again bore fruit; the tree with branches broken by the fruit's weight, it helped Angela unexpectedly, beyond time, bringing a childhood game, "let's pretend," to bear on the thoughts she had been struggling with.

She pretended to plant a flower seed in Europe and another one in North American soil. She then drew, on an imaginary screen, a line representing standard time, as recorded by a clock and decided by the cosmic rotation of planets and stars. And she waited to see what would happen.

The European seed grew into a plant whose flowers opened cautiously and gradually; its petals covered the vineyards of Burgundy, the Escorial, the Thames Valley, the Cologne Cathedral, the Parthenon, the Roman ruins, and her pear tree in Hamangia or also called Baia, her village in Dobruja, a place where artifacts of Neolithic culture dated back to 4500 B.C. The days felt huge there, each of them long as an era, heavy with sun and time waiting for something that had never happened. The hours licked the objects, fed on them, and eroded them, giving them an early classical glaze. The entropy, the disorder and decomposition, increased steeply as time progressed toward the future. That vital living object Angela had imagined lived (in this time defined by the laws of thermodynamics) fifty psychological units of time in sixty standard-time years. When it passed the twelfth standard year, it had lost its flowers. The fruits were collected toward the fifteenth standard time unit. In the remaining time, that living object slowly decomposed and died, struggling to stay consistent with its younger self past history, which had been organized in a model with clear rules, something comparable to a civil code.

Pulling its juices from the Appalachian Mountains, Florida's swamps, the fatty air of the East Coast, the West Coast's magic, Arizona's desert, and the fertile soil of the Midwest, the second imaginary living object grew up with lightning speed. Compared with the first one, it lived a hundred

psychological time units of life in sixty standard-time years. It bloomed twice and as many times spread its seeds on the ground, living under the sign of renewal and novelty. Its entropy increased and decreased. The rules changed with a passion for change. At the sixty-eighth psychological time unit of life it flourished for the third time and remained so, practically dying in bloom. When this happened, the second vital living object still had – in comparison with the first one – forty-five psychological time units in its “future.” Living more within the same standard, cosmological time, it lived longer. As such, Angela estimated, scrutinizing the horizon as if the concrete form of time was hidden there, all beings that went from America to Europe aged fast and died quickly. But everyone who came to America lived more and aged under the seal of youth and renewal. Was this the magnet that attracted waves of immigrants to the North American continent? But what if these thoughts and images were only in her mind? Was it possible that by thinking this way she had a different measure of time? If absolute time didn't exist, was she perhaps moving at a different speed than others? Did she take shortcuts, jump cuts, through her own warped or bent or twisted space-time?

She looked in the makeup mirror from her purse. She looked younger despite all her trials and tribulations; it was as if she had gone ten years back in time. How to explain it? In Eastern Europe a woman of her age already had deplorable looks, as illustrated by her own face on her departure from Romania. But here, her waist lengthened, her legs had become more elastic than ever, she had lost all fat from her body, the dark circles around her eyes had vanished, while her skin had acquired a slightly reddish tinge, with tiny pink freckles. Between her eyes, at the root of her nose, had appeared a faintly visible brown oval, like a third eye. Her hair's strands became elastic; her mouth had an air of voluptuousness, while her breasts had become larger. A few days before, she had noticed that the brown circles around her nipples had widened almost obscenely. She was ready for love, in a way she had never been ready before. One night, in her sleep, she experienced a completely unknown erotic sensation. When she awoke she surmised that she had had an orgasm such as she had never experienced in her life before. Eroticism emanated from that soil, air, and food. Women and men were looking hungrily for love on that piece of land, to engulf it and then abandon it in the never-ending search for new objects of pleasure and new sensations. She even had the courage to look at her inner face, the hidden one, that welter of sexual fantasies fed by frustrations she had been more or less conscious of, and had hypocritically ignored.

One night Fred had invited her to watch porn channels. While Fred was asleep under the influence of sleeping pills, Angela explored the sexual fantasies of gays and lesbians, group sex, and other orgiastic performances. But sex without love did not mean anything to her; in this sense she had been really frigid. She became so inhibited that she decided that in that new world her only choice was to abstain. With Fred, this was possible. Sometimes on the weekends they took sleeping pills together. Fred slept in the living room, while in the bedroom she had the huge bed to herself – a bed made exactly for making love.

In Battery Park the lights went on. The beams coming from the roots of the trees shaped a surreal atmosphere. It was as if Hansel and Gretel were there, trying to unravel the way home, and adults, who knew the tale, wanted to help the two lost children. Not far from her, a man leaning against the iron bars of the cliff looked at her sideways. And suddenly the taste of the ocean brutally invaded the

land. She turned to admire the magic of New York City's gigantic constructions mirroring the reddish sunset. She had to agree that she loved the city as a work of art. Sometimes she felt as if she were living in a masterpiece, something like living in a painting such as Mona Lisa. Mesmerized by the unique landscape, but also hungry – all she had eaten all day was a piece of fruit – Angela headed slowly toward the Bowling Green subway station. All the escalators and platforms were deserted. Although recording cameras swept every inch of them, she did not feel safe, as if a vague threat had been engraved into the concrete walls. Again she accused herself of paranoia, of insecurity and persecution mania. But who, coming from Eastern Europe, was not paranoid? She stopped in a safe place, near a marble column, and was relieved to see someone coming down the escalators. It was a young woman wearing a black silk dress, daringly slit. Heavy silver jewelry hung around her neck and wrists. On her left shoulder, a superb tattoo of a blue bird on a green tree was inscribed. Angela approached her, attracted by the drawing's surreal beauty. The high-life ladies of the city considered that eccentricity tacky. But on that woman, whose skin appeared translucent, the drawing lived, unreal as in a hologram. A diffusely scattered noise announced the train's arrival. The green light of the first car had already come in sight when a draft of air, like an improper vibration of that moment, hit Angela. She quickly stepped aside. There followed a second bang. She barely had time to glimpse a large man in a striped shirt crossing the platform at high speed and disappearing into a parallel tunnel. She assumed that the blow, meant for her, had gotten the woman with the tattoo; she had been pushed into the first wagon of the train. The collision had thrown her back. From a gaping wound among her black tresses, blood trickled down quickly onto the marble slabs.

CHAPTER FOUR

“NO MONEY, NO honey!” It meant that if she wasn’t paid by Hector and his people, she would stay home. Fred had the power to ask this of her, according to their contract.

Before the Bowling Green incident, Angela’s stories didn’t trouble Fred too much. Eastern Europe was far away, and whatever had happened there seemed a sort of never-ending story lacking a happy ending. But now those stories had taken on some concreteness; “they” had apparently come after Angela to New York City.

Wrinkling his nose, Eugene Goodman allowed her to take a few days off without pay. But Fred was confused. Angela’s decision to accept Hector’s invitation seemed absurd. The subway incident had obviously been intended as a warning. However, if she wished to risk her neck after all, then, well, at least she had to do it for big money. Finally, tired of telling her that he was right, Fred lay on the couch with a single thought in his mind: all women were stubborn, irrational, and superficial.

The ocean’s sunset lights beamed in through the living room windows. The bridges linking the island of Manhattan to the continent were blocked by traffic, and from the depth of the horizon a thin fog moved in. As usual, New York City had changed its appearance according to the metabolism of each hour. Downtown for example, at that hour everything was dead; almost everybody left the office and went home after 5:00 P.M., but the stream of life, following its precise rules, moved to Midtown, to the Village, and to uptown Broadway. Angela was sipping from a glass of cold orange juice, while Fred twisted one of the Japanese netsuke on the crystal table so nervously that it was imminent that he would break it into pieces. The two of them lived in completely different realities, and it was clear that they had never been less able to communicate the truths of their own worlds as in that moment.

Angela had never thought of asking Hector for money, much less bargaining about the amount she would receive. It was the opposite in this case. As far as what she would write about Hector that was part of the noble cause of liberating her former country from communism.

“It is an honor to attend him!” She knew Hector Romano only from history books. Hector, who had played an important role in ending the war in Eastern Europe and had saved the country from the German and Russian troops, had been forced into exile when the Soviet Russia took over Romania. Hector had hoped for forty-five years that one day he would return home, but the officials who came into power after the 1989 revolution did not want this to happen. Hector was in fact their only legitimate opponent, the real one, for the opposition parties were mostly understudies on the political stage. And now Hector had decided to go to Washington, DC, to seek support for his struggle.

“Support him for free?” For Fred, only the amount of cash could be a measure of that honor. “How much will you get for this?” Fred insisted.

She never asked herself this question. With the little money she'd received for whatever she had published, she had paid the typist of the final draft of a manuscript, had gone on a vacation and perhaps bought a coat. After the revolution, she had been part of a lot of committees without receiving or asking for a penny. Selfless dedication to the cause of her homeland seemed absolutely normal. How to ask Hector for money?

"Does he have money?" Fred shouted back at her, as if he wanted to wake her up from a sort of blackout. "What world do you live in? Did you come here from the Moon?" Her facial features, her skin's color, her way of thinking, had made Fred think at the time they met that she was some sort of being that had come to Earth from another planet. In turn, Angela had understood slowly that she had arrived in a completely different dimension of space, time, and spirit; whatever she had lived before did not have much in common with what she had to deal with now. Actually, those who met her in New York City on her arrival felt the same way: that she was a being who belonged to a little-known race, making a desperate effort to be like them.

Angela shrugged and ran to the kitchen. Fred followed her.

"You have to be paid for your work, and for this you have to bargain!" Fred caught her in the space between the sink and the refrigerator, blocking her escape.

"To bargain? With Hector?" Her voice showed horror. And besides, she did not know how to bargain. In the country where she had lived, the principle "Where the State rules you do not bargain" had been supreme.

"Who said that stupid thing? How much money do you have in your bank account in your country? You didn't bargain there?"

"I have no money there, I don't have a bank account, and I did not bargain."

"Then why the hell have you wasted your time in politics and writing?"

"This is what I know how to do best."

"Without lots of money?" Fred burst again. Hand on hip, it seemed that he himself was about to argue with an imaginary seller. He looked indignant, as if he'd seen her walk past a treasure with indifference. On her side, Angela was more convinced than ever that Fred had a check in place of a heart.

"It was a gift that I made to my people." She sincerely believed that this was what any real artist had to feel.

"Shit! Your people! They gave you a kick in the ass because you were not on the good communists' side. You ran from there for fear of being killed on the street, your ID destroyed, thrown in a morgue's refrigerator, and after six months buried in the grave of the unidentified. They would let your corpse rot, and this time nobody would ask about you because all would have thought that you fled abroad. Didn't you tell me that?"

She had. Someone from the forensic institute, scared of what he had witnessed, had given her a tip. She'd mentioned that story to Fred. It had happened in the first months after the revolution. She'd managed to reach the third level of the morgue's basement. Paul had followed her there. They were unable to get past the iron grilles and bars blocking the passage; however, they saw the refrigerators where they were told the corpses of those intended to disappear were hidden. After a while, the

temperature of those refrigerators was set at four degrees Celsius, and soon afterward the decomposed bodies were taken out for identification. But no one could be identified, because the bodies were an amorphous mass.

The phone rang. It was Fred's father, to whom he explained at length about Angela's business with Hector. Soon she assumed that Fred's father was on her side; Fred's voice became milder. It felt as if the air in the apartment was warmer. Waiting for Fred's decision, she sank into the armchair beside the glass door leading to the terrace. How would it be to be a plant under the free sky of the city?

"Let's go shopping at Bloomingdale's. I have to buy you some decent clothes," Fred said after ending the conversation with his father. "You shouldn't have to be embarrassed by what you wear. And you're lucky; my father reads French newspapers and knows a lot about Hector." He said that in admiration, flattered by the unexpected link between Angela, Hector, and his father. "Dad really admires this Hector of yours."

Fred bargained at Bloomingdale's for every piece of clothing. He asked for a big discount on a silk blouse because he discovered a microscopic stain on a sleeve, and scolded the cashier for not being careful enough giving him the change, for he paid in cash, using large bills. Finally, when everything was over, Fred handed her the crammed bag. Then they strolled through the solemn coolness and silence of luxury floors displaying astronomical prices and a typical American snobbery.

"Don't forget," Fred paused in front of the store's entrance to light a cigarette. "These gifts are your birthday presents. I'm not saying you will not get anything else, perhaps something small."

To say everything out loud; to not be ashamed of what you feel. What a horror! Angela was so humiliated by Fred's comment that she wished to be swallowed by the dusty pavement, glittering in the sunset with all its bits of mother-of-pearl.

"You don't look too bad tonight." Fred inhaled the cigarette's smoke, and cast Angela in his opaque eyes in which one could not read anything. "Last week you had a look on your face like a dead fish."

The lipstick-shaped pink building on Third Avenue added more color to the sunset. Angela's eyes clung to it, like a child to its mother's clothes. She admitted that she was not able to say aloud what she felt and thought because her entire inner past life had been a continuous suppression; a permanent fear and camouflage. To survive there, the way not to be caught and punished for what one really thought had been the schizophrenic splitting of the mind. Who was the provocateur or the informant, the one who reported to the secret police even a banal confession such as that she felt miserable one morning? She had confided such feelings to close friends, and those words of hers hung heavy, deserving of serious and imminent punishment, in her secret file; she had lived continuously as a culprit, in fear that one day she might reveal what she felt, thought, and yet daring to be herself. She was considered brave in Eastern Europe; in America she discovered she was a coward.

"You're a sneaky girl," Leslie snapped one day. "Why you didn't tell Jonathan what you're telling us now?" They talked about the disordered state of files and folders in the office.

"I'm not a hypocrite," Angela defended herself.

"You're afraid that he'll fire you," Leslie mocked her with laughter. "You are very stupid. He needs you now. You work a lot for so little."

When Angela received the flight tickets for Chicago, Fred repeated the same sentences about money

and bargaining. He calmed down when she told him that she was booked in the most luxurious hotel in Chicago.

“Luxury, at least, if not money,” Fred said disgusted by all that business, which smelled very cheap to him. Politics meant money and good connections. He did not give a damn penny for Hector’s visit to Chicago and Washington, DC. Who would intervene for him, who would butt in for a poor former member of the elite living in exile? They wanted to change the government of a country under Russian influence without money and powerful political connections! He, Fred, would not invest one dollar in such business. He would not have gone to that part of the world even if you cut him into pieces, not even to visit for a day. There were no porn TV channels! They didn’t have a stock market, lacked food preparation skills, didn’t have horse racing; instead they had a lot of political parties (who needs more than two?), daily antigovernment meetings, strikes, and inflation going through the roof. In other words, that country was outside the civilized world.

Upon leaving, Angela packed her diary, among other things. She had learned long ago that precious ideas that burst in a specific moment would perish if they were not written down in the environment where they were born.

August 1992, Chicago

Yesterday – a day of nightmares. I waited for 3 hours in O’Hare Airport and nobody came to pick me up, although I was assured that someone would be there. My instinct saved me. At eleven at night I found a guide to the city’s hotels and I called the Drake. I was connected with Diana, Hector’s secretary. The taxi from the airport to the hotel cost me a fortune. When Stuart, one of those who organized Hector’s visit, saw me, he reproached me for being late! Classic Romanian style! I could not sleep because of stress and the luxury of my room. The bed is so large that it could easily sleep four people. Everywhere I see food, drinks, sweets, fruits; the carpets, curtains, bedding, blankets, sheets of paper with the hotel letterhead humiliate me. I am a poor woman, coming from a world of scarcity and fratricidal wars. One half of my country terrorizes the other half. I understand that without peace and political stability the country cannot make a step forward. If reckoning with the past does not include a judgment of the guilty, we’ll remain lost in nonessentials. We’ll stay asleep, caught in vanities, while here everything moves furiously forward. I look awful because of insomnia and fatigue, dark circles under my eyes down to my mouth. I understand that Romania will not achieve anything because chaos governs everywhere there, as well as lack of organization and management.

Today at eleven o’clock in the morning I had breakfast with Hector. I took some pictures. I said he could unite the opposition in Romania during this hard political time. He shook his head. He’s right; this is hard to do from abroad. After lunch I walked on the shores of Lake Michigan. It was stormy. Everything here looks different from everything I have ever seen. My criteria are inadequate.

We had dinner in the house of a prominent citizen of the town, who ran away from Romania long ago. I cannot forget the huge bath, the bathtub of shell-pink marble, and the

Venetian mirrors. In contrast I remembered my cold bathroom in Bucharest, which had hot water only at five in the morning for a few minutes. I was impressed by the humility of the host, who blessed the food on the table. He is the first truly happy or satisfied man whom I have met in my life. "Lord," he said, "Thank you for everything you have given me. I am a happy man. My table is full, my wife is expecting a baby, and in my house I have the master of my heart. What more could I possibly want?"

No matter how much someone has in my former country, he would not thank God. First, out of ingratitude; and then because it seems they had lost God there.

I dislike Bianca's attitude; she is Mary's friend. Bianca follows Mary, Hector's wife, everywhere. Bianca is an aristocratic Italian married into an English aristocratic family; she is about forty years old and looks pretty good. She is that kind of raisin woman, too thin, ambitious, full of devils, with eyes pointed everywhere, speaking in a honeyed voice and being nosy. It seems that she dislikes my presence too. She is doing some sort of secretarial work for Mary. However, Bianca tries hard to befriend me. Fred called me at two in the morning.

During the morning, I went along with Hector and those who joined him on a visit to the Governor of Illinois. An evening gala followed, thrown in Hector's honor. After the performance, a shady guy approached Hector on the stage as he congratulated the actors. I rushed to cover him with my body. It was a false alarm; otherwise I could have ended up with a knife in my heart.

At the banquet that followed I sat next to Hector. I talked with him more than before. Among other things, I told him about my investigation related to Corbu, and my belief about the true "K" – as he had been called by those close to him – that the real Corbu had been replaced by a KGB agent who handles Washington's policy toward Eastern Europe and Russia. Hector listened in silence. He usually does not say much, but every word from him makes sense. He said at the end that his foremost enemy in Washington's circles is Corbu, who even boycotted a press conference that he was supposed to give at the National Press Club. That would have won considerable support for Hector's diplomatic approach.

Mary has an extraordinary energy, and she supports Hector with dedication. Unfortunately, she does not perceive Eastern Europe's people accurately. She belongs to the West by training and education. Her pragmatic and logical mind would hardly find governance partners in Romania. Hector urged me to get back to Romania. Generally speaking, everyone wants to use me for his purposes, would like me to do what he or she wants. Each likes to put his or her grip on others, could this be human nature? I do not aim for more than to be able to take possession of myself.

All articles faxed to my newspaper in Bucharest don't arrive at their destination, have

disappeared. Bianca takes care of sending the texts. It is odd. Do they “disappear” here or there? However, one article went through, but it was published in a miserable way.

I have no tangible proof, but I feel that someone comes into my hotel room and controls my papers, goes through my things. Maybe I’m crazy, but I do not like Bianca. She wants to find out what I think, what I am going to do, what friends I have, and the like. She greatly annoyed me when she entered my room without knocking on the door. I was talking on the phone with Fred. “Who is Fred? Your boyfriend?” I wanted to tell her to “kiss my ass,” but I refrained.

We spent three days in Washington, DC, after which we returned to Chicago. There I came to understand how strong the Romanian secret police infiltration is on my former newspaper’s editorial board. The person who lobbies in Washington, DC, for my Romanian newspaper asked me, “Who actually is in charge of the newspaper?” I do not have to wonder too much. Mihai told me that when he was freed from jail, after which he was deported to Moldova, he was forced to make a statement promising to become a collaborator of the secret police. That was a paper signed by all those who were arrested and interrogated and then released during Ceausescu’s regime; now these statements are like a time bomb in their personal records. Therefore, their hands are tied; therefore they do not fight back against the secret police supporting the establishment.

I spent all my money. I told Diana about my situation. Before leaving New York I had paid for two English courses. I reminded Mary about this too, but I got no money for subsistence. Fred was right. I gave an interview to the Voice of America in Washington, DC. They thanked me warmly and that’s it. Everyone is hungry for political intrigues, underground news from Romania, about those pushed onto the political stage after the Revolution. I find that information is paid for in the U.S. However, I continue to give away information for free.

I was invited to visit a Romanian family in a village near Chicago; a huge weekend house in a town that sprawls like jelly. The houses are made of wood; from the outside they look like cozy huts, but inside they are sort of dull palaces with a golf course behind the house, gardens, and garages. It is impossible to sit in the garden; the peace of the prairie is torn by the howling air conditioners. Everything is built tightly with a horror of nature. In the supermarket, in the middle of colored cement paths there are resting places decorated with artificial greenery, parks of a sort in the bunker, where people walk “to get fresh air.” I could not endure this madness and I left the supermarket, preferring the hot air, but I felt bad because of the sudden shift from the freezing interior to the hot weather outside. Sitting on a wooden slat in front of the supermarket, I realized the absurdity of my situation. The windowless concrete store stretches like a sausage for hundreds of yards. Young people flirt in their cars, listening to music, or on top of their cars, as if afraid to walk on the earth. The superb park is traversed by car, nobody walks. The old city center, which looks like papier-

mâché, was empty, maybe only two or three people on the streets. I wanted to see the prairie, and my hosts drove me into the fields. I opened the car windows, I asked them to stop the air conditioning and the car's engine, and for the first time in my life I inhaled the hot smell of prairie in the night. There were wet, heavy smells mixed with flavors of plume corn, soy, maple boiled in the sun of the day. I saw fireflies. The vastness of space, of the continent, overcharged with a sort of fatigue, and the heavy moisture that makes everything denser, even the darkness of the night. I've never seen a fruit tree there. There are no flowers in the gardens; no carrots, parsley, or onion grows here, such as you can see in any garden of the Carpathian foothills. Only grass; for everything here is bought from the supermarket.

It's late at night, the house air conditioning stopped for a few minutes, but a similar engine works full force in the house next door. However, a cardinal comes close to me, chirping.

7:00 A.M., a clouded sky. I opened the window of my room, to the annoyance of my hosts. Then I left the house to walk on the street. Stunned people watched me from behind the curtain windows of houses. I was told that walking is abnormal, like sitting in a chair in the garden. All fear of insects. There's a crushing coolness inside; has civilization reached a peak through power, fear of nature, and waste?



“Today we'll meet Marque.”

Early in the morning, Hector's secretary went over the schedule in her dry tone. “Only a small group will attend,” Diana added.

Marque was known as an expert in European politics and the history of religion. However, a few close to him had described the professor in his early forties as an initiate of the occult, expert in studying and practicing the most bizarre esotericisms, such as – just for one – Kabbalah. He had been lucky to receive permission to leave Romania years before 1989. At first, he seemed a taciturn man, with no distinguishing characteristics; he was short, plump, and unattractive. Angela had seen him once in the past, passing through the halls of Bucharest University with one of her professors.

“Would you look into my planets?” She asked Marque to do her horoscope.

Hector's official visit to the University of Chicago was over. The University campus was deserted; classes were to begin in a month. Angela took a few pictures. She had no idea how valuable they would be. While Hector was engaged with a group of professors who had come to greet him, she followed Marque to his office in a not-too-distant wing of the building where they'd been received. His office was full of books, but a niche also housed exotic objects. Angela's eyes browsed the desk, the computer, and the large windows through which the shady chestnut trees in the park shone. Marque turned on the computer, removed a disk from his breast pocket, inserted into the drive, looked for something in a text displayed on the screen, and then as quietly removed the disc and turned off the computer.

“I wanted to check something,” he said in an impersonal voice.

All of a sudden the muddy, dark skin and intense eyes of Marque took on a shamanistic air. His black hair gleamed like a wild animal's fur. His dark suit and tie seemed to be uncomfortable. When he smiled, his upper lip had a deep crease, like a knife cut. To all appearances he was a cold, indifferent man, but Angela had the insight that beneath that mask lived a passionate intellectual, detached from the vulgar areas of existence.

"Check something? What?" Angela pretended to be calm and uninterested, her eyes searching the shelf holding a golden Bodhisattva that probably cost a fortune.

"You have the Moon among the stars, so you were famous in a past life. And you will be again. Control your feelings, they can destroy you. Your mind creates more problems than you have in reality. In matters of the heart, there is love but no marriage; marriage constrains your spirit. If you hadn't fled Romania, you'd be dead by now. You came out of the bad stars, changing the constellations by one hundred and eighty degrees." Marque looked at her curiously, a little surprised. "You have a clear inclination to communicate with the metaphysical." And after a pause: "There is a person who haunts you in particular?" Angela read Marque's mind. He knew.

"Corbu is in Chicago, isn't he?"

Marque looked at his shirt cuffs. He hesitated a moment, then said: "Why are you looking for him?"

Angela let the question pass without an answer. Instead, she took a book from a shelf. "I heard that you are writing a history of Eastern Europe's nomenclatura."

"What makes you think that?"

"I feel it in the air," Angela joked. Actually, Tim had entrusted her with this secret.

"Let's suppose that, so what?"

"Move your office. There's nobody around." In brief, she told him about the *Bowling Green* incident, but Marque was absent; it seemed as if he did not hear her.

"You're too remote here. The hallways are empty, and the chapel is a perfect hiding place." She did not know why she was insisting. Why she was repeating those words. A few minutes earlier they had visited the medieval chapel, with its doors giving into a hallway that ended opposite Marque's office. She had felt an irrational panic. In fear she searched the deserted chapel; a kind of mist seemed to hover over the place. And that mist actually surrounded Marque too. Something sinister was here. She blamed herself for stupidity, but the fear did not disappear. Now she felt ashamed to repeat those comments, and feared that Marque would take her as a hysterical woman.

Meanwhile, underneath his indifference and icy gaze, Marque had actually been surprised. He estimated that the woman facing him might be, if properly assessed, about two hundred years old. He knew what it was like to live for so long, because he considered himself about as old as her. And suddenly he perceived Angela as existing, like himself, under the sign of change, the Proteus pattern. He discerned in her biological body, within her embodied soul, many selves, each possessing an ineffable "*qualité maitresse*," and he strived to count them. Actually, her memory helped herself to adopt many perspectives that might suggest other selves, but were not, for self was a function, a creation of memory, and memory a creation of self – a decision-making entity that integrated the outside world into the inner self, creating knowledge. He knew that it was not easy to see all those "selves," for each of them "showed" only in a favorable environment; and that everyone who thought

they knew her had just grasped the Angela which he or she had been prepared to see. Marque compared her to a molecule of carbon (having the ability to form large numbers of organic compounds), which carried many connotations. For Marque, the protean was not so much of a chain of metamorphoses in successive time periods; he lived and understood metamorphosis as a temporal simultaneity: being at the same moment “many” and each “one” with his own time, pleasures, and language.

Slightly amused, he classified her as a “non-Euclidean, anti-Balzacian, and non-Sainte-Beuvian” character. He satirized her in his mind with the nickname “Madame de Lafayette to the seventh power” without even explaining why he compared her to the author of “The Princess of Cleves,” but this was the first mild irony that came to his mind. He knew why she had been alone: because every man in her life had seen only one within her. The rupture had occurred because the “others” could not be successfully cut back to the “one.” Marque thought that maybe he was the only one who ever saw all the Angelas, that “dragon with several heads, brain, and uterus.” He smiled, excited at the thought that at least one of the heads must have a uterus in place of a brain, and he shivered with pleasure. He felt the irresistible urge to touch Angela, but he suppressed his gesture, taking a book loosely in hand.

“Do you know it?” It was a synthesis of esotericisms from Africa and Asia. Angela browsed the table of contents.

“And Eastern Europe?” She raised her eyes to Marque expecting a response. He enigmatically shrugged his shoulders.

Angela bent to pick up her scarf, which had fallen on the floor; her long neck emerged from the tresses poured over her vulnerable and fragile body. But Marque had been concerned with who she really was. Which was the main her? He saw as through a veil of fog the persuasive woman, able to snatch any secret in a conversation; the hen-wife and the madly possessive woman (ah, how impossible!); the independent woman with an unfettered imagination, free like a wild horse; the essayist sick of so much culture; then he deciphered that “revolutionary animal,” completely unconscious of danger; and finally he stopped, amazed to discover a woman with the vocation for love: the perfect lover. The person who spoke to him had six or seven heads and as many voices, intersecting in a counterpoint of gestures and sounds. Marque wanted to take them all in his arms, kissing seven rows of lips, each with its taste, ah, the synthesis of their tastes! He imagined how it would be making love in bed with all of them, a girl for each of those who made up his being.

He stopped dreaming. They were already surrounded by Hector’s group. While Marque wrote dedications in his latest book, he sent several bright thoughts to Angela. In exchange, he received confusing images; it seemed that she saw something that he could not. Suddenly, the place appeared to him, too, in a dark light. Panicked, he made an effort to empty his mind, but could not.

“Let’s have lunch tomorrow,” he suggested instead of saying goodbye. That night, Angela had to join Hector at a dinner to which Marque was not invited. Marque bit his lip, refraining from saying, “What if we have breakfast in bed?”

“I’ll have the privilege of a complete horoscope?” Angela indulged herself. She was surprised to find herself flirting with Marque; she wasn’t impervious to his advances. She looked at him and recognized that she had always been attracted to intelligent and not necessarily handsome men.

“Even more than you dream of,” she heard with the slam of the car door.

She skipped breakfast the next day. Outside it was unbelievably cold, but sunny, which seemed a good sign. One of the FBI agents planted in the lobby to guard Hector looked confused to see her going out so early alone. She caught a taxi in front of the hotel, hoping that the address Peter had given her was real.

The cab crossed the city toward Oak Park. “K”’s house was supposed to be on Kenilworth Avenue, not far from the Frank Lloyd Wright Museum. The words *vivere pericolosamente* echoed in her head. She truly loved danger; isn’t the real writer always simultaneously an investigative journalist? Who said that? Hemingway?

A colonial-style house with two floors and a flower garden in front showed up at the given address. At the entrance hung a board saying “For Sale” and the telephone number of a real estate agency. Although the windows had their blinds down and the house seemed deserted, Angela decided to take a stroll through the garden. In the alley she loaded her gun and, with that calm that had helped her to pass unharmed through rabid dogs and revolutions, went across the corner to the backyard. Fir trees were planted all around the yard. She inspected the lilac bushes, the empty trash cans, the closed white garage, the barbecue grill, the shed at one side of the garden. The “eyes in the back of her head” warned her that someone was looking at her. She turned with a lightning movement.

A window curtain had moved.

“Anybody there?” Angela stopped in the middle of the courtyard, showing that she was not going to leave. “Come on, I just saw you!” she shouted stubbornly. A gun barrel, then a vague profile of a human being appeared when a curtain was drawn back.

“Go away!” A window opened. “This is private property, not a public park.” An old man with wrinkled features looked at her through the sight of a sniper rifle. “I have the right to kill you. You are on my property,” he yelled in a hysterical voice.

“I am a buyer ready to defend myself,” Angela pointed the loaded handgun at him.

“Bullshit,” the old man said with a subdued laugh. “I’ll shoot.”

“Me too.”

“Are you crazy?” The man put the rifle aside. “Who the hell are you? If you wanted to buy, my real estate agent would let me know.”

“I actually came to visit my friend who lives here,” she said in a voice full of disappointment.

“He’s gone,” snorted the old man, preparing to close the window.

“Where?” Angela shouted as loud as she could.

“To hell, somewhere south, everyone’s fleeing the cold to the south.”

The window closed. There was nothing left to do there. Angela had the feeling that someone was either mocking her by sending her down false trails, or had simply warned the other one of her movements. In fact, she only wanted one thing: just to see Corbu’s face, to make sure whether it was the real one or not; the profile taken in the Marriott wasn’t convincing. But it was obvious that someone deeply disliked this.

In the cab, she felt a state of belonging nowhere, coupled with the feeling of a definitive loss. She assumed that somewhere something bad had happened. Even though the evil might have taken place in

Africa or New Zealand, she had recently discovered a new gift in herself: that of feeling in advance, or of perceiving, any large loss of intelligent and feeling life. She could not explain why and how, but it was a fact that she had no way to avoid it or control it. This “gift,” which she had accepted as such only with difficulty, was a part of her being that possessed, among other things, the ability to sense danger, which had saved her from death so many times. Often, when she taunted herself in front of close friends, she joked that she had survived her fate, and by approximately how many years.

On the hotel’s stairs, Hector’s secretary, Diana, punched Angela as she ran toward a car waiting with open doors. “Let’s hurry,” she whispered, as if the two of them had planned to go somewhere. A gust of wind swept the building’s facade and grabbed the clothes of the people on the sidewalk. Angela followed Diana, though she had no clue where they had to rush.

“Where?” Hustling in beside Diana on the back seat of the car, and trying to pull in the hem of her dress, Angela took the lighter from her purse to light a cigarette.

“Marque is dead.”

Diana saw Angela’s hands shaking. In her position, Diana thought, Angela should have a better grip on her inner self. She ranked Angela among emotional persons; she disliked Angela’s pathetic reactions during meetings in which Hector’s assistants and advisers worked to establish the best tone or content of Hector’s press releases or speeches. Many times she said brutally, cutting them to pieces, that they had no idea of what was going on in the minds of people in Eastern Europe, or of what was happening in that part of the world. Which was true, at least as far as Diana was concerned, but a bit of care for those people following Hector could not hurt at all. She, Diana, was an English woman working for a salary. The truth was that even to her Hector’s political fight seemed pointless. True, Hector was a fascinating personality, but what could he do with a handful of people, with modest financial resources and secondhand political connections? It was obvious that they could not change what the superpowers had agreed on in their secret talks. However, Diana harbored a kernel of admiration for their cause. There was no doubt they were risking their lives. For example, they still had not been able to discover how information flowed from their entourage, or who it was that had been watching Hector so closely. Her hunch led toward Bianca, a woman Diana could not stand, but Mary was extremely attached to her. In the end, Bianca became the shadow of Mary and Hector; she knew everything. Diana was sure Bianca worked for the “others,” but she still could not prove it. As far as she could understand – she had not been admitted to the secret meeting between Hector and Marque, but Bianca had! – Marque had revealed important things to Hector and pledged his support. Marque proved influential and his connections seemed firsthand. Hector was stunned, though usually little took him by surprise. Returning her thoughts to the meeting that had taken place at the university the day before, Diana could no longer fit the insipid, dull image of the professor with that of the person who’d had a private audience with Hector.

The university building, where Marque had been killed, was surrounded by police. Right in front of the stairs, on the chestnut alley, Stewart stood petrified. He was one of Marque’s friends and one of those who had organized Hector’s visit. In a nearby group, Bianca talked with a guy who looked like he worked in the university’s administration.

“He came to take something from his office,” Stewart whispered to Angela. “He was just passing by.” Stewart had approached Angela, relieved to talk to a person he knew.

“We were supposed to have lunch together.” Angela looked at her watch. “Right now he was supposed to be in the hotel lobby. I think he planned to show me something.” Angela spoke aloud in her native language. “What did he want to show me?” she asked herself.

“Let’s go to his place,” Stewart suggested in that language that many mistook for Polish, Italian, or Serbian. Angela looked at him as if he was a madman. “I have the keys to his apartment. He gave them to me to fix his printer, it got stuck a few days ago.”

“Where is the printer?” Angela asked Stewart.

“In my car. I planned to fix it this afternoon.”

Angela knew that what Stewart intended to do was against the law, and had no logic, but she let herself be dragged. Her secret hope was that by going to Marque’s home she could change something in destiny’s plan, that she could prove that Marque’s death was a lie; she could not say why, but she felt that Marque was alive. Or maybe she wanted to prolong the pleasure of being with him, because that time was meant to be theirs; they had to spend it together. Didn’t they have to meet? Angela followed Stewart, trying to keep up with him; he was already running to his car.

Marque’s apartment was a few minutes away, in a building overwhelmed by greenery. They carried the printer up the stairs to Marque’s apartment. From a small hallway, they entered his study and the living room and beyond that, the bedroom. Angela reviewed the yellowish sofa, the armchairs, the Persian rug, the window with a shelf of Asian gods, and a silver teapot. She did not know what she was looking for. The study was dark, unlike the living room, which had an entire wall of windows. On Marque’s desk were papers in disorder, all opened drawers were empty, and a few books had been thrown on the floor.

“The diary and computer discs are gone,” Stewart said bluntly. “The diary was supposed to be in this cabinet,” pointing to one among bookshelves. “All his friends knew about it. And the computer discs, he kept them on that shelf on the left, I saw them there yesterday.” Stewart grabbed his head, taken aback. “They got here first,” he sighed helplessly.

“Who are they?” Angela shouted.

“We have to leave!”

Stewart flung himself at the door. Angela pushed him away by the built-in shelves filled with books, and dragged him to the computer. With calm gestures she turned it on. All directories were empty. She clicked on the *Sign In* icon on the Desktop. It was Marque’s connection to the University’s server. On the computer’s side login instructions written on a piece of paper were Scotch-taped. The username was easy. But she stumbled over the password, which was not written there.

“Help me,” she appealed to Stewart.

“You are mad. You’ll be caught by the login’s date.”

Angela tried all combinations in her mind: the name of Marque’s former wife, of his daughter from his first marriage. “Give me more names,” she begged Stewart.

“Beatrice,” Stuart exclaimed as if in an epiphany. On the computer’s screen the university’s home page showed up, and from there she clicked on the email feature.

“How did you know it?”

“He was working on a book about Beatrice and Dante,” Stewart wrinkled his forehead. “Something about the magic and mysticism of love in the Middle Ages.”

The last message received came from a California university that had invited him to a conference. The last time he'd read his email was that morning. Angela opened the Sent directory; she supposed that Marque sent book chapters from this email to another email account. It had been the best backup method for anyone who wrote a book. She looked at sent emails that had attachments and forwarded them to herself, to an email account that did not disclose its IP or ever share her account data with any third party. Stewart looked over her shoulder, supervising each maneuver with a professional air. He was a specialist working at a well-known computer and printer corporation.

“I confess ... I wouldn't have thought of it.” Stewart smacked his lips.

Just as quickly, Angela turned off the computer, left everything as it was, and dashed down the stairs with Stewart. Someone who had been there before them had known the time Marque would be murdered; while one was committing the crime, another one came to his place to copy what was in his computer and then delete everything. Those attached files of Marque's had to contain something important, if Marque sent his work in progress to another email address.

They parted in front of the hotel. Although Hector's antechamber was crowded, Angela asked Diana for a computer. Just back from the university, the secretary stood firm in front of Hector's visit organizers who clamored about “treason” and “revenge.” For them, Hector's life was in danger. Only Cornel, the chief of protocol for Hector's visit, warned everybody there that Marque's death had been only a warning and that the beast does not attack twice in the same place.

“You have one hour at the reception office,” Diana told Angela, who disappeared down the stairs without waiting for the elevator. In front of the reception desk she stumbled on Bianca, but she paid her little attention, just pushed Bianca aside. The computer was on. Soon, Marque's attachments to emails appeared on the screen: protocol letters, memos about magic and mystical love, and files with the name “novel.” She did not have time to read, only to browse. She chose the email with an attached file called “NovelK.doc”. It was a kind of character sheet, in fact a real investigation about Corbu, a.k.a. “K”: life, crimes committed crimes, personalities who were in contact with him. Marque had been close to Corbu. The late Corbu was described in an admiring tone, as a lonely person, with powerful relationships and connections. Next came a paragraph that spelled out another insight: Corbu and Marque were members of a group of political visionaries. That was followed by a few transcripts of discussions with people who knew “K”; Angela saw Tim's name. She was shocked to read that for Tim, the real “K” had been dead for a long time. She copied everything onto a flash drive. Late that night, looking in a sort of numbness at the cars flowing on the Outer Drive along the shore of Lake Michigan, she tried without success to sleep. Nestled on the edge of the too-broad bed, which sent her mind into a state of panic, she had to admit that she had come too close to Corbu. Marque's death connected them more than before. They were actually connected through Lawrence's death, too.

Years ago Lawrence had confided in her about an attempt on his life staged by Corbu, famous for special methods he knew how to put into action. One of Corbu's subordinates had tried for months to

convince Lawrence to work for them. An informant was needed in the close circle of A. E. (A. E. Bakonsky), Lawrence's best friend. "K" wanted close monitoring of the poet and prose fiction writer who had cooperated from the late 1940s to the '60s with the communist power put in place by the Soviet occupation. For two decades he had served the interests of communism, but in the '70s he severed his ties with the political establishment. A. E. had published a few articles in the West, and a book that conferred on him a sort of ambiguous dissidence and greatly upset the high-ranking members of the nomenklatura. To the astonishment of the secret police, A. E. didn't defect while he was in the West; he returned home each time, perhaps because he was too old to start from scratch over there, or because he could not give up the privileges he had been spoiled by as a member, still, of the nomenklatura. Because the West knew A.E.'s position, the secret police couldn't control him directly or kill him, for they all wanted to avoid an international scandal. The decision had been made to monitor the writer, trying to prevent A. E. from making any further public gestures against the communist establishment.

In his ambiguous style, Lawrence had preserved his non-informant status. More, he told A. E. about these pressures on him during a walk in Herastrau Park. Their favorite bench, close to the shore of the lake, had been surrounded by flowers and willows in bloom with green clusters. Close by, the floral exhibition sent its fragrances their way, while the Village Museum showed the roofs of old houses. Soon after, Lawrence discovered that the secret police knew what he had told A. E. It meant that even their walks were under surveillance, and their bench had been bugged. They stopped walking in the park.

Close in time to this moment, "K", the great elder of the communist party who liked to go on short vacations joined by writers, activists, artists, and other people approved by the regime (it was a way to reward them for their faithful services), invited Lawrence to a hunting party in the mountains. Lawrence had been the project manager of one of the works commissioned by the Dictator, a monstrous building that Lawrence was ashamed of. He had tried to escape, but it wasn't possible. Corbu had taken him by surprise; Lawrence wasn't important enough to receive such an invitation, but there was no way to refuse it, because it was actually an order. A. E. advised him to say no, but it wasn't Lawrence's style to be explicit; it would have been crazy, and he feared for his life if he did. Lawrence's story implied that during the first evening in that hunting house in the mountains, Corbu came unannounced into his room; he brought with him a tray with two glasses and a bottle of very expensive French champagne, a delicacy in those times. Lawrence politely refused to drink, but Corbu insisted. Upon leaving, Corbu took the tray, the almost empty bottle of champagne and the glasses. Lawrence remembered that soon he had collapsed on the floor. Two days and nights he lay there alone, struggling between life and death, in that room of the villa reserved for the comrades of the Central Committee. His robust body had saved him. When Corbu saw Lawrence in the lobby of the villa on the morning of the third day, he was as surprised as at the sight of one who had risen from the dead. Sometime later, a doctor friend of Lawrence's explained that considering the symptoms, he had been given a drink heavily mixed with a substance to which he was allergic. It was certainly known, written in his medical chart at the consortium's clinic, that he was allergic to any kind of antibiotics. Lawrence's guilt was that he had tried to be like *them*, but couldn't. He failed to

pronounce, as in the Bible story about the Ephraimites and Gileadites, the “sh” in “shibboleth,” so he had to be slaughtered like the Ephraimites trying to cross the Jordan River. (*“And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said to him, Are you an Ephraimite? If he said, No; Then said they to him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.”* (Old Testament, Judges 12)

Back in New York, she worked late evenings for a few extra hours in a beauty parlor on Lexington Avenue. Joining Hector had left a big hole in her budget. From the law office she ran directly to “Printemps.” It was, of course, temporary, and Fred encouraged her, telling that she had started acting like a true American woman. He had been a waiter during summer vacations when he was at prep school before Princeton, and his former wife had saved her first money caring for small children. It hadn’t mattered that their parents were multimillionaires! Children had to work to make money for their daily expenses! Something totally outrageous in the poor Eastern European countries. So, during the evenings, from six to eight-thirty, Angela washed ladies’ hair, for which she received one or two dollars as a tip, plus five dollars an hour from the owner. That night she had to leave half an hour early. The manager, a woman, wanted to find out why, because a real manager was supposed to be aware of what subordinates did and thought while at the job or at home; discreetly, of course. That woman believed her only when she saw Angela dressed for dinner (she had brought everything with her in a bag), makeup on and hair simply and beautifully set. She combed out her own hair in the narrow room where workers changed their outside clothes for their work uniforms; none of the hairdressers could help, the salon was too crowded that evening.

“Waldorf Astoria?” whined the manager. The Waldorf Astoria was the most expensive and elegant hotel with the best balls in New York City; it was the goal of every woman dreaming of a prince and a ball. There was no time for further explanation, she was already late, and she flew out the salon’s door. Taking the money to pay the cab fare out of her bra, she discovered that that evening she had earned exactly the right amount.

The Banquet Hall of the Waldorf Astoria was full. Hector’s and some of the New York City officials’ tables had been placed on a higher platform. From a microphone installed on one side of that stage, toasts were uttered. The round tables shining with silver cutlery and crystal glasses gathered Hector’s partisans from the states of New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. All were among the desperate and lucky who had managed to escape from Romania years ago in various ways. There were also a few curiosity seekers, or just snobs eager to notch into their belts a handgrip with the famous Hector Romano. Present also were a few of Hector’s declared enemies (sniffing at any crack in protocol), FBI agents, and consular agents of Eastern European countries from the United Nation missions in New York City. It was well known that for those installed in power after the 1989 revolution in Romania, Hector was the most feared opponent.

“It’s true that Marque was going to have lunch with you on the day he was killed?” From the next table, turning his chair to Angela, Bogdan pretended to expect an answer, but he was actually

measuring her with new respect, intrigued. A few clients had given him all sorts of fanciful details about Angela and Marque's death. One had even insulted her in the most ordinary terms, claiming that Marque had been killed because of her. Dressed in a knee-length black silk dress, low-cut, sleeveless, with only two thin straps, Angela looked happy and relaxed. In Bogdan's view she was really unable to see her connection with the death of Marque. He thought, surprised, that somehow she seemed to see everything, as if she had another pair of eyes in the back of her head. Angela nodded, and took a bite of paté. That day she had had nothing else since breakfast.

"If you had been with him, you would now be in the morgue." Bogdan quickly emptied his glass of scotch. Dorina, a rich woman, much older than he, who had a flourishing business in the jewelry industry, stood beside him. It appeared that she did not want to give an inch in the eternal race for youth. It was said they were lovers, while Bogdan's official girlfriend at that time was a Czech lady who had gone to see her family in Prague.

"Really?" Dorina's senses were on high alert. She knew Bogdan; he was now attracted to that woman, who it wouldn't be a bad idea at all to detain in one of Chicago's morgue refrigerators. Dorina took a mirror from her purse to arrange a lock of hair on her forehead. She looked astonishing. She truly loved herself. She did not look more than forty-five, though she had turned sixty. The skin of her face glistened with beauty thanks to the best moisturizers on the market. She agreed again that men were senseless, lacking intuition, good to be used for one or two hours and then dismissed like stupid servants.

"It's terrible!" Mihaela Banu, wearing a turquoise lace dress lined with fine silk to reveal her body's shape, embraced Angela with overstated love. Someone from Chicago who had called her was sure Angela had had an affair with Marque during Hector's visit there. Mihaela thought that it would not be a bad idea to invite Angela to her mansion in Huntington for the weekend; there she would have leisurely time to pull a confession from her. Mihaela loved gossip, most of all when it was firsthand.

All conversations spun around Marque's death. If he had been killed because he had pledged to help Hector, then everyone there was more or less in danger. The police had not found the culprit yet; who killed Marque and why was still an enigma. Hector spotted Angela in the crowd of guests and acknowledged her from the center of the platform. Tim came to present his respect to Angela. He was appalled by Marque's murder.

"You have to tell me the entire story," he murmured while kissing politely Angela's hand.

From a table not too far off, Nicolette, "the witch of Times Square," carefully watched what was happening in the crowded dining hall. On one side of her sat Bianca. A shadow flew across Nicolette's face. Angela did not have time to focus too deeply there, because Graham suddenly appeared at her table.

"We have to talk," he said in place of a greeting. "Leave the political crap aside." Bogdan turned back to Angela, neglecting Dorina. His golden rule: politics were dirty and money clean. Graham was silent and surprised. Angela, who had anticipated this particular moment, did not miss it. She stood up and followed Graham slowly through the packed dinner tables.

"About what?" Angela asked with an innocent smile, lengthening her neck gracefully. She suspected

what response she would receive.

“What happened there,” he muttered. “I’m very interested. And if you want to write about it, I can recommend you to an influential newspaper.” His evening suit made him look taller and more robust than he actually was, as if disclosing his true profession. Graham ran a hand through his blond hair, which hid a balding spot on top of his head. “Personal or professional?” She pretended confusion, and received an ambiguous response. “Then let’s make a deal. I’ll help you, and you help me. I need help now. But without too much fuss,” she said quickly.

“Why quietly? Noise would be to your advantage.”

“Nonsense. Nobody is protecting me,” she challenged him.

“That can be arranged. Find out what the Department of State thinks about Eastern Europe,” suggested Graham. “Prepare a list of ideas and plunge yourself into writing as soon as they’re approved.”

“I understand, thanks; I have never been politically correct” she said ironically. “I prefer anonymity—and exchanging info with you.”

“OK,” Graham quietly accepted. “But your answer surprises me, to be honest. I was not expecting that.”

Once Graham had headed toward Mihaela Banu’s table, and Angela came back to her seat, Bogdan described his and Dorina’s visit to the pyramids in Egypt, in a voice loud enough to be heard by as many as possible.

“Good for nothing. I got out of the limo only to pee. It was hot, which is why I preferred to stay inside, in the air conditioning, and drink brandy. But Dorina lost her mind; she went to see them closely. I sent them a kiss through the car windows. Stones! What the hell is there to see?”

Bored, Bogdan played the role of entertainer for quite a while just to have some fun. At the end of the dinner, marked by a series of other toasts and formal good-byes, Bogdan offered to take Angela home. She accepted. It was late and she did not have enough money to pay for a cab. Bogdan stopped the car in front of Dorina’s building on Park Avenue South. “Come upstairs and have a drink.” Dorina was boiling. She did not like to be discarded like that.

“Next time.” Bogdan opened the door, helping her out of the car.

“No joke, you have a full life,” Angela mocked Bogdan after Dorina’s disappearance into the imposing building, where two doormen in elegant liveries officiated even at that late hour over the comings and goings of tenants.

“She’s a pleasant rich woman who knows to handle my vices,” he explained briefly.

Once on Queensboro Bridge, heading to Long Island City, Angela looked back; Manhattan seen at night from that vantage point was so fascinating that millions of immigrants were willing to accept any humiliation only to be able to contemplate it from time to time.

“Let’s go to Danubius.” Bogdan’s lips bared his teeth in a vague smile. It was a restaurant in Queens where Romanian immigrants used to gather over a glass of wine to chat in their native language. Whoever felt alone and lost in the New World went to Danubius to meet friends and alleviate homesickness.

There were cheers when they entered the full restaurant. Famous for the parties he threw there,

Bogdan was also famous for his generosity: he always paid for everyone present, for he did not like to drink alone.

“All drinks on me!” shouted Bogdan, waving his hand in the air. The cheers grew louder. Tables were drawn aside and the space between them squeezed to make room for another table, but no one protested. “Where is Marga?” Bogdan knocked his fist on the table. “Cominggggg!” The wine came from the other end of the bodega. The owner, a brunette with big wet eyes, wearing a shirt that exposed much of her stony breasts, slid a few strips of beads on her finger. Deep wrinkles at the corners of the lips, and expressive black eyes underlined with makeup gave her face a distinct charm.

“Drinks without music, what’s this!” Bogdan snapped.

“Cominggggg, Your Majesty!”

Marga let her breasts rest on Bogdan’s shoulders; he closed his eyes and ran his hands over them. It was an intimate gesture, and both of them experienced it with real pleasure.

“I’ll sing for you tonight.”

A violinist and an accordionist appeared beside her.

“Who’s the girl?” Marga pointed to Angela.

“Not what you think. Go ahead!”

There were old songs of love about the curse of love and magic being one. Marga sang spinning around their table, with small steps, as if she wove an invisible web. Her large earrings and strands of hair intertwined around her neck. Up close, the band of gypsy musicians followed her. The restaurant had become warm and cool at the same time. From somewhere, the smell of hay and fir trees and mowed grass after rain insidiously entered the place.

The violin’s murmur became a sort of background sound, like that of a stream flowing downhill among stones. Bogdan took Angela’s hand and kissed her fingers one by one in slow motion. When she wanted to withdraw, she could not. Angela felt as she had as a teenager in the country, in front of the house in Rucăr, crushed against the fence by that boy, with no possibility of escaping his kiss, but not wanting to leave, and therefore ashamed of herself. An irrepressible and pure desire sprang from Bogdan’s massive body. Marga’s songs speeded an unexpected intimacy, building a kind of wall around them. No one in the restaurant paid attention to their table anymore, as if they had disappeared.

Marga’s spinning circles got narrower. Angela felt her pulse and Bogdan’s heartbeat at once. They throbbed at equal intervals. She felt the air that had washed his mouth, and the taste of his saliva; his skin touching every nerve of her body. His rough hair mixing with her tresses.

“Drink!” Bogdan’s voice resounded as if in a dream. “Don’t be afraid of love.”

He was holding half of her body in his arms when the contents of the glass slipped down her throat. That taste of basil flower mixed with honey and the oil—without any doubt—from an icon’s candle was familiar. Auntie Gena had taught her how to prepare it on the night of Pentecost. Everyone who drank it fell in love. But she had not given it to anyone. Just for fun, she had secretly prepared it once to try its powers, and then she had tried its taste. She fell in love with the first boy she met, a tractor driver from around there. It had been a real fire. Then Aunt Gena hung the magic string around her neck that helped her be free of spells.

She touched the silk cord around her neck and looked around. With a firm movement, she freed herself from Bogdan's arms trying in vain to hold her.

"The trick doesn't work on me. You don't look like a magic connoisseur," Angela said, surprised. Marga stopped singing; she pretended to pour wine into their glasses. "Get out of here," Bogdan snapped at Marga. Suddenly the noise of the restaurant rushed over them. Angela threw her purse over her shoulder. "I'll think of tonight as an attempt at friendly persuasion," she giggled at Bogdan.

"I really like you," he said with a defeated shrug. "Me too. But I'm not the harem type," she said seriously. "By the way, you did not tell me anything about my immigration case." "We must wait," Bogdan made a bored gesture of his hand. Marga blocked Angela's way to the door. The two musicians were behind her like a personal guard. Angela forced Marga to back away. Meanwhile, everyone in the restaurant had awakened from drunkenness, or it was just the morning's chill entering through the open doors? Bogdan watched them from afar. He threw a bunch of bills on the table, hurrying to catch up with Angela, but stopped, puzzled by a wailing sound. Marga had dropped to her knees and kissed Angela's hand as if she wanted to apologize. The scene lasted only a split second, because Angela had already vanished through the open doors.

On the deserted Queens Boulevard, time grabbed her bluntly and physically. Was it just the feeling of time, or a concrete form of it? Who could know? She perceived time in so many ways!

She felt it as a coldness passing through each nerve. The pain of time's passage through her body was no longer a metaphor; again and again time had taken her brutally in its claws, throwing her into the most impossible corners of its crossings and passages! Viscous density: grinding wheels passing through the brain and body to adjust them to new dimensions of life; the so unbearable light of revelations; the narrow corridor, so narrow that she was just able to pass through it. Sometimes the air became unbreathable, and returning wasn't an option, for that corridor demanded only one direction: forward. She was lost in an overwhelming form, like the worm in the apple, so alien to the outside world of the butterfly. In that darkness she couldn't see more than the next step. There were desires, needs, dreams, a sort of gradual anticipation of that future that would happen when she was been too tired to hope.

Feeding you with time! With changing! It was not easy to accept that she was going through a metamorphosis with rules she could not understand. The body of her birth (in which she had lived until then) was lost in the strange passage. She ended up in another body with new rules and abilities. She could beat the pain; learned to be in different places at the same time; she was able to do ten things at once: sometimes it seemed that she had reached a state of ubiquity. And her face had acquired a reddish tint; between her eyes, at the root of her nose, appeared a perfectly round brown circle, like a third eye; her hair had become reddish, and strong, supple muscles throbbed beneath the elastic skin, allowing her to easily stand up for twelve hours non- Could it be that old Cronos, the destroyer of forms, had turned into a creator of new forms? That here Europe's ancient gods had taken on other dimensions? If words were able to create reality, then could it be true that she had become somehow close to Fausta – Lady Destiny – a character in a novel she'd published years ago?

Destiny was highly selective, and discriminatory; it paid attention to young people, it was not interested in the old. (In her mind the concept had acquired the form of a cascade of concrete

possibilities – in fact, of a chain or succession of waterfalls.) Some destinies were poorer than others; they went through fewer temporal nodes, while others were richer. And death – the flesh shell’s explosion under the unbearable pressure of a new and hard-to-endure essence – stopped the race through temporality’s nodes. Once a choice had been made, once you embarked on a path, everything pushed forward towards the fulfillment of that option, to the end of it. The road looked like a ski slope. Sooner or later the end of the slope would be reached, and there a new crossroads would appear. With only one choice possible! Each node or crossroad was a step. It was impossible to say whether it was “up” or “down” or “sideways,” because time does not have spatial representations. But what could be charged with fear was the frightening responsibility of choice.

“I don’t get it!” The expert at Compaq, a computer store on Lexington Avenue, apologized. Marque’s disk was there, in front of their eyes. “It’s just not a virus. I guess it’s a sort of embedded program. If the code is not written down or active or just displayed on the screen by the time you access a file, you lose information. This is a way to protect highly sensitive documents. And they cannot be transferred, copied, or attached. Practically speaking, as you open it, you lose it.” The man looked at her with suspicion. It was clear that the object in front of him had been stolen. Angela turned off the notebook and hid it in her bag. “I’d buy it if you want to sell.” He hesitated to say for how much. If he managed to decode that program, he could hit the jackpot. He was sure he was dealing with top-secret software. She left the store. Graham’s car was parked on 36th Street and Fifth Avenue. Crowds of people flew towards 34th Street and Avenue of the Americas, to Herald Square.

“No one understands anything, nobody knows anything.” She sat in the car beside Graham without any further explanation. She wrapped her long legs around the heavy bag in which, lately, she hid Terente, her gun loaded with blanks. It was the only thing that helped her feel more or less safe.

“It doesn’t matter.” Graham gave a bored shrug. He sipped from the coffee he’d bought at the deli on Madison Avenue. “I got ‘K’'s address.”

“Are you serious?” Angela regretted her impatience, seeing the look on Graham’s face.

“He is hiding in Florida.” Then he added: “Are you sure you can prove this man is a fake? I mean, he is not the true ‘K’?” Graham worked for a parallel investigative section of the Secret Service, a department that verified procedural steps and conclusions of pending or solved cases in other departments. The rule was to use civilians as much as possible in these kinds of inquiries; nobody wanted a conflict with the official investigators. “K”'s case had been partially accepted by his superiors. He was only allowed to pass Angela some benign information. Graham believed that someone in his office’s hierarchy wanted to find out whether this “K” was or was not the real one.

“This guy,” he said slowly, biting his upper lip, while entering the Midtown Tunnel to arrive faster in Forest Hills, “has a great influence somewhere up high in that channel of intelligence with Russia and Eastern Europe, where we believe we have a mole.” Something had gone wrong there; it was rumored that more agents fell, more well-planned diversions broke down, and thus information seemed to travel unrestricted over there, while more and more wrong decisions were made at the highest level here.

“I get out here,” Angela said instead of goodbye. She was not surprised by those findings. “We’ll talk.”

“Be cautious,” she heard. “K and Hector Romano ... that’s too much.” Graham’s colleague in charge of immigrants from Romania showed him full bags of anonymous complaints and letters of defamation arriving monthly at the FBI address in New York City. No other immigrant community had such a record. Graham wanted to know if Angela’s name appeared in those letters. It did. Anonymous informants reported the silliest things about her. But one was clear: the informers’ tide had risen against her after Hector Romano’s visit.

Graham watched Angela crossing the boulevard. He experienced a wave of sincere empathy for her, even professional respect. She had no money, no connections, she didn’t do these things to get a higher position; actually she did not want anything for herself. It was something he could not understand. Maybe that was why he had tried, in his own way, to help her, although it made absolutely no sense. Sooner or later she would disappear if she did not give up or find powerful allies.

While Graham turned the car toward Manhattan, Angela crossed the threshold of the two-story house in Forest Hills where Tim had his immigration agency. She did not ring the bell because she had known since the time Tim got her the first job that the front door was always open.

“What a surprise!” Tim exclaimed instead of a welcome. He had no idea why she was there, and he had to leave for a gathering of the Iuliu Maniu Association, to which Angela had not been invited because Nicolette, a member of the board, did not want her there.

Tim pretended to look for something on his desk. Meanwhile, Angela sat on one of the sofas in the room, in fact a loft that occupied an entire floor of Tim’s house. She seemed relaxed, and that bothered him. Tim pulled heavily on a large pipe, which was obviously not lit.

“I’m trying to quit smoking,” he explained, caught in the act. Just then the fax machine started up. Someone had sent a long text, and Angela could discern words in their native language.

“A fax from my brother in Los Angeles.”

“When did you see Marque, I mean, when did you meet him for the last time?” She overextended her neck as if she wanted to shrink the distance between them. The afternoon light’s intensity suddenly subsided. There was a great calm.

“Who?” Tim wondered loudly, faking work with the pages he’d received by fax.

“Marque,” Angela repeated.

Agitating his hands, Tim headed to the middle of the room. His legs, his hands were so fat they seemed deformed. His short neck was completely hidden between his shoulders; his forehead merged into the baldness of his crown, so his small eyes seemed lost in a yellowish pigment.

“I think one year ago.” Obviously, Tim disliked those memories. “Is this an interrogation?” he defended himself, as if an imaginary fly were bothering him.

“Why did you tell Marque that this ‘K’ is not the true ‘K’?”

“Did Marque tell you about this?” Tim wondered loudly. Angela made a vague gesture. Tim lit his pipe to minimize the irritation.

“Marque, may God rest him in peace, told me about his friendship with Corbu,” Tim said in an exploratory tone. “I was surprised, you know, Marque was a dissident, a fugitive from Romania, and Corbu had been a prominent member of the communist nomenklatura there. They were both defectors, but the past could not be changed. We ran into each other in the house of a mutual friend in Manhattan,

at a party to celebrate the host's PhD. The man about whom Marque spoke to me was totally different from the one I knew. I supposed that Corbu had changed a lot, which in a way seemed normal," Tim lied with ease.

"You were close to him, weren't you?" She was alluding to Romania and Tim's past. Tim had worked for one of the censorship boards in the administration of national culture. When he ran away, no one understood why. He left behind a great position with excellent prospects: he was qualified to reach even the highest level in the administration of censorship.

"Let's say yes."

"I also suppose that you knew very well that Nicolette has nothing to do with 'K' now."

Angela reclined on the couch, her eyes acquiring a blue tint. Tim noticed how much she had changed, becoming more feminine, more attractive. Tim was confused and amused at the same time. He felt like the subject of an investigation and also of a seduction scene, in which he took part with undisguised delight.

"It's true, they are separated, but he takes care of her financially." Tim pretended defeat with a cunning smile on his round, sweaty face. Under his stretched skin, strong jaws showed through. He approached her as if he wanted to whisper those words into her ear.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Angela's hunting instinct assured her that in the end she would seize him beyond all chance of escape.

"To protect you." Tim tried a gallant explanation. "In addition, Nicolette might, who knows, mention you in a conversation with Corbu; then, if he accepted, you could see him. But you missed it. To be honest, this fixation of yours worries me ... Why don't you engage in more pleasant things? A love affair, for example."

After the first moment of surprise, Tim had regained his self-control. What she knew – probably found out from Marque – was insignificant. Tim displayed a worried, paternal posture. Very affectionate, he kissed her hand, so Angela couldn't keep up her accusations. Once out on the street, she assumed that Graham, too knew what she had found out from Tim.

At the risk of losing more information, she further explored Marque's disk. As soon as she got home, she placed the voice recorder next to the computer and read aloud what appeared on the screen. She opened "To My Witness," a description of a perfect murder. From a certain point on, it was as if Marque had described his own death long before it happened, or had imagined that scenario for someone else who then used it to kill him. Or, who knows, just to frame someone for that crime.

CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER A FEW cool, dry days, the disgusting and insane humidity defeated the city. The air smelled of fat putrid fish; a wave of hot mist dampened everything; the city was boiling. White vapors emitted by gigantic air conditioning installations, wrapping the highest floors of skyscrapers in unsettling smog, brought the physical feeling of huge pots of boiling water on hot oven plates. On such days, nothing was more precious than a mouthful of cold, dry air. Some just dreamt about it; the lucky ones fled hundreds of miles north or sought refuge in concrete giants endowed with huge refrigeration devices. When rain and humidity took over the beginning of September, Fred decided to spend the Labor Day weekend in Atlantic City. It was so disgustingly hot he didn't even have the will to drive. He rented a limousine with a bar full of light beverages and a TV set on which he could watch his favorite business shows on his way to Atlantic City.

Angela accepted Fred's invitation. She knew that Fred had always booked an apartment there, so she could have her own room and privacy. She thought that she could go through the notes she had taken during Hector's visits. She also brought along the voice recordings she had made while reading Marque's disk. She listened to them again and again, hoping to find a clue that could shed light on the mystery of Marque's death, actually a sort of ritualistic killing seemingly intended to humiliate him even in death. But her plan proved totally wrong, because Fred did not give her a free minute; unexpectedly, he besieged her with rapprochements, crises of fury, and declarations of love.

Fred was not able to love anybody because he did not have that kind of affection in his drugged mind. Love for him meant an attachment to a human being or object, and his continuous tormenting of that human being or object. Biologically, he was incapable of making love, and he knew it, but in his mind he never abandoned the possibility. His recent experiences with escort ladies had aggravated the insanity; the sexy escort girls hadn't cured him, but they charged exorbitant amounts of money per hour. In the limo headed to Atlantic City, Fred was more furious at himself than ever; he looked like a truly mad man. Angela discovered the untouched bulk of his pills; he had not taken any lately, and she forced him to swallow them one by one. How many times had she felt the desire to take those pills herself? She was close to a breakdown. Lately, for Fred, she had begun to be not only his weekend companion, but also his nurse and stepmother, and the psychoanalyst was encouraging this mess in Fred's mind.

"You are sexy. Why don't you work for *Playboy*? You could make more money; don't you think?" It was his way on getting on her nerves.

The short walk on the beach showed on Angela's face, she had enjoyed the moments of freedom from him, and this made Fred angrier. She made an effort to remain calm and encourage him to

swallow the medication. Fred, however, was furious; the woman in front of him had been a reminder that he was an impotent man, which he never accepted. At least one hour to be a normal man! That was what he wanted most, and this wish couldn't be fulfilled! On the bed he displaced more small silver boxes with pills, each pill in a special compartment, each one a different color.

"You could earn far more money as a sexy star for *Playboy*. It's a profitable business," he insisted, knowing precisely how to madden Angela. "Or you could work in porn. There you can earn even more money. But for that you'd have to learn to make love," Fred said with a sarcastic grin. "Over there in the East I bet you just jump on each other like animals and you're done."

Fred swallowed each pill with brief breaks. He took small sips from a glass of water as if he craved the water, a ritual that took a long time. Sometimes he hesitated in front of a pill; he wasn't sure if he had taken it earlier that day, or if the dose prescribed by the doctor was the right one. But what Fred had just uttered was something Angela never had thought of it. Learn how to make love?

During her college years, *Ars Amandi* and *The Kama Sutra*, borrowed from the university library, were texts she considered fiction. At that time she had been so into German philosophy that sometimes she even forgot she had a date with Michael, her platonic boyfriend, a physics student. She and a group of girlfriends would talk about Kant and Schopenhauer until dawn in the laundry room of the dorm. They were an unusual group of girls, thirsty for philosophy. She remembered Svetlana from senior year, one of the beauties of the Faculty of Letters: desperate because she could not grasp Schopenhauer's depths, she wanted to end her life and drank caustic soda. She didn't die and had to live with an esophagus made of silver. Another girl, disappointed that Kant could not answer her existential questions, jumped from a fourth-floor window. It had been a trend of philosophical suicides, meant to show their disengagement from oppressive Marxist philosophy. She herself had had a huge amount of arsenic (stolen from the dental office of an uncle who used it for fillings) in a small bag well-hidden in her pockets. She decided to take it the next time the most desperate thoughts took her on their wings. She never got the chance to do it. A cousin to whom she had confessed revealed the secret to her parents. She had to throw the arsenic in the toilet in front of their eyes. Other university colleagues had chosen other suicidal paths: one swallowed more than one hundred sleeping pills, and another one shaved all the hair off her head as a sign of protest against the overuse of Hegel's dialectic by Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Their group was dismantled when the Dean called them to his office one by one. Each girl was advised to redirect her mental energy toward dialectical materialism, or else be kicked out of college. Around that time Angela discovered a lot of old banned books in the university library. One evening she read aloud in the dorm room from a French version of the *Kama Sutra*. All the girls in that dorm room were virgins, and puritanical. The education in their families had been severe. Although they were over twenty, they had been fed the idea that they must have sex only with their husband on their wedding night. However, they were all dying of curiosity; they wanted to know what had been forbidden. Two girls in the dorm room began, in jest, to act out with each other hat Angela was reading aloud from the *Kama Sutra*. The result was awful. The conclusion: the act of making love must be accepted by the woman only for the sake of keeping her man by her side, and at the same time concealed with shame, for it was indeed something to be ashamed of; but something that the woman had to accept if the man wanted it. It was not a

pleasurable act, and it couldn't be learned, like rhetoric or existential strategy, for it was purely stupid and ugly. And so, even if Angela liked someone, she made no move, scared that things would end up in bed. She had never been aggressive in the sense of wanting to conquer a man, or take the lead to make love to a man she wanted. But Fred believed that the art of making love or sex was a part of civilization, so he was not embarrassed to expose his fat body; on the contrary, he was quite proud of himself.

"You are inhibited," he was quick to conclude. "I think that the communists did something to you, and who knows, to all of you; look at yourself, you don't even have the courage to talk about sex. Have you ever chosen a man? Here in America the woman chooses the men, and we are happy about it."

Fred seemed proud of what he was saying, but Angela was appalled; no man in her country would accept such a statement. In addition, she had not chosen Fred; they were business partners. She had always been hunted, chosen, because this was the rule of love there. If she liked a man, she hid it carefully in horror that he might find out. Another cause for inhibition was the barbaric male custom of disclosing to others intimate stories about a woman with whom one had made love. Writers and journalists in particular specialized in such public executions. Perhaps out of frustration – or so she assumed, meditating on this subject – their egos had been enhanced by ridiculing a woman who had sex with them. Then the political police, the national instrument of intimidation and hypocrisy, used this kind of information to destroy the public images of those who were in its sights. When Angela refused to attend the Political Academy, it was heard that she had had hundreds of lovers, that she was totally immoral, and that her former boyfriend had received fake letters, written, supposedly by her, in the dirtiest possible style to another man. She did never write such letters; but those crude forgeries had been written in her name. Whom to sue? A lawsuit or a court case for libel and defamation was not possible in that world; whom to blame? A cynical joke popular at that time was that whoever was uncomfortable for the establishment became, overnight, "a Jew, immoral, or with relatives abroad."

"It wouldn't hurt to get some cocaine, or to consult my psychiatrist." Fred couldn't believe that what Angela told him was true. In New York City love affairs of famous people were holding the headlines, and slander cases were very common. As a consolation for that afternoon of quarrels, Fred chose to watch *Emmanuelle*, a semi-porn series he liked, but he didn't get very far into it because out of the blue, a furious Angela began to scold him. She loudly accused him of everything that came into her head, while Fred, surprisingly, listened calmly. He was smoking, and it seemed as if her insults did not reach him.

"Darling, let me tell you why you are screaming," he said as her recital wound down. Fred was frankly amused. "It's because of the movie. You got excited and you are embarrassed. Do you know what a woman does in this situation?"

"I know what a man should do." She had never hated him more.

"That would be in the barbarism of Romania." Fred laughed heartily. "I think they should be wiped off the face of the earth. They are worth nothing and deserve nothing." He spoke with strong conviction. "And I researched their market. It's zero."

After dinner they entered Cesar Casino. Fred felt refreshed, vindicated in a sense; her moment of fury made him happy, so he dealt with Angela more nicely than she expected. He gave her a bag full of casino chips and explained how to sniff out the poker or *chemin de fer* table's gains. As they ended their tour of the gambling hall, Fred declared agitatedly, "I'm going to play roulette. Leave me alone. I don't like to be watched."

Angela lingered alone for a while in front of the slot machines, watching the crowd gamble with insatiable rage and dedication, and realized that her behavior was atypical for that place. A slot machine spat chips and a lucky man filled his pockets with the gambling coins; she decided to play. She bet herself that she would win twice the amount Fred had given her, and if she didn't stop then, she would lose everything. It happened as predicted. Breaching the agreement, she went to Fred. He was angry that he was losing too. With the usual grumblings he gave her a few handfuls of coins. She gambled again, but differently this time. It seemed that the machines' software observed a simple algorithm: the player won double the amount invested and then, at the moment of climax when no gambler stopped gambling, the machine would win back everything. She lost four times the amount she risked; she changed machines a few times. She won and lost down to the last coin. During this time she experienced a subliminal connection with each machine. Through combinations on the screen, the machine wove a vicious kind of intimacy, taking control of the player. It could be likened – keeping things in proportion – to the intimacy between victim and oppressor. She had experienced it in the past.

She ordered a Coca-Cola and lit a cigarette in the small bar on one side of the gambling hall. It was amusing to discover that the mass of people who had come there to have fun were in fact victimized. She leaned back to admire the chandeliers. At a neighboring table, a guy was trying to clinch a conversation with a woman whose face couldn't be seen. She liked to suppose that the two had met through personal ads. Probably they would each meet others over the next few hours, and then, with their meeting notes in front of them, decide which candidate was the most convenient. Oddly, the offensive luxury all around her was no stranger to her. She had encountered something similar years ago in one of Ceausescu's palaces. It had been a bizarre adventure, if she could call it that, one of the weirdest of her life. It had happened in the fall of 1989. At that time she had worked at the Ministry of Health newsletter, writing anonymously, with no byline allowed.

She had been moved there to be disciplined and "re-educated in the communist spirit" soon after the secret police discovered the underground anticommunist publication. Three men from their group had been thrown in jail or deported; after being threatened with two years in jail, she got a lighter sentence. Around her were only informants; as far publishing was concerned, she was a dead person. And suddenly, a few months after she was moved there, her former boss, close to the dictator, had called her to his editorial office.

"I have a mission for you; a pathway to your political rehabilitation. I understand what you're going through."

The editor in chief had whispered these last words, as he feared he would be recorded by hidden microphones in the room. Sitting behind a desk covered with papers and books, he had the dictator's portrait on the back wall, overseeing the room. Angela could not distinguish anything on that portrait's

tie but heel and toe plates; the dictator's profession was that of a cobbler, he repaired shoes. The proverb "The shoemaker's children go barefoot" had been true for Romania. And the man behind that desk had been a worker in a factory, a skilled lathe operator – responsible for manufacturing metal components and assembling them. He had nothing to do with culture. Being a machinist with a good personal file, he became a police officer, and then the communist party had promoted him to other jobs in the field of media until he became the one in charge of this newspaper.

The editor in chief watched her, holding his hands together as if demanding understanding. He did not want to hear a refusal. With cunning eyes, short hair slicked back, impeccable gray suit, and red tie, he was the image of the most perfect party servant. She had avoided the chair next to his desk, but she had to give in eventually, bored by his insistence.

"I don't write positive, laudatory articles," she said, to leave no trace of misunderstanding.

"You don't have to write anything, dear, you have to attend a visit I cannot honor in my place."

"Why me?"

"Aren't you curious?" said the communist media mogul, gritting his teeth behind a cheerful face; he had tricked this recalcitrant woman who could not guess the reason for the meeting, although she had always believed herself to be above the others ... so smug.

"You have to attend a summit of newspaper editors in chief from countries that are our friends." He avoided saying where the summit was supposed to take place. "I had the honor of being invited to the Party's Congress. I recommended you to go to the summit in my place. This is an important step in your political rehabilitation."

The communist media mogul blinked, and then nodded conspiratorially toward the ceiling. She was supposed to understand that everything had been decided up there in the high spheres of power, where they wanted solid proof of her ideological reeducation. He was convinced that it would be a victory to tame this woman, force her to lick his hand. Then and only then would she be totally removed in one way or another. When a political magazine in France wrote about the journalists who had tried to publish a clandestine newspaper, it had been decided that the members of this group should disappear quickly and quietly, one by one. There were many ways to do it; the safest and most commonly used were "suicide," such as throwing the disgraced person from the balcony of a high floor of a building, hanging, or asphyxiation in the bathtub. The problem was that the secret police was not overfilled with brilliant guys, and lately ridiculous contradictions had cropped up. For example, when a writer was found hanging from his ceiling by a rope, nobody could explain why he had left the fucking soup pot to boil on the stove. Someone who intends to commit suicide does not start cooking right beforehand! Another one was found asphyxiated in his bathtub by a gas leak from broken pipes, but the family found out that very fucking night, by calling a professional plumber, that all the pipes in the house were in perfect condition! No gas leak! The most compromising staged suicide was that of a writer thrown off a bridge into a lake that was almost dried up. It was late winter towards early spring; the location for the "suicide" had undoubtedly been decided long before, with no consideration of the fact that the lake had almost no water in it at that time of year. Bureaucracy was slow even in secret police headquarters, so what happened in that case threw the whole notion of "suicide" into the fucking absurd: how to drown in a dried-up lake? Finally, it had been accepted at

the top of the chain of command that the secret police had flaws. And because the executions were supposed to appear to be genuine suicides, new venues and methods had been crafted.

Angela left for Transylvania that night. She had accepted out of curiosity; she had never had the chance to meet the dictator's inner circle, nor did she care that she could pay a price for that decision. If she had to lose something it might as well be her life, which was worth nothing. More, the city she was going to was close to the most active center of magic. Back in time Gena had told her unforgettable stories about those lands in the north of the country.

When she got off the train at dawn in the ice-covered station, a whole crew was waiting for her. Strangely, they all addressed her as "Comrade Professor." The media mogul was teaching Leninist philosophy at the Political Academy of the Communist Party, and he preferred and enjoyed being called "Professor." Although she was a mere replacement, the other attendees proceeded with her as if the real person was present. She felt like one of a Japanese drama's "black characters": the entities nonexistent in the play – the stagehands changing the set – were dressed in black.

At dinner, representatives of the Eastern Europe communist countries and of the republics of the Soviet empire talked extensively about the role of communist propaganda in the economic and cultural development of society. Someone paid tribute to the fraternal socialist countries' friendship and to the need to strengthen the truth that freedom for people means the consciousness of necessity. A delegate from the Baltics, who was actually Russian, continued on the topic of the transformation of necessity into freedom, and then complained through his translator about the ingratitude of the locals, who did not appreciate the heroism of the Russian occupation army defending the gains of communism in Estonia.

"Do you need anything special?" The First Secretary or regional governor, the local dictator, leaned toward her gallantly, with a familiarity that was out of place. He wrapped Angela's shoulders in his hands. In fact he had passed from guest to guest, exchanging greetings with each of them. And he was the only one there who seemed to notice that instead of the eighty-year-old professor, a woman was sitting in that chair at the table. The local potentate seemed stuck there beside Angela's chair; embarrassed by so many eyes on her, Angela stood up. The First Secretary made a sign, and she followed him to one of the bars set up with drinks at the sides of the room, where he ordered cognac for both of them.

"Is it true that in your region every wish is fulfilled?" Angela revived the discussion's thread. There was nobody around them. The others were all talking around the dinner tables, and she tried to guess where the hidden microphones might be.

"Whatever one wishes. I grant it." The nomenklatura man blinked unambiguously. He was handsome and elegant. She knew that once he had toyed with writing; he had even published a book that received the most overinflated praise. Who would have dared to criticize him? Allegedly, he had liberal views within the communist party. It was also rumored that he could afford it because he was one of the dictator's wife's favorites.

"What if I have, let's say, a subversive desire?" She challenged his pride. At once she saw ambition, cruelty, and lust for power on his face. The first secretary of the region considered himself the true successor of the dictator.

“Here nothing is out of place.”

An arrogant look beamed through his narrowed eyes; he toasted her, raising his glass. The excellent brandy came from a famous winery, producing exclusively for the nomenklatura.

“I would very much like to see Dokya,” she said as if in passing, testing the limits of his ambition and power. She balanced on the tips of her toes with her head tilted to one side, letting her ringlets fall over her flaming cheeks. Oh, it did not matter at all that she was dressed in a blue suit without taste or style!

“And I wish to see the Great Hermit and also to take a look inside the Forbidden Library. As you can see, I have three wishes.” What she had asked for was pure madness. When she looked up, she could not read anything more in his eyes than a sort of affectionate cynicism.

“Three is a good number,” he said neutrally. “Three is magic, and I have nothing against it. And I have always honored what I promise.” He bowed reverently in front of Angela. “I keep my promises especially to persons for whom I have an intellectual weakness.” And, leaving aside the glass of cognac, he moved with elastic steps toward the “Grand Inquisitor,” as he was secretly called, entering the dinner hall, the man in charge of the country’s culture and communist propaganda.

No one had seen Dokya in a long time. Auntie Gena recounted eccentric details, as she had been Dokya’s apprentice. At one time it was said that Dokya had been killed; then it was rumored that she was somewhere near Upper Galda and Lower Galda or Gladiu, those famous villages whose names were linked to ancient magical practices. It seemed that her forecasts of the future not only displeased but enraged the dictator; therefore he decided to keep her at his disposal, using her magic powers as a defensive shield. It was also said that, forced or tortured, Dokya had disclosed secrets of long life and eternal youth to the dictatorial couple. It was obvious that as time passed and the nation aged in deprivation and misery, the dictator and his wife had undergone a sort of rejuvenation, and their lust for life had become inflated. Everyone hoped that one day Dokya would poison them. She remained the only hope of people taken over not only by the invaders from abroad, but by the occupiers from inside: the cohorts of collaborators with communist power, mainly made up of party activists and secret-police informers.

About the Great Hermit it was known that he openly opposed the Dictator; he lived under house arrest in his own monastery, which nobody could approach. He had also the gift of prophecy. This gift, given by or coming from God, was considered the spiritual support of resistance against the evil that crushed all of southeastern Europe. He hadn’t been killed for diplomatic reasons. He was had strong connections to the Christian Orthodox patriarchate in Constantinople, and to Rome’s Papacy. Christian Orthodox believers hoped that one day the Great Hermit’s curses would kill the Dictator. They all expected a miracle. They all believed that the Antichrist would be punished in a mystical way. Therefore no one did anything against him, they just awaited the Dictator’s death with irrational optimism. And because the miracle did not happen, and everyone had been in waiting mode – Angela sarcastically summarized as she looked at the hysterical crowd infested with the lust for winning in the Atlantic City casino – the Romanian secret police and the KGB had staged the miracle. To be credible, the “miracle” was televised, so the entire country could virtually “participate” in it. Those who directed this play brought in tanks, thousands of real corpses, street battles, and the mystical

execution on Christmas Day of the devilish dictatorial couple.

As for the Forbidden Library, well, it was the secret dream of everyone who lived in a damaged culture. In it were piled all the books banned by the Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist ideology brought by East Asia's barbarians. Those books had not been burned just yet, because it was assumed that the original manuscripts of the official doctrine were in there somewhere, but they were still nowhere to be found, despite the efforts of a research team that had been locked into the library for nearly a decade. No one knew the names of any specific member of that team; many assumed that they had never come out of those underground tunnels. Another assumption was that they had been killed; still another was that they had gone astray, lost their way back in the depths of the vast library and died there. It had also been said that the vast Forbidden Library acted like a living organism: it could defend itself, hence the miracle of its survival.

Fred showed up at Angela's table in the bar, carrying a bag full of coins. He had won several thousand dollars. He left a pile of chips on the table, inviting her to have more fun gambling; ordered sweets and soft drinks—he did not even touch them—and ran back, seized by the gambling fever.

Angela remembered that on the next morning of her journey to the north, she had visited an exhibition of art designed exclusively for the dictator's wife. This had been followed by a visit to a natural herbal therapy center, as the official business of the summit was to take place in the afternoon. Angela remembered that glass roof on which the storm outside wove surreal swirls of snow. After she had swum in the pool filled with thermal water, she was given a massage. Three girls outdid themselves. Then they let her rest in a large bathtub of pine-needle tea. She had almost fallen asleep there when two bodies crept in beside her. The water rippled slightly. The girls started an underwater body massage.

“Are you all right, Comrade Professor?” One of the girls piled lasciviously on top of Angela, caressing her breasts. Whimpering, the other one embraced her shoulders. Pulling their hair, hitting and yelling at them, she told those creatures to get out of there. They didn't, but she did.

“We'll be fired.” One of the girls burst into tears. The other one pointed at a glass lens that gleamed on one of the yellowish beams of the ceiling. Even though she was disgusted at being taped, she returned to that tea smelling of resin; she was too tired to protest or resist. The tea flavors had penetrated under her skin, into her lungs. In the aphrodisiac bathtub tea, she called up the image of Lawrence; he had been her only support in a world increasingly demented, suffocating and crushing all. Lawrence's disappearance hadn't changed anything, his presence was there, fresh, and in her mind the two of them lived on in the same intimacy. She remembered yet again—how many times had she relived it?—every detail of their first night of love; there in the tea bath, to her shame, she was close to orgasm.

She had crawled out of the bathtub, barely able to stand. In her hotel room she collapsed on the bed. When she woke up, the Governor was beside her bed.

“You missed the conference,” he said, “but I am still keeping my word.”

It was a night of blizzard. Waves of snow had come in gusts from the Russian steppes, angrily

swallowing the thousands of miles between the north of the country and Siberia. Packs of wolves were out for prey, running toward Blaj. Snowdrifts rose swiftly, while the forest sent an accomplice silence to muffle the town at the foot of the mountains. A jeep crew was waiting in front of the hotel. When the motorcade entered the forest, the Governor opened a bottle of champagne. He poured some into a glass and invited her to drink, baring his teeth with an unpleasant laugh. Then with his other hand he wrapped her waist, pulling her toward him. He kissed her temple and then just as suddenly withdrew. Angela remembered how hot the air in the car had become; she had unbuttoned the fur coat offered her for this trip. It also felt as if her dress had become too tight. The governor's cologne filled the car with a thrilling fragrance. She had no idea where they were headed and supposed that a fancy dinner had been planned for the members of the summit.

The forest's blackness into which the convoy had advanced was curtained with dots of snow. A pack of wolves running toward the city crossed the road. The storm was so strong that the convoy of cars slowed from time to time, whipped by gusts. After a while the convoy stopped, and only their car continued to move forward through a tunnel. Vegetation edged the road, as if they had entered a greenhouse. Hot steam came out of the ground in small vortexes above the road, and she remembered that not far from there were famous hot springs and caves with lush vegetation even in winter. The northern land revealed another face, the opposite of Dracula's vampires and of bloody political and nationalistic crimes. However, nearby were prisons with cells buried in the ground where political detainees were rotting alive. Back then she had felt a vague scent of blood in her nostrils. Her mother's brother had been tortured in a nearby prison, in Aiud, and a cousin had been shot in the prison yard in Gherla, then cut into pieces and thrown into a landfill for opposing the collectivization of agriculture.

At a bend in the road, an old manor, a sort of nobleman's house, brightly lit, suddenly appeared. Giant barking dogs surrounded the car, but very quickly everything calmed down.

"Watchdogs," the Governor said, tenderly touching her cheek. "Idiots from around here say that they are fed with human flesh. What nonsense," he laughed, nervous at his own words.

In front of the old mansion, which looked like a small medieval castle that had obviously been renovated, a steward was waiting. He invited them in, opened a few doors, and let them settle in the dinner hall. Nobody else was there. Cutlery and crystal ... the humiliating "too much," close to bad taste, created a feeling of unreality. They ate in silence; Angela often had to guess what was on her plate. Finally, the courteous governor toasted the Dictator, addressing Angela as "Comrade Professor."

"He is a genius for whom our nation has been waiting for two thousand years, Comrade Professor. We are the lucky witnesses to the Golden Age."

For the official ideology, the Iron Age had ended long ago. Hesiod was nullified by the ideology of the communist nomenklatura.

They had brandy on the edge of a pool, chatting about all sorts of nonsense. In the Atlantic City casino Angela once again relived that hard-to-define sensation of deadly adventure and eroticism. A foreign sensuality, like that which overcame her in the bath of fir-tree tea, had haunted her body with a violence she'd never lived before. She had a lot of coffee, looking at the snow outside through the

glass walls. Fierce dogs were grinning at her from the terrace. Curious as hell, she had opened a door parallel to the terrace and found herself on the brink of a tropical garden. Only then did she realize that she was in the most eccentric of the Dictator's palaces, which was spoken about as one would speak of a legend. To be convinced that it was not a dream, she took a leaf from a branch of a tree. It was real. Without doubt, this was the place where a large part of the National Botanical Garden had been relocated. It was said that part of it had been lost to an inexplicable disease.

"Are you all right, Comrade Professor?"

Leaning on a tree, the Governor looked at her calmly. "Do you have a strong heart?" he insisted, as if she were the real professor, one of the Dictator's favorites. "It's time." He did not say time for what, or what was supposed to come next. They went up and down stairs, and then took an elevator. The heat grew as if they were close to a hot boiler, while the governor's look took on a glow of ominous dark. He sat on the bench across from her, staring at her, although he did not expect an answer to any question. His presence steamed aggression and lust. With a brutal gesture he pulled up her dress to bare her knees. He kissed them wildly. Angela pretended she did not care; she stayed still. Then he groaned, surprised, and suddenly stopped.

"I want to confess that there are two kinds of magic," he said in an incongruously neutral tone, abandoning the formulas of politeness, while he straightened his tie. "Natural and artificial. The first is a divine gift and leads to the knowledge of nature's essences. The other kind of magic is due to the propagation of miraculous effects by skills, spells under the teaching of demons. You will know the real thing."

They left the elevator and entered a vast room bathed in semidarkness; the Governor remained behind the door outside. Even now, in the casino, Angela sniffed the scents and flavors, similar to those in Gena's house.

"What is it like not to be afraid?"

A thin voice from the shadows. Angela recognized her. Dokya seemed implausibly young in that light. She leaned on a pillar of the room as if waiting for something to happen.

"I thought you were dead."

It was she, no doubt. Angela remembered her moving through the room and the two whining cats that wound between her legs.

"Nobody can replace me."

Dokya's voice mixed certainty with concern in a single sound inflection. Her face looked like a mask on which time had left a smoky trace. At the root of her nose a few deep wrinkles created the illusion of a sun or of an eye deeply encased in flesh. She was in fact the Dictator's prisoner; he used her to strengthen his power.

"For how long will *he* be around?"

"He will leave us quite soon, but those he raised will survive, to the country's bad luck." Dokya's voice rang clear; she was a contradictory creature, a mixture of vulnerability and strength. "It's better to go through the pain of change, even knowing there are moments when it would be much more desirable to skip steps." Dokya gulped her words, as if the air was not enough.

"Am I going to die soon?"

“In one and a half years.”

The answer was puzzlingly calm.

“I can’t do anything to change this?” She hadn’t suspected that she stood so badly with time.

“Change your place by 180 degrees.”

“And go where?” The woman in front of her seemed fully out of touch with reality. Angela had never been able to leave the country; she was also a prisoner. Didn’t Dokya know that?

“America, Australia, or even New Zealand wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

She wanted to ask more, but Dokya vanished, and suddenly the whole thing appeared ridiculous, like a circus trick. The way back to the city seemed shorter. On the front seat, next to the driver, the Governor dozed, immersed in apathy.

The following day passed quickly in round-table conversations and group visits. At nightfall, the Governor arrived at her room earlier than the night before. He was dressed as if for a trip into the mountains, and Angela did the same, clothing her body in pants, a bulky sweater, and hair tightly knotted and hidden under a hat. It was known that the Great Hermit hadn’t allowed any woman to appear in front of him for the past forty years.

“If he runs away from you, or if he does not want to talk to you, then nothing can be done.” The Governor seemed worried, but his voice regained authority in front of the bodyguards.

The Great Hermit’s church had been dug slowly over time in a cave by each of the thirty-one monks who had preceded the current one in an unbroken lineage over sixteen centuries. It was known that the first hermit had received baptism in the fourth century in the Thebaid Desert from Saint Anthony the Great.

The road was marked with white signs on tree trunks. After a point there was no road, only wild forest, where cars moved carefully forward, avoiding hips of snow. The Dictator had come there, stepping on his pride to obtain a blessing. Unfortunately for those who arranged the visit, the Great Hermit had disappeared behind the steep rock of the mountain, hurling a terrible anathema behind him. Everyone had expected that the Great Hermit would soon be killed, but he was still alive due to diplomatic considerations. The Head of the Christian Orthodox Church, living in Constantinople under siege by the Muslim officials, saw in the Great Hermit a possible successor to the Patriarchal Seat. Therefore the Great Hermit was guarded by three guard corps made up of monk–secret agents planted there by the Dictator; the Patriarch of Constantinople’s monk-agents; and local Christian believers.

The inside of the small church shone with lit candles. Icons covered with plates of gold and silver, the sparkling miniatures on open pages of old books, the embroidery on silk tablecloths and long napkins around icons; then the craftsmanship of handmade carpets, all gathered there over time, had created a magic cave where the old Byzantine art found refuge from invasions. The icons displayed different styles of different schools throughout the ages. The liturgical veil of the sanctuary was pulled aside. Angela remembered that she went forward and stopped on the right side, by the tripod on which were placed the canonical books. In front of her eyes had been the Book of Masses. She opened it bashfully, as if her gesture was a response to an inaudible urging. The page on the right began with the Ascension of the Son of God on the fortieth day after the crucifixion. She read it as if

for the first time. Randomly opening and reading a page of the Holy Book (an ancient custom) had been banned by the official church because it came under the magic rubric of learning about one's own destiny. To try to find out the intention of the Lord was severely judged as heresy.

"Rejoice." A monk, probably an insignificant one officiating at the sanctuary snoozed on a chair beside the book.

The rustle of pages had awakened him. "That is the way of everlasting Law," he added.

"What do you mean by Law? And what is that Law?" she questioned him skeptically.

"He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It seemed that after these words the monk sank back into sleep; he spoke as if he were talking to himself.

"Love has always hit me hard; impossible loves, fake friendships. I received betrayals and cynicism instead of love."

"Present your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Dress yourself in God's love and don't care for your flesh." She recognized words from Peter's Epistles to the Romans.

No one had truly loved her, although she had been in love.

She sat on the wooden bench, leaning her forehead on the opened book, and closed her eyes under the pressure of the brilliantly shining silence. Then the light alighted on her right hand as if the light were carefully hiding something precious. She saw herself walking on a green hill, on her right that light that resembled a shining spear.

She was the most beloved angel.

She went along in that light of joy and peace among green hills with a gentle slope. On the top of a hill, a thought came out of the apprentice's mouth.

"Lord, what is Life?"

The angel sensed a strange delight in the voice that answered.

"If you want to know, go into that cube down in the valley."

Something like a white box lay on the green valley floor at their feet. It seemed impossible to enter that small form, but still the apprentice slipped toward it. It was gray inside, and the most loved angel felt compressed to the point of suffocation. Soon, the pressure of events and beings in that cube grabbed the angel in a dizzying whirlwind. The apprentice angel lived a full life as a woman, experiencing pain, loneliness, worry, betrayal, fear, exhaustion, disappointment, horror, desperation and joy. It was a continuous run ended by death. After the last experience, the exhausted apprentice angel found himself on top of the same green hill. Apparently what had happened in there didn't last longer than the blink of an eye, and the memory of the monstrously dilated existence lived within that cube was still buzzing, tainted with heavy disappointment. Life had always ended in sorrow. It seemed that there nothing had been complete. The apprentice angel felt sorry for asking that question, even impure, for it seemed he had committed an error.

"Did you find out what life is?" The same voice was heard.

Something heavy fell on the floor and Angela, coming up from that dream, found herself alone in the church pew; the monk napping nearby had disappeared.

"I fear for your life," murmured the Governor instead of goodbye.

In the hotel room she transcribed a good part of that dream, trying to rebuild everything she'd seen and experienced; however, it was impossible to get it all. The mystery had vanished; the sequences had rapidly deteriorated, but in writing that account she understood that she had talked with the Great Hermit.

The next day she had skipped all meetings and traveled straight to the northeast, to the secret location of the Forbidden Library.

Suddenly, Cesar Casino was filled with a greater clamor. Bodyguards quickly entered the gambling hall. Near a table a few people shouted frantically. Then everything became quiet, and the clamor vanished as if nothing had happened. The hungry-to-win crowd focused back on roulette, baccarat, *chemin de fer*, poker, slot machines and other gaming devices.

"The underground pleasures," Angela muttered. She compared the place where she was now with the one in which she had been born. Whenever migrations coming from Asia vandalized Eastern Europe, culture took refuge underground. During the last invasion in the middle of the twentieth century, the barbarians had done the same: they killed intellectuals and aristocrats, forbade their children the right to go to school, burned books found inconsistent with communist dogma, and so on. It was said that one of the main collaborators who betrayed Romania had obtained from Stalin the favor of setting aside some loads intended for burning and instead burying them in the underground library in the north, the place where those who occupied the country over the centuries had traditionally stored whatever scriptures, texts, etc. they did not approve of. It had been considered a great cultural gesture, and the traitor had remained a patriot in the unwritten history of the culture of the past half century.

When the car in which she and the governor rode stopped its engine, the halt seemed to be a short break. The building of the winery, lost under the snowy hills, kept watch over vineyards bleached by snow, stretching far away to the border with Asia. The road linked to the major invasions of Eastern Europe meandered somewhere on the horizon. That path had been so travelled over the last thirty-odd centuries that it had become a kind of natural drainage ditch of the Far East, always in deep overpopulation and food crises, toward the settled West, concerned with innovation, art, organization, and productivity. Whenever the rice population was hungry, it mounted horses, wagons, or tanks and boarded ships on its way to rob what it considered tribute owed by the West.

Once a mansion, seized decades ago from its last tenant, a nobleman who had studied in Paris, and who died in prison on charges of being an "enemy of the people," the cellar stretched on for miles of underground galleries full of barrels.

"While you stroll through the library, I'll drink with my bodyguards. I told them you are the Curator's niece. Be fast, we don't have too much time left." The Governor had high hopes that this time everything would work out as planned; that she would not make it back alive. Frankly, he had liked her that night when he hoped she would flee the elevator. The comrades had counted on her reaction when he pulled her dress above her knees, but they had been wrong. If she had escaped when the elevator had stopped, a mechanism would have cut her to pieces. That's why he had been forced to bring her to Dokya. Likewise, he had hoped that she would die in the cataleptic sleep which overtook those eager to see the Great Hermit. From that, too, she had escaped alive. But he was sure

that the library would do the job. From the library's labyrinth very few had returned, perhaps two or three in the past five decades. The library fended off intruders in a way impossible to understand. The central leadership expected that the Forbidden Library would permanently resolve the uncomfortable case of Angela Kaminski.

The floor of the cellar's front gallery creaked under the weight of barrels of wine from the harvest of the century. A courteous custodian invited Angela to mount a steep staircase; as he cursed and grumbled about his many afflictions, he asked her to not fall behind.

The custodian was not old, but somehow he pretended to be. His face and movements had something lizard like about them. The distrust and caution that were her second nature had counseled her to walk right on his tail. Her senses were on high alert. At one point, the winding stairs ended in a library lounge. The Custodian, short and bent, but moving with the grace of a ballet dancer, uncovered a door behind a curtain, and they found themselves facing another library. On the first shelf was written the year 1989. Around the walls, sealed boxes were stored, with tiny lists glued on them.

"The Library is organized by years and centuries." The Custodian exposed his reptilian teeth and a green tongue. In his upper jaw, the gum displayed a tiny corner tooth. Angela remembered Aunt Gena's story about men-snakes living underground. To defend oneself against one of them, a handkerchief had to be put in his mouth, then pulled out forcefully to break and remove that poisoned tooth. As if suddenly seized with cold, Angela put her gloves on and pulled the scarf over her neck.

"It's cold in here, and very damp," she said retreating a few steps. "What's the library's classification system?"

"There is only chronological order," the Custodian swung the flashlight "Although the first shelf is 1989, you would think there was no room for other books and years. However, the library makes its own space by pulling back, retreating as new books come in. And everything is in my mind, the year, day, and even hour. We were lucky with this place. While in Dacia Superior (Upper Dacia), the Romans fortified this part of the province. They built underground paths and had the idea to store the imperial banned books here. Among the first you'll find Ovid's poems," explained the Custodian with the pride of a collector of rarities.

The place widened as they walked deeper. The lantern at some point had become unnecessary. A light coming from nowhere lighted that endless underground.

"People find it difficult to bear the truth," hissed the Custodian, as if tired of her long strides. "Although, who can decide what is truth and what is not? Banned books are so essential!"

"Essential to whom?" Angela sensed a rustling as if scales were rubbing the ground. More people-snakes like him were perhaps in there. She raised the collar of her pullover to protect her face and neck. The long boots, the pants crammed into the boots, the tight leather jacket shielded the rest of her body. She had to keep her guard up, to strengthen her defensive shield, to make sure it didn't have any openings in it then an iron spike appeared out of nowhere. If she had not seen it in time, her clothes might have ripped to the skin.

"Being banned shows how necessary or important a book was during a specific time ... I do not exclude the possibility that some are rubbish, but I speak of books that require time to be digested without prejudice," continued the Custodian, holding out a hand for balance while with the other he

hung the lantern that had become useless on a rack. “Tyrants have insomnia because of books. Look, there is a special section of diaries stolen from their authors’ drawers. It must be awful to read what your contemporaries write in their diaries about you.”

He tried to lead her to another section of the cave, but she noticed a parallel path that led to a much brighter opening side.

“Those are the prohibited manuscripts, the ones that didn’t have the chance to become a published book; it’s a special kind of fame to be the author of such a manuscript. Last year, our Great President of the country banned one of his own speeches, and we have it here, placed in that box with the red, yellow and blue, the colors of the national flag. He wanted to taste, or let’s say experience, this special glory of a forbidden manuscript.”

Out of the blue the Custodian sang, “Red, yellow and blue / I love you.”

“We have something special here.” He courteously invited her toward a niche when he stopped singing. “You are the second visitor to this spot in the past ten years. I heard that your predecessor hanged himself while cooking a pot of soup in his kitchen. What a pity.” The Custodian seemed sincerely upset, but Angela was aware that the author who hanged himself had been involved in secret police doings. What was not said publicly, and few knew it, was that the witnesses had had seen a snake’s mark around his neck.

In a move seemingly impossible for his body, the Custodian struck at Angela with his face, trying to bite her cheek. Instead he found her fist, which plunged deep between his jaws. Angela’s glove was quickly covered by a filthy fluid. She pulled her hand free and turned, trying to find the way back on her own. A wall opened at a touch; she found herself facing another library of unparalleled beauty, with shelves of books shining in a golden light. Massive, gigantic file cabinets housed card catalogs in alphabetical order, but there were also cabinets with catalogs by author, title, century, and subject.

“This is the real library,” the Custodian whispered; his appearance had changed to that of a helpful and humble person. Without any warning the wall of stones slid back, and she found herself in the place where the visit to the Forbidden Library had started.

In a rush she climbed back up the stairs that led to the wine-tasting hall and found it empty. Running to the courtyard, she saw the convoy of cars that had brought her there hurrying to leave. One car suddenly veered toward her; in the back seat, the Governor’s face looked appalled. At that very moment he was convinced that Angela had actually come there to check on him at the Dictator’s order; once in a while the Dictator verified his close collaborators’ allegiance before he raised them in rank or executed them.

The Governor thought very carefully about what kind of report he had to write on her. His cloudy mind became more cluttered than ever. So he called on all those who reported to him about any movement, gossip, or rumor in the Dictator’s entourage. He delayed sending the report to the Party’s Central Committee. He postponed it as long as he could, giving the most ambiguous reasons. Angela, meanwhile, wrote her report and sent it to the communist media mogul. She stuffed it with protocol visits, talks, a bunch of lies and politically correct slogans. Then she waited for the punishment to descend. Naturally, the northern province’s Governor had to report on what had happened there. But the communist media mogul didn’t have time to read about what had happened during Angela’s

journey, for the coup took place. It had been so remarkably staged that it took over the country as if it were a true revolution. Even if the power only passed from one hand to the other, in the haze of the first days Angela witnessed how the media mogul was fired from all the positions he held. The Governor from the north was arrested and brought under guard to the capital. But because it had been alleged that he had “plotted” against the Dictator, he was declared a hero and received a key department in the new “revolutionary” government. In the turmoil of the months that followed, Angela had forgotten about those events. But in the Atlantic City casino while waiting for Fred to finish stubbornly playing roulette, she tried to remember more. However, returning from the casino to New York City, everyday fatigue had forced her to focus on the immediate requirements of life.

“Next exercise!”

The English as a Second Language class went into a panic. Cynthia prepared a camera to tape each response; afterwards they’d watch their answers together. Joan, an energetic Chinese woman, recited the ads found in the subway in fractured English pronunciation, heightened by the spasmodic rhythm of her mother tongue. All the students were tired; they all had come there straight from work. Outside it was late night, but nobody gave in. For their empty pockets, every class costs a fortune.

“What’s ‘to lean’?” Angela asked her classmate when she finished the exercise. Joan inclined her body against the wall.

“And ‘flag’?” Joan drew a flag.

“And ‘gorgeous’?” Eugene used to say this word, but only when she was alone with him in his office. Cynthia, who was quick to grasp everything that was discussed, laughed out loud. “It’s something more than beautiful,” she pointed her finger at Angela. The English class erupted in laughter. Each spoke without caring about mistakes, throwing all possible pronunciations into the air. The English language agonized under the pressure of Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and still more pronunciations.

Angela felt lost in a world of incomprehensible codes and signs, like Orlando Furioso and Parsifal in the palace of witches; or like Lancelot in the castle of the Fisher King. Unlike them, however, she did not try to release a loved one from captivity or find the Holy Grail. She labored to give birth to her true self in another language, freed from fear and the communist mentality. When every day’s heroism eased by evening, she felt as if she were in the skin of Defoe’s Friday – not Friday on the desert island, but Friday brought to London. Sometimes she took on the role of Zadig in Paris from *Lettres persanes* by Montesquieu. She was Friday and Zadig, falling into ecstasy before any high skyscraper with admirable architecture, while the locals sped by without even looking at it, without raising their heads. She liked to wander in atria with exotic plants, to stare at gigantic lobbies with waterfalls, or to gaze at the parks on the roofs of gigantic buildings of eighty to a hundred stories.

The class started the exercise, “Where are you from?” Immediately afterward, each of them had to tell a story or a fairy tale from his or her former country. And because she did not understand why, in English, the preposition had to be at the end of each question – she said loudly that the placement of “from” was absurd – Cynthia stepped in.

“Almost everything in existence is illogical,” Cynthia said in a drained voice, leaning her crossed

arms on the desk. “Including the placement of a preposition in a sentence. It’s your turn.”

The whole class focused on Angela. As she moved into her narrative, she gradually got the feeling that she was sitting on a ramp lost in time and space. She had slowly alienated herself not only from the meaning of the story, so strange-sounding in her English rendition, but also from the spot where she stood, talking. It seemed she had not been able to pass on anything of the meaning that she wanted to deliver. Alienation flew into the classroom with its walls papered with posters proclaiming the beauties of Europe. The classmates’ faces were stuck to her sweaty skin. In the folk ballad “Master Manole,” what Manole and his men build during the day collapses by night. Manole finds out in a dream that as a sacrifice, they have to seal into the wall the first wife or sister who comes the next day to bring them food. Manole is the only one who didn’t tell his wife to stay home the next day, so she arrives. Manole embraces Ana and, as if for a prank, places her on the wall. They talk while the wall goes up to her ankles, to her breasts, and finally conceals her completely. All the while Ana, the sacrificial victim, refuses to die, to be killed. Ana is not serene or fatalistic at all. Ana cries out to her husband, “The wall’s crushing me!” She defends her right to be alive, for her baby too. In frightening words she implores Manole, who is silent, accepting fate; he cannot fight against the supernatural powers. The monastery is built, and the prince of the land does not want another one built anywhere else. The prince orders that all scaffolds and ladders be taken away. On the roof, Manole and his men make wings out of shingles and leap to their deaths. Does it mean that those supernatural forces were evil and therefore God punished Manole? Could it be that evil was related to the concept of the masterpiece? Could Manole have avoided that crime? Manole is torn between his love for Ana and his desire for glory. What if the dream was an effect of his ambition? Did he have a choice? Manole doesn’t believe so, as throughout human history blood sacrifice assured the strength of an edifice. But this event didn’t take place in time immemorial, but in the Middle Ages, in a Christian world, and what was being built was a Christian monastery and a church! How to interpret all of this?

“Are you trying to say that the woman in your ballad, who delivered a baby not long ago, her breasts full of milk, went to bring food to her husband, the architect, despite the storm? And after she escaped the storm alive her husband built her into the church wall as if his wife were a brick? And, finally, she accepted this to save that church that had been demolished during the night by evil forces?”

Cynthia stopped her short with a shrug; she was afraid that Angela had not correctly expressed the meaning of the story in English. The English professor was an overweight feminist in her early forties. During class breaks she had argued with Angela about communism. For Cynthia, this utopia was alive and possible in the future. She did not understand anything of Angela’s experience. Meanwhile, the girls from Japan and Brazil listened with eyes full of tears to “The Ballad of Master Manole” and his beautiful and devout wife Ana. But the guys seemed embarrassed. Notable among them were a famous Chinese painter, a Colombian composer, and a Peruvian chef, previously assistant professor of biology in his country. Each of them had changed professions to survive in the United States. All of them were fighting for life and death to become again what they had been at home.

“Finally,” Angela stammered, “Ana actually pleaded with him not to build her into the wall. It had started as a game, and Ana realized what he was really doing when it was too late. She was covered in mortar and bricks up to her breasts. But she obeyed. This was the proof of her love.”

Angela did not understand what was happening. That story about the great architect who built his wife alive into the walls of the church demolished during the night by evil forces, that tale of human sacrifice required to raise the masterpiece, was considered one of the most sublime artistic motifs in her country: the demiurge’s theme, creating across space and time.

“Is it necessary to kill a human being in order to build a church during the Middle Ages? That’s awful.” Cynthia was outraged. “Don’t you think that, on the contrary, a life was or is more important than a fucking building? That preserving a human life is more important than saving art?”

“Art is part of our humanity. It is in our genes. A masterpiece and a human life are equal. If I had to save one of them, I might choose the masterpiece. Great art requires sacrifices.” Angela said the first things that came to her mind. Then she closed her eyes, as if blinded by the bright colors of the class; or maybe because of the unexpected meaning of what she had said?

“Good Lord, but not a crime!” exclaimed Cynthia. She shifted her body with energy behind the desk full of tests, videos, piles of books and dictionaries. “I understand the ancient Euripides in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, where Agamemnon has to kill his daughter, events that took place at the time of the Trojan war, but not something that happened, as you say, five hundred years ago. And don’t forget that at the moment of the sacrifice a miracle happened – instead of Iphigenia, a deer took her place.”

Angela felt more barbaric than ever. No other story told in class that evening was as bloody as hers. She tried again to understand the essence of the world she came from and where she was born. Before her eyes appeared Medea, the axe-swinging lady from Tomis in Pontus Euxinus, the woman who killed for love; Antigone exiled in deserted temple at Colchis; the golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides, stolen like the Golden Fleece, perhaps because the East did not know how to enjoy them; the exiled Ovid in Tomis, wailing and lamenting in his *Tristia*; the celebrated Master Manole killing his beloved in the name of the masterpiece. She felt so exhausted after this account that she believed she could understand why, after living only one life, God granted humans an eternity to rest.

Meantime Cynthia moved on to the next student, a woman from South Korea who had obtained an internship at Cornell Hospital. Her story was about a wise frog who was able to bring eternal love and happiness – a myth, a sign of human imperfection; myths were nothing but marks of human helplessness, for nothing is forever in life. Lawrence appeared in her mind all of a sudden, as a contradiction. He had believed in everlasting love. They talked about it in those days spent in the mountains at the resort reserved for high dignitaries of the communist party. Back then she had no idea how powerful Lawrence’s ties were with those preparing the dictator’s departure under the supervision of Gorbachev’s secret agents.

By that time, the director of the institute of electronics, Lawrence’s childhood friend – married to one of the dictator’s nieces – looked for Lawrence too often. And because this man had access to exquisite resorts reserved for the nomenklatura, he recommended Lawrence to the official in charge of the party’s special housing. Thus they spent a few vacation days in an apartment on the top floor of

a villa, just below the roof, at the foot of the Bucegi Mountains. It was a romantic place that probably no one wanted. Not too far away, in the forest, one of the magnificent palaces of the Romanian kings had been erected toward the end of the nineteenth century. The Dictator ordered the palace to be restored and used as a personal residence, but he never set foot in it. It was rumored that there was a reason for the dictator's reluctance: the wood inside that palace had been attacked by a mysterious fungus, and he was a hypochondriac. It was said also that nothing had been effective against that fungus, which multiplied exponentially.

They had walked through the forest daily, careful not to violate the "No Trespassing" signs. Without knowing why, they were both hoping to glimpse something special, but apart from soldiers and barbed wire, they did not encounter anything unusual. Angela knew her anxiety never came for no reason; the night before she had had a moment of panic. She had always been convinced that her truest thoughts came when she woke from a deep sleep for just a few moments in the middle of the night; it was a kind of thinking freed from the pressure of existence. But during the previous night fear had strongly gripped her. She realized then that a lot of locked doors ended in their small apartment's walls. Together with Lawrence, she searched everywhere without discovering anything unusual. There were no microphones in the place, yet fear did not want to leave her; when panic became overwhelming, she sought refuge in love.

Lawrence knew the way she was, her nature. That night they made love like two close to committing suicide. In those moments he conveyed a miraculous calm and peace, planted deeply in his spirit. She sometimes suspected that that miraculous calm and peace were his defense against reality. Even their love seemed based not on physical attraction so much as on a deeper kind of mental communion. On his part, what had attracted him in Angela was the chance to communicate, their state of synchrony creating the comfort of an indestructible identification or osmosis. Their lovemaking was therefore more a form of communication; from the outside they would have appeared unimaginative, lacking special lustful pleasures, exasperatingly monotonous.

She remembered how the following night, after she got up for a drink of water and was preparing to go back to bed, the unusual light from outside caught her sleepy eyes. She suspected a full moon and looked out the window. Instead of the silver globe, powerful reflectors swept the grass and the sky between the hotel and the palace. The castle, deserted during the day, had lighted first-floor windows. A house on the left side of the palace that she had not noticed before was lit *a la giorno*. Military vehicles were waiting at the main road entrance. Patrols with dogs revolved around the iron gates.

"Special units." Lawrence was behind her. "The palace is connected with the building on the left through a tunnel." He spoke as if he was in a deep sleep.

"What are they guarding?" Everything seemed a mirage; she believed at first that Lawrence had had an attack of sleepwalking. He seemed to be asleep with his eyes wide open.

"Unusual people," he said, as if in a trance.

"You always know more than you let me think." Angela searched him in the darkness as if only then could she find the true him. Lawrence had strange friends whom she had never asked him about; she was not the kind of woman to control her man's every move. He also respected her desire to be alone with only her thoughts sometimes. But Lawrence could be friend with party activists, agents of the

secret police, Special Forces officers, and with dissidents. He did not consider himself to be tainted by the trade-offs of one or the dissenting gestures of the others. Sometimes he accepted invitations from people in the higher spheres of the nomenklatura. "They wanted to know what we think, but I found out what they think," he liked to say. He had hoped that the most corrupt were not so corrupt. That was part of what he called "my peasant naïveté."

"Let's go out on the fire escape."

The convoy of vehicles had entered the iron gates, the patrols had departed, and the lights had gone off. She began to pile on clothes.

"Do you long for a bullet?" Lawrence embraced her as if he wanted to wake her up from a dream. "Now you're irrational."

"I want to see what's there." Pulling from his embrace, she hit her head on the archway of the lower ceiling of the room. Lawrence watched her passively.

"Do you think it's worth it to lose your life for something stupid?" He obviously regretted having disclosed that secret.

"It's not stupid," she faced him stubbornly.

"Obviously, it's a counterintelligence fortress guarded by special units. And you want to jump the fence to find out what is in there?"

"And what is in there?"

"I told you already," Lawrence shook her, only half-seriously. He knew that if she wanted something no one and nothing could stop her.

"And what are spies doing in the mountains?"

"Training, processing and downloading satellite data, all kinds of stuff." He had said too much again and regretted it again.

"Who do you think the special units were guarding?" She pulled a sweater on and her hat; she was ready to leave.

"Two hundred twenty volts run through that barbed wire. If you do get over the fence, the dogs will tear you up, and if you get away from the dogs, the guard soldiers will shoot you."

"I feel like dying," she hissed dramatically. Of course she had no desire to die, but she was challenging Lawrence; she wanted to learn more.

"Do you remember who died up here in a hunting accident?" Lawrence teased her with those words. Of course she knew. Gadhafi's rival had died there a few weeks ago, in that very forest, while deer hunting. Pure bad luck.

"I want to see who is hiding in there," she repeated stubbornly. She had put on her padded jacket. Summer was never true in the high mountains.

"Arab terrorists," Lawrence uttered the words calmly. "And if my memory is right, one of them is the famous Carlos surnamed The Jackal, his real name being Ilich Ramírez Sánchez. He is hunted by the spy agencies of all the Western countries. Carlos is a very close friend of the Dictator. It is said that the Dictator asked him to kill Corbu for defecting to America, but all of these could very well be rumors, or diversions. There are also whispers that Corbu is a double agent. Gossip had it that if it were not so, the KGB would have had him executed long ago."

She remembered Lawrence standing there near the window, arms crossed, as if he was looking for something in the darkness of that night. Dogs could be heard barking far away; were they warning of wolves in the woods?

“That’s information worth a bullet. Take off your clothes.”

She did. Lawrence had never lied to her about an important issue; maybe he sometimes lied when it came to the cost of a cake or gossip about an affair – he had always exaggerated the woman’s guilt and diminished that of the man. The next day they left the hotel. What she had found out that night from Lawrence was so terrifying that she didn’t have the courage to ask him where he had learned all that.

Cynthia dug into the new lesson with energy. She looked surprised at Angela’s absent expression, but continued to teach. The class had to watch a movie clip, after which each student had to tell what he or she understood. On the screen, characters from a past century appeared. The clip was from *Amadeus*. Mozart was dying, poisoned by Salieri, but he worked with his last drops of energy to finish the *Requiem*. In her mind she saw Lawrence lying in bed, weakened by illness, unable to eat and move, struggling to continue to write in his diary.

It was the summer of 1989. All his blood tests seemed perfect. What had happened to Lawrence was inexplicable. Meanwhile, his diaries sat untouched in hiding (a portion of them buried on his parents’ land, the rest behind the cupboards invaded by cockroaches in his studio kitchen), so they should not have had any reason to suspect punishment by the secret police. Lawrence had written in those notebooks, step by step, events he had witnessed or had been an accomplice to, or even an architect: the demolition of villages and the building of a sort of prison barracks into which the peasants had to be moved, away from their houses and land, because for the dictator they were “an unnecessary social class”; the demolition of an entire district of Bucharest to build the grotesque edifice pompously called the House of the People; the demolition of churches under the pretext of the rational redesign of the capital. Also hidden there in the ground and behind the cupboards were Lawrence’s memoirs from the time of the bloody collectivization of agriculture. Apparently everything was untouched; the secret police had not discovered the secret diaries, but he slowly died without apparent cause. He died at the beginning of the fall. It had all started a few months before, following a trip to Timisoara. Lawrence had been convinced that the man with whom he shared the train’s sleeper car during the night trip had been an agent. But he could not make a connection between his health condition and that man.

In those months of despair, a friend who worked at the Institute of Atomic Physics suggested a test for radioactivity. After numerous delays, Lawrence was called to find out the results. Returning home, Lawrence told her about his discussion with the director of that institute of medical research. By chance, the institute’s director had spent his childhood in the same village as Lawrence; they actually had been schoolmates. Therefore he told the truth, violating the secrecy he was bound to by his high position. Lawrence had sworn that he would not divulge the secret, but he transcribed the entire conversation in his diary. Leopold disclosed that Lawrence had been irradiated with a lethal dose of plutonium.

Leopold was not surprised that this method of “clean” elimination, reserved for those in disgrace, had been applied to Lawrence. Leopold made an accounting of Lawrence’s guilt: his close

relationship with the dissident A.E.; his hidden diaries; his connections with the old nomenklatura hostile to the dictator. The old party activists who came to power in Stalin's time and were expelled from key state positions after 1965 were preparing something against the dictator, but they could not be annihilated. They had Moscow's protection, and whatever was the Kremlin's was taboo. Only the dictator, in his megalomaniac dream, had forgotten this, and therefore he was to be punished soon. Those bound to Moscow respected the orders coming from there. Unfortunately, Lawrence's case had landed on the dictator's desk, so nobody could protect him anymore.

"If that were found out a few months from now, everything would be completely different," Leopold stressed his words. He was sure that Lawrence had been irradiated with a device called "RADU," coming from the *Securitate's* laboratories. That man with whom Lawrence shared the same compartment during the trip to Timisoara had stuck the device to the bunk bed above. The device was efficient over short distances and long intervals of time, four hours or more. Lawrence had stayed in that bed for about eight hours.

All of a sudden, Angela saw Leopold. He was a large man who seemed more a boxer than a doctor. His carved mahogany desk was overwhelmed with flowers, books, bottles of liquor.

"I am but a humble subordinate of power."

Leopold tried to make excuses under Lawrence's resigned gaze.

"I don't have microphones in here. They have full confidence in me," Leopold raised his arms to heaven. "To be honest, I am deeply honored to have a friend like you. Unfortunately I cannot help you with anything; I can perhaps only tell you precisely how long you'll be alive, how many days are left for you – not too many. I know that after death you will become glorious. One day your manuscripts will be printed, and my name will be in them too. This will reward me for all the disgusting compromises I have made in my life. You'll elevate me, my friend, what to say ... you're great! To be so hated, even to be killed ... well, they don't even do that to anyone anymore ..."

"I don't understand why they didn't destroy my diaries." Lawrence crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. He had written in his secret history of that time about the vicious connection between the victim and the executioner. He wanted to understand, once again, who was stronger in this abnormal relationship, so natural to the society they lived in: the executioner who prayed in tears, asking the victim to understand that he had to kill him? Or the victim who allowed himself to be killed, understanding and accepting the executioner's reasons? Lawrence sipped his coffee, craving a cigarette. The black leather armchairs marked the nomenklatura's taste for "massive" and "too much."

"You can eat and drink whatever you want," Leopold encouraged Lawrence. "It won't make any difference. In terms of your manuscripts, well, we have patriotic souls in the Secret Police. Many of them collaborate with your buddies. When they take over the power, they will not forget, of course, those who helped them. Things seem too precipitous. I'm sorry you have to leave us now. In a few months you would have enjoyed the privileges you deserved, when the Dwarf will be ..." and Leopold waved a hand around his neck. "Dwarf" was the nickname of the dictator in his close entourage. With a towel Leopold wiped off the sweat around his neck that softened the collar of his white coat. The discussion had become uncomfortable. He hoped that Lawrence would tell his friends who were preparing the coup against the dictator about this conversation; it would be useful to him in

a few months, when *they* came to power. It was a matter of time.

“I wanted to know myself what will happen to you,” Leopold continued to talk, “and I learned things worthy of praise, my friend. You see, *they* do not want to destroy what you have written with such dedication all these years. *They* appreciate the depth of your political analysis and your artistic qualities. *They* had to choose between you and your diary, a remarkable chronicle of the age we live in.” Leopold clasped his fingers. At that time, a secretary entered the office and reminded him of the patient rounds schedule. The medical students were already waiting for him in the hallway, but Leopold did not allow himself to be interrupted. With a gesture he dismissed the secretary, to follow his thoughts to the end.

“My dear friend, you must agree with me that your diary, a true masterpiece of thousands of pages, is more important than your person. After all, the author does not matter; he’s hidden behind his work ... And between you and me, you’re wrong about Corbu. If you want to know, well, I have reliable information that he actually saved you when you thought he had poisoned you. He turned things in such way that you survived.”

The pain in Angela’s legs was back. She feared she could not get up from her chair. The English class was almost over. Hadn’t everything they wrote then in Romania become dust? Does dust settle, after all? Even on Lawrence’s writings? In those days, every text they had published had been considered a contribution to the mounting wave of resistance against communism. To sneak into a book or an article an idea inconvenient to power, to be politically incorrect in small ways that censorship couldn’t sense but the reader could— this had been their struggle. Pale truths; whispered dramas; who would read them now? They had created a culture of the subtext, of implied, disguised meanings; an oblique culture, rendered provincial by the esotericism of permanent insinuation. What could be transmitted even in a good translation to the reader from another culture? What was left of it? Just a collection of dull facts lacking the subversive subtext.

“Did you ever consider translating one of your books?” Cynthia asked, right before Angela vanished through the classroom door. Like many American intellectuals, Cynthia lived with the myth of European culture without caring much about what Europeans believed about the American culture. Cynthia did not hope for anything. She considered herself exploited and frustrated, and she did not know that she had lived one of the most decent lives that could be given to a professor on this planet at the end of the twentieth century. A cream silk dress swirled around Cynthia’s full form, and a purple hat highlighted her blonde tresses. She liked to dress up. Her feminism and leftist views came from the fact that she could not lose weight and was aging unmarried. The beautiful teeth, the Scandinavian face, the softness of her gestures certainly had a Rubenesque charm. By contrast, Cynthia was brutal in everything she said, or at least so it seemed to Angela.

“After all, the whole idea of that crime for the sake of a unique work of architecture can be understood,” Cynthia admitted as a peace offering, while gathering the papers on her desk. “Exile is also a form of death, a suicidal one, with the hope of another life, of course. I think that exile is the touchstone of any great writer,” she announced. Then she began to count the famous expats of the twentieth century.

“My books were written for the world in which I lived,” Angela interrupted her. Cynthia looked at

Angela, not understanding what she meant by that. But Angela could no longer waste time explaining. It was too complicated; she was already too sick of trying to clarify the meaning of those words to try one more time. She went ahead toward the school exit; as she walked through the winding corridors – she had always gotten lost there, she could not say why –she suddenly had the feeling of losing her balance. She knew it was because she had lost a familiar reality, a friendly frame in which her being moved with ease, surrounded by all her books, which were lost there and here forever.



“You’re lazy today!”

Ron spread dozens of case files on the floor; that day he was engaged in a bloody fight with many insurance agencies’ adjusters. He looked like an obsessed general before the final battle, thirsty for victory. To defeat the enemy had never been an easy task; it required intelligence, persuasion, and shrewdness. Everyone in the office was always racing. There were times when a win had to be engineered at all costs. More tactics had to be thrown in the fight. Everyone’s pay depended on each successful lawsuit, especially now when two important cases had just been lost in court.

“I didn’t take a break even for a minute,” Angela defended herself.

“Sit down and write.”

For the first time since she had been there, Ron had asked her to sit. Feet on his desk, he declaimed the names of almost a hundred cases. She must bring the files to him; find them first, take them out of the steel cabinets, the secretaries’ desks, out of the partners’ briefcases, cars, even out of the depths of the earth.

Ron – icy, able to get any information; persuasive, insistent to the point of madness –the one who oversaw everything that happened there and how every one of the firm’s employees worked. Jonathan – like a starved fighting beast, unpredictable, sarcastic, trained to fight in courts. Eugene – apparently good-natured, able to influence judges at hearings to interpret witnesses’ testimony in a desired way, a master in battles behind the scenes, a genius at pulling strings, a friend of politicians, the business interface with the high life, a perfect lobbyist and public relations man.

“I want all the files right away in my office. And I want my mail, and to talk to all of them ...” He threw Angela his phone log. Then he dropped the stack of files he kept on his knees onto the floor. Angela had to kneel to pick them up.. “Move your ass!”

She had done it all. Meanwhile, she had run to one of the courts on Center Street to change the date of a hearing, and then rushed down Broadway to an office that specialized in serving official documents to parties in conflict. The autumn sky showed signs of rain. Number One Federal Plaza loomed dark and mysterious. In front of the building hundreds of people were demonstrating against discrimination, or an embargo, it wasn’t quite clear which.

All she wanted at that moment was to vanish.

To escape without delay from this world where everything she tried had ended miserably; her life had been a failure. Books written in the past that now had no value; no personal life, the only man she loved had died. She had survived a dictatorship, passed through a “revolution,” actually a palace coup that brought to power the same communists and secret police collaborators. She left her country,

and started from scratch again on another continent. And now she was like a primitive, unable to express herself, working to survive, counting every penny to live from week to week.

She wanted to go to sleep and not wake up ever.

She would have given anything to be able to sit down for one minute. The torture of standing up, running without any break, was as terrible as waterboarding; her legs aching as if spikes of iron or steel claws pierced the flesh; continuous pain. The philosophy she had studied, all intelligent speculation on the existence and metaphysics of survival, the position of the self vis à vis destiny and God, were worthless in the face of the reality in which she concretely lived. She was totally alone. Words of consolation, ideas had no relevance in the struggle for survival. She did not know, did not understand, why she did not abandon this struggle; it was too much for three lives, but for one! Maybe she kept running out of curiosity? After all, what was happening now was a question of biological survival. She had already endured trials of intellectual and social survival. Would her biological matter resist this new trial? Was she close to the breaking point?

She was like a whipped horse engaged in a life-and-death race. To stop meant death. To continue ensured the same result. Then why not go on out of curiosity? For segments of time she suspended thinking and cherished only basic desires, for she was an exhausted body. To leave hell only to find herself in another hell ... well, life had its sarcastic turns; the composition was different, the ingredients. A few days before, she had written a few lines to God. Sitting in the overcrowded subway – it was a lucky day! – she took out the small notebook she carried in her purse. “God,” she begged on the number 7 train, “thank you for the life you gave me, but I want to return it to you. I don’t want your gift anymore. You can do with it whatever you wish. What you have given me is too much to endure. You made a mistake; I am not as strong as you think. I am like an overloaded cart with a broken axle; a too-full bag falling apart. Please, take back your useless gift from me.”

Once home, she lay down on the wooden board placed directly on the bed. The board had been her only way to relax, and to alleviate the pain in her spine. A sleeping pill added more comfort, while the restless fingers with a life of their own scratched her neck’s skin bloody, as always when she was far away in thought. How else to compensate the revelation that writing was her blood; that she had lost her essence with each day she did not write? She had depleted the vital engine of her life in irreparable, unstoppable bleeding. What was left of her?

It was two o’clock in the morning when her soul crossed the East River, floating gently in the fresh breath of the ocean. The Brooklyn Heights scenery made the city reminiscent of Tulcea, the familiar point where the Danube River prepares to enter the Delta.

The salty, heavy air diligently washed her thoughts. Immersed and regaining her true inner essence, she rediscovered the simple truth that she must write no matter about what: the fantastic lit city on the enchanting island; the fear of being suspended between yesterday and tomorrow there; the death-and-life ballet among the pillars that sustained the metropolis’s vertebrae; the mornings on the subway and the piano players in the tunnel from the 5th Avenue / Bryant Park station connecting the 7 train with the F and B trains. They all marched in her dream, as well as lunch hour on the variegated Broadway, and those evenings when the blessed laborers of the metropolis, exhausted by fatigue, had left Manhattan for the boroughs. Fred, Tim, Hector, Nicolette, Corbu paraded one by one in her dream, and she

relieved the deaths of Lawrence and Marke, and what it meant to start over in exile – a subject about which almost every artist was embarrassed, ashamed to write so as not to expose that ghastly struggle to the entire world. On another hand, the world beyond the East River wanted to be conquered. It was worth a try. On her side she had the power of Eastern Europe's truth, which wanted to be disclosed as the power of the suffering of the newcomers working silently in fear, enduring the contempt of the old immigrants towards the recent refugees from the most afflicted parts of the world.

If Europe thought in metaphysical terms, the European lands had lost faith in God. And when Judeo-Christianity took refuge in North America, its soil became metaphysical ground; what she sensed here was strong and incorporeal. Or was it a deception concocted by her European mind? Despite her doubts, the accelerated speed of fortunate events had obviously been part of a mystery that had chosen her.

At dawn she tried to put these thoughts on paper, but did not feel capable of anything; the wildest light she had ever seen distracted her mind. Then she chose an old entry in the log and began to read.

DIARY

June 1989

I knew he, the devil, must arrive as he did every day around this hour.

It is at this time of day that he has always entered the cold room, with its walls as thick as those of jails, where I have been assigned to stay like a piece of furniture. I hardly breathe in the building on Calea Victoriei – Victory Boulevard – across from the Museum of the History of Communism. The only trips allowed outside of the office's doors are to the restroom. My only friend here is the apricot tree in the inner courtyard. I envy its privilege of sitting in the open, but I pity its fate: since the dawn of its life it has lived in a concrete quadrangle watched by blind windows.

How deep are they drilled into me, the visible iron bars and the invisible iron lattices of the camp where I was born?

I was told to shut up. I have been silent for hours, but able to write this note; sometimes I am allowed to answer in monosyllables. I live under the icy gaze of people who have been contaminated by the former Gestapo walls placed here during the Second World War. In the basement of the room where I am, there are the cells from the time of the Kingdom of Romania's alliance with the Nazi Germany. Surreptitiously I went down to the basement one day, but I found it locked. We live close to each other: the poisoned breath of the former cells has poisoned the building and the people in it.

And he is coming soon, the daily visitor, the emblem of these oppressive signs! His mission is to find out what I think, what I do, what I plan to do, my reactions to whatever is happening around me. I have no right to a private life. Privacy has no right to exist. The oppressive power wants to know everything, as if I live in a glass showcase. The Dictator's tools want me transparent to the bottom of my brain and soul.

Mistrust and panic at the nausea of being.

I must be reeducated into the communist party spirit and brought down to the level of a

jellyfish without a skeleton, or with a broken skeleton if possible. And if this doesn't work on me, then I'll be crushed.

I denied all accusations. This is the only way to avoid two to five years in jail. Before the interrogations started, all of us in our group had decided that the only strategy in the given situation was to reject the charges and to depict each other, all others, in the most negative ways, such as saying, "How could I associate with such an idiot?" or "unscrupulous or jerk?" etc. In the interrogation room I wrote such a declaration about my friends. I hope these lies written under pressure will never see the light. How shall we face each other?

Every day the secret police officer in charge of my being enters the room where I am assigned to sit and do nothing; his lank hair, the fake, duplicitous smile, and the sliding eyes unable to fix on a point make me vomit. The creepy creature seeping through the door is one of the guards of the righteous ideology and the establishment's policy: the slander selector, the watcher for political mistakes, the one distributing tasks: who has to spy on whom. He is actually one of the real leaders of the Ministry of Health and of its obscure newsletter – my place of penance.

He sets priorities, sends people on missions as directed by his superiors, divides tasks, and collects information and denunciations from the informants. When he appears I feel a trembling of cowardice take over all the people around me. I read panic in their eyes. It's the fear of losing their jobs if the secret police officer dislikes them, and in this setting they will be out of the publishing business forever.

I've always pretended to read; I do not take my eyes off the book. I hang on *Don Quixote*. The years Cervantes spent in the Moors' captivity were incomparably worse than the trial given to me, although I've started doubting this. More and more I think that to each human being is given tests according to his or her power to endure. Could mine be a sort of slow poisoning?

Cervantes, the Moors' captive, was born and lived in freedom. He even finally managed to escape from the Arab camp and returned to his homeland free of Islam.

I was born and spent my entire life in a camp. I am a camp animal; like a captive lion born in a zoo who does not know what a savanna is. My country is a communist camp where the imprisonment was done slowly, to a level that I can't thoroughly define from within, but as long as I haven't, I cannot grasp the fabric of freedom. Lawrence, sicker day by day, congratulated himself loudly that we are not legally married. In that case he would definitely lose his job and the nomenklatura status health benefits. He did not hide that he had been asked both by the communist party leaders and by the secret police informers to break up with me once and for all.

How to escape?

Where to go?

I heard what it means to be, to live as a free human being from my parents' stories and from books. Freedom, for me, is a scholarly notion. Could be that what I wish today is a fulfilled reality in my future, bounced to the present in the form of a wish? I am not sure, but

I feel that time is not linear!

Could it be that my people's numbness comes from being imprisoned? Similar to what Rilke suggests in his poem "The Panther"?

This punishment – a new restriction of my freedom from an already restricted, false freedom – threw me into a moral dilemma: Is it worthwhile to continue living in the absence of hope that I can ever experience freedom? Could I perhaps achieve my only true freedom during this life through the ultimate gesture, which would save, absolve me from the entire humiliation of my existence? But somewhere deep within me, an irresponsible hope blinks, still alive. What if ...?

PART II

CHAPTER ONE

HOW MANY TIMES had she told it before?

In a voice that wasn't hers, the story began with "I used to be this and do that; I survived communist dictatorship, lived through a 'revolution' that turned out to be a coup d'état bringing the communists back to power." And reviewing what had happened after that, she ended with: "I ran away from my country out of fear and hopelessness. I am like a world war survivor."

During that monolog, her inner voice (contemplating those sentences) never stopped wondering about the mystery of courage. She had done everything she said, but in all those accounted facts no one could sense a tone of victory or pride, only an agonizing tiredness as if she had experienced three or four lives at once. Or perhaps the fatigue of the dying century had taken over her words?

"It's an unusual story," one of the wedding guests in the bar acknowledged. "You're a brave woman. I think the Chinese curse suits you: May you have an interesting life."

Angela turned toward the voice that said those words. A gentleman was leaning against the bar, not far from her. He was astonishingly elegant in a blue jacket, white pants, and a white shirt open at the neck. She thought that his exquisite air came from the blue collar of his white shirt. He seemed to be a pleasant man, whose eyes displayed all possible colors.

Another guest, who had just entered the restaurant moments before, made a rude remark:

"I'm sorry, but to me, your story seems fabricated. If I didn't know Eugene, I'd believe you are crazy. Don't tell it to strangers." He was surely referring to the discrepancy between her insignificant job at the law firm of the three Gs and what she claimed to have been in her former country.

Surprised by the brutal tone, Angela revolved on her chair towards him, trying to stay calm. The man who had jumped into the conversation seemed popular; he knew everyone there and shook hands with each guest at the bar. He wore a beige suit, and thick red hair sprang up like a bow tie over his buttoned shirt collar. From the other side of the club, Eugene sent her a look of encouragement. Dressed in a suit with a red carnation in the buttonhole, he displayed the air of a lawyer one hundred percent confident of himself.

"I dislike repeating it. I think it would be better to write it and publish it," Angela ended abruptly, taking a nervous sip of the cappuccino with whipped cream in front of her. Whenever she talked about those things her heart would go crazy, and an overpowering sense of waste would make her feel like a stranger to the world she lived in and to herself. Yet she felt impelled to add one more comment: "I am against Eliot's theory of the impersonality of the artist. I am personal and confessional, as John Berryman liked to say."

"And, excuse me, in what language would you write your story?" A tall man with a beard and a

bow tie advanced slowly toward her with a glass in his hand. He was obviously referring to her broken English, far from being academic or literary.

“My language is the sum of all the languages I know,” she answered quickly. “How many languages do you speak?”

“To be honest,” the pedantic, over-sixty gentlemen stepped back, “I am comfortable in my English.”

They were gathered in a restaurant close to one of the Long Island beaches for the wedding of Danny, the youngest associate of the three Gs. Although it was past four in the afternoon, it was still hot out, and many guests took refuge in the comfortable semidarkness of the bar. From somewhere within the walls “November Rain” sounded, like a signal of the coming season. Angela held on tightly to the ends of the silk shawl covering her bare shoulders. The waiter changed the ashtrays. Someone asked, “Would you like a drink?” But she did not answer, and the question vanished into the air.

The religious wedding ceremony had ended long ago. On the meadow in front of the restaurant, a line of guests was still in the process of congratulating the bride, the groom, and their families, while at the mahogany bar of the restaurant other invitees had drinks, discussing the unusually hot weather and high humidity of that September. The weather seemed to be everyone’s favorite subject. In Bucharest, politics had always occupied the first place in any conversation. It took her some time to understand that political views, religion, money, and business were taboo subjects in New York City.

She remembered, recoiling, the arrogance of a hard-core nationalist who had asked years before in her newspaper’s office if she was Jewish. Back then she had returned his insolence with a gross joke; it was the only way to respond. The communist activists drew up lists of journalists who were not pure Romanians, who were supposed to be purged from the media. Her foreign name in her official papers sounded Jewish. Later on, to clear up everything related to this issue, an activist had been sent to investigate her parents and neighbors. For her literary debut, her name had been changed to sound Romanian. “There are too many foreign writers in our literature,” she was told as a reproach, which burdened her with a sort of lifetime guilt. It was as if she had done something wrong before birth. Angela’s bones quivered under the delicate silk dress. The whole time she had lived *there*, something had made her feel like a stranger, even though *there* was her homeland.

She breathed a sigh of relief when those gathered around the mahogany bar seemed to have forgotten her: no one sitting there gave any sign of being interested in her story or her person anymore. She took her coffee cup and discreetly moved closer to Eugene. His wife, Arabella, a virtuoso flirt, had attached herself to another group. Those who saw Eugene and Arabella were struck by the complete lack of communication between them. They were both on their second marriage, still young, beautiful, successful, but from what was said about their relationship, it looked as if they had made a mistake again, marrying each other.

“I don’t understand your problem with communism.”

Without any introduction, a man from the other side of the bar came over to Angela and Eugene. He was a solid man, about fifty years old, who spoke with a strong Midwestern accent. Pronouncing his words slowly, he introduced himself as the owner of a major irrigation-equipment company. His impeccable haircut revealed the broad forehead of an intelligent man, while his gold-framed glasses strengthened his air of self-assurance.

“I did business with them, I mean the communists,” he said lightly, running his hand through the flawless haircut. “I sold them a lot of corn irrigation systems for a good profit. Why didn’t you use them? If I were you, I would have gotten into the top nomenklatura and had an easy life. That would have been the smart thing to do.” He earnestly emphasized the last words, taking a sip from his glass of wine.

“That’s right,” another one continued loudly, encouraged by the turn of the conversation. He was young and blond, slightly sluggish, holding onto the waist of a girl as if it were a life preserver. “Only money counts, here and everywhere. I think you’re an idealist. Excuse me, but you’re living in the clouds, like all opponents of communism in Eastern Europe. To be honest, I don’t care about patriotic ideals. Let’s get the money!”

Everyone laughed approvingly.

“What would you say if I ask you to go back there and work for us?” A skinny bald guy with thick-rimmed glasses came along. He pronounced his “r’s in such way that he seemed to be a French speaker. He had been listening to the conversation with obvious interest.

“You have good relationships there. You know the people in the government, and they know you as a bad penny. In addition, you have an idea of the market there. I’m thinking of buying cement from Romania and selling it in South America. I have a good buyer in Venezuela.”

“She is afraid to go back,” Eugene defended her. His grandparents had fled from Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, during the 1917 revolution. The atrocities experienced during that time by the members of his family had been passed down through time to his generation; the memories of those events were still fresh, in a way. “There are blatant crimes against the rule of law,” Eugene continued. It was all he knew about that part of the world, no longer connected to anything else except for the memory of a distant relative who had recently died there.

“Give me a break with the rule of law! And not all discrimination is bad ... I mean discrimination between the high nomenklatura that owns the country and everyone else. If she is afraid she might be killed there, well, they may very well kill her right here,” the gentleman with the cement deal said calmly. He introduced himself as Maurice.

“My dear, listen to me: leave politics aside and start making money. This is the land of opportunity. Otherwise you are wasting your time here.”

“I want to live in freedom,” she said crossly. Maurice felt that her silver earrings with their massive ancient workmanship, a family heirloom, unexpectedly brought more stress to the tense air of the conversation. Their brightness seemed that of a sharp steel knife blade.

“Freedom? Here it’s real slavery, my child,” Maurice contradicted her condescendingly. “Freedom means money and power. Do not get drunk on words. Here, now, you’re just a slave.”

“New York City is not America,” the irrigation equipment man from Nebraska reentered the conversation, completely puzzled. “You got yourself into a trap. Go to the Midwest and get to know the real America, the hard-working America. Here it’s just a bunch of ... of ...” Mr. Harloff seemed unable to find the right word.

Some of those present blamed him for blindness and provincialism. Someone exclaimed, “Oh my God, it’s so boring there!” But Mr. Harloff invited everyone to come visit his mansion by the Little

Blue River to understand the pleasures of living in such a place; to taste the delights of country life.

“This is my freedom, my country, for now,” Angela said as if she had not heard Harloff.

“I do not care about democracy in your country,” Maurice interrupted rudely. “I want to sell my products. If business goes well, I don’t care if it’s a dictatorship, a kingdom, or a republic.”

“Would you sign a pact with the devil? Did you already?” Angela challenged Maurice in a gloomy tone.

“Who knows?” he replied ambiguously. She had shown Maurice the image of a free woman, exciting to contemplate but hard to bear. “It depends on the contract. Did you ever have a sense of humor?”

Embarrassed by the turn of the conversation, Eugene suggested taking a picture with the bride and groom. But it was only a pretext. He led Angela to the barrier of sand between the ocean and the garden. On their way, he greeted acquaintances while admitting to himself that he liked holding Angela’s arm. He decided that once the party started, he would invite Angela to dance.

“Don’t pay any attention to these trifles, this nothingness,” Eugene coaxed Angela in an affectionate tone. “Take it easy. It’s nothing personal. In this country everybody says whatever he thinks; we live in a free country. But don’t reject Maurice’s offer. He is damn serious. Think about it.”

As they split in front of the flower border marking the beginning of the dunes, Angela headed toward the beach, trying to cool her face and her thoughts. She had never seen so wide a beach with such white sand. The breeze was carrying something fluid, hard to define, and the sky displayed such a dazzling curvature that she was afraid of drowning in the firmament mirrored in the ocean. Maurice’s words followed her like a stubborn mosquito. They had managed to penetrate the crust that she had thought solidly built over those past memories and resentments. She was ashamed of her vulnerability and fragility, and she did not know which was worse. But even so, Angela wondered: *Why could I not be like **them, there**?* She was astonished by that sentence that gushed clear as spring water from within: “Even so, why did I not allow myself to be bought?” There had been so many good offers! Lucrative offers! Playing with the splashes of little waves, she silently enumerated a few. What difference would it make now?

Her tresses waved around her shoulders, and her eyes had become greener. A gust stirred the ocean’s surface. She took off her shoes and carefully lifted the green silk dress above her knees, smoothly advancing into the warm water. Walking on her toes, she looked much taller and thinner; she had grown very thin lately, and the dress, tailored in her former country years before, seemed larger. The underwater dunes of fine sand studded with clam shells made it difficult at first to advance, as in a swing dance with graceful pirouettes. In the distance loomed Manhattan’s skyscrapers, wrapped in the witchcraft halo of steam from the air-conditioning installations. Over there, in one of those gigantic buildings, Fred was asleep. Because that evening they could not see each other, he had taken a powerful dose of sleeping pills. And all of a sudden, she realized that it was the first time in her life she had felt the ocean’s sand under her feet. She had been in New York City for two years, but she had not yet had the chance to walk on the Atlantic’s shore.

She set herself adrift among the small waves beckoning her onward, enumerating to herself some of those who had recently consented to be bought back there. The head of a major party, whom the

democratic opposition had been counting on in the upcoming election, could not overcome his weakness and greed. Emissaries of the country's president offered him a secret deal: complete withdrawal from politics in exchange for appointment as ambassador to Paris. And he did it; a client of the establishment and informer for the secret police was elected in his place. Similar events took place daily, while other persons uncomfortable to the new power oddly disappeared. Five generals and a colonel involved in the events of the revolution events died under mysterious circumstances, as well as a bunch of lesser-known names—for instance, Maluğan, the pilot of the helicopter that had arrived on the roof of the Party Central Committee building on December 22, 1989. Maluğan had arrived earlier that year in New York City; Tim had introduced them. Maluğan was convinced that he had been next on the list to die; he wanted to hide, but he knew they would find him even in the back of beyond, and that was why he was going back. He told her about a lost briefcase during the brief trial of the Dictator and his wife. In the briefcase were the Dictator's important documents and his agenda, in which it was suspected he had recorded his secret accounts in Swiss banks. She did not believe him; everything he said seemed incredible. Maluğan said he was going to be called as a witness before the December '89 Commission. His deposition was shocking. Scheduled to come back before the Commission in the coming days with concrete evidence, he had died the day after that first hearing.

As if she wanted to wash her thoughts, Angela scooped up water in one hand and washed her face. Leaning slightly toward the wavy blue canvas, which seemed to regard her with equal curiosity, she discerned oily algae and small shells. Minnows slipped boldly between her ankles. From her cupped right hand, while with her left hand she held her dress above her knees, Angela sipped the ocean water. The taste was unbelievably good. Those ocean waters, which wrapped unobstructed around a quarter of the earth, were not as salty as the Black Sea.

“Be careful, you might become a fish! Or, who knows, are you Undine, whom the Americans call Ariel?” It was a voice with a pleasant tone, slightly insistent

“The water tastes good,” she answered, keeping one hand in the water as if playing with it. “Have you tried it?” She avoided looking in the voice's direction, toward the shoreline. One of those who had been listening in the bar had followed her to the humid sand of the shore.

“Don't you think it would be better to come back on land? The water here is polluted.”

Angela giggled, sprinkling water around. “Don't worry about me,” she called back to him.

“I'm not,” he said calmly. It was the gentleman in the blue jacket from the bar.

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I like to be part of the solution and not part of the problem,” he said ironically. She had seen him earlier talking with the bride; they seemed close.

“Are you a lawyer?” Angela waded ahead to the beach, looking for a place to sit to put on her sandals. She saw a bench not too far away. He kept in step with her longer strides.

“Do you doubt it?” he laughed, following her. “Aren't you hungry? Or are you full from drinking seawater? Are you guys from Eastern Europe used to this kind of food?”

Snacks were being served in a white tent on the lawn in the restaurant's courtyard, not far from the romantically decorated awning where the religious ceremony had taken place.

“What would you like?” He introduced himself as James. They stood in front of a table with shells, sea creatures, and various salads.

“I don’t like mussels,” Angela shivered.

“That’s strange. You prefer water from the ocean?”

“Very well,” she accepted. “Just a little.”

“Did you know that the average American man, especially from Texas, is obsessed with European women?”

“Are you from Texas?”

“You are smart!” He laughed heartily.

James could be fifty years old, but he could also be her age. Like Americans, he wore on his face a mask of time that had stopped flowing long ago. He was taller, athletic, and the cropped brown hair and almond-shaped eyes betrayed Latin ancestry.

“Are you Italian?”

“You are dangerous. Not only European but also educated!”

The guests crowded around the tables. From far away Eugene made a sign to her with his hand, as if to assure her that she was not alone there. Angela moved toward Leslie, but changed her mind; she felt good with James. He had a nice personality, which could only be a handicap, especially in New York City, where a lawyer had to prove one hundred percent aggressive.

“Who invited you to the wedding?” James was curious.

“I work in the same office as Danny,” Angela shrugged. Danny had graduated from law school two years ago, and now he had married the daughter of a Republican senator. The bride and groom were classmates. Their love story was touching for those present, who predicted a bright future for Danny.

Danny was highly intelligent and educated, and Angela enjoyed talking with him —when they had a free minute, of course. And Danny had always responded to her curiosity about American justice and politics. He even gave her books as soon as she was able to read more than headlines and titles.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” James continued his questioning in a lawyer’s style.

“Only a friend. Do you have a girlfriend?”

James hesitated to answer, but finally said, “A sort of relationship, but she is not in New York City. Why don’t you have a lover?” he insisted.

“Because I don’t want to love,” Angela said simply.

“But the greatest thing in life is to be in love.”

James sounded a bit naive, as if love was a profession or a physical exercise.

“I ultimately realized that I have to pay a high price for each pleasure. That’s why I decided to stay away from it. Free of pleasure and of suffering. I have no discernment in choosing my lovers.”

She whispered the last words as if she wanted to keep them to herself. And suddenly she missed Marque. Everything seemed absurd, but that was happening more often lately. Was it possible to be in love with a man who had died? The truth was that Marque’s texts were alive in her mind; they had a unique lyricism, as if addressed directly to her. She looked at James as if Marque were in his place.

“So boring! That’s berserk. Are you telling me that you strive not to enjoy anything?” He was trying to understand her. They stopped near a fountain with Cupid, planted in the middle of the meadow. The

evening sun produced rainbows in the sprays of water.

“And there is another strange thing in my life,” Angela smiled. “It’s enough to love someone, to be attached to someone, for that person to be taken from me in one way or another. This is why I don’t want to love.” The pupils of her eyes dilated as if they wanted to absorb the unseen side of reality. “If you could see my ethereal heart,” she muttered to herself, without caring that she was confessing to a stranger, “you would distinguish my scars. There are wounds that will never heal.”

They went their separate ways in the restaurant, their places set at different tables. Later on they danced. James was a good partner in ballroom dancing. At first she had danced with Eugene, but when Arabella saw them on the floor, she found time for her husband.

“What do you like to do most?” James seemed in a hurry to find out all about her.

“To read and write.”

“And what do you want to do in this country?”

“Guess.”

“Something close to it?”

She inclined her head in acknowledgment.

“Do you write sexy novels or cookbooks?”

“That is what you read?”

“That’s what sells here.” His voice was serious. He was not the first one who had told her the same thing: “You live in the clouds; you have no idea what kind of world you live in.”

“I understand,” she said. She was not angry or amazed. All her life she had heard the same words: that she had no sense of reality, because she had always chosen the most difficult and dangerous path. And time had proven that to be the best of all, and she had succeeded in spite of all risks and dangers. Could it be different this time? She struggled to what her place was. It was as if she existed in two opposite worlds that equally did not need her. In her first world, everything she tried had been achieved only after heavy testing. Her former life had been like a race across a minefield. Now she had received a harsher lesson, that of indifference.

“I don’t understand why there are so many highly regarded intellectuals in Eastern Europe,” James went on, undeterred from the thread of his idea.

“Culture had remained the only refuge of a civil society that collapsed half a century before, under the Soviet occupation. Culture was a saving implosion; it allowed the spiritual survival of my people, and it became a refuge from the repressive communist system.” Angela tried a simple explanation that unfortunately ended in a rather complicated phrase.

“Aren’t you tired out by those difficult thoughts?”

James himself was showing signs of fatigue. Angela tried something even simpler, some points about American culture and pre-Columbian culture. That was worse.

“Culture is my way of living,” she apologized. “Does the fish get tired of swimming in the water?”

“I don’t like swimming.” James shook his body. “But frankly,” he backed off with courtesy, “I love listening to you.”

Angela did not mind. She was used to it. “In every society there are individuals who live culture as a way of existence,” she said, certain of this truth, as James followed her onto the dance floor with

devotion.

“And that ... and where is the profit?” James could not help asking.

“There is no profit.” Angela laughed as if she had heard a joke. “Culture does not bring money into one’s bank account, and what’s more, culture makes men run away from women like me.” She was cheerful and did not care that she might offend James.

“You don’t scare me,” James said. “You are adorable.” He brought her closer to him, continuing the steps of the rumba, and tried to press Angela to his chest. The female animal he had met that night was unexpectedly different, and, excited by this discovery, he forgot manners and protocol. He was flirting without any inhibitions. His friends tried in vain to lure him to a table where they were ardently discussing a new rule of criminal procedure. Two judges of the Supreme Court of the State of New York and several lawyers from the New York Bar Association Headquarters were the focus of the conversation.

“I remember how my ex-husband loved to listen to me at first, but he ended up hating me,” replied Angela dryly.

“Why?” James wondered.

“He was jealous of my success. When I published my first book he found an excuse to throw all the copies out of the house.”

“What kind of excuse?” He was eager to hear the answer, dying of curiosity.

“In the book I had an essay about someone who loved me and who I had loved long before I met my husband. My husband knew.”

“And why you did not stay with that man?” James said impatiently, dragging her into the past.

“Because he was a genius, and a genius cannot live with anybody; he destroys, kills everything around him.”

“What’s a genius?” The band’s current number swelled to the huge noise in the restaurant; it was playing loudly, and the clamor reached its climax.

“It’s like a giant tree around which nothing grows, not even grass.” She did not remember if she had read that sentence or written it. Sometimes she repeated herself, but only to make the wording clearer.

“You are elegant, I like that,” James changed the flow of the conversation. They went out on the terrace. The ocean sent a lazy blast. A lot of boats were moored at the pier; others soared across the broad bay. The sun was dying gloriously in the water while the green grass and blue waves melted into one color.

“I still get dressed in the clothes I brought here from my former country,” Angela apologized, taking James’s remark as an oblique reproach. Fred argued that she was too European in her taste, that she had no idea of American style and ways of dressing.

“I feel the style,” James admitted. “The rich ladies in the restaurant are no more elegant than you. In terms of fashion, they are obsessed with Europe.”

She had bought this dress and shoes in Innsbruck, where she had been invited to talk about what had happened in her confusing and contradictory Eastern European country. Only a few months after the December 1989 revolution, the communists (under another party name) had won the election. College students opposing the neocommunist regime – on a hunger strike for eight weeks – had been savagely

beaten and imprisoned. Then the miners, led by the secret police, pounced on the capital to dismantle the entire opposition. And the former nomenklatura had fully reinstated its power.

As in a magic dream with open eyes, Angela saw herself in that past.

In the heart of Old Innsbruck, in front of the *Goldener Adler*.

Strangely, James was there with her. It was a temporal inaccuracy that did not go away.

He followed her inside the *Goldener Adler*, between the giant paws of the entrance's imperial lions, as if they would have voluntarily allowed themselves to be smashed by those paws of marble! They silently climbed the stairs that led from behind the bar downstairs to the restaurant itself upstairs. All those supposed to attend that lunch were gathered there: parliamentarians, secretaries, journalists, press officers of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly summer session. The rain, falling in gusts over the fir trees in the old town, sent its sounds through the old stained glass. The city seemed asleep, tired under its medieval ornaments. The gloss of the passing of time had created a special light; it was hard to decide if this was due to the stained glass or simply to the old history of the place.

"Your *deux-pièces* is absolutely charming," Mario Lucca Pini greeted her in French, languorously kissing her hand. "You look lovely." Then he retreated. He stood beside a reserved table, turned slightly toward the other half of the restaurant, careful not to commit any impolite gesture. Pini was a darkish man from the north of Italy, thin, with an expressive face.

"I adore green. Did you buy it in Paris?" he pointed to her suit.

Angela reminded him that this was her first time in her life outside of Romania. She had not been allowed to have a passport before.

"I'm sorry," Pini exclaimed, distressed. "*La dura sorte!*" In his position as a Council of Europe parliamentarian he had lost the notion of borders.

"I am an international person, I can't even conceive that I could be the prisoner of a single country only for a day ... "He shivered to chase away that unpleasant image.

"What language would you prefer to speak?" Those present there did not care if they spoke Italian, French, English or Spanish. She chose French. James looked at her reproachfully.

What had surprised her from the beginning was that Pini seemed not to represent his country, but an abstract concept, "European." As if he understood her concern, Pini talked to her privately while he poured ice water into her glass.

"Nationalism, *ma chérie*, is the disease of confused and poor nations. It's time to think about global prosperity. Idealism brings catastrophes. I think that the national feelings of Europe's nations have been satisfied, fulfilled in the past two hundred years. *C'est suffisant.*"

"You have no idea what is boiling in Eastern European countries," Angela tried to wake him from the shallowness with which he seemed to regard those things. "What you are suggesting is dangerous. I am not sure I would give up the right to be Romanian for the right to be a citizen of the European Union."

"True, from despotism to democracy, civil society passes through nationalism," Pini responded promptly as if he had not heard her last words. "Nationalism is a political and moral disease that triggers collective paranoia. It is part of the culture of fear and panic in which Eastern Europe lived

for half a century. But this should not scare us. On the contrary. We must be prepared – in this political context, going more to the right is more intolerable; for example, Western Europe’s response to the wave of immigrants. Nationalism is based on ‘*le discours du ressentiment*’ ... don’t forget Daniel Halèry’s words,” he quoted with ease: “*Le peuple a été toujours contre la société ...*”

Pini concluded his little speech with a diplomatic smile, somewhere between grace and sharpness, for the approval of those who had overheard him. Angela had no chance to reply, for Pini had completely forgotten that subject. He focused on Angela’s bio that she had prepared at his request in the press office at the Kongresshaus. Pini found it impossible to match what he read on that page with the person in front of him. However, his face remained impassive. At first he was tempted to assume that much of the resume was an invention. He knew from experience that women who sat in the library a lot were generally ugly: their asses sagged, and they had a hint of a hump. Secondly, he was fascinated by the incredible stories of the misery of the East that Angela told with a true storyteller’s talent. Listening to her, it was difficult for Pini to believe that everything she recounted had taken place only one thousand five hundred kilometers away from the city where he lived a comfortable, civilized, and free life. In that country in Eastern Europe, once so rich, people did not have water or milk, for instance.

“Does Romania lack fertile soil? I mean, land on which grass and crops grow?”

He saw Angela pouring a lot of half-and-half into her coffee. They were in a session break at the Kongresshaus cafeteria.

“Oh, no, we have a lot,” Angela replied, sipping greedily.

“Then there are no cows in your country?” Pini said quickly.

“We have cows,” Angela said.

“I guess there is no one to milk them?” Pini clapped his hands as if he had solved the mystery of the hungry East.

How to explain the criminal circumstances in which all the country’s food was sold overseas? “It’s the communist system,” she gesticulated, frustrated. Pini’s face brightened.

“*J’ai compris*,” he assured her, but he did not understand anything. He took the absurdity of hunger in the midst of plenty as fate, labeled with the name of “communism.”

“Is this true?” Pini looked at her, then at the curriculum vitae in his hands. She nodded, tucking a lock of hair into the tight bun that tried to keep her thick hair together.

“*Mais pourquoi?* You are a lovely lady ... or are you perhaps sick? With a serious illness?”

And because Angela did not know how to answer, he suspected something much deeper.

“Is it a kind of penance? Atoning for something? When do you have time to live? To have a good time ... to enjoy life ...”

“To have a good time?” She did not understand what Pini was talking about.

“Maybe you wrote all of these papers listed in your bio to hide your opposition to the regime?” Pini scrutinized her.

“It was my way of saving myself,” she said ambiguously.

“Anyway, so far you are the first normal person I have seen coming from *there*,” Mühlocker, a journalist from Vienna, said loudly. He sat on the other side of the table sipping from a glass of beer.

His cheeks were so large that when he spoke his eyes were concealed, buried in the abyss of his head. He was known for his acidic articles and his sharp tongue; even as listened to this conversation, he took notes.

That day's luncheon gathered only a small group of parliamentarians and journalists. "Goldener Adler" was famous for its copious dinners; wealthy tourists had always enjoyed its atmosphere of an imperial past. Angela's great-great-great-grandfather had lived there at the imperial court; he had been one of the Hapsburg Empire's aristocrats, with a palace in Innsbruck, if her grandfather's stories were true. As a child she remembered seeing the big portrait of Emperor Franz Joseph hanging on the wall in her paternal grandfather's house. But everything had been lost. Nothing was scarier back then than a having a personal file that looked aristocratic. Many had paid for it with their lives, or with years in prison.

The fate of small countries was always the same. Would Eastern Europe again be considered only a strategic barrier to East Asian migrations? A border to those lands where the clan of the communist nomenklatura had been born? Nicolas Berdyaev had described them: without historical or cultural roots, without regard for human communities. "*Homo sovieticus*" hadn't been engineered in laboratories. Anthropologically speaking, it belonged to a humanoid form whose aim was to hold political power through hatred, destruction, violence, and vicious suspicion.

Angela tried to follow what Reinheimer, a journalist from Strasbourg, suggested to those at the table. She only caught the end of that speech that praised "an attitude of intellectual resistance."

Meanwhile, a disconcerted James wandered through the restaurant, trying to guess where he was and what was happening there. Nobody paid any attention to him. He read the year, 1990, on one of the newspapers on a table. "Do you have today's newspaper?" he asked a waiter.

"This is today's newspaper," James heard the answer.

"Don't you think you could talk in English?" James whispered as he approached Angela and sat down close to her, as if seeking protection.

"I cannot, it would be a temporal violation."

He shifted and sneezed; it was cold, and the French language had annoyed him. Fortunately Reinheimer spoke a mixture of languages; they all were used to that. Two secretaries who looked sickly, probably from a British dominion, were offended and left. They had thought they could freely gossip in English, convinced that nobody would understand a word. Angela asked for one more salad. She could not stop enjoying the combination of vegetables and spicy sauces.

"It's not easy at all, if we take into consideration the conflict between totalitarian power and civil society," Honning intervened in the conversation. He nervously opened his mail, brought there by a secretary. The head of an important parliamentary committee, he wanted to know as much as possible about the new government of Romania, and especially why peoples of the East continued to favor those structures which he called "administrative-communist." That had happened after the last free elections.

Angela talked about the decades of stillness, of social paralysis, and the suppression of any kind of freedom. She told all she knew about how the KGB triggered the riot that was intended to overthrow the Dictator, but not communism; about the anonymous Russians hidden days before in the basement of

the consulate near the national television station, about the diversions created by those who had organized the coup, such as rumors of poisoned water, foreign and domestic terrorists, agents of foreign powers buying the opposition, etc.; the manipulation of the country's population through television. All these diversions were aimed at confusing those who had fought against the repressive system while the anti-dictator but pro-Moscow nomenklatura completed their takeover of power.

It was obvious that many of those present at the lunch table either already knew or did not like what they were hearing. Pini, Honnig, and Reinheimer exclaimed with hypocritical wonder, "Really?" "I can't believe it," and so on.

"Don't you think that you guys over there first have to demystify the discourse of the neo-communist regime, as well as its slogans? Couldn't this be a way to blow up the barrage of indoctrination?" Honnig drilled his eyes into Angela's. Then he shook his finger at her as if in paternal warning.

"Don't forget the remarkable unity of those in power at all levels of society," she contradicted him. "The only existing social and political structure belongs to them." It had been hard to accept even for Angela, but this was the truth. Meanwhile, James listened to the conversation; it appeared favorable to the enterprise, actually a branch, that his partners wanted to start in Eastern Europe.

"Do you really believe that Russians are involved in everything that happens there?" Pini turned the conversation to another path. He snapped his fingers as if he wanted to remember something.

"Don't you think that Eastern Europe is still in their paws?" She fixed her eyes on Honnig.

"Do you experience sleepless nights? Do you suffer from insomnia?" Mühlocker asked out of the blue.

Angela felt the way she had in childhood when her friends played a game called "cordless phone." Each said whatever went through his head; no one was forced to pass on what he had truly heard.

"With nightmares and feelings of being depressed?" Mühlocker continued, undisturbed. Pini sensed the embarrassing situation but did not react.

"I don't see the connection." Angela seemed to be defending herself while smoothing an imaginary wrinkle in her blouse. James was also overwhelmed by the absurdity of that moment.

"And anxiety, with memory problems?" Angela heard again.

"What's this?" Pini cut off Mühlocker's questioning. The gold cufflinks of his white shirt sparked like a knife blade.

"I think she is sick. She suffers from a disease called survivor syndrome," Mühlocker muttered. "It has been described by Doctor Niederland from New York City. He studied the survivors of Nazi camps. As long as the survivor remains on the site of the former camp, he suffers. If the survivor leaves the place, he has a chance to heal. But only with a good psychiatrist."

"Do you think that this would explain why they elected the communists again in free elections?"

"Well, I think they chose them because they do not yet know how to choose," Reinheimer assumed, supporting his chin with his palms. It was obvious that for him that the conversation had become devoid of interest.

"Can we hope that yesterday's communists may become tomorrow's democrats?" Pini launched the question with a sly smile.

"Stupidities," Honnig said sourly. "Let her talk, please!"

“And how do you know that they had free elections?” Reinheimer mocked Pini.

“I was just there,” Pini exploded.

“To watch the eggs under the hens?” Mühlocker laughed loudly.

The air swirled with imprecations such as “Mamma mia,” “Bastard!” “Merde!” “Stupid,” and so on. Not far away were the Imperial Palace and the Hofburg and the Triumphal Arch of Empress Maria Theresa. Angela projected herself outside. She was again suffering, unable to translate the truth of her world into a language for all. But was that the truth, or only her assumption? She was not sure of anything anymore.

“I like your criticism,” Pini diplomatically retreated. He kissed her hand, holding on to her fingers longer than was allowed by the European protocol. “You confirm my theory that the communist dictatorship, fortunately, could not annex the individual, the last bastion of civil society,” he gallantly complimented her. Then the conversation returned to political theory.

“I recently wrote in one of my articles,” Reinheimer jumped in, “that if communism suppressed political pluralism in society, it couldn’t suppress the pluralism of human existences.”

“Are you saying that we have to take into consideration the metaphysical dimension of human existence when we talk about the evolution of societies?” asked Honnig. He was a renowned specialist in political science.

“Exactly,” Reinheimer clapped his hands.

“I am worried about those from the East running to the West,” Honnig grumbled. He carefully checked each letter in his pile of mail. Whatever was unimportant was discarded into the open briefcase at the foot of the table.

“They run from communism. They want to live in freedom.”

Honnig did not like the explanation. “We have to come up with a solution. Do you have any ideas?”

“A new revolution,” Angela said with conviction.

Those around the table exchanged glances. Only Reinheimer, the journalist who did not care about anybody’s sensitivities, put his finger on the wound.

“My dear, right now the West is furious. If the entirety of Eastern Europe flees to the West, who will defend the West from the coming Asian invasions?”

As if they had not heard anything, those around him concentrated on the next day’s trip to Mayrhofen. They were supposed to go up into the mountains by a special mountain train. Local girls dressed in Tyrolean costume would offer them domestic drinks from silver teapots. Then they would climb the Alps by cable to the Ahorn Plateau. An excellent picnic was scheduled afterwards in a village at the foot of Alps.

Pini took Angela aside. “Tomorrow is a good day for planning. We” – he emphasized mysteriously – “do not want to talk directly with your country’s officials. You will be the intermediary. And by the way, did you know that Yevgeny, the journalist from Novosti, is here?” Pini whispered. Angela did not understand at first what he was talking about. “I am talking about Yevgeny, the journalist from Novosti, the Russian news agency.”

She knew him from Lawrence’s stories. Yevgeny was a known KGB agent in Bucharest, with strong ties among pro-Moscow local nomenklatura. He had been close to Corbu. How was Pini aware of

him? Nobody around the Dictator had had the courage to ask for Yevgeny's recall back to Moscow. He had been useful to all. Yevgeny also had been the one they thought could be of help after Lawrence's irradiation. Also, they thought of Yevgeny as the only one who could confidentially provide printing when the group of underground friends and journalists tried to print a clandestine anti-communist publication. By that time, Yevgeny – the ally of dissidents – represented Perestroika, rejected by the Dictator. Angela had learned lately that Yevgeny had had an important role in the 1989 December events. He was a person she would not want to meet.

“Why the hell do you need all this? Capitalism, communism, it's nonsense. All political systems are only the dominance of one group over another.” James took her arm and pulled her toward him. Pini was left with half of what he had to say unsaid, the negotiation plan and other things of a kind that in the past had brought Angela only grief, anger, enemies, and suspicion. James's tight grip pulled her wrist so forcefully that she almost slid onto his knees. Her long eyelashes touched his jacket.

“Nobody is offering you anything in exchange, no money, no position, but you are ready to get into a mess. They'll all hunt you because you know too much.”

Danny's wedding party went on; the guests danced happily on the floor, the air-conditioning installations worked full blast, while Long Island floated like a boat with all its lights on over the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. She thought with a sort of resignation that she had not yet broken out of that pattern of naiveté that had marked and distorted her entire life. It seemed to her that she had learned no more than a ballerina who always falls on the exact same musical note, always going wrong at the same pirouette.

She wanted to leave.

“Why now?” James's face seemed to retain a vague trace of fear.

“I am tired.” It seemed there was nothing to add. James offered to drive her home.

“I would very much like to spend more time with you ...” he said. “But I feel that your past and your stressful life here hold you back; you are not ready to date yet. I understand it very well.”

Angela felt the burden of her past.

She longed to be free of that past, which meant fear, unhappiness, and hatred. Her soul was soaked in hate, a huge, concrete hatred from which she wanted to escape but could not. Sometimes she felt dirty from so much hate. It seemed that disgust soiled every corner of her soul, leaving no room for forgiveness and love.

“I need more time,” she said.

“Make an effort,” James insisted. “Try me; I am a loving and gentle man.”

Angela was silent.

“How long have you been alone?”

She did not answer. Her personal life was her own business; she did not owe anyone an explanation of it.

When James's car entered Queens Boulevard she felt relief; she was almost home. James's insistence touched her more than she wanted to recognize. She liked him. But something else, hard to pinpoint, had warned her to run away from him. It was as if reason urged her to flee, while female

instinct demanded the prolongation of intimacy.

“I don’t think you made an exchange to your advantage,” James said, with no apparent connection to their conversation. He stopped the car in front of her building and invited her to dinner the next day, Sunday, but she refused. Then she declined his invitations for Monday and Wednesday. Finally, afraid of being impolite, she agreed to meet him the following Saturday. Actually, she was afraid to meet James, for it would be stupid to start something with a man who would soon leave for Europe.

“After all, you exchanged Ceausescu’s gray communist buildings,” James smiled, embarrassed, while saying goodbye, “for Queens’s ghetto buildings. To be honest, it is only the second time in my life that I’ve ventured into this borough. All my friends live in Manhattan.”

She harbored no resentment toward James’s last remark about Queens. He was right, but only from a purely pragmatic point of view. Her perspective, that of the artist, was different. She wrote in her “log” a thought born during the trip home: “I am an artist, and I live out of curiosity. I have no wealth, but I have the peace and the freedom to be myself.”

That night she dreamt of Marque. There were a few moments when she felt wrapped in his tenderness. Then, all of a sudden, Marque’s face turned into James’s. Early in the morning she continued her work on a short story she had started not long ago. Fred had recently discouraged her from going on with it.

“If you don’t have several murders and sexy stories in there, no one will buy it. You don’t get it, do you?”

She hated stereotypes of this kind; the power of the true writer was not to care about them. But there was a grain of truth in Fred’s remark. Her mentality belonged to her country’s literature. And the literature of her country competed, indeed, in cultural refinements impossible to sell in the American context. But wasn’t this the way good literature was always written? Excelling in cultural refinement, paying attention to aesthetic innovation, anchored in universal human issues and aspirations? Fred’s remark applied to commercial literature. She did not despise it. It had been a necessary product of human cultures in all times.

Crickets in the nearby park, birds’ cries, and an ambulance siren tore apart the peace, but not within her, for she did not hear anything. It was as if in those moments she was living in a different time and space, somewhere in the sweet-as-morphine process of the mind focused in writing. She liked to call it “the state of being a king.” The first paragraph, running in her mind for a long time, took shape.

Blood stained their clothes but none of her group was hurt. One of the teenagers in the plaza had no time to run out of the tank’s way. They all thought that the tank would stop; that these were only warnings to frighten them. From helicopters and high buildings’ rooftops blank bullets and tracers fired continuously. Then the tank hit full on: smashed bodies and blood sprayed all over the place. Only then did she fully feel the December night’s cold.

“I don’t understand why they didn’t shoot us!” A young man, a worker at a metallurgical industrial plant who had taken refuge in the entrance of the metro, voiced the question in everybody’s mind. He had long arms and legs; when he ran he seemed to

stumble from a lack of synchronization of his limbs. Ioana knew him by sight; they both worked on the same unit, where she was a designer. She spun around, gasping air. She was scared. As if sensing her fear, machine guns began to sweep University Square.

“We’ll see each other tomorrow morning at eight o’clock at the same place.” A washed-out blond, speaking with a nondescript accent, confirmed the meeting place to his companions. More than half the men she had seen during those hours were dressed in impersonal gray jumpsuits that didn’t match any industrial plant uniform in the capital.

“Where are you from?”

“From the north. We came here to start the Revolution.”

“You all come from the same place? Where?”

“Timișoara,” she heard.

“Timișoara is not in the north,” she said in wonder.

“From the north of Timișoara,” the blond man tried to escape her questioning.

“Where did you get those guns?” she persisted, questioning the man who seemed more talkative than the others.

“We bought them from the Serbians, from over the border.”

Her questions were not welcome. The others all dressed in uniform gray gathered around the washed-out blond. They looked well-prepared for a battle. Their muscles were those of professional athletes, while their backpacks contained all the items necessary to experienced fighters. They were the ones who had brought into the plaza encircled by the police all that was needed to write the first anti-communist slogans on the walls, and they had taught the local demonstrators- students, journalists, citizens- how to shout those slogans and resist aggressors. Those in uniform gray gave Ioana’s friends water and helped them escape from the police-encircled plaza. While Ioana’s group and those in uniform gray were searching for a subway exit, a military patrol appeared in front of them, emerging from one of the tunnels. They were trapped, but resolved to fight to the last man. The white-haired colonel commanding the soldiers shouted to them to flee. He pointed in a direction that led to the National Theatre underground parking connected to the subway area. Ioana did not have time to suspect a trap. She followed the men from Timișoara. They split up at a crossroads, but not before reminding each other of the meeting at eight o’clock the next morning. She ran alongside the metallurgical worker, and they got out of there by pushing the lever of a subway’s air shaft.

It was three o’clock in the morning. University Plaza, where the protest against the dictator had begun, had been emptied. The police washed the blood from the pavement with water hoses. Those who had been caught had been loaded into vans and brought to prisons on the outskirts of the capital to be tortured and interrogated. The dead from the Plaza were carried by other vans to an unknown destination. The order had been to destroy any records or identification papers to make those corpses easier to “disappear.” Rampant rumors had it that all the corpses from Timișoara’s battle between civilians and the armed police had been cremated.

She went to the kitchen to drink a glass of water. At that moment she saw more clearly than ever the faces of those two young people who had come to her newspaper's office to ask for help a few weeks after the revolution. The boy introduced himself as the son of one of the colonels accused of cremating the corpses of Timișoara. The boy was worried that Angela's office was bugged with secret police listening devices. He was right, while she did not believe it! His father, he said, was innocent. There was evidence, tapes of telephone conversations recorded during those days between Army headquarters in Bucharest and Timișoara. His father's arrest was a setup covering for the real criminals. He was worried that his father would be killed in jail before getting a hearing in court. Which proved true. But she had already made the connection to Corbu.

“Was your father one of Corbu's close partners?”

“Why is this important now?” the boy screamed.

She didn't tell him that the entire affair seemed to be a battle between different branches of the intelligence establishment. She had tried to get into the jail to interview the colonel, but she was not admitted. Then she was sent to the countryside with a mission. One of her colleagues, a journalist who had press credentials for Parliament tried to persuade her to stay away from this affair, which was suspected to be a conflict between those on the Dictator's side and those working under KGB orders. Back in the office she heard that the colonel had committed suicide in jail. He left a letter in which he stated that he was the sole author of cremating the corpses of Timisoara.

CHAPTER TWO

THEY HAD FORGOTTEN to pull down the curtains, and the December daylight entered freely through the windows overlooking Lexington Avenue. The light had slowly swept all corners of the room through the glass wall, producing the dizzy feeling of an open platform above the city, at the mercy of wind and light.

As if the sound had passed through successive waves of fog, Manhattan's noises on Christmas Eve arrived muffled at the 45th floor. Weaker light rays paused eventually on the oil portrait of a beautiful woman from the end of the nineteenth century, one of James's ancestors, whose face was inscribed with tragic suffering. Or maybe that appearance of grief was the embarrassment of those silent eyes witnessing their lovemaking?

They had lost track of time. Caught in only one dimension explored with wonder and fear, they discovered that both of them were endowed with the gift of love; but beyond that was something more, the match of a virtuoso player and a Stradivarius violin. Somehow fearful, they went further, suspiciously tapping into the realm of knowledge of self through the other. The delight of exploring was weighed down with the diffuse fear of losing freedom through love, and also the fear that what they had experienced would never happen again. It was like a threshold beyond which they were not sure they could go. Also, each of them knew that "to belong to the other" could be a kind of suffering.

Several months had passed since Danny's wedding. Meanwhile they had talked on the phone, gone to movies, and a few times eaten together. Sensing something, Fred ratcheted up the culinary treats, pampering Angela with more luxurious restaurants and exclusive bars, while her mind was busy with the mystery of Marque's death. It was as if she had lost a valuable interlocutor to whom she had not had the chance to tell all her inner thoughts. How to solve this? On the other hand, unexpectedly, Graham kept his word; he gave her an address in Florida where it was assumed Corbu was hiding. Graham also gave her some friendly advice: to stop stirring up things related to Marque's death. In his opinion, and according to sources he had access to, Marque's death was not a political crime. It seemed to be something more complicated, which he could not grasp despite his influence in the department he was working for. And James, during this time, had patiently accepted her delays. He had also reminded her on each occasions that they did not have too much time. Then she suddenly felt the fear of losing him.

"It's the first time in my life that I don't think of anything while making love," she whispered in awe. James's tenderness uninhibited her. She had always been self-conscious, but now shyness disappeared naturally. Wrapped around his body, she grew there like ivy, right up the left side of his chest. Did her body change toward the form of a boundless femininity? She gave herself to him with

the same lack of restraint with which he gave himself to her. For a fraction of a second she had even forgotten her name; it was close to “self-oblivion,” a phenomenon she had read was a form of epiphany.

“Let’s take a bath,” he said, kissing her arms stretched over her head.

In the bathroom, James turned on bright lights. It was as if someone had raised the curtain to start a show. Yet, close to his body in the bathtub filled with warm water, touching it, she did not feel like hiding even though she felt as if she was onstage. She closed her eyes and succumbed to torpor. Suddenly Beethoven’s *Variazioni* flew into the air.

“Why did you get divorced?”

From the opposite side of the bathtub James softly broke the silence. Had he forgotten that they had discussed this subject not long ago? Was this the moment to remember her former life with another man, even though that man had been her husband? The question was inappropriate, but she answered.

“He couldn’t accept my professional success, bigger than his, or his failure,” she summed up the story of her marriage.

“Nonsense.” James patted the water. “I would be happy if my woman were more successful than me.” In that ruthless light he became impersonal, as if distancing himself from her body and spirit. He looked at her from the other end of the bathtub as if they had met there for the first time. “Life is a hard fight dotted with a few moments of pleasure,” he added, as if he wanted to trivialize those hours they had just spent together.

Angela guessed a lot from the look with which he appraised her. First, those women James had brought here and then abandoned after he satisfied the thirst for possession; then the occasional girls brought into the same bed and the same bathtub, the after-sex conversation, and the blunt abandonment of the object of pleasure. As if underscoring her thoughts, James conceded:

“An individually perfect life does not need to be a moral one.”

“Am I to understand that you are a Don Juan?” Angela laughed with her head thrown back. Her smile and beautiful teeth were charming. However, that ironic sentence couldn’t hide her anxiety.

“Why are you upset?”

“I have no reason to be?”

“Right.” Angela did not buy it. James shook his head with ease, faking a victim’s innocence.

“How come you didn’t ever get married?” Angela put the ball in his court.

“I found that women from Latin America are more objects of pleasure than partners for life. I am attracted to European ladies but they are formal, and highly unreliable, while the American women are – oh, my good Lord! – truly impossible!”

“In what sense?” Angela slowly moved. Small hot waves swept the bathtub. Her long brown hair with its reddish tints dampened at its ends, and her pupils became so huge that one could believe she had taken a drug overdose. The brand of adolescence marked her face with cheeks aflame. In a quick movement she gathered her hair into a bun on top of her head. Even though James found her lovely – she resembled a nymph of classical antiquity – he did not stop to build his defense.

“They don’t think of anything but money, expensive restaurants, and in bed they are very ... I would say impersonal. I think these women are missing something, but I cannot say precisely what.”

“Did you have children with any of your lovers?”

“I think I did.” He stopped for a second as if trying to remember. “Once I was involved with two women at the same time, and I am positive that they both got pregnant. It happened many years ago. One of them visited me every weekend from Bogotá. I was assigned to a case in Rio de Janeiro at that time. But somehow she disappeared. Many years later I heard from a common friend that she had a child with me.”

“Did you try to find her?”

“Why?” James wondered.

“Why did she run away from you?”

“I think she was afraid I might take the child away from her.”

“How many women have you had out of the three billion available?” she said mockingly.

“Sex, that’s the truth, takes over more than eighty percent of the male’s mind,” he tried to protect himself. James sipped from a glass of white wine placed on the edge of the bathtub. Angela did the same.

“Sex without love?”

“There is a saying,” James smiled while his cupped hands poured water over his shoulders. “To have sex with a woman you’re in love with is wonderful; but it’s not bad either if there are no feelings for her.”

The whole situation had become absurd. Angela herself seemed to forget where she was. The curiosity of the journalist took over.

“And the other child?”

“That’s only hearsay ...” James looked innocently at an invisible point on the ceiling. “However, the only woman in my life I wanted to have a child with did not get pregnant.”

“Why didn’t you marry her?”

“She couldn’t have children. What’s the use of marriage if there are no children? That’s why we broke up. I loved her very much.”

“Where is she now?”

The cynicism of James’s sentences did not hurt her. A sort of madness of candid confession had been present in the scene.

“She is somewhere in France; her marriage is totally boring.”

James took Angela’s ankles in his hands. With tenderness he kissed each of her toes, one by one, and then he pressed them against his chest and slowly submerged into dozing. He attained a threshold of relaxation in which he revealed himself more than he was aware. It was a state of complete lack of inhibition; he would have given the most honest response if Angela had asked any question. It was close to male narcissism, reminiscent of a passage from Kierkegaard: “Every man is essentially thrown back upon himself.” She was afraid of this James. Wouldn’t it be better to run away this very moment? But between self-preservation and pleasure, the carnal attraction prevailed.

She touched his skin with the tips of her toes. James’s skin had a never-before-seen color of polished ivory. His body even had an unusual flavor, a kind of sweetness she could not stop tasting. She admitted to herself that she had never felt such a strong attraction to another body and wondered

if it was real or misleading, simply an effect of her prolonged sexual abstinence. That moment could be a deceptive form of love hunger.

“Let’s get out of here,” James decided. For him, the woman in the bathtub had the ability to change depending on the circumstances. Now she was a teenager with flaming cheeks experiencing her first love.

They stopped and kissed in front of mirrors, restoring a sense of loss in the same plasma light, while gazing at their chained bodies. In the bed wracked by love she swayed in his arms, extending her abandonment, igniting that erotic matter that took all the forms of love.

“Why I didn’t meet you long ago?” James asked softly as talking to himself. His voice betrayed a sort of regret, but more than that, a tone of loss. Of himself? Of her?

“Leave this place and come with me,” he added simply.

A large international law firm, which had decided to open a branch in Central and Eastern Europe to assist its customers with onsite purchases, investments, and establishment of new corporations, had appointed James Executive Director. “Mayer, Brown and Platt,” with offices in Paris and Mexico City, specialized in cases of corporate finance, litigation of market manipulation, trading, international tax, and securities brokerage. A manager had been on his way to prepare offices in Prague, Warsaw, and Budapest.

“I came here from there,” she reminded him.

“No one will touch a hair on your head.”

“Don’t leave.” Angela tried to stop him, but she knew that the request was too late. With his head resting in one hand, James showed an air of helplessness.

“It’s one of destiny’s bad jokes?”

She looked at her sweaty palms. “Everything I love is taken away from me. Again.” Her eyes had acquired a sort of muddiness, as if they were losing their color. Julie had cast a curse on her while they were playing with magic in their teenage years. Was it an accident or intentional cruelty? It seemed that all the years that had passed couldn’t wipe it out. At lightning speed she reviewed her life, a chain of events she would no longer have the strength to experience again. And what would it be like to start everything from scratch again there?

“Go back with me,” James repeated stubbornly. “You cannot succeed here.”

Her face seemed to lift as if under pressure. “To go back to a world sick with communism? I am not sure if I am cured myself.”

James looked surprised. She did not seem sick with any kind of disease. And he did not understand any of her fears. For his part, everything was supposed to be crystal clear: he would go there to become very rich and nobody could get in his way, and he needed her. No other woman in his life had had so much power over him.

“Do you hate your country?” Suddenly Daniel’s shouts rang in Angela’s ears. They had met by chance during Christmastime in front of Macy’s, in Herald Square on 34th street. Daniel had recently been appointed to the Romanian Embassy in Washington, D.C. They knew each other quite well. Daniel had also been a journalist who opposed the communist power. Now he was working for a president and a government considered illegitimate by the entire opposition.

“You are so venomous.” Daniel smiled in a pacifying way, as if at a child who had made a mistake. The sidewalk was jammed with people carrying full bags of Christmas presents.

“I say what I think; I live in a free country.” She did not want to chat with Daniel. They hadn’t ever been friends.

“People like you harm the country’s image.” Daniel didn’t care that she was showing signs of irritation and boredom. “People like you compromise us.” He softened the words with an agreeable tone. But he rebounded fast: “You cut and disregard your roots, and you will be punished for it.”

“I hate only those who destroyed my country and my people.” She remembered that her body arched; she was ready to slap him.

“You make countless mistakes,” he hissed. “You’ll pay for them.” Daniel’s face had gone white with rage.

“I pay the price every day,” she hissed back. “You’ll pay for your own, too.”

“You’ll crack in poverty like a fool.”

“And you in jail, or before a firing squad.”

There was an instant of silence, then Daniel mumbled with a crooked smile:

“Bullshit. You didn’t have to do anything, only to want to be a big shot in the country, that’s all.”

She chuckled. “Is this a business proposal?”

“Why not?” Daniel admitted. “And don’t pay so much attention to Hector, no one likes it, damn it.”

They looked at each other in silence. Then she was the first to speak:

“Who doesn’t like it?”

Daniel did not answer. He crossed the street and vanished into Herald Square’s crowds.

During that short conversation Angela had asked herself why she could not have a normal discussion with Daniel. She had experienced the same thing with friends she’d left behind. Their rhetoric was not clear; their answers seemed unrelated to her questions. Fear again swelled their sentences, conforming to the official discourse pattern. They hated everything; did they hate even themselves?

It had been written by some servile critics after the revolution that censorship wasn’t actually so bad, because it had challenged talents who had produced great art under communism! It was true of a bunch of chosen ones who had at first written servile hymns, kissing the asses of the most powerful, and so had become the literary elite of the country; they were embraced by the higher ranks of the nomenklatura. After the Revolution many of them had become the trademark of freedom.

“Why don’t you write a book?” James noticed the fuming of thoughts on her face. “You’ll get rid of slag and it could be a great success. What you have told me I have not read anywhere, and what’s more, readers are mad for gossip.”

The dry white wine was tasty and fragrant.

“Would you like a little more?” James smiled and she blew him a kiss. Then she let herself slip into his arms and closed her eyes. At dusk, the hard-working New Yorkers had already retreated into their homes; the nightly partygoers were prepared to assault the restaurants, the nightclubs, and the brothels with sophisticated names such as “Night Escort” or “Unexpected Encounter” – because prostitution was illegal in New York State. Crack had been sold at the intersection of Park Avenue and 60th Street;

girls who served customers in cars were aligned according to the Hudson River's main streets. Those of divine beauty, swimsuit only, were strung along the sidewalks on 42nd Street. Performances of opera, ballet, and the symphony started at Lincoln Center. Broadway was filled with hordes of people milling around theaters' box offices. At that hour a few were shot dead in the Bronx and Brooklyn, according to daily statistics. Immigrants were packed around dinner tables, as family was the only stable point in that world of still-unknown laws and rules. A pleasant breeze, between cool and warm, blew outside. As always, the city prepared itself for Christmas.

"Leave this place."

They were talking about a book by Mark Almond that had recently been published in England. For James, what Angela had told him about the dictator was more captivating than what he had learned from that book.

"That monster doesn't deserve one more minute," she said roughly. "He destroyed the better part of my life, my youth." She shook her head in disgust.

"Why not go back?" James again showed perplexity. "Think of the financial side, you can make a lot of money." He was serious; he knew how much she earned and how she lived. His voice had become winded, as if he was forgetting to pronounce the final sounds of words.

"The literary market is interested in subjects like this; it is never fed up with gossip and political scheming. Forget about philosophical essays, poetry, reflective fiction, too heavy for me, forgive me ... and on the other side, writing a book like this could be fun."

"I don't want what happened to Procopius to happen to me," she said, thinking of events long past.

James frowned. "Are you talking about the famous rug store Procopius and Procopius, on 87th Street?"

"The Procopius I am talking about had been a high official of Emperor Justinian of the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century. In his secret diary he wrote about the doings of Justinian and his wife, Empress Theodora. His secret diary surfaced after many centuries, and Procopius linked his name forever to those whom he hated."

Her words had acquired a strange echo in the surrounding silence. James ran his hand through his hair methodically; he was confused again. He had been sincere in what he said, that's why Angela's rage melted. She had to accept that from another point of view her thoughts had no connection with the fact that they loved each other and that their lovemaking had been heavenly.

"Did you ever see him up close?" James stood up and went to the window. He peered toward the horizon as if he was looking for something there. He had tried to express the question in the most tactful manner. Then he came back and with a tender gesture brushed aside a strand of hair from her forehead.

"At a students' meeting while I was at university. His contorted, unhappy face struck me. In time he proved to be a madman, diabolically wily."

Sitting comfortably between cushions in one of the high-rise buildings of Manhattan, she spoke easily about a time when she had not believed she would survive.

"How about his wife?"

"At an international scientific conference in Bucharest that I attended as journalist. There were a

few Nobel laureates there. She was the chair of that conference, a woman with no scientific qualifications despite her countless scientific titles. She was extremely elegant. I can't forget her jewelry, dress, perfume. And around her were flatterers kissing her hand, making compliments. She was sexy."

James drank all the wine in his glass and poured himself another.

"And her husband?"

"He was under her spell. To prevent his flirting with other ladies, she surrounded him with ugly women, while she had lovers she met romantically in Transylvania's castles. By chance I visited one of those places."

James felt an immense pleasure. What he had just heard reminded him of many spicy stories about Latin American dictators.

"She dominated him, did she?"

"He worshipped her. She was his weakness. And she cheered on all the bad traits of his character." Angela's shoulders flashed, whipped by her tresses. James listened, feeling that something spicier was coming.

"She was not only the scholar and thinker of the nation, but also 'the mother' of the homeland's children, 'the muse of painters and poets,' 'the exemplary wife of the country,' 'the leading politician of the state,' et cetera; even her hair color, and hairstyle became the national standard."

"Do you think they are still alive?" James referred to the rumor that the two had not died, that only their doubles had been executed.

There was indeed something nebulous about that business of the hasty trial and execution of the much-hated couple. All kinds of rumors flew around. Not long ago, in a deli in Queens, Angela had met a guy who fled Romania in the spring of 1990. He turned out to have been the pilot of the dictator's personal helicopter. Mr. Maluțan said that the couple in the helicopter he flew on December 22, 1989, taking away the dictator and his wife from the roof of the Party Central Committee building, were not the real ones but their doubles. The pilot had fled the country when he saw his colleagues begin to die mysteriously. He also mentioned the "Boteni operation." It concerned a plane that took off from Otopeni airport on December 22, 1989, with Zagreb as its destination. That plane, with sixteen people on board, was shot down near the town of Boteni by Romanian artillery, and disintegrated. It was said that on that plane was evidence that could prove that the pair who fled in the helicopter were not the dictator and his wife. That incident had been reported to Mr. Maluțan by an artilleryman from the military unit in Boteni, who died in an accident soon thereafter. Angela didn't mention to James that the famous helicopter pilot Maluțan had also died not long ago, and James took her silence as a form of repressed memory.

"I don't understand how this whole fucking mess happened."

Was it cold? Or was Angela cold from reliving snippets of those years that she wanted to forget? In December 1989, who had brought whistles, horns, and spray paint to University Plaza? And the marchers, immediately after the Revolution, sang songs against those who had taken over the country; who wrote them?

Angela pulled the blanket over her breasts, but James playfully pulled it away. He pressed her to

his chest; he liked to feel her, to look at her.

“How about their children?” James went back to the Dictator’s story.

“The eldest was a physicist; he had gotten divorced without his father’s knowledge. His mother did not like her daughter-in-law, the daughter of a Stalinist with whom the dictator did not agree.”

Angela stopped, turning pale. Her first love in college had been a physicist. Their love had also ended miserably.

“And the second one?” There was a seed of bitterness in her eyes. James seemed more interested in the story than in her presence.

“The girl was forced to break up with each of the men she tried to have a relationship with. Her parents felt that none of them was worthy of her. She became an alcoholic and began to resemble her father.”

Angela paused again. James tried to catch her eye. He disliked what he saw on her face. He put his arms around her to make her feel comfortable and touched her hair affectionately.

“And the last one?” The book James had recently read discussed the third one at length. He seemed to be the most important, even though the author mentioned schizophrenia.

“He was given political power, but the power to decide on his own personal life was taken away from him. He went crazy.”

Those phrases linked Angela again to a time of humiliation and fear. Her pulse accelerated; her temper flared.

“I don’t understand why you send me back to the past.” She freed herself from James’s arms. He looked at her, surprised.

“What are you afraid of? You’re in New York City.”

Angela did not respond. It was not fear. It was her harsh hate, a hate that overwhelmed her soul; hatred from the depths flared up and stained her essence.

She wanted to forget but could not. There was something in her soul that would not allow her to forgive and forget. Somehow, all of them there had been educated to hate. It was a society built on hatred, from class hatred to hatred of the other and hatred of yourself. In such moments she was ashamed of all those kinds of hatred present in her soul. However, the revulsion she felt toward K. or Corbu had been special; it had to grow. She nurtured it with pleasure; he had to pay for his doings. At least one member of the “Nomenklatura clan,” that aberrant race born of an unlucky accident in human evolution, had to pay.

She called on Christian mercy for help. Ah, Christian forgiveness—where was it? Why could she not feel it? And why was she, by contrast, able to forgive those who jumped to lynch her in March and December 1990? Well, she simply did not have the strength to hate them. She knew that their hatred was coming from the darkness of crippled souls; from ignorance and helplessness. And violence was nothing, of course, but the last argument of stupidity. But these were scholarly interpretations, because there in the street, in 1990, as they prepared to celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution – they still stubbornly called it a revolution, hoping that words would change the reality with their magic – things were different.

University students gathered again in University Plaza. From the sidelines, groups of people slung

verbal mud at them such as “Go to work, you stinking freeloaders,” “Who’s paying you in dollars to stay here, bastards?” “We do not sell out our country,” “What’s your problem with our beloved President Iliescu?” On her way home she stopped on Magheru Boulevard to do some shopping, then walked slowly toward University Plaza. Another journalist colleague from the newspaper was covering the place. She heard cries. From afar she could see the restless movement of the crowd; she knew that many provocateurs were swarming among them. She stopped near a group of people speaking vehemently against the “irresponsible” young people who were “destabilizing the country” and opposing “the President who risked his life in the revolution, saving the motherland.” Unwillingly, she felt herself being stoked by the aggression all around her. Anger flowed through all like a wind of madness, compounded by the complicity of the darkness and the candles burning on the site where young people had died a year before.

“These youngsters are not stinking freeloaders,” she entered into discussion with a group of angry citizens. “They are university students on Christmas vacation. They have the right to say what they think.”

Her bags were heavy. The pain in her back was intense; she was tired, she had just come in from the field, but she did not care. She entered the storm.

“These guys will soon become violent; that’s why they are being paid by the opposition’s decrepit old men coming from abroad to take the place of our President. Man, these guys did not eat soy sausages like we did under Ceausescu!”

“These guys are selling our country,” another one screamed, with eyes staring as if in a trance. A dirty handkerchief covered part of his right ear, probably torn in a fight.

“They’re not selling anybody. They’re insisting that the country’s leaders haven’t changed and that former members of the nomenklatura shouldn’t have the right to hold political positions in the state. This is also written in the Timișoara Proclamation.” She had spoken in an artificially calm voice. In reality, her emotion had been high. She could barely restrain herself from slapping that hysterical brute, obviously lacking in judgment.

“Our President clearly said in a speech on TV that communism has ended,” another one screamed. “Our President gave us heat and food this year. He’s leading the country in the right direction. He keeps our country safe, while the opposition parties are selling our country for dollars to foreign powers.”

“The President was and still is a communist. His cronies took over the reins of power. His people erased the slogan ‘Communism, go away!’ and any other such sayings from the city walls.” She had hoped to lead the discussion onto another path by using a concrete example. But she had raised her voice. She knew she had made a mistake.

“Folks, she is with those who are selling our country to the foreign powers,” a woman wearing a fur coat screamed hysterically. Angela supposed that the woman had been the former chief of the communist party cell of an enterprise. “This woman is thirsty for death and revenge! She works with those who want to turn us against each other!”

She did not remember how she had fallen. They pulled her hair, kicked her in the ribs, spit on her heartily. A few university students, who had seen it all, came to her rescue. A clash followed. The

next day, in the late afternoon, as she prepared to leave her office, she saw a compact group of people advancing down the alley behind the newspaper's offices. They were armed with sticks and clubs, and they held signs that read "Death to Traitors," "Journalists Sold Out to the Enemy," "We Do Not Need Your Paper," and more. When the line of soldiers that provided protection in case of terrorists' aggression stepped aside to let that group of people pass, she understood what was supposed to happen. She called the garrison's colonel on the phone; he declined any responsibility. One hour earlier he had received an order from army headquarters, instructing him to withdraw the soldiers from around the newspaper's offices. If the people of the capital wanted to express their outrage against a newspaper that wrote against the interests of the country, instigating hatred against good communists and good secret police officers, they were free to do so, and the army would not protect them anymore. She remembered her petrifying fear and disgust listening to those words. She assured the colonel that nobody from the newspaper's headquarters would run away; that he would be responsible in the eyes of history for whatever happened. It was his judgment in charge of the situation, not army headquarters'.

She had waited for the outcome with irresponsible recklessness. Even if what she had lived back then was yet another attempt by the political police to frighten and destroy them, she could not understand those people in the vigilante group who were not only secret police informers, but also Romanian citizens. The compact group was stopped at the foot of the stairs by the colonel. He had arrived there in a rush, without his military cap, with disheveled hair; it was her only remaining memory of him. She had tried back then to understand whether what the colonel had done had been decreed by his conscience or by his superiors' orders.

It was dinnertime, and James ordered food from a nearby Indian restaurant. Angela prepared more coffee. And out of the blue, James felt guilty.

"I am lucky, I was born in a free country, but it doesn't mean I didn't have my own failures." He had won and lost time after time. And now he hoped to win again. He tenderly caressed Angela. He ran his fingers over her arm, trying to prolong the pleasure of the touch; it seemed they could talk without getting bored for the rest of their lives. A few minutes later the doorbell rang. The delivery had arrived, and soon, from where she was sitting, she saw James in the doorway, taking the bags of food and carrying them into the kitchen. Then he appeared holding a silver tray on which he had placed the dishes they'd ordered. The two of them sat at the table thinking that this was their first dinner alone. Angela looked around. She liked to breathe in that place, and gaze at the complete edition of Shakespeare's works bound in leather on a bookshelf; at the Persian carpet hanging on a living room wall; at the cream silk lampshade radiating a loving light; and at that mysterious painting, as if it were the third person in the room. From where she sat, the face of that portrait now showed a look of serene resignation. Almost unwittingly, she resumed the interrupted thread of that history that James wanted to know, and he listened almost holding his breath.

"The youngest son of the dictator was supposed to be the successor to state power. That's why his mother paid special attention to him. His first girlfriend, the daughter of a member of the nomenklatura who had some disagreements with the dictator, was forced to have an abortion. Her

father did not object; he did not want to risk his position. After that began what has been called the heir's derailment. When his mother ordered him to marry, he obeyed. One Monday morning, all friends of the future leader of the country, all of them officials in the party apparatus, were ordered to marry within a week. So there began a frantic search for brides. I also received a marriage proposal. I was assured that my personal file would be "laundered," I was promised political ascent, and other advantages. I escaped by arguing that my file was so "dark" that it could endanger the future of my hypothetical groom ..."

James laughed out loud. "And the Dictator's heir, what did he do?"

"He married a provincial nomenklatura girl with whom he had once had a brief sexual encounter. Neither of the two wanted this marriage. They submitted to that game because the succession to power hung in the balance. After the wedding, the fresh groom resumed his former wild activities. When his wife got pregnant, her mother-in-law staged a car accident. The first lady of the country decided that her boy was too immature to have a child. When the second lady of the country woke up after the car accident in the nomenklatura hospital, she discovered she had been scraped out, her baby was gone. And because the couple's scandalous fights had been notorious, the wife of the heir had been moved out into a separate villa. Everybody was waiting for her death; back then it was the norm. I do not want to romanticize, but it seems that December 1989 saved her life, too."

Angela remembered the tall woman with rich black hair down to her shoulders; when she walked, she rocked her body as if embarrassed by her long legs. She had lived in a villa guarded by dogs and secret police agents, close to the building where Lawrence had his miserable studio. Angela smiled across time, to those days when she and Lawrence had lived the magnificent beginning of their love.

"What happened to the heir? Is he still in jail?"

"He is doing pretty well. He is free, rich, and became a businessman. His father's friends – who now run the country – are doing everything they can so that the former heir does not bear any resentment that they killed his parents."

"What did you do in 1989?" He seemed embarrassed by the outcome of the story about the heir. Angela talked briefly about how she was supposed to be reeducated in the communist spirit. If the results were not seen as positive, there should follow something that would have looked like a suicide. The Dictator preferred to get rid of his opponents without much noise. During that time, Lawrence, also frightened by his strange disease, withdrew from her slowly, leaving her alone. By then she had had that strange episode when she lost her memory; she forgot how to get home. She sat crying on a sidewalk, she could not tell for how long.

James listened with pity, surprise, disbelief. He took her in his arms as if he wanted to protect her from that demented time when she had been the witness and subject of so much misery.

The rest of the recent days they had spent together had been calm. Each evening they went on long walks, dined in small restaurants along Third and Lexington Avenues, laughed a lot, went to the Catskills Mountains for a few days. They walked around Hunter, roamed the surrounding mountains, danced at the jazz festival, and recounted their lives as if they would have liked to revise them in the light of the moments they lived now. They knew they would not see each other again, or if they did, that perfection of togetherness would not be attained again. James seemed eager to find out what had

happened after the fall of the dictator: he encouraged her to explain the subtext of some political scandals, to describe personalities and key events related to the reorganization of the former political police or secret police. He listened like a good student, and many times he repeated the names she just had voiced. Once, Angela remarked on his correct pronunciation of consonants, very typically Romanian, in a name that ended in “ceanu.”

“Did you take Romanian language classes?” she had asked innocently, but James did not answer. He deflected her gaze with a face she could not read. She did not persist with that question; but she accused herself of a monstrous suspicion, part of her still unhealed soul. She thought that the correct pronunciation could be an accident. Then, in another context, James asked her if she had trusted friends left behind, confidantes she could count on. “At least five,” he suggested, talking about his unsettled feelings about being alone in Eastern Europe.

“If I had five people to trust there, I would not be here,” she said, again blaming herself for her suspicion; back there she had been poisoned to suspect everything.

So Christmas and New Year’s passed, and then came the time for James’s departure.

“We’re like honeymooners,” James joked one evening, and Angela looked at him hesitantly, for his words were an echo of her thoughts.

January 1993

§ I took a break in the Park Avenue Atrium between 45th and 46th Streets. A sculpture of bronze weighing several tons hung over visitors’ heads. I didn’t see what it had been hung on, for the roof was made of glass; glass elevators ascended smoothly, and the Atrium faced balconies with greenery. After that I passed Sniffen Court, between Lexington and 3rd Avenues, a courtyard from the time of the Civil War. On 53rd street near the corner of 5th Avenue there is a place right across from the Rolex Building called Refreshments. Water flowing down an entire wall reproduces a waterfall. The noise of the falling water in an atrium is unexpected. People sit and watch. Listening to the quiet murmur, looking at the white foam falling over the small stones with uneven surfaces is a way of getting out of the daily rush. And Manhattan in the dusk: Central Park in the twilight; the doormen in livery watching buildings’ luxurious entrances, passersby looking for a cab, the reddish sunset maddening the melancholy of the day past ... a world that retreats and another one that prepares to take possession of the core of the world. And then at 7:00 a.m., Manhattan is like a silver shell; its streets just tired. I stroll around trying to forget that soon James will leave for good.

§ At a party in Forest Hills at Michaela Banu’s house I met doctors, engineers, businessmen who arrived as political refugees decades before. Bogdan was charming as always, in his own style. Tim said that I had made a mistake rejecting him, for he could provide me with a worry-free life. Everything here translates into money. Nicolette wasn’t invited because some guests cannot stand her – these are former dissidents who hate even the pale symbols of totalitarianism. Among the guests I met a few true-born Americans.

Michaela's villa is outstandingly beautiful: terrace, comfort, luxury, and over all, the melancholy of an incomplete integration into American life. Michaela didn't feel well; obviously she had been in pain. She took morphine to handle the host's role at the party. Three days ago she had breast surgery, although she is only forty years old. Tim spoke sourly about her boyfriend, too young, whatever that said about the lack of prejudice of American women.

Lucian, a misanthropic doctor, painted a portrait of an America populated by scum and plagued with flawed democracy. I replied that unfortunately we do not have a better country on earth. The guests mocked the "sluggishness" of Romanians: they forget what they promised, there is no communication with anyone, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, etc.

A couple of engineers who closely watch what is happening now in Romania expressed confusion because in the new media the words "legionary" and "fascist" are used while the word "communist" is missing. The idea of a possible festival of Romanian immigrants in New York City has failed for now, for we are allergic to big gatherings after experiencing communism's collectivist philosophy. And in the emptiness of conversations about cats, closets, remodeled bathrooms, country houses, what stinks in Romania and America, and Văleni plum brandy, I thought of Lawrence, and those killed in the Revolution. What does it matter if someone has seen Argentina ten times and Paris ten times if he is not able to express what he thought when he saw them? 'Nice' does not mean anything.

I belong to my inner world.

Tim told me that each person has a price; each will sell himself for a certain amount of money. I said that I did not sell myself ever.

Someone started to cry.

How strange! In Bucharest people die and here they cry.

The disappointment of Romanians encountering a hard life in America is redoubled by the shame of belonging to a nation where stupidity, laziness, theft, and ignorance are replete after the Revolution. In America, well-being is a source of individual paralysis. I also believe that America is a non-chauvinist, non-racist country to the highest degree possible on earth. America wants to be conquered by each new immigrant, she wants to be won!

§ It's snowing, cold with a crackling of dry leaves. I have lost much of my excitement and

illusions. I live day after day the same agony of mind, seemingly a state with no cure, and I do not know how to drive it out. I write on my knees on a chair cushion, on the floor. It's only seven-thirty in the morning. I got up overwhelmed by the thought of isolation from last night.

§ The Village; places where they sell drugs; the burned faces of drugged women. The police hunt them; the steam coming out of drains; large clouds and my unbearable melancholy. America has taught me to think in the mannerist's *conceitti*. Over here I have met "cold sentimentality," "indifferent passion," "disloyal patriotism," "scarce abundance," etc. Their kindness makes me think of a "courtesy of hooliganism."

§ The Romanian language is a romance language, but unlike its sister languages it has a thick accent, a heavy pronunciation that comes perhaps from the long-extinct language called Dacian. It's evident when I speak English; it translates from one language to another. And why is Romanian, a romance language, included in the Slavic-language literature departments in America? Because of this heavy accent? Romanians do not have a heavily softened "l" like the Russians, but a very clear "l" sound. Could the hard "r"s and the lack of proper long and short vowels be another explanation? Obviously any speaker of a language that doesn't have these vowels will have the same problem. Could the Romanian "t" sound, not explosive enough for English, be another reason? However, a lot of languages do not have an explosive "t" sound, so this is not particular to the Romanian accent. I asked a few people how they perceive my speech, to what languages they might find it similar. The answers: Portuguese; Catalan; Italian; Polish; French; maybe a little bit Slavic. Someone said that Romanian sounds more "Latin" than Portuguese from Portugal; someone else, that the Romanian language sounds like Italian with a Slavic touch. It could be a remnant of the ancient Dacian language, sister to Latin, Celtic, Illyrian, and other pre-Indo-European matrix languages? And what's the origin of the adverb of affirmation "da"? I regarded it for a long time as coming from the Slavic languages, but that's not it! I found out that Danish has the adverb "da" meaning *surely, then*, coming from the Proto-Indo-European **deh-* ("to give"), similar to the old German adverb "da" meaning *there, here, then, so*.

§ Fred asked me to join him at the airport. He was excited about spending a few days in the Las Vegas casinos. I note here his anxiety and grumpiness; he is as unpredictable and generous as an artist, except he is a bipolar on lithium and other pills; an amalgam of suspicion, mistrust, kindness. There were memorable fights at JFK Airport: first, he was forced to put out his cigarette (no longer permitted in the airport); after that, he agreed to give up the defensive spray from his jacket pocket only when the airport police were summoned; then the circus with the lost money before boarding the plane: he could not find a few thousand dollars he'd had in his shirt pocket, so he called for the police again, but in the end he found everything he'd thought was missing in his back trouser pocket.

§ I called a colleague still working for the same newspaper; he said that the atmosphere in Bucharest was a continuation of the days when miners were brought in to beat up student demonstrators, and that nothing positive can be built in the political arena. Romanians are the first in Eastern Europe to once again elect a communist president, a former member of the communist high nomenklatura. This neocommunism (a legitimate regime elected by the people of the country) is a crypto-communism with a tricky frill of freedom. The watchword is the “restructuring of communism,” meaning “perestroika. Graham wanted to know when I plan to go to Florida in search of Corbu. For now, I have no way to get there. Graham assured me he believes that Corbu is not the true Corbu, but it must be proven. “Do you have more evidence?” he asked me.

§ I waited in a long line on a cold day on the sidewalk in front of the Guggenheim Museum. I had wanted to visit it for a long time, but I had chosen the wrong moment. “Great Utopia,” an exhibition of Soviet art between the years 1917 and 1935, pushed me off balance. Seeing Lenin and Stalin on the walls, the oppression I had lived in came back to me, as did all the humiliation endured because of socialist-realist censorship. Besides all the evil that communism brought to Romanian art, such as *proletkult* (proletarian culture) and socialist realism, another just as awful was the way it pushed art into imitation. Creators copied Western art because they felt provincial. Feeling marginalized in the world of art, artists who lived in the “red” countries followed those from the “center” of European art like stupid herds of sheep. This was also felt to be a sort of protest against communist propaganda. But here arose the compromised originality of an art on which toxic models had been imposed by force. The writer, in other words, lived in fear of censorship, but also in fear of Western European models in comparison with which his work appeared to be outdated or simply junk.

§ New Yorkers’ souls seem made of a rare, wired-canvas fabric; the intensity of daily stress makes them like that. Self-defense? Everything passes freely through their souls; almost everything slips through the mesh, and in the soul strainer there remains almost nothing, no trace.

§ I have the feeling I’ll explode from absorbing so much novelty gathered in the heart of the metropolis. I glance at myself while I relentlessly admire the light smog, accept sudden feelings and experiences that hurl me from one extreme to another, like the bliss between the two marble lions at 5th Avenue and 42nd Street, the largest public library in the world. Brutal revaluations change the course of life; I sometimes blame my moves on histrionic behavior. Convulsive cry; the sense of irreparable loss; then the reaction of lost and found. A famous theory states that God and redemption can also be found through the “negative” path or through the faulty way. I am thinking of course of the Cathar heresy, born about one thousand

years ago, in the twelfth century in Languedoc, and crushed soon after.

CHAPTER THREE

“DO YOU LIVE here?” Bertha stepped close, dying to find out what Angela was doing on the deserted beach. Was she drawing something? Adding up her assets, or just recent expenses?

They had exchanged a few words at the swimming pool the day before. A Jewish woman from Hungary who had an apartment in Fred’s condo building in North Miami, Bertha had fled Hungary during the German invasion in the Second World War; she had escaped the Nazis’ camps and the Russian invasion. Dainty, pleasant, and sexy at about seventy, Bertha cared for her beauty with the dedication common to all rich women in the area. She wore jewelry and used makeup even to walk on the beach or swim laps in the pool. As if caught at something forbidden, Angela snapped shut her notebook.

“I’ve just moved in.” With a small gesture Angela invited Bertha to sit on the sand but she refused.

“How many bedrooms for how much?” Bertha couldn’t control her strong Hungarian accent.

“Three bedrooms for one million two hundred fifty,” Angela graciously smiled. It was fun to play millionaire.

“That’s a good price for a condo in this building,” Bertha conceded, “I paid two million for three bedrooms and now I cannot get more than half of it. You are lucky to buy in this real estate market. All prices are going down.” And without further introduction, Bertha jumped to another issue. “Are you so much in love with this bathing suit?” She pointed at Angela’s two-piece suit.

“I am nuts about it,” Angela said surprised. “Why? Is something wrong with it?”

“It’s nice, but I wouldn’t wear it every day ...” Bertha said with reproach.

Angela did not think that wearing the same swimsuit daily meant lack of elegance, money, or taste.

“It’s the same model, but not the same suit,” Angela went forward. “I bought eight identical swimsuits, that’s all.”

Confused, Bertha moved away. The sun had passed the summit of the sky, and the ruthless light took on some tenderness at four in the afternoon. On the left side of the horizon, some clouds were trying to advance towards the center of the bay; above the deserted beach, a flock of migratory birds trained the newborn to fly long distances, soon to leave the tropics for the north of the continent. The ocean’s breeze tossed a pile of shells and Angela’s hat; hot waves washed her ankles. She gazed along the fairways, sniffing the flavors of the ocean and the scent of the distant Florida Keys. Cuba’s closeness sent a waft of alarm; the communist disease was just a stone’s throw away. The wind coming from there dragged to Miami’s shores the smell of blood, terror and madness. A faraway anomie could also be sensed; she supposed that might be a wisp of the hysterical political smog that surrounded the

island of Haiti.

A few brave seagulls cut the green expanse of the ocean; nervous boats patrolled the bay. The moon showed its contours in the March afternoon, marking the first official day of spring in the endless spring or summer of Florida. She went to sleep only at dawn, stayed up all through the mystery night of the spring equinox, but nothing had appeared even in her short doze of the morning. She lowered her eyes from the ocean waters and wrote:

“Unusual shadows of birds on the sand; the dull erotic swing of the ocean today: is this the fading of the exotic?”

Could be that the artist belongs only to what I am calling the *artist-self*? There is no himself or herself, but *ArtistSelf*, for the artist is beyond genres and genders. “In the world from which I ran, several utopias had been born (different from those of Erasmus and Thomas More), one of them being the mandatory freedom and happiness attained by everyone once they arrived in Western civilization. According to this thinking, fleeing from the communist camp system to the Western world was enough to fulfill a life, to confer freedom. But here I understood that freedom is not a thing or a state, but a process of individual self-creation in a society that encourages you to do so.”

She stopped moving the pen and with closed eyes tasted the opposites coming to her: the hot sand, the cool wind, the rumbling coming from the deep waters in the absolute silence of the beach. There was nothing dramatic, shattering in what she had experienced that moment, but all that she felt became to some extent a tense reality. Are intuition and sensitivity the essence of femininity? Why do many women writers strain to write like men? And how to write, what fiction strategies to use for the American reader? The book market, the publishers liked thrillers. The book was supposed to sell in large print runs. Everything had to be lowest common denominator, fully accessible. But art was never accessible to all. How many were aware of Dante’s symbolism? In this truth there was nothing elitist, nothing shameful. But too many expressed derision for the “boring depth” of a book. “Who the hell has time for it?” They were saying, “Luxury or European perversion?”

There had been a time in the past when, walking among seaweed thrown by waves on the Black Sea’s beaches, she had liked to sniff the deserted expanses as if she expected a promise from them. Now she wanted to be, just for a few moments, a palm trunk washed by the southern sun and wind, bathed in the maternal iodine. The seed-sprouting season was fully unfolding; animals sought each other on the ground and underground, and the earth began to warm up; in the breeding eroticism of the month of March, the compulsion to perpetuate the species filled the air, water and food. Would she ever bloom again? Deeper-than-ever insomnia; her body, in synchrony with nature, was ready for love. She had gone to Ocean Drive two nights before ready to catch and devour a man. All the restaurants were full. Seated at a table on the sidewalk, she didn’t have to wait for long. A young gentleman looking for an erotic adventure sat at the same table and offered to buy her a drink. Everything went well until he grabbed her arm. She rejected him without much thought. She resolved to repress her rejection at his next attempt. The young man touched her again, and she instinctively did the same. “Are you a lesbian?” he asked, standing up and leaving the table without waiting for an answer. Back in Fred’s apartment she had to accept her hybrid structure, half-spirit and half-animal. She could not lose her clarity. But why had that not happened with Lawrence and James?

It was March 20 of the year of grace 1993. The Gold Coast abandoned itself to the somnolent breeze coming from the Gulf of Mexico. Miami lived passionately and sensually; it was enough to walk during the night on Ocean Drive to fully experience it, but it wasn't the same on the sanitized Bal Harbour beach. James was stubbornly calling several times a week. They planned to see each other for a few days in Paris, but it didn't work out. They could marry, but that would not solve anything; she did not have the will to go back to Eastern Europe, and for James marriage was a form of social coercion. Also, she thought that everything they had experienced could be a form of mental deceit, due to the distance between them. Actually, they had never had a real life together. The drama of their relationship was therefore only half true. In addition, after she pieced together numerous stories from James's past, Angela suspected that he had always loved to be in love with a faraway woman, and not with one around him daily; a permanent presence would quickly bore him.

Their first night of love surged out from among Angela's deliberately banned memories. During that night they had sought each other many times, kissing with an increased thirst. While they made love they had talked to each other in a language of pure pleasure, a language they were inventing, though without any sense. Those words amplified the pleasure, sometimes even provoked it. She remembered that in James's company she had experienced many kinds of pleasure, each of them a new step that prepared her for a different kind of abandonment. But nothing was more wonderful than those moments when James kissed her to prepare her for love.

March 1993

I watch flocks of birds preparing to go north. My entire life, at this time of year I was somewhere in the North, waiting for migratory birds to arrive from the South. I feel like a prisoner again; a prisoner in America, after being a prisoner in the country of my birth all my life. Over there I was labeled a dangerous anti-establishment journalist and therefore a possible defector. Because I did not collaborate with the secret police, I didn't ever have a passport; all my requests for one were denied. I do not understand why they did not let me leave the country back then; was it my punishment for not being like them and with them? At one point, even my right to *ask* for a passport was denied. By providential luck I was able to get asylum in the U.S. after the December 1989 revolution. But here my residency status is unresolved; it seems lost in the chaos of government bureaucracy. I am a bird in a cage again. I cannot travel; and this was my lifetime dream. Once a year I stand in a huge line around the immigration building to ask for a work permit, feeling the crazy anxiety that my request could be denied. Between myself and the homeless person on the street here, the difference is that he is a citizen of this country, fully protected by his state's powerful laws, while I do not belong to any country, and no country would defend me. It's certainly much better for State Department people to know me in Romania than in New York City. They want me there to fight for democracy. My life could become a casualty in the internal war there, but who cares?

“I admire you very much,” the ambassador's secretary said after handing over the passport

with the American visa. Flattered, I had seen several of my articles cut out of the newspaper and fastened with pins on a board in the ambassador's office. He invited me to lunch in the embassy's cafeteria. During the three courses he gracefully questioned me on many issues. "Rest assured that for you we will always have a solution, an exit strategy, if something out of control should happen here," he said with expressionless eyes. His impersonal face had simply been erased from my memory.

I thought back then that he was referring to a possible arrest, an imminent large-scale social conflict, or even a new dictatorship. In the autumn of 1990, political circles in Washington, D.C. and Strasbourg discussed the benefits of military rule in Romania.

"Like what?"

The ambassador's secretary managed a mixture of French and Italian. I knew only two or three words of English.

"A permanent entry visa for the U.S., for emergency situations, in case you have to leave immediately, or a scholarship to an American university could be a solution for now."

"I thought that Ceausescu's death would mean the beginning of a new era, a new society, and even prosperity," I confessed in disappointment. "I have the feeling that I live in a state once again betrayed by the Great Powers."

"That's because you don't have political experience," he said with the same inexpressive glance. "The Great Powers do not owe anything to Romania. Politics is driven by mutual interests, not by feelings. Somehow your country's interests have to align with those of the Great Powers, or your country has to convince the Great Powers of the benefits they might get from here in an international crisis. The logic of the Great Powers is peculiar," he ended abruptly.

"And what about here over the next years?" It was something I could not imagine. I was overwhelmed by uncertainty and helplessness. My fight as a journalist seemed lost, at least for the next decade. However, I worked on my book of reportage on the Revolution, which I called *The Shibboleth Report*.

"The next five years will be awfully harsh. Then five more hard years will follow. After that the next decade will only be tough. There is hope of change and social prosperity after twenty-five years. Although I personally believe that it will take at least forty years for this to happen. The communist mafia will not hand over power. Political and economic power will have to be seized from them, grabbed," the ambassador's secretary said frankly.

"In other words, I belong to the small and so divided group of those who have the task of snatching power from the hands of the communists or neo-communists. I have to do it without any help, with all the ensuing sacrifices, and with the promise that in case of force majeure I will have a visa that will allow me to escape. But what if I don't have time to flee?"

I was reliving the horrific panic, disappointment and disgust of those hours when hordes of miners from the Jiu Valley, led by secret police agents disguised as miners, attacked the

capital. The pretext: to rescue the President of the country from an alleged extremist putsch organized by the opposition parties. A telephone call from Switzerland warned me a few hours ahead of what was about to happen. But I did not believe that warning. Meanwhile, all the key points of the country, such as train stations and international airports had been taken over by miners. Airports and border stations had received lists of names of people who were not allowed to leave the country. I found out my name was on such a list. I phoned the President's office, the headquarters of the Army Chief of Staff, the Office of the President of the Parliament, to warn that if I was killed, they would be guilty of my death. Everybody hung up on me or slammed the door in my face. The Chief Cabinet Secretary of the Vice President of the Parliament assured me cynically: "Don't you deserve this, dear? Do you fear the wrath of the people now? You and your friends are nothing but paid agents of Western capitalism. Let's face it, you have called this punishment on yourself."

Back then, in that conversation she had been asked again to resist, continuing to fight. That she had done all her life.

She understood in New York City that America also had her tough issues to solve: inflation, unemployment, the recession, mass immigration from Cuba, Haiti, Mexico; presidential scandals, high taxes, and too many kinds of alleged discrimination. From outside, America looked like a bright monolith, but this image was just a commercial advertisement, mostly produced by Hollywood movies. From inside, one could see clearly how crumbled America was and even how fragile. In addition, she didn't belong to any minority group that had enjoyed special protection from the state. Being a white, polyglot, educated immigrant was a huge handicap. There was no support group for her.

She had tried to become a member of the PEN Center. She had to have two books published in English in order to become a member. Books in another language were not of interest, especially those printed in that unknown language from Eastern Europe. She had hoped to find a grant in the "Grants and Awards" published annually by PEN, but they were awarded to American citizens and permanent residents writers only, and she did not fit these categories yet. And more, the vast majority of those grants were awarded for books written on an assigned topic. She hated the socialist realist culture from which she had run exactly for this. A fugitive writer arriving in New York City without money and connections and recommendations had to give up the idea of being recognized as a peer, and had to do anything else, any kind of job, in order to survive.

The high tide arrived with the evening. Looking at the waves ready to engulf the beach, Angela reached again for the truth that any true writer had always considered "writing to assignment" as an insult. Throughout the history of literature and culture, the right to inspiration, the right to write about what the writer wanted, had always been the most precious and respected freedom. She had not made this concession, ever, and therefore she had accepted poverty and marginalization in her former country. But in America this concession seemed mostly normal. Not only were grants for writers frequently tied to a specific topic, but writing itself had become a business. Books and magazines on

how to write and how to sell better were everywhere. The idea that the writer was a unique voice and a unique style didn't have much place in the book publishing trade. What mattered was the realistic story torn from the news and its commercial appeal. Courses in universities about "how to write" poetry, fiction, memoir, etc. were all over, growing like mushrooms after rain, burying the idea of talent in the process of learning the craft of writing. The "writing schools" imposed by Soviet communism in the occupied Eastern European countries during the 1950s had been a disgrace. They were meant to produce communist writers whose mission was to replace "bourgeois" literature. They imposed socialist realism, and thereby banned, blamed, maligned, and buried under silence a generation of authentic writers. The literature produced was mostly garbage. A few real writers had survived, but still tainted by the compromise they had made.

In the notebook held on her knees, Angela wrote: "I lost my world—or any world. I am not anywhere, except in myself. My country, not found on any map of Earth, still lacking a flag, with no official anthem, is called ANGELAND. Its language, ANGELANDIAN, has vocabulary, syntax, and morphology based on hope and despair."

She wanted to expunge James from her mind, and more, the bothersome feeling that he had lied to her. Strange details of their conversations about politics surfaced once in a while and stood like a question mark in the depth of her mind; she had no way to explain them. However, she was not anxious to find out the truth, because she knew that the truth would always find her. For now, she only wanted to run away from its harsh and wounding call. So she focused her mind on finding Corbu. The last address that Graham had provided traced Corbu to Fort Lauderdale. That's why she had accepted Fred's plan on how to learn "K's" whereabouts: to spend a week in North Miami in his apartment in Bal Harbor.

"You cannot afford to pay for a hotel there. Spend a few days in my place close to Fort Lauderdale, and also see how America's rich live," Fred said. "I'll pay for your flight ticket too; my present for your birthday."

She was, after all – and she was not ashamed of it – just a poor immigrant, working hard to pay rent, school tuition, and other monthly bills. She couldn't afford a room for one week, or even for a few days, in Miami or Fort Lauderdale hotels! The discovery that more than half of Americans lived just like that, saving every cent, sending their children to work during school breaks from an early age, without vacations, evenings of theater, or any of that, gave her some comfort. When she arrived in America, she did not know how to do anything, from America's point of view. Her mother tongue, her working tool, had vanished, or had simply become useless somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. She had to choose a new profession. Being a file clerk in a law office, she naturally went for the field of paralegal, a decision that cost a lot of money and months of intensive courses after office hours. For Fred, all of these had been Angela's personal issues. In addition, his greed had sharpened after his mother's death. But what had really upset him was that she had stopped seeing him after confessing that she was in love with James. However, stepping on his heart, Fred bought the flight tickets to Miami.

"This is your birthday present," he explained again. "You won't get one more penny from me."

That day they had pizza at a place close to Lexington Avenue and 58th Street. It had been the site of

their first dinner after Fred became super-rich. But because the inheritance had been below his expectations, he decided to save significantly. He had invested a lot of money in the stock market and he did not want to sell anything. That was why – he said – he was short of cash.

“You’re doing surprisingly well,” Fred mumbled while finishing a slice of vegetable pizza. “You have found a better job, you speak English better, even if your annoying accent has not disappeared; finally, you have become more independent ... But to be honest, though you make a good impression, and this is what my psychiatrist said – he admires you – I don’t think you’ll find a better job after graduating from these paralegal courses ... I think you’re wasting your time and money.”

Despite Fred’s predictions, she had found a better job at a law firm on 42nd street and 6th Avenue. On the last day at Goldenberg, Goodman & Greenberg, the office girls bought her a cake, a card, and flowers; they sang songs, and even cried. She did not recall ever having experienced anything similar in her former country.

In a world where the collective was sacred and the individual counted for little, she did not receive others’ regrets or congratulations. Over there, exit from the collective and the proletarian class was a black mark against you, and high professionalism was viewed as a form of political mistake. That was why she had always gotten fired there: because, unfortunately, she was one of the best – professionally, but not politically.

The law firm of the three “G’s” gave her an excellent recommendation. Eugene told her that any time in her life she encountered difficulties; she would be welcome to come back to that office. The door of his law firm would be forever open to her.

“I’m sorry that you’re leaving, but I know that this is no place for a woman of your education. God bless you,” Eugene ended his short speech. Then he took her aside.

“How’s James?” She had no idea how Eugene had found about him. She did not react; she did not like to confess about her personal life.

“I don’t envy him,” Eugene continued in a lower voice. “That’s a risky business. I don’t understand why he needs it,” he tapped her shoulder paternally. “If I were in his place, with his money and a woman like you, I wouldn’t work for *them*.” And then, amused, as if at a good joke: “But that’s the nature of men, my dear: in every one lurks a James Bond.”

Feet sunk in the warm and wet sand like quicksand, she counted how many times she had been fired in her former country and stopped at five. Then, digging in the sand with a childlike eagerness, until she reached the groundwater, she arranged in some sort of logical order everything that had happened after what Eugene had let drop with a slip of his tongue. She answered James’s calls monosyllabically. He became alarmed. He asked her to refrain from making any decision and to give up those “projects” – he was referring to Corbu and Marque, about whom she had talked before – and asked for patience until he came back to New York.

Airplanes traced the bay’s sky with advertisements, invitations to restaurants, yacht parties, parties for singles, and romantic tours in South Miami. La Bohème, the picturesque, the real life was there. In North Miami the tomblike silence of guarded residences looked like a cemetery of elephants; children and young people did not exist, for millionaires didn’t like noise; they were too old, stressed, and

wary of their own wealth and death.

She picked up a few shells gathered on the beach and went straight to the electric fence of the newest, most elegant residential building in North Miami. In front of the video camera hidden in the branches she took out her hat, posed, and soon a snap signaled that the door was open. She pushed the white wrought-iron gate. It wasn't far to the swimming pool. She plunged into the water. Even though the temperature outside was close to ninety-five degrees, the pool's water was heated, and nobody cared, for there was plenty of money. She stroked the water slowly; those splashes gave her a state of well-being. After a few laps she turned face upward into a well-executed back float. She didn't feel at ease. Four cameras were taping, as usual, every inch of the pool, as well as the white chairs around it. Dozens of monitors installed in a huge room on the first floor inspected everything that was happening in the hundreds of corners of that monstrous building and its grounds. An army of technicians watched those monitors. Angela was convinced that video cameras were installed even in the most hidden, private spots. She had sensed herself being watched in Fred's apartment.

She floated longer; she liked to doze on the water. But the silence and opulence all around developed a sort of uneasiness in which she could not relax. She abandoned the swimming pool for the Jacuzzi. The hot underwater jets emphasized the dropping of her guard. Everything had been perfect; a perfect setting for a love affair from which the main subjects were missing. The thought that her life had been the material for a parody changed her mood.

She posed before a video camera at the main entrance of the building and, crossing the cool hallways, called the elevator. The bland music, reminiscent of funerals, filled the luxurious halls and the elevator. Contemplating herself in the elevator's mirror, she stuck out her tongue, and suddenly the metallic box stopped between floors; sitting cross-legged on the floor, she talked with the doorman.

"Is the computer scared because I made faces in the mirror?"

There was no answer, but after a few seconds the elevator's door opened in front of Fred's apartment. Following the same ritual, she introduced the electronic card into the alarm device. When the red light turned green, she twisted the door handle. Finally, home! Unfortunately the place did not look like a home but like an exhibition. How to live in a museum?

"Care about nothing," she heard her inner voice say.

"That's too much." She pirouetted in front of the mirrors covering the walls. From the living room she ran to the bedroom, then to the kitchen to drink water; then she ran to one of the four luxurious bathrooms – it had always been hard to choose one of them, and this was irritating because sometimes by the time she decided she forgot what she was in there for! Everything in that place was a sophisticated visual display in red and white. The paintings in the living room had caught her eye from the beginning. But it was impossible to find the artist's name on any of them. She had asked Fred if they were original paintings. "Sure," Fred said in a proud tone.

"But they are not signed," she replied in wonder.

"The artists' names have been erased," Fred said. "They are contemporary painters, not so famous, but if you want to know their names I can call the designer to send the list. I did not want to be bothered with authorship and other nonsense; I just wanted to enjoy those pieces, that's all."

The hysteria of having as much as possible! Had art been anonymized again? The faces covered in

makeup and tightened by plastic surgeries displayed the desperation of not being able to buy youth, eternal life, love and happiness; so why not buy art? Anyway, art was safe in their homes guarded like federal prisons, empty-shell paradises haunted by loneliness and agony in a sea of nonsense. How to describe this? Could it be a state of mind somewhere between crying in sorrow and exaltation?

“You’ve lost your sense of humor,” she heard her inner voice again. In the bedroom, the chandeliers competed with the outside light. A lightweight metal venetian blind went up at the touch of a minuscule switch on the side of the bed. The Gulf’s beauty entered the room through the glass wall.

“Why don’t I have humor?” Angela asked her reflection in the mirror. The cool air in the apartment forced her to wrap herself in a big white towel.

“Because you cannot see what’s good and bad, and you don’t know how or what to choose; you are short-sighted; and you lack discernment.”

“How do you know?”

“Remember your foolish modesty.”

When Fred invited her to choose an item from his mother’s jewelry collection, she had picked out a plain, unfashionable necklace. She did not want to look greedy. It was the only custom-made piece in the entire collection.

“You don’t know how to discern, to ask for, and to get. It was a good imitation of gold.”

She ran to the kitchen, the only warmer room, and, drinking coffee, reviewed the notes she had written on the beach.

“No crimes, no mystery, no sex.” A rattlesnake flooded the kitchen. “You won’t make it.”

She switched on the TV set to drown out that rattle. A movie for sexually frustrated men ran on Playboy; on the other channels were only zombies or soap opera. Fred was a great lover of pornographic movies; his apartments were full of that kind of videotapes. In Eastern Europe, for a movie like that, the entire movie crew would have gone to jail for life. In fact, in some ways that puritanism was not so bad.

The house phone rang, and the doorman announced that her cab had arrived. She had not ordered one! But she accepted it. She pulled a sheath dress from its hanger, let her hair fly free, and wrapped around her neck a silk scarf painted by a famous painter, found in one of Fred’s mother’s closets.

“No makeup?” the rattle went on.

She did not like it, while all the women around her used it heavily. Makeup seemed like a mask on the face, but she put on lipstick, then grabbed a small black purse with pinkish pearls from a collection of purses. The apartment in fact had huge closets, each of them dedicated to one category, such as furs, evening gowns, purses, informal dresses, accessories, shoes and so on. Because Fred’s deceased mother had been petite, Angela could borrow only her purses, scarves, and belts.

Valerie was waiting in the cab. Angela had no idea how Valerie had found her; she’d given her the phone number, but not Fred’s address. And when she had called Valerie’s cousin Johnny in South Miami, he knew nothing about Valerie.

“My mistake,” Valerie apologized with a healthy laugh. “I gave you the wrong number. I actually have two cousins with the same name.”

Thin, of medium height, with hair black as anthracite, Valerie was dressed in a long evening skirt

and a blouse with a daring neckline. The big earrings that hung from her earlobes gave her the air of an American imitation of Carmen from the opera by Bizet.

“How are your recordings?” Angela wanted to know.

Valerie was about forty, sang jazz music and wrote poetry. She spent her summers on the Patmos Island, where Saint John received the divine revelation of the Apocalypse, after which he spoke it aloud and a disciple transcribed it. During the winters Valerie stayed in New York City. She had had some unfortunate experiences; the last one had brought her to the brink of a depression so deep that she needed years to find herself again. That’s why she had taken refuge in art and meditation. A monk from Patmos had been her spiritual adviser. Angela knew Valerie through a common friend from Bucharest who had met Valerie at a European poetry festival.

Valerie seemed not to hear Angela. Her voice tuned to a note of a contagious excitement. “Let’s start the hunt. It’s not in accordance with the Holy Spirit, but today is March 20th. The equinox”.

“How would it be to rush over to Fort Lauderdale first?” Angela suggested.

“Are you talking about that ‘K’?” Valerie closed her eyes. The melancholy of things known. How to flow within the wholeness? “I don’t understand what’s going on.” She raised her eyebrows. “I see more and more lonely women giving up completely on men; and more and more men who, after wasting their lives running from one woman to another one in search of perfection, end up with creatures I can less and less regard as belonging to the feminine gender ...”

Once in Fort Lauderdale, the cab driver couldn’t find the address. He missed two exits on Las Olas Boulevard; then he entered Seven Isles, one of the super-exclusive districts where there were no streets, only house numbers. Finally, following Graham’s instructions and looking for the number he’d provided, the cab driver stopped in front of a modern house built by the side of a golf playground, surrounded by palms and oleanders. A yacht was docked at a chic pier on the other side of the house. When the bell stopped ringing, a tanned, wrinkled man in his 80s speaking with a heavy accent opened the door of the house.

“May I speak to Mr. Corbu?” Angela asked, surprised by that apparition. Behind that man a person somewhere between a bodyguard and a butler watched the dialog.

“That’s me,” the man said calmly. “How can I help you?”

“I am a journalist and I’m writing a book about Eastern Europe,” Angela introduced herself. “She is my friend, Valerie,” and made a gesture toward Valerie, who sneered for no reason. “I asked Nicolette to tell you about this ... I am on vacation and I thought I could pay a visit ... Michaela Banu gave me your address, but she could not help me with your telephone number,” she lied shamelessly. She talked so fast that she gave him no time to interrupt.

“Michaela Banu?” The man in his eighties wrinkled his forehead. Angela thought she heard a woman’s giggle coming from inside the house, but she saw no one. “I withdrew completely from public life, and especially from Romanian immigrant circles.” The man spoke in her mother tongue, in a tone that left no room for challenge. “And if I have something to say about the past, I’ll write a memoir.”

The door slammed brutally.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief.

“What would you do if he accepted?” Valerie could hardly keep from bursting out laughing.

“If there are so many fake Corbus, the original should be around somewhere.” The man in the picture taken at the Marriot Hotel seemed a better replica than this one.

“South Miami, Lincoln Theater,” Valerie clapped her hands in the cab. “I know a shop there with many unnecessary wonders that will entertain us.”

They were already floating in the amniotic fluid of the night, while words describing Marque’s horrible death filled the cab’s space. All of a sudden, a paragraph from Marque’s texts about Tim brought a surprising hypothesis: was it possible that the road toward finding Corbu was the false bait, while Tim was the holder of the truth?

“Oh my God, Lancelota,” Valerie clapped again her hands in mockery, “I shall add that you suffer from the same kind of stupidity as the knight, the stupidity of a good education!” She laughed heartily. “What nonsense,” Valerie emphasized, “to be there, so near the Grail, to need only ask a question to shatter the spell or curse, but he did not open his mouth!” Valerie spoke as if she had been there, in the Fisher King’s palace, during the night when the pure Lancelot, too polite because of his great education, failed to utter a question and so lost everything. But how many really knew the story about Sir Lancelot, who went to find the Holy Grail, about the Fisher King’s mystical disease and his mysterious palace, about the knight who was offered the role of savior of others plus his own personal redemption and failed both?

“Let’s be real,” Valerie cheered her up. “Perhaps it’s not the goal of this quest that matters, but something else; you’ll find out what.”

They flew along, talking; time and space had become pure poetic license. Arriving at the Lincoln Theater crossroad where Gershwin’s music seemed to be born out of pure timelessness, Valerie ran toward the narrow entrance of a lace store. The shop window displayed objects otherwise seen only in old French art albums. Angela slid into the narrow aisle of the boutique overwhelmed by merchandise, carefully touching a goblin of perfect beauty. It was hard to say if it was a copy or an original.

“This is Linda,” Valerie drew her attention.

Turning her head, she saw Fred engaged in a fierce conversation with Linda. The woman’s face showed different ages simultaneously; the confusion was woven by her eyes, as if they were attracted by different objects existing in parallel worlds. Was she 55 years old? Or 100 years old?

“She is an old friend,” Fred introduced Linda to Angela. The voice that uttered those words wasn’t only Fred’s, but also Valerie’s. Linda dragged Angela deeper into the store, to a place filled with bright light.

“I am a good evaluator,” Linda boasted in the rugged voice of a smoker. “I’ve seen plenty of people during my life, old and new customers from all continents ... I know at a glance who the person in front of me is.”

Unexpectedly, Linda kissed Angela’s cheeks while holding her hand. Fred looked annoyed. Angela indulged herself in the wonder of that moment. What she was experiencing was stunningly close to a scene from one of her novels published years before. One of the characters in that novel had met a woman like Linda in a perfume shop in Paris. Had fiction become reality?

“I am pretty sure I have here in front of me a lady from Eastern Europe,” Linda started in a drawling voice, as if she needed more time to guess about the woman facing her. After a coughing fit, she continued in her wheezing voice:

“A trustful one; devoted; courageous; with a name starting with *a*.” Linda stopped as if waiting for approval or for someone to confirm what she had said.

“You don’t know what you are saying,” Fred said hurriedly, as if panicked.

“I hope you know who this man is,” Linda barked. “If I advise him to keep you at his side, I advise you to run away from him as fast as possible. He doesn’t deserve you, he doesn’t deserve you,” she sniggered.

Fred threw down a bunch of lace handkerchiefs he had wanted to buy. Linda did not care a damn that she had lost a good customer. Actually, during that moment it had become obvious that Linda did not want to sell anything in her store to Fred.

The feeling that crossed Angela was close to what she felt in New York City in the Bryant Park subway station at 5th Avenue and 42nd street whenever the horrible Q train appeared from the tunnel. Something bad was going to happen; that’s why she had always preferred to wait for the F, B, or D on crowded mornings while trying to sketch out the next scene of the novel about the Revolution (a novel where fiction came from reality and reality merged with fiction) which she had called *The Shibboleth Report*. Carrying the notebook all the time, she felt happy when, finding a place to sit, she could scribble some notes. Her time was so scarce that she used any free minute, even in the cafeteria or the subway, for she did not have the luxury of any break. The last time she took Q train had been before James’s departure. If, during those days, she could have gotten an exit visa from the country, she would have been stupid enough to follow him, but then she realized that it was a blessing that she couldn’t get the visa. Under no circumstances would she return to the place from which she had fled. Hadn’t she abandoned everything, her language, profession, friends, and country, for freedom? She had left everything for freedom, the foremost thing of her life. “How could I break my beliefs? At what price?” she asked herself. “Isn’t freedom priceless?”

“There are prices that nobody can afford to pay, and there are things that many people want to pay for but have no price,” Linda said, as if she had traveled inside of Angela’s mind

At that time she had had to choose: to be with James or to live her life alone in New York City.

“I had a life in my former country and in a way, that life of mine was destroyed,” Angela attempted to explain to Linda. “I paid a lot for it. I believe that being free is the biggest accomplishment of a lifetime. However, it is important to know. . . to learn what to do with that freedom.”

She found herself on Ocean Drive; Valerie was craving a sip of iced coffee as they strolled, listening to the music coming out through the wide-open doors of restaurants and night clubs. The drive was so crowded that everybody bumped into each other; a torrent of people and cars: a flood of nice girls, of eccentric faces that wanted to draw attention at any price, of lonely men, ecstatic tourists, homosexuals, lesbians, the merely curious, drug sellers, well-groomed beggars, professional thieves, fumlbers! There revolved on the Drive a humanity hungry for money and pleasure, more rapacious than she had ever imagined, crueller, knowing how to extort money with perfect science.

Why not? It was written on their foreheads. America's wealthy old came here, and they needed help to spend and eventually to die.

Leaving behind Ocean Drive, the two of them walked, chit-chatting, in the sweet air of the night. After a while they stopped at a coffee shop on Española Way. A young man with *The Firm* by Grisham in his hands sat alone at a table with the only available chairs on the terrace. With a gesture of his hand, and without moving his eyes from the book's pages, he allowed them to sit there. Valerie chuckled as always when she was ready to joke. This time she went a little edgier than usual.

"Are you coming from a war?" She pointed to the young man's outfit. Many youngsters were wearing army uniforms just for fun.

"Oh, no, I am on a short leave from the army," he answered simply, without interrupting his reading.

"Are you coming from our military bases in Europe?" Valerie said, enlightened.

"From Africa, I arrived yesterday," he bashfully raised his eyes from the book. He looked about 28 years old, well built by nature as a war machine. Without doubt, his battle adversaries were as well built as he was.

"You kind of kill each other there," Valerie squinted at him sideways.

"What can we do, that's life," he accepted with unnatural calm.

"I am from Eastern Europe, from Romania," Angela jumped into the discussion to stop Valerie.

"I saw on TV or I heard a few years ago about that place ... Is it true that there's still communism over there?"

"Who knows," Angela said imprecisely.

"However, it was a televised revolution," he insisted.

"It was a film script shot in plain reality to look authentic and more dramatic," Valerie explained sharply. The young man, offended by her cynicism, turned to Angela.

"Did you have a lot of casualties there?" he wanted to know.

"What do several thousand dead matter, compared to the hundreds of thousands or even millions who have died in Eastern Europe in the past fifty years?" she said in a veiled voice. "What's going on in Rwanda?"

"What can we do, they want to kill each other, people have always killed each other, this has been going on from time immemorial," he shrugged.

"Is Africa dying?" Valerie jumped in as if she already knew the answer. "Do you think that the black population will be extinct and Asians will colonize the continent in the next century?"

"That's the weirdest thing. What I know is that black people perceive the whites only as enemies or as aggressive colonists, while they like the Chinese a lot," the young man said. "However," he returned to the conversation's thread, "I heard that the Congress voted for financial help for Eastern Europe and Russia."

"Honestly, I think that whoever helps them could be called crazy, nuts," Valerie cut off Angela's answer. "I have the feeling that America supports the KGB to create more jobs for the CIA," she burst into laughter. "The development paradox," she sarcastically ended.

It was a perfect night. The coffee had also been perfect. The smoke coming from Valerie's cigarettes had shaped a sort of sweet fraternal closeness. The petrified, unreal palm trees appeared to

be painted sculptures of antiquity.

“Is the pollution so high in Africa?” Angela switched the subject.

“The wild animals are dying and the soil is dying, not so much because of pollution,” explained the young man, whose name was George, “but because of the frightening breeding of the population, let’s call it overpopulation. There are not enough natural resources of food, i.e. fruits that grow naturally on trees, for example; nobody is working the land ... The tribes and clans kill wild animals and destroy the savannah in search of food.”

“Are you a racist?” Valerie took him on a short leash.

George put his hands over his blue eyes as if he wanted to wipe out the fatigue on his face. His milky white skin had an African suntan. His body breathed strength. Angela glimpsed James’s features for a split second on his face.

“The whites from Africa cannot understand America’s weakness,” he avoided that subject, and a straight answer. “What happened in Los Angeles in the Rodney King case looks totally incomprehensible from over there. It is known that the verdict was decided under the pressure. What did you get from that?”

A group of youngsters crossed the street and entered a nightclub. Angela thought that it would be nice to go there together and dance.

“You are simplistic,” Valerie said shaking her locks. She told him about that day the previous year 1992, when all of New York City had fled in panic and hysterical fear. Stores, offices, institutions, factories were closed; the police was on high combat alert; everybody had waited in horror for the verdict in the King case. By noon, the blacks from Brooklyn and the Bronx had massed in the city center in a peaceful demonstration. It was said that the city had stopped on the brink of slaughter.

They all around the table looked uncomfortable. A few sexy girls stood in front of the nightclub. Music, giggles, laughter were heard from the other side of the sidewalk.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Valerie could not contain that question buzzing in her mind.

“She is in Johannesburg. I want to work a few years on the Wall Street. I am not sure if she would come here.”

“Even if you marry her?”

George’s features became haggard, as if he had become more tired. He nodded.

“Perhaps you are better off with an American girlfriend,” Valerie insisted. “But be wise, I hope you don’t get into any lawsuits before you marry ...” Valerie laughed loudly, in good spirits. She’d had too much cognac. Angela ordered more coffee for all of them.

“In court? What do you mean?” George grimaced, uncomfortable.

“If you become a boss and one of your employees were to sue you for sexual harassment. Europe laughs at us. Soon, American men will be impotent.”

George seemed worried. Valerie was flirting with him, making sexual advances in the purest American style. What would be gaudy in the rest of the world was normal here.

“Let’s go shopping,” Valerie suggested. “Would you join us?”

“I am not sure.” George looked at his watch. It was obvious that he had no interest in buying anything, and that his only wish at that hour was to go to sleep. However, he accepted.

They grabbed a cab. Soon, Angela found herself on 8th street in front of Succa South Beach – Clothing and Accessories for Women and Men. Valerie and George had disappeared. Looking through the shop window she descried a familiar figure. She pressed her face to the glass to see better. It was James, trying on a shirt.

All of a sudden the air gained a translucent light; in that cloud she could distinguish myriads of small transparent bubbles. She did not feel anything, only a closeness to emptiness and absence. As always in times of tension, she had been taken over by a sort of anesthesia close to paralysis. Pain had always come after those moments, as well as the best answer. But right now she experienced something different. She felt herself better secured, anchored in a spirit of goodness more powerful than the evil spirit she had felt ruling her entire past life in her former country. Back over there, she had always done whatever had to be done; what other people in charge of her life decided. But now she was able to do what she wanted.

“I am sorry. I cannot leave this path when I have gotten past the hardest part. I need help to go faster,” she whispered toward James. With open arms, he called her inside. Around Angela cold and heat fought for supremacy.

“Come here, darling!” she heard.

Outside, the blizzard brought frost and knee-deep snow.

“Come on!” James shouted.

She was trembling outside, glued to the window.

“You cannot understand,” she mumbled. “I cannot go back to the cage from which I escaped.”

She missed Lawrence; walking together on the Black Sea beach, in Carpathian clearings, on the green hills of Bucovina, on boulevards cooled by summer rains! The unique flavors of her native air struck her in the chest. She inhaled it with a deep craving. In front of the building on the periphery of Bucharest where she lived, she dropped to her knees on the dirty, stinking sidewalk and kissed it. Then she saw her small study, with the old desk on which so many generations had written, the typewriter, the shelves packed with books and manuscripts, the lamp that Lawrence gave her as a present. They hadn't married, for they both viewed the marriage vows as a sort of black magic, a curse having nothing in common with love and commitment. What else would it be, this “till death do us part” and “as long as we both shall live” or “until we are parted by death”? Pure magic, and worse, black magic they didn't need. The telephone rang and she heard Lawrence's voice. How precious was the mother tongue, her working tool! Writing as a form of existence! She cried reading the last page of the diary written before she had fled the country, slowly covered by the South Beach snow.

“Madame, are you sick? *Vous êtes malade, madame?*” Someone touched her shoulder. A black man, probably from Haiti, bowed his head to listen to her words. If only he would kill her, it would be so good!

Angela nodded as if defending herself.

“Please, go to the restaurant across the street, it's dangerous here,” the man respectfully suggested. Angela allowed him to escort her to the front of the restaurant and invited him to join her at a table.

“I cannot,” he said smiling. He was wretchedly dressed, like a typical beggar who had to soften any

heart. One of his hands was bandaged, but the beggar had given no importance to it while crossing the boulevard. He had held her without complaining of pain.

Angela peered through the window into the restaurant. It looked as if Fred was in there.

“Would you help me find another restaurant?” she begged the beggar.

They headed down South Beach Boulevard, and she soon found herself alone at the Española Way café. On a chair at the same table she noted: “Lately, I think more and more about Virginia Woolf’s diaries; saved or chopped up by her husband? Dilemma: should we leave behind us, and about us, an accurate picture or a corrected one?”

“You’re incorrigible.” Angela heard Valerie’s giggle, but instead of her Fred came in sight. He looked tired, exhausted, as if afflicted with severe insomnia.

“I’m hungry,” he said in a weak voice. He picked up her purse, the notebook, and her scarf, forcing her to follow. They ended up in Osteria del Teatro, a restaurant on the opposite side of the boulevard, where they ate in silence, to the point of vomit. Fred was fat, his heart was in bad shape, but eating was the only pleasure left to him. After paying the bill, they moved to the closest nightclub. There his face relaxed as he sipped Remy Martin.

“It’s hard to understand your depression,” Angela started, “that’s a luxury you can afford. The entire population of my former country is depressed, but they have no idea. They don’t go to the doctor for it and don’t take drugs.”

“Listen, stop this nonsense. You know who I used to be!” Fred groaned and Angela had no choice but to hear his story again.

“After the anxiety attack came the hospital, and after the hospital I lost my senior analyst position. I couldn’t accept a job without the power of decision after handling more than thirty percent of the Dreyfus Corporation’s money. Then the baby that died at birth; a stillbirth,” he whined.

“Why didn’t you try to have another child?” Angela asked wonderingly. “I don’t understand.”

“My wife didn’t want to. But after she divorced me, she got married again, to my best friend, and they had a lot of kids, I think nine. And my best friend’s wife, Scarlet, whom I liked a lot and was planning to bring into my bed for revenge, was madly in love with my wife, Barbara; she even sexually attacked her.”

“And in these past twenty-five years you couldn’t find another woman?” Angela sprawled on the green velvet on one side of the bar.

“My mother always interfered with any woman in my life, I told you many times, for God’s sake, I couldn’t go through that hell again. My wife and mother hated each other’s guts. When we had lunch together, they disagreed so awfully that many times I feared that I would have a breakdown and faint right there at the table. I believe my mission in this life has been to help my mother, sacrificing myself. I was supposed to die before her,” he said pathetically, with a strange gleam in his eyes. He seemed to regret not committing suicide to please his mother.

“Look, I did not let you die, I played a prank on that crone,” Angela laughed with her head thrown back.

“That’s why she stated in her last will that if I get married – she was thinking of you! – I get less money. Because of you I lost fifty million,” Fred lamented.

“Nonsense! She did not want to leave you everything. She mocked you after keeping you as a puppet at her will for your entire life,” Angela replied bored. “Don’t involve me in these stories about millions of dollars when I have only two thousand dollars in my bank account.”

“Are you saying that I am lying to you?”

“These stories make me yawn; they are nonsense for me, a trifle.”

Fred nervously smoked cigarette after cigarette.

“Nonsense?” he cried. “Me? I suffer from depression, I had a heart attack, and I am ill because of the chemical imbalance in my nervous system!”

“I would have loved to see you back in time, living in the Romania of the ’50s, or ’60s, or ’70s, or even the ’80s,” Angela hissed with a devil’s smile on her face.

“Myself over there?” Fred stepped back, scared to death.

“About ten years’ imprisonment as a millionaire and bourgeois exploiter; then about two years breaking stones in a mine; another two years in house arrest, followed by deportation to a wasteland; all your wealth confiscated; forced to work humble jobs, watched by the secret police. You would have been healed, my dear, and never have known you suffered from depression. More, you wouldn’t have had a heart attack because you wouldn’t be fat. And more, I can say that you would have been married, with many kids and by now, grandchildren. You would have fought for survival, and who knows, with your Princeton education, you could have become a good accountant, if, meanwhile, you hadn’t been executed as a U.S. spy.”

Angela was laughing like crazy.

“This is what you want for me?” Fred bristled.

“This would have been normal there,” Angela mocked him. “Three of Lawrence’s brothers were butchered; one of them in the Târgu Mureș penitentiary. Even his remains have not been found. About every family there has a loved one killed in prison, labor camp or deportation. The Romanian partisans stayed in hiding for more than seven years in the mountains, fighting with the communists who occupied the country, and waiting in vain for the Americans to come to Romania to liberate it from under Russian Soviet rule. During this time those who helped the partisans were crushed, one by one. I’ll give you an example: two partisans came to a wedding in the village where I grew up in Dobrogea or Dobruja – they were relatives of the bride. The consequence was that all wedding guests were sent to jail. Some of them returned after ten years, but others never came back. Secret police informants were everywhere. And what did Europe do all this time? The European intellectuals were left-wing, they were friends with Stalin. Some of them even visited Soviet Russia. And whoever did not agree with their views was thrown away. Look at Sartre, who strongly believed in communism, and how Camus was hunted after he left the French Communist Party. Look at Louis Aragon, Romain Rolland, and their legacy. But finally, happy that the barbarians had been appeased after they had given them the gift of a few unimportant countries in Eastern Europe, the Western countries developed their material well-being and asked Romanians to resist because they would arrive soon to free us from the Russian occupation. “The Americans will come soon to free you! Be prepared, brothers!” was heard in the broadcasts of radio stations from Western Europe and America—Radio Free Europe and Voice of America—for more than twenty full years. If someone in Romania

was caught listening to them, he was thrown into prison.

“The Romanians surrendered to the Russians while waiting for liberation by the U.S. Army. The leaflets dropped by U.S. warplanes over Romania during the Second World War had said: ‘Dear Romanians! Surrender to the Russians for the moment! We are with you, and we’ll come to save you!’ Meanwhile the Romanian educated class, the intellectual aristocracy of the country, was murdered by communists in labor camps and jails. Girls from formerly wealthy families refused to marry, for they were waiting for the brave American officers, secretly knitting socks and gloves for them. I think some of them are still knitting with the same hot hope. You’ll ask me why everyone was waiting and not fighting? Because the country had been taken over not just from the outside, by Stalinist Russia, but it had been also taken over by the collaborators within the country. And after they killed or threw in prison the country’s ministers, journalists, priests, writers, teachers, landowners, and private company and factory owners who refused to cooperate with them, the communists went on to brainwash and indoctrinate the next generation by propaganda, training it in the communist spirit. ... And terror.”

“That’s exaggeration.” Fred fidgeted with obvious guilt.

“Exaggeration?” Angela jumped up, angry. “Do you have any idea what it means to flee your own country, to leave everything behind, to prefer to die than to live watched, listened, threatened? I pity you! I feel sorry for all of you in this country, damn it, for you all live in happiness but have no idea!”

Angela had drunk the full glass of cognac. A few curious youngsters looked at her. One of them suggested that the man she was with was too old and ugly. The bar manager appeared with a few bodyguards to prevent eventual violence. On the dance floor the dancing was voluptuous, even wild. And she had a mad urge to dance, a mad lust for life! She was alive, sane, in one piece, still young; and she was in Miami; and she had so many projects to finish, and she was sure she would fulfill all of them.

“Are you trying to tell me that you lived in a fascist state?” Fred made a visible effort to express his mind. As a Jew born in America, he regarded fascism – about which he had read in the newspapers – as the sole measure of unhappiness.

“If the enacted laws had been applied fully, then I would have lived in a fascist state,” Angela explained.

“So was there a sort of resistance?” Fred’s face brightened.

“Yes – corruption,” Angela replied, “the only human trace left in the communist dictatorship. Let’s go on the dance floor.”

Happiness and unhappiness couldn’t be explained through words. They were existential words, impossible to define; their meanings could be understood only by tangible, real, physical living.

“You know that my doctor doesn’t allow me to dance,” Fred excused himself. Angela shook her head with disgust. She slipped onto the parquet floor and started dancing with an imaginary partner. But soon she felt chained. It was James.

“You’re unfair!” He spoke with his Texan accent that she loved so much. It was as if two doves gamboled in his throat.

“Do you think so?” Angela backed off.

"I'm positive," James pressed her to his chest. She felt his breath, the rhythm of his heart.

"Why don't you want to be with me?" James kissed her as if he felt her weakness. She felt lost, her head on his shoulder.

"Why not you with me?" Angela whispered as if in her sleep. "We rent an apartment in Manhattan, you start your own law firm, and we enjoy a normal life together. And remember, I still haven't forgiven your lies. You lied to me."

"The only true philosophical phrase epitomizes the size of the bank account. Believe me!" James looked into her eyes. "I have been in more than one hundred countries, I saw a great deal of this world. The only thing that matters, my darling, is to make money. The amount in the bank account is the only true philosophical statement."

"I am not interested in becoming a millionaire." Angela shook her head. She wanted to be close to him, pressed to his chest, feeling his breath.

"How could you?"

She tried to say what had been on her mind for a long time. And she failed. They spun on the dance floor. Each of their truths was true. There was nothing to add.

The orchestra played blues; behind the contrabasses stood Lawrence, in front of the piano. He had been a virtuoso of the piano, but she had never heard him play. By the time she met him, he had long since abandoned music for architecture.

Angela couldn't believe her eyes! Lawrence was there, two steps away from her; Lawrence was playing their blues. When had they danced to the blues the last time? Angela approached him bashfully, realizing that he looked at her sideways.

"You have no idea how much I suffered," she gasped, and burst out crying. She had run away because those who had slain him couldn't be punished.

Wild splashes of rain on roofs and sidewalks flooded every cubic centimeter of Miami air.

"Our daily rain," Lawrence said in sadness.

It was that rain in the mountains, their first night of love in the valley besieged by storm. As the wild rain outside had joined the springs coming out of her body, it seemed as if the flood would drag them into the nearby tributary.

Angela remembered the Carpathian Mountains, the fascinating and beautiful Transylvania, reviewed Dracula's spirit embodying the quintessential destructiveness unleashed by the barbarian hordes that had rushed in from the Far East in the past fifteen centuries. The rapacious giant wave had always first hit the Carpathian Mountains in the invasions driving toward Western Europe. Was it possible that in those Carpathians there had been a force that slowed down, appeased, the Far East's attack on the West? Who could tell if that soil would resist to the end, absorbing repeated invasions that made one with the ground all that they met in their way? During the past three centuries the West had swung satisfied in the myth of Voltaire's *Candide*; one's own Garden as the only possible rescue of the individual spirit from history's harshness. "Work Your Own Garden" was the only philosophy or theory of rescue that she had found in books. Work your garden or field without caring what's going on around it. But what do you do if someone jumps over the fence into your garden? What are you going to do if the outside world bursts into the oasis that you worked so hard on? Did there ever exist

a place on earth where it could be possible to have a garden protected from history's savageries?

"America, of course, at least for the next one hundred and fifty years," Valerie cheered her up.

A mirror in Fred's apartment had been framed with two life-size marble swans: a black and a white one looked unkindly at each other.

"The last will of grandma, mom's mom, consisted of only one sentence: "Run to the West!" Angela said to her troubled image in the mirror. "Grandmother's Vlach clan from the Balkans, fed up with persecution by Greece after the First World War, went up to the north of the Danube to restore primordial unity with its people. This move proved to be a catastrophe. The clan didn't find any of what had hoped for. And they never returned, first because of shame, and secondly because they could not. They remained prisoners, trapped by the revision of Europe's map and country borders after the Second World War. The barbarians from the East invaded again. Grandma's clan lost their fortunes, and whoever did not die in misery and prisons then fled, escaped – each one in his way – to the West. They started over from scratch in Germany, France, Italy, Australia and Greece. I ran away to America because Europe doesn't look safe for me."

She felt at home in New York City and was ashamed to say it, because "home" for a writer had always been his country and his mother tongue. But she felt safe in New York City. It was as if for her entire life she had yearned for something hard to describe, without a name, something undefined, and she had finally found it. The morning birds were sending trills through the wide-open doors of the living room. The sun reddened the ocean and in the elegant balcony of glass and copper rods rested wearily with the last remnants of the night. The bay unfolded its splendors on a fresh note. Nothing could be brighter than the intoxication of the thought that you could lose yourself forever on the expanse of the ocean with its yellow, pink, and blue tints. Her sight attracted by the flocks of seagulls busy with the morning's ritual, she drank more coffee. The palm trees by the beach looked tired of living in petrified ecstasy. The swimming pool shone like an encompassing eye. She had never before felt so powerful and strong. Those evil people would eventually have to pay for the harm they had done. Evil cannot go unpunished! A few days before she came to Miami, a newspaper had published news about the latest pardons in Romania: all the dictator's close collaborators had been released. Justice had died again under the label of national reconciliation. The Eastern European nations were asked to forgive their nomenklatura. However, she would proceed with their punishment in *The Shibboleth Report*.

David, an American friend, laughed at this kind of revenge.

"I know someone, a former professional killer – right now he is retired, but I am sure he would love to spend a vacation there," he said seriously. They were chatting in one of New York City's suburban summer parties, in the garden of a common friend. David was a native-born American, a broker on Wall Street. He was listening to the Romanian group's chatter and was obviously amused by the happenings in Romania.

"I can help," David interrupted their conversation. "I am willing to pay for it. My only condition is that you write a movie script afterwards and share the money you get for it. Bronson would fit perfectly in the main character's part."

“Do you think it’s the Wild West over there?”

“Let’s be practical. Give me a list of high nomenklatura names in the Eastern European countries. They just won Hungary’s elections. We stay away from Russia; there’s too much work to be done over there. But I say yes to all of the other Eastern European countries. Former notorious nomenklatura members will be killed one by one. And the movie will be called *The Nomenklatura Killer*.”

Actually, David was not very original. How many criminal plans had she concocted in her former country? If she remembered rightly, back then there wasn’t a big difference between her mind’s thirst for revenge and that of a professional killer. Especially when she played tennis. She remembered that short vacation in July 1988 in Predeal, in the southeastern Carpathians, when everything that had not yet managed to flee was desperately running away. Even the birds fled from those places.

It was a bad shot. The ball went over the fence. Sweat flooded her eyes; her arms and legs were stung by sun. She launched a new shot. This one was a little better.

Damn it! What’s “better”?

“We live in a shithole. Don’t dig in it; the disgusting maggots will climb on you!” This had been the summary of her last philosophical conversation with a journalist friend. Angered by that sentence, she punished the tennis ball while shouting: “Eat the shit! Smell it! Don’t dig in it!” The mountain’s echo returned some of those words. She knew she had no chance to run away from that reality, from that land cast in shadow by a morbid deviation of contemporary history, where time ran painstakingly slow under the pressure of inefficiency and futility. Who would fight that monster with three heads, the guardian of the Lost East, that most perfectly adapted creature that haunted the twentieth century, which had “secret police” as its heraldic title? And self-censorship and denunciation of others as the basic concepts of happiness and freedom?

To abandon everything to escaping the immense fatigue of ideology, the daily indoctrination, hadn’t been a fancy decision for anybody. Each individual who had sensed the abnormality of his life had been commanded by the survival instinct to run! That day in July 1988 on Cioplea Hill hordes of secret agents and party activists had prepared the spot for the dictator’s arrival. Could it be that people’s hatred of him gave him the power of destruction? Does such immense hatred change into a form of acceptance and even love? Nobody, or almost nobody, had ever tried to kill him.

She visualized a briefcase full of dynamite; a sniper gun; a massive dose of arsenic; then a commando force that simultaneously destroyed the centers of political power. She how many needed to be annihilated; there were a few hundred thousand. That would require dozens of armed groups. It was too much. Then she thought of a plot, a coup. She enumerated how many she could trust. No more than three. And all that time, while she was making plans on paper, behind her and her generation loomed the ideologists of managed happiness. She and her generation were meant to become the full triumph of this ideology.

“How the hell could I be happy, from their point of view, if I cannot fully censor myself and I have not denounced anyone to the secret police? ‘I have full confidence in him; he has full confidence in me,’” she had read in a French novel. That was something she had never yet experienced. She wondered how it was even possible. The only thing that came close was what she felt for her mother.

Back then she had been living in the communist camp, alive and breathing. She had always wondered how much of her brain had been laundered by communist ideology. “At least wash it through and through, assholes!” Angela spit back in time, as if to spit pieces of her brain. “You were good for nothing!” She had been poisoned, as if born on a poisonous plantation. Didn’t she work for them? What difference did it make that she hated them? Even though she did not use words such as “ideology,” “communism,” “Golden Era,” or “multilateral developed society”—one of the dictator’s favorite slogans – in day-to-day life, she worked for them. She pretended to ignore them, they pretended to leave her alone. Her bosses, old party activists, hoped that someday, in the not-too-distant future, she would have to give in.

“Impotent officials,” Angela began swearing. “I wish to see you all belly-up like dead fish in the water!”

The reservation on which she had been born and lived almost her entire life was a stinking land stretching from Berlin to Vladivostok, passing through desperate nations, labor camps, suicidal souls, and detachments of collaborators eager to live well. Wasn’t it a schizophrenic, grotesque world? On that day in July 1988 she felt that even the Carpathian Mountains approved of this statement. If they could move, they might disgustedly run to the Western Alps. But to return to the incapacity of officials to carry anything through to the ultimate end, her friend Lucia, had made a powerful comment.

“I think we have lost our hormones,” Lucia had said, lengthening her neck gracefully. “Instead of talking about men, we are talking about these bastards.”

That was part of the system. Every citizen of the Golden Age must live politics even in bed, be obsessed with directives, official documents, decrees, and whatever the political powers that be demanded that the citizen do in order to be a model citizen of the Golden Age. When she had accidentally come across a treatise on the science of ethology, she had found out that there was no difference between her and the experimental animals that were deprived sequentially of freedom, heat, light, water, and food. At the end, those animals had lost their instincts and become perfectly manageable. They did not even want to copulate, to reproduce. Something had happened, obviously, to sexuality. It was said that Elias Hospital, the exclusive hospital for the nomenklatura, was full of impotent activists.

“I swear,” said Lucia, “I know from my doctor, there are pavilions full of nomenklatura guys from all levels, from the highest to the lowest, and even hell cannot heal them. Could it be that communist ideology makes men impotent?”

In front of the mirrors in Fred’s apartment, Angela longed for Lawrence. His immaterial presence of the previous night was still before her eyes. During the spring of 1990 she had realized she could not yet publish his vast memoir. That’s why she had brought it to her aunt in Rucăr. Lawrence had been convinced that when the Dictator disappeared, a new life and society would start anew. There had been a moment of utopia, which had quickly vanished. They, the former dissidents, hadn’t been able to do anything. They couldn’t even put up a decent resistance to the totalitarian structure that laughed in their faces, revealing the corrupt among them, and those ready to compromise with the neo-communist power for minor advantages. They, the dissidents, regrettably nurtured conflicts among

themselves; they engaged in hate and gossip, did not dismiss bad judgments, developed unfortunate tensions, and damaged possible alliances.

Perhaps the nation's ethics had been destroyed by the past Phanariot rule? Or maybe in the fierce wars of history the brave ones had died on the battlefield, and so only the powerless and handicapped remained to perpetuate the race? And more, most national victories of the past two hundred years that were glorified in the history books were, with few exceptions, acts of treason. Was this a curse? There were sentences that she feared writing down on paper, for they were words no one would ever dare to write about her motherland.

From a distance, from the perspective of America, she was seeing Romania more clearly. Trying to ponder so many new, alarming and unforeseen insights, she strolled the vast space of the living room. The only familiar noise came from the air conditioning. On the couch in her favorite corner, where everything was reminiscent of a garden – vases, decorations, floor lamps – she closed her eyes, allowing memory to frisk freely, at ease. The surf had always been unpredictable. Right now, sentences from Lawrence's diary, *The Witness of the Apocalyptic Golden Age*, took shape, pages or paragraphs she had browsed at random before leaving the country, when she discovered that Lawrence had been against the Dictator, but not against the society they lived in! Or perhaps they had been so brainwashed, so dumb they couldn't even imagine a better one?

The Witness of the Apocalyptic Golden Age

February 1984

It has been decided: a quarter of the capital, namely the oldest part of the city, will be razed. The dictator personally chose this land, actually a hill, because it's the safest ground in the capital; he has a morbid fear of earthquakes. And he wants to build for eternity; a kind of record of stupidity and crime traveling into the future?

The model of the gigantic and useless edifice, as well as of the adjacent buildings, is ready. Around them will be built neighborhoods with apartment buildings filled with nomenclature, ministry, officials, secret police officers; the lists of names will be approved by the dictator's wife. The residents will inhabit those apartments only during their official tenure in office. It is also said that these residences will be monitored by microphones and other secret police surveillance gadgets. Why should I be surprised? I found a minuscule microphone in my office and one in Angela's office, and I suppose that another one must exist in my home, but I haven't yet been able to track it down. I can't imagine the demolishing of thousands of beautiful houses, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people brought by force to yet-unfinished buildings without running water, heat, or electricity on the outskirts of the capital. The overall project architect – [Anca Petrescu,] a young lady, a sort of twin of Albert Speer, Hitler's architect – summoned me to yesterday's meeting. All the project chiefs were present in the room. The "Comrade" arrived without his wife, followed by a small retinue. At the beginning everything went smoothly, almost to the point of finally receiving his approval, for the plans had been revised hundreds of times according to his orders. However, at one point I saw him waving his hands, upset. His face

had become dark and he screamed hysterically. The reason for the frenzied reaction: he could not imagine how the real cupola above the main building would look.

“No problem,” Anca, the architect in charge of the whole edifice stepped in: “Comrade First Secretary, you will see the model of the dome in full size!”

On the spot, the allocation of some additional millions was ordered to build a life-size model of the dome, a gigantic one-day toy. He would inspect the dome from several points in the city and survey it by helicopter.

During another meeting I had seen him playing with model parts of the project, encouraged by the cries of his servile suite. As the game became hotter, he thievishly hid in his pockets some parts representing bridges, trees, buildings. Finally, with enlarged pockets filled with the layouts of future construction, the dictator went out as quickly as he had come. The project model was in havoc. I was confused. Then someone, an assistant designer, replaced the missing pieces. I was surprised that there were duplicates for each objective of the overall project.

“It happens every time,” the assistant said, whispering. He probably assumed that I was a boss who knew that secret. “He comes here and steals pieces from the general layout of the construction. I heard he plays with them at home, poor fellow ...” Everybody agrees the dictator is mad. Then why he is not replaced? Or even killed? Someone from his entourage should sacrifice himself for the good of this country. His bodyguards are invincible. He can be removed only by a palace plot.

March 1984

I took the camera with me. What I saw today from north bank of the Dâmbovița River—Unirea Square, Coșbuc Street and Calea Rahovei, then from Sabinelor Street, Izvor Street and September 13 Road, toward Splaiul Unirii (the Union Embankment), and Splaiul Știrbei Vodă (King Stirbei’s Embankment)—will soon be history. I walked along the Dâmbovița River, passed Antim Convent, staring at the rows of houses in front of the monastery that will disappear tomorrow. “Schitul Maicilor” (The Hermitage of Sisters) has been already moved a few hundred meters away, pulled aside to leave space for future buildings in the baroque style. A style belonging to the time of Empress Maria Theresa, embedded with elements of “dictatorship Gothic,” different from those of the “Stalinist Gothic and Baroque.” That difference will reside in the elegant but obsolete patina, so hypocritical and false for our time. Everything will actually look as if outside of time. The Brâncoveanu Hospital, with Biserica Domnească (the King’s Church), will be demolished. Also be razed from the face of the earth will be the centuries-old Biserica Albă (the White Church), Biserica Spirea Veche (the Old Spirea Church), Biserica Izvorul Tămăduirii (the Church of the Life-Giving Spring), Gherghiceni Church, Cotroceni Church, Curtea Arsă (The Burnt Court), as well as beautiful houses, thousands of beautiful houses with courtyards and gardens. Going up the hill, I experienced panic. People will be removed by force from homes they own because the representation of the repressive power has to be built on this

land. The new palace of the Dictator, with thousands of rooms, will have to overwhelm the city and its inhabitants, to crush them by its monumentality. The compound was designed to be invincible like a medieval fortress. Secret underground tunnels will connect with the Dictator's residence, Cotroceni Palace, and the Party Central Committee buildings. I have no idea who was the designer of these tunnels. My colleagues are convinced that the army is involved in this project, as the underground will have anti-atomic bunkers.

I am hallucinating about my life's time and place. Am I a slave of an ancient era? What I design on the drawing board has no connection with the twentieth century's architecture.

June 1985

I was assigned to solve an issue on the demolition field. There was nothing I could do to prevent the tragedy. I witnessed the demolition of a house at the crossroad of Banu Mărăcine and Negru Vodă streets, a two-story villa designed by a famous architect at the beginning of the twentieth century. The owner refused to vacate his home. The bulldozers were taking bites out of the walls of the elegant furnished rooms, of the bedrooms and the living room, where the owner was found hanging by a rope from the ceiling. He preferred to die, which hasn't slowed down the pace of the demolition. In Bucharest right now there are two kinds of suicide: one by hanging, which is usually real, authentic, and another one by jumping (from the balcony of a house, an attic, bridge etc.), a way for the establishment to easily get rid of undesirable individuals.

October 1985

Demolition hit Calea Văcărești (Văcărești Road). Stray dogs, packs of rabid cats, pets that have lost their loving owners wander in the city; for weeks, an apocalyptic dust raised by the uninterrupted demolitions hides the sky. Drinking water does not flow through the capital's pipes; giant piles of rubble rise on the hill; heavy trucks carry away the rubble, day and night; haggard people prowl places where they lived before and are brutally chased away by the police. It is like a planned earthquake. I shudder looking at the demolishers' petrified faces, as if they repressed any human dimension in order to survive. Is it possible that my face looks like that too? Among demolition teams there are rumors about unearthed treasures found in the basements or walls of homes. They belong to the state, the real owners do not have to find out anything about them. The digging of the ground for the new foundations also revealed ancient ruins from the Imperial Roman Era. Those ruins were totally destroyed before any archaeologist caught the news. The pace of construction is not allowed to slow down.

July 1986

The home of the famous historian Nicolae Iorga on the Ilie Pintilie Boulevard, which was about to gain museum status, has been demolished despite an excellent plan to move it to another place. The dictator now settles accounts with Romanian history and its notables. The

National Archives building is gone already. The dictator wants to destroy everything and eternalize himself. I hoped for a miracle (disease, death, accident), but he is flourishing more than ever. I start believing in black magic. My friends ask me to be patient, they tell me that his days are numbered, but each and every day ticks by and apparently no one can do anything against this evil's desecrations.

June 15, 1987

Traian Pop, who deals with the structure of the project, told the paranoid dictator to his face, without caring about the consequences, that the demolition of the Sfânta Vineri (Saint Friday) Cathedral is contrary to the international norms for the conservation of the cultural and historical landmark monuments of a nation and against the Christian faith of the Romanian people. Professor Al. Cișmigiu, an important advisor on the project, seconded him. Pop suggested several variants of embedding or simply "hiding" the cathedral among other buildings.

““It's too big, it cannot be hidden,” the madman screamed, “I do not want to see crosses and churches from my balcony and my windows!”

It was the last chance to save it; I hoped it would be saved at the last moment, as happened with Domnița (Princess) Bălașa Church. It wasn't like that. Rumors said that Pop killed himself. He left a letter to his family, in which he explained that he joined the dictator's monstrous plan hoping to save whatever could be saved, but he realized he had only been a tool; as a consequence he decided to take his own life.

His case is also mine and that of all those who work for a murderous mind, hoping to lessen its dementia, but we got it wrong, for he uses us. We all will pay on that day when the evil will be gone and a new society, free and harmonious, will start to naturally exist. As for me, I am still alive because I consider myself the chronicler of this demented age. My task and my duty: to mark down everything, because absolutely nothing should be forgotten, but brought to history's court, and to the next era's trial courts which – I know – will judge and convict me. I am a coward and I will accept my deserved punishment.

June 19, 1987

During this very morning the demolition of Sfânta Vineri (Saint Friday) Cathedral started. I stopped by on my way to the institute. Thousands of people around the cathedral were holding lit candles, in a living chain. Inside, the priests were praying; they refused to leave the cathedral while heavy demolition trucks were around the building, ready to attack. In the afternoon I saw a frightening scene. The army had scattered the civilians with water cannons. Crushed flowers and candles were all over. Because relics had not been removed from the cathedral for safekeeping, the soldiers rushed to throw out whatever was inside, from icons, books, and furniture to coffins with relics. A terrible groan was coming from everywhere, from the air and the ground. The sky, to which all of us looked for hope, was silent. A huge choir said the Our Father prayer in the tones of a curse. Soldiers were crying.

A monk killed himself in front of the soldiers; another wanted to set himself ablaze, but was stopped and arrested.

A hard covenant hovers over the holy place; it is inscribed in the original paintings of the founders of the church in the narthex, already under the heavy trucks' attack: whoever touches these holy walls, built to face the ages to come, will be killed by God's punishment. Divine punishment is the only hope of millions of souls.

I knew that hate can kill a person. However, hate does not touch the dictator. Rumors say that the dictator is defended by a famous witch hidden in a palace in the north. With superstitious fear, Angela told me that this rumor is true. One of her aunts from Rucar had once, long ago, been the apprentice of this magician or witch woman. I don't believe such a thing exists!

I was about to faint on the street, I don't remember anything like that ever happening before in my life. I ran away from the cathedral under the trucks' siege and took refuge in the Theological Institute Library. Father Băbuș, my old friend, didn't ask any questions. Outside it had been hellishly hot, while inside a blessed coolness protected those in panic, but nobody uttered a word. The pain swept us all like a metallic strap. At a desk, an old monk with white hair and long white beard – was he over ninety? – sat with eyes closed in front of a gospel book framed in silver. “He is mad,” someone told me. All the other monks avoided him, afraid that he could be a provocateur, or that I could be a spy ready to report what was happening in there. I saw tears flowing down that old face.

I approached the old monk, thinking he was sick, that he needed help; he did not open his eyes, but I sensed he could see me through his closed eyelids.

“So it was written to be,” he solemnly uttered, ““the devil is allowed to go all the way before he is crushed, he and all those like him.””

CHAPTER FOUR

“CAYMAN ISLANDS!” A man with gray hair and spectacles on his nose answered with displeasure. The questions that had to be filled in on the office forms bothered him. He didn’t believe his lawyer had to know all the details concerning his business, especially about secret financial transactions. Legs crossed in an armchair in the office, he occasionally cursed the bureaucracy, taxes, and the humidity outside. Clearly, he did not feel at ease. The lawyers always came to his office; it was never the other way around, for they represented him in all his cases in court, and he paid them very well; but today he had come in person because he wanted to learn firsthand about the all-too-appealing laws of those islands, which seemed suspicious.

Angela didn’t give a dime for those patches of land lost in the Atlantic Ocean’s immensity. However, lately more and more of the firm’s clients were moving assets there, or opening new businesses in the “Tax Havens of the World.” It was said that on those islands there were more banks and other financial institutions than residents.

“Socialism is taking over this country,” the client muttered to himself. “More and more laws and rules and regulations. Ever since ’64 the business in this country have been going down!”

This was what James believed, too. The idea of a financial conspiracy had led him to a kind of paranoia. According to James’s theory, a handful of people manipulated the world, the Federal Reserve, and the stock market. The transnational companies owned by them decided government policies and controlled international politics. James kept huge charts on the walls of his apartment showing the fruit of decades of observation, a correspondence between indices of the Federal Reserve and the stock market’s behavior. “If I lost a lot of money because of them,” he liked to knock a chart with his fingers, “well, now I have the chance to force them to give it back to me.” That’s why he had taken that job, as the lawyer and the boss of a transnational law firm’s branch in Eastern Europe, behind which was a powerful group of magnates who wanted to access Eastern European markets.

That idea of a conspiracy or a secret group that led the world had come to her mind in connection with Corbu and Marque’s assassination. If it was true, could it be that K. had been under their protection? Was it possible that Marque had access to secrets he imprudently disclosed?

Fred had discussed some similar things with her, but his theory had been tied to numerology, the interpretation of world events through a code of numbers. Fred’s numeric relationships showed that a sort of number language existed according to which major world events were planned. She listened to him skeptically, but Fred claimed that the theory had been verified on a few disparate events, such as the outcome of the Belmont Stakes, North Korean crises, and the fall of the stock market on Wall

Street.

“My advice: be mute as a grave, otherwise you can get in big trouble. You have no idea of the exact size of the game. It is about power and money ...”

The client who wanted to start a trade business in the Cayman Islands was gone. Angela went back to a paper called “Pleadings” that had to be filed the next day in court. Everyone worked in silence. A fax hummed smoothly as the last text received for the day came to an end. While she cleaned her desk, she thought that she might have some time on her own before meeting Tim. Passing by the open door of the firm’s library, she remembered her startled reaction when she visited an American library for the first time. All the books were accessible to the public, free from any idea of censorship. Later she discovered that censorship still existed, but it was financial. The electronic databases were exceptionally good, but expensive. Access to a private library with legal materials impossible to find in public libraries cost money. In comparison, memories rushed back to her: the torment it had taken to obtain a book in her former country’s libraries, the hours of waiting and the cold in the reading rooms during winters, then reading in hiding, the secret police watching over all book requests in the Library of the Romanian Academy on Calea Victoriei (Victory Road). Sometimes in that library in Romania it was enough to wish to find a book to discover it in the card catalog, as if a friendly spirit were guiding her. Other times it was as if books came to her; it had been enough to mentally “call” them.

DIARY

June 1993

Lately I postpone or amend every project I am thinking of. At this rate I wonder if I will not end up crushed under the mass of projects shattered by my own hyper lucidity. Nothing I wrote in the *Shibboleth Report* pleases me. The watchword: cremation! Once Fred asked me what I had written about in the past, and he screamed with compassion: “Poor baby, did you write these?”

It could be that the narrative of my life goes anywhere between soap opera and tragedy?

The weather is pleasant and cool. In deep sleep I doubt that I will ever be able to think and dream in the English language. This language obsession is traumatic.

I track Hector’s political efforts in the French press, such as his memoranda to the Council of Europe, his speech in the European Parliament, etc. Obviously, governments prefer to have discussions with officials able to facilitate trade and businesses; no one cares about democracy. From their point of view, Hector could politically destabilize Romania and send to jail those guilty of communist crimes, people now in charge of trade and business! In Ceausescu’s time it was the same. I increasingly hear it said that the cold war was an economic mistake, and that the diversity of political ideas and social systems does not have to prevent business from being done. Is cynicism behind all of this or not? Why embargo some countries and not the former communist counties pretending to be democratic?

I feel like sharing what I think and feel with someone. James calls me dutifully almost every day, and this surprises me. I am trying to preserve my calm; if I want love fulfilled, I

feel its frustration most deeply. Is that I am putting barriers in the way of my love? But this is treacherous, for the effect could be devastating. Is there a way for both of us?

To avoid unsolvable, irreconcilable, and irreversible things, at least for now, I bought a computer. I entertain myself with virtual reality without color and smell. I think that Marque gave me this virus; his texts are full of Internet addresses, and when I went to them I always discovered amazing things. I am sure that some of them are private databases I can enter only because Marque left the protocols of access. I sense something like a revelation or epiphany coming; I cannot say what is out there. I believe that Marque was a member of a sort of society, I don't want to say organization; I am sure he had someone of trust to whom he assigned something precious or important, and that something exists, but I can't grasp where. Perhaps a conversation with Hector could be of some help? I heard he came back here, but he has not called me. Did he not have time to make that call? Or is something else going on?

Worth Street always greets me with all lights on for crossing – walk! I like to cross a street with all four green lights on for crossing. Would Marque like that?

Yesterday I sent more documents to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. I am trapped and humiliated. I am a file and a number. I've lost hope. If I go mad, if I disappear or die, it would be much better for those here and those I left behind.

Is the “American Dream” related only to material things? A home, a car, a TV set, money in the bank? Some trips over the years, and barbecue with friends in the backyard of the house on big holidays? I am not sure how America outside New York City would be for an immigrant, but here all of the above are indeed a dream. Most immigrants struggle to live from one paycheck to the next. They are neck deep in loans to the banks (the banks are the owners of Americans!), charging bloody interest rates for each borrowed dollar. A working family spends more money on taxes than on food, clothing, etc. It is lovely to live in America if you have money, but honestly earned money is hard to get; it's paid for in blood.

For Romanians, America was the country of opulence where one would enjoy an abundant and worry-free life. We were convinced that the most competent and the smartest would immediately find the place or job he deserved just by opening his mouth. But things are different once you're here; this is the country of references and recommendations. The bureaucracy or red tape is huge; the difference is that it works – slowly, but it works. In addition, without an American degree, all other degrees do not count. More, one could be a genius with many degrees, but without strong references one cannot get a job at one's true level, with rare exceptions. Working in a corporation, one will be promoted if he has good relationships with his bosses; if God forbid, he has too many original ideas not shared with his superiors, is too efficient, and doesn't keep a low profile, he will be forced to resign eventually. Sometimes a suicidal spirit seems to be alive in corporations: the internal wars are so powerful that they compromise the organization, bringing it to bankruptcy.

In my first days here I was confused because none of those I was introduced to lived in villas with grand staircases, or had luxurious cars. More, they did not dance during nights in night clubs! This is what I knew about America from Hollywood movies and advertising –

an unmatched art of presenting fiction as reality!

For Romanians before the Revolution, America was the country of fairness, democracy, freedom. We lived under dictatorship and were not helped to get rid of communism because America did not know about it! America was ill-informed! Now I know that America knows about everything going on everywhere, and its help goes where there are American business interests – which I now consider normal. As for the bastion of justice, I see what's going on with me. The American state is interested in dissidents who fight and die in their own countries, not in those seeking refuge here in the hope of escaping death and injustice. Decreeing that democracy has been installed in Eastern Europe, America washed its hands for the second time in a century of all Eastern European issues; issues that were born after the WWII peace when America gave Russia a free hand to do what it wanted with the East. Isn't it normal for one who has made a huge historical mistake to try to fix it? Maybe that will happen in the future?

My life is truly absurd: I still dream that I can change something important in my former country, I, a woman without powerful friends and money (Hector has been unsuccessful for more than forty years); because I am trying to find out who killed Marke, when the FBI couldn't; because I want to prove that the real Corbu is a KGB agent, a mole in the American political spheres that draw the strategy regarding Eastern Europe. How I can improve the machinery deciding the fate of the world? Why am I doing it? What for? Where is this vindictive spirit that wastes all my energy coming from? And what if the CIA knows what I know about Corbu, but does not care for reasons far beyond my understanding?

My independence, to which I have clung, the freedom of being anything or nothing ... Graham is using me, otherwise he would not allow himself to be used by me. Probably his bosses asked him to find out why this woman without a clear immigration status is looking for Corbu, why she is involved in "Marke's case," what she is planning for with Hector, regarding whom the establishment is indifferent. And yet that does not bother me; what upsets me is that I came to this country deeply rotted by an illusionary way of thinking, lacking a practical mind and any awareness of the actual dimensions of reality. The only thing left is to readjust the way I see the world, the way I see myself, to relinquish the spirit of misconception, that collective mind I belonged to that was so out of touch with reality, and to become an individual, one hundred percent myself.

In spring, squirrels lose their fear of people. Without inhibition they approach the benches on which passersby rest in Washington Square Park. And when trees are blooming, New York City enjoys the revival of life despite all warnings about the metropolis's assassination. Around the fountain, young people play the guitar, and others roller skate under the Triumph Arch. On a bench surrounded by shade, Angela would ruminates on her endless obsessions and new, surprising discoveries: publishers communicate with authors only through literary agents, something unknown to the European way of publishing; was it worth it to continue working on the book without a known name here and strong literary relationships? She was not Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or Václav Havel. Who would be

interested in the story of a woman journalist who ran away from Romania? And where and what was Romania? It wasn't ever an empire, or a land exotic enough to interest the American reader. That country was so foreign, so far away mentally from this one, that she stopped breathing, overwhelmed by the magnitude of this revelation. But what the hell, she had always risked, and she had won.

"That's you, go ahead," she heard Lawrence's voice as in a dream.

"Stop, you'll get ugly," James's voice resounded as if close to her.

"If there is no money, it's nonsense," Fred's mumble traveled in her head.

"Are you talking to yourself on the street?" a passerby asked her.

"Sometimes, when I'm trying to clarify something in my mind," she answered.

"Washington Square Park gives no clarifications," that person laughed. But no one was there; the answer came from her inner self, who continued: *"It's enough to want to do it."*

"I'm afraid," Angela confessed, turning into a walkway toward West 4th Street.

"Stay at the bottom of the ocean and whine. Look around and remember that you are a European mind coming to America to teach these people, who give ladies flowers in even numbers (as if they're going to a funeral, that's what an even number of flowers means in Europe), and have no idea how to compliment a lady. Let's recap: How is American society for you now?"

"Like a bowl of soup. On the surface float morsels of bread. They coexist, they are interrelated but don't tyrannize over each other ... the drama is that this bowl of soup is so large that an individual cannot survive unless she joins a group, accepting membership in it. European criteria do not function here. That's why this nostalgia for that kind of intellectual life, much warmer, more familiar ..."

"How would you define democracy?"

"As something inversely proportional to the size of the constitution. This country has a constitution with the smallest number of pages on earth!"

"What do you deeply dislike?"

"I'm not sure yet ... I heard that the Sioux Indians dislike the Social Security number. They say that this number changes their spiritual essence."

She entered Strawberry's on 8th Street to buy stockings, and afterward lingered in the shoe stores that made this street famous. On Broadway, a group of Buddhists preached on the sidewalk, and sold books and Buddhist foods to the sound of Buddhist music. Two men in suits, neckties, and books under their arms loudly foretold a quick salvation and the imminent second coming of Jesus. A woman raised money for hungry kids on all continents; another one distributed manifestos about the legality of lesbians adopting children; a young girl gave a speech about the thousands of New Yorkers unable to afford a place to live. Someone gave her a flyer with an address in Times Square where money, food and clothing for the poor were collected. While on Prince Street in SoHo, she crossed Mercer, Greene, and Wooster Streets, then turned north on West Broadway and crossed Houston. On Bleecker she passed by The Bitter End nightclub, turned onto Thompson, and found herself again in Washington Square Park. The World Trade Center shaped its sigil forms in the sheer smog of the evening as the sigil of a highly efficient and organized world, whose pragmatic aesthetics breathed perfection, together with indifference and grandeur. It was a society that dismantled the traditional state. The

generous state, helping those in need, did not own anything except a precise tax system. In her former country the state, which owned everything, had actually been poor.

She entered The Blue Note, with its awning shaped like a grand piano. Pictures of singers and band musicians who had been on the stage of the famous jazz nightclub on West 3rd Street near 6th Avenue hung on the walls. She bumped into a tall, handsome guy who almost took her in his arms.

“Later on, baby!” he said with humor instead of excuses. Laughter was heard.

“You are late,” Tim called her from the bar, “and you’ll be punished.”

“Come on, be kind, I’ve been punished since I was nine years old,” she laughed for no reason, telling him, with no connection to the present incident, how she had been punished in the second grade because she knew more than had been written in the textbooks for the fourth grade. Obviously, she enjoyed seeing Tim; she could chat with him in the Romanian language. Sometimes, in such situations, she reproached herself for verbal bulimia.

“Communists were elected again in Eastern Europe. Did you see today’s *New York Times*? Could you imagine that the Hungarians would do that?” Very excited, Tim played with the ashtray to hide his interest. Angela pulled the ashtray in front of her and lit a cigarette.

“I’m not surprised.” She pretended to be cold. But the expression on her face suddenly changed. She didn’t like Tim’s tone, the unconcealed pleasure in his voice. Did he want to annoy her at any cost?

“Are you telling me that it’s normal?” Obviously, Tim didn’t buy her remark. He sipped from coffee and cognac by turns. He had expected to hear remarks from her about falsified ballots, disinformation, and other similar comments.

“You see, here I came to understand that countries in Eastern Europe don’t want the kind of democracy that means individual self-determination, only a few basic human rights, like free speech.” She paused as if she wanted to be more accurate in what came next.

“I committed a crass confusion in my articles written after the revolution. I didn’t realize that the great mass of Romanians wanted the Westerners’ comforts, but not the hardships of their lives, such as job insecurity, small pensions, job pressure, and the stress of all of these. Nor should we forget the Romanians’ negativity.” It was clear that for Angela it was not easy to say what she had said.

“Negativism?” Tim pretended to be confused.

“The endless whining.” She waved her hand, really annoyed.

“You are bad,” Tim teased her.

“People here believe that tomorrow can be better than today. In Romania it’s the opposite: everyone is sure that tomorrow will be worse than today. I know many grim jokes about this.”

“Have you heard that Solzhenitsyn went back to Russia? Would you go back?” Tim searched her face. Angela asked for one more coffee. The bar was full of people listening to blues.

“Perhaps he wanted to see for himself the fiasco of perestroika, which I already experienced.”

Tim gave up the subject; Angela had no humor about it. He had left Romania so long ago that for him all those things that had recently happened there were a spicy, juicy gossip, but not for Angela.

“Have you heard anything new about Corbu?” Tim asked cunningly. “Do you think he is alive?”

“That’s something I would like to know myself.” Angela held his gaze.

“So he is not in Kansas City,” Tim said with uneasy calm.

She wriggled on the chair. “All the addresses, as you already know, were phony.”

Two weeks ago Graham had given her a new hint. Corbu’s whereabouts pointed to Kansas City. She planned a one-day trip there. By a strange coincidence, Tim had called her to let her know that he had to travel to the same place for business: the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Kansas City had held an auction of paintings by Andrew Wyeth. One of Tim’s clients wanted to purchase watercolors by Wyeth for his collections. At that moment she decided to verify Tim. She asked him to verify the address at which she believed she would find Corbu. Tim acknowledged it. She did not tell him about her trip. She flew from Newark in the early morning, two hours before his flight. The next day she looked for the address at the time when Tim was in the auction.

The house where Corbu was supposed to live was close to the Nelson-Atkins Museum, in a zone between Gillham Road, Locust Street, and Brush Creek. An overweight woman, the house’s owner, assured her that no one besides her family had ever lived at that address. No way, she said about a man with heavy accent from Eastern Europe, or any foreign country in general, anywhere around that street. For a few hours Angela circled those streets, hoping to find something. Then she headed to Westport, the old town, rather like Sibiu in Transylvania. At the Jerusalem Café she had baklava, from there she visited Hereford House, the place with the biggest beefsteaks in the world, and caught her flight to New York in the afternoon. Late that night Tim called her from Kansas City. He reported the result of his investigation. Everything he said was accurate; he even did not forget to mention that the lady, the owner of the house, had one arm in a cast, for she had fainted on her backyard grass.

“Don’t bother to come here,” Tim ended before hanging up.

Had that woman told him that someone else had asked the same questions that morning? Perhaps. She had more or less expected this to happen. That was why she swallowed Tim’s remark without saying anything. Surprisingly, he didn’t get upset and didn’t mention the incident again.

“How about James?” Tim silently repeated in his mind the truism that where there was much intelligence there was also much stupidity, and bad luck too. He had discreetly researched James and was sure he had found out more about him than Angela was aware of. She had fallen foolishly out of the frying pan and into the fire. James had connections with one of those mysterious agencies the American public had no idea existed. Perhaps he was wrong, but Tim’s fine bloodhound’s nose said that James could not allow himself to be dragged into a serious emotional connection. If Angela discovered the truth, well, for him her double take was predictable.

“How about Micaela?” Angela defended herself. “How long have *you* been together?”

It was hard to match Micaela’s features with Tim’s, especially her history of spicy infatuations with his cumbersome look, but Tim was smart, had humor, and who knew? Couples’ secrets had always escaped expectation. Tim stayed silent, only his gaze lit with irony. With a quick movement he approached her; his breath touched Angela’s face.

“Why are you so obsessed with Corbu?” Tim probed with innocent trickery on his face, a mixture of teasing, irony and seriousness that, strangely, he no longer hid as he had before.

“Pure curiosity. I’ve always been in love with archaeology,” she mocked him. Her large sapphire earrings flashed strangely. Tim couldn’t match Angela’s personality with this fancy pleasure,

collecting earrings with sophisticated workmanship or gemstones.

“You know Marque’s bad luck very well ... so bad that when he worked on a book, the manuscript got lost.” Tim appeared unsettled, or perhaps he wanted to say more than he dared to? He had lost weight in the past months, the loose skin of his neck hung over his collar. Who wouldn’t feel pity for him? Diabetes ravaged his body. Despite his cravings for food and parties, his severe diet cut a lot from his energy.

“Nothing was lost,” Angela said, as if she wanted to calm his worries. “Those who deleted Marque’s files and stole the backup didn’t know they were also saved in the University’s server.”

“Nonsense, how would you know?” Tim said softly. “That’s a simple supposition.”

“I have read those files.” Angela’s voice was so convincing that it roused irritation in her companion.

“That’s impossible,” he laughed with a touch of nervousness. “There is no way.”

“In those files I came across your view about Corbu, the decoy and the real Corbu. I found it soon after I arrived from Chicago.”

“Lies,” Tim burst out in a voice that had in it something akin to panic. “What are you concocting? I am sure you wouldn’t wait until now to let me know ...” He tugged insistently at the collar around his neck, avoiding her eyes in embarrassment.

“Corbu was killed before he could defect to America. He was replaced with a much smarter and more biologically vital double, one able to convince the U.S. administration that they are the ones who brought about perestroika and other such nonsense, such as the advantages of a military alliance, the common struggle to defend civilization’s values, common economic interests, etc. I believe your words because I saw the new Corbu with my own eyes. But surgeries could not perfectly match his well-known identifying mark,” Angela hurled her words, “for God’s sake, you knew him well; you were close to him ...”

“What mark?” It seemed that Tim could no longer fit on his chair. He couldn’t believe that she knew it. He leaned over the table as if fearful that a word of what was about to be said would be lost.

“He couldn’t keep both his eyes open. One eyelid covered half of his left eye. Surgical correction of it could only be done in the early years of a child’s life; it’s unsuccessful at a mature age. In the back offices of newspapers the retouch people struggled to undo this anomaly whenever Corbu appeared in photos with Ceausescu. And they did so successfully,” Angela said with humor. “However, I knew when it was Ceausescu in the picture and when it was his double. Ceausescu’s forehead was lower than the double’s, that’s why the double’s wider forehead was filled with hair ... sometimes more than necessary.” And suddenly she flashed back in time to the Boteni affair, the lost videotapes that could prove whether the dictator or his double had been executed.

“Then ... what for?” Tim stuttered. He protectively covered Angela’s hand resting on the rim of her glass.

“Marque didn’t deserve to die,” she said simply. “The same with the hundreds of thousands of innocent people killed in Romania by the communists, torturers and their collaborators, I consider that someone, at least one, has to pay eventually; but maybe I’m wrong, because it seems to me that in this world only the weak pay for their wrongdoings.”

“Why are you so convinced that Marque is dead?” Tim leaned back in his chair, and the chair seemed to bend. He put more space between them to better see her reaction. But despite being surprised, Angela stayed silent. Could it be that Marque staged his own death and Tim was one of those who had helped him with it? It wasn’t impossible, either, that the one who erased the files in Marque’s computer had been Tim, while another corpse had been dressed as Marque. A few nights before she had dreamt of Marque; he told her he wasn’t dead, but he was in danger. Angela told her dream, and Tim, encouraged by her confession, continued to disclose strange details:

“Did you know that at the morgue, when Marque had to be identified, his watch, suit, and tie were identified, but nobody identified him?”

The jazz band’s blues released a kind of narcotic ease; a general good mood floated in the air. Tim’s confession seemed aberrant. But she liked to listen to these kinds of stories, and she felt she would love to stay there listening to them and to the blues while chatting with Tim. Despite all that, she decided to leave.

“One more thing,” Tim said, asking her to bear with him for one more minute. “There are things that cannot be changed, other that don’t have to be changed, and others that can, and you seem to be unable to see the difference between them. You don’t have this knowledge.”

“I want to help, what more wisdom do I need for it?”

“When God, for example, punishes a person, that person goes through hardship in his life in order to understand something precious and eventually to choose another path on his or her own. If you interfere and ‘help,’ the result is awful. That person will go back to their initial path, but much harder, and you will suffer dearly – this is *your* punishment. Don’t interfere so easily in other people’s lives; decipher who really needs help and who doesn’t. Save the one sinking in the water, but leave alone the one living in a hell he voluntarily chose, for that person has to find God and get out of his own hell himself, in his own way.” Then he stood up.

“I’ll give you a ride,” Tim concluded, “we can talk more about this in the car.”

Why had he wanted to meet in that nightclub? He had promised to bring something important; had he forgotten about it? On their way out, Tim added in timid tone, “I brought the book.” He had never mentioned a book. On the crowded sidewalk in front of The Blue Note, Tim searched his shoulder bag, which he constantly kept glued to his body.

The regulars of the night had already changed the appearance of the streets. As if in contempt for the white-collar and corporate civilizations, the Village was taken over by extravagant couples, youngsters dressed in black, pierced noses and African amulets around throats hair dyed red, purple, and pink, as if extending the hippie phenomenon in what had been its headquarters more than twenty years ago.

“It’s a copy.”

The cover page of the book showed an unknown publisher. The year of publication was 1988. Angela had never heard that Marque had published a book in France. “There is also a manuscript that continues this book,” Tim explained impersonally, as if he did not want to surprise her too much.

“It’s here.” He handed her a computer disk. “Read it as a follow-up of the book,” he insisted. But suddenly, although it seemed he must have more to say, Tim gave no more details.

Angela's gaping mouth inhaled more air; she balanced on one foot, then the other, looking at the disk in her hand without much confidence. She had a similar one that had not proved to be of much use. She leaned her body against the night club's wall as if trying to get sand or little stones out of her sandals. Lots of questions were in her mind, but she didn't utter them. She was afraid she might say something out of place, which would push Tim back into silence.

"And since you are so interested in the Boteni affair tapes," Tim added, zipping his shoulder bag closed in slow motion, "who knows? If you behave, you might watch them someday."

Tim crossed the street and entered the garage where he had parked his car. Angela remained undecided for a few moments. She almost called out to stop him, for she humbly regretted the way she had treated Tim. Maybe she would have to accept his invitation and leave together? However, she steadied herself in her initial decision; she could not forgive him for keeping her in the dark, making fun of her all this time. It was crystal clear: he had listened to her while laughing in mockery, all the while knowing more about Corbu than she could ever have imagined was out there. Troubled, she headed toward 6th Avenue. What would be the logical explanation for Tim's lies, detours, and sudden benevolence? Why should she believe that Marque had entrusted personal items to him, which Tim, without explanation, was now entrusting to her? And why Tim? Or perhaps there were others whom she didn't know?

As she was about to turn onto 6th Avenue to the subway, a noise and screaming riveted her to the spot. A heavy white truck collecting the city's garbage hit a car coming out of Minetta Garage full on. From afar Angela recognized Tim's green Toyota.

She ran down the subway stairs, and took the B train uptown, then the 7 at 5th Avenue and Bryant Park to Queens. She hid the disk in her bra and the manuscript in her purse, held tight to her chest with both arms. When she got home, she barricaded the door, made a big, strong coffee, put on the kimono robe with the red flowers on a cream background, which had a large hole under the right sleeve, and began to read. At first she thought it was a mistake but it was not. The one hundred fifty-page novel published in 1988 by an obscure publishing house accurately described what Romania had gone through from the fall of 1989 to the spring of 1993, with references to what would follow. The typescript mentioned events, real people with their names scrambled into anagrams, even the two earthquakes, all with accuracy. When she finished the manuscript, she was forced to acknowledge, beyond any doubt, that Marque had known about those events before they happened. There had been talks about his premonitory gifts but that could not explain that data. It was something subtler, something that slipped through her power of understanding, and which could have been related to those files about Corbu on the first disk. Was it possible that the real Corbu had disclosed those to Marque, who published them imprudently, full of a professor's intangible academic freedom, nonchalantly careless of political scheming? How else she could explain those eccentric words of his when they met in Chicago? There were sentences she could not get out of her head. They had been talking about Corbu while they got out of the university building; actually, Marque had started that thread of conversation.

"He is an outstanding person, I am sorry to tell you this, but he is exceptional in many ways." Marque said, as if trying to excuse Corbu's past. "In some circumstances we must forget history's

crimes. What would we do if Napoleon's myth had been destroyed because he had sent hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen to death in wars?"

"What Corbu did has no connection with Napoleon's guilt." Her answer had brutality in it; Marque didn't get upset, but he had a cynical answer.

"Perhaps that's true if you are unable to take the long view of past and present history."

"It's easy to play history's philosopher in Chicago."

"This was my chance to escape while all the others, including you, were damned to live there. I congratulate myself that I could do it."

Angela turned on the computer; on the screen appeared the files on Tim's disk. One of them was called: "Read Me!" All the others were numbered. She went through them in order. The first one started abruptly. It was dated two or three years after Marque's escape to America.

"Read Me!"

I have no idea how to answer the basic questions of existence: *where I come from, where I am going, who I am*. Thus, I have decided to stay away from a conflict I don't know anything about: the fight between good and evil, yes and no, life and death, white and black, love and hate, etc. These battles take place among entities I do not know and I cannot define. Whenever I have tried to do it, they have seemed interchangeable, chaotic. I am convinced more than ever that these entities if they exist as such, use humanity in their own dispute.

I have decided to get out; to step out. I need a clear mind. Perhaps in this way my thinking will understand what's happening within itself and outside of it.

. . . If good and evil are not entities of my scared mind that has created a universe of fright, but concrete manifestations, than I want to talk to them on the same spiritual level. If Good exists as an entity and we are its work, then he has created a species of the silliest morons. What else is a person who has no idea where he is coming from, what is his essence, what is his final destination, what life and death are, and who are those that created him? We are the Idiots of the Universe. What would be the reaction of an intelligent species of the Universe finding we are descended from monkeys? To run away as fast as possible. What would they do hearing that God created us? They would ask us for his address.

Thinking about our Universe, I am more and more convinced that inorganic matter is the rule, and the biological and the psychic are a sort of accident, let's say an anomaly. According to the laws of thermodynamics, physical matter would try to fix its own issues, to heal itself. I know that the logic of physical matter is that of yes and no. I guess that the logic of good and evil (and anything else that comes from it) is a way for physical matter to intrude into psychic matter and constrain it to limitation and self-destruction. Our life on this planet is based on this principle of action and reaction. Mysticism and totalitarianism are the results of this kind of mind. We are engaged in a senseless fight; we are the enemies of all organic forms we do not like and we destroy them, while they are perfecting themselves, asking us to create more sophisticated biological weapons. Why we did resort to the worst, most rudimentary scenario of this Universe?

. . . How can I get out of the preconceived ideas imposed on my mind? Doing what I have not ever done, yet consider to be part of my own essence?

That's not easy. I have been born into a realm that liked to scorn whatever is original; a nation of imitators who become, under communist rule, a nation of censors. My fate! My good luck! Whom I have to thank for it? Romanian foolishness is known to me down to its last resistance myths. Before escaping to Europe I met Dokya; I paid a clandestine visit to the Great Hermit in his small cloister surrounded by secret agents; I was able to slip into the Forbidden Library despite insurmountable dangers, bribing its administrator and realizing one more time that the bribe is the only positive, human thing in a totalitarian system.

And what a disappointment! I do not need Dokya's magic to learn my future. Fate is the sum of decisions, of my past, present and future actions changed by an imaginary pressure foreign to me. I can foretell the future much better if I want to, I am smarter than Dokya. As for the Great Hermit, he is senile, lacking any dimension of reality. His only reaction regarding the Dictator is the hysterical curse. And the Dictator being mad, only another madman could scare the Dictator. That's why the Great Hermit is left alone, but his connection to the outside world has been cut. The vision the Great Hermit conveyed to me during my visit there, disguised as a swineherd, was that of God's most beloved swineherd – an angel! Voilà! As for the Forbidden Library, its existence gives a reason for censorship to exist and a sort of voluptuousness to the county's inhabitants to feel they are above the rest of humanity. I asked myself why past kings, emperors, dictators didn't destroy it. My answer: they were wise; they wanted to satisfy the crowd's self-esteem, and wipe out the difference between stupid and smart. To suggest that one is smarter, more complex, and more profound than one really is, but that one could not express the true self because of censorship! What great circumstances! The blooming imposture reaches its apogee. The stupid becomes intelligent and creative, while the smart and creative one is looked upon as stupid . . . Whenever I feel like laughing, I go to the New York Public Library and read *Monitorul Oficial* – The Official Gazette. I laugh to tears, not only because of the unwise content of the laws, but mainly because the way they are put on paper.

My uncertainties are impossible to resolve; my emotions: do I have to abandon the reflective mind for the curious view? How can I think thoughts that rest on general truths if there is no general truth? From what point of view do I value what I do? Could be that I crave to be in relation with the good? And who's giving me this craving?

I can picture the following image: the "box" into which the entirety of humanity, governed by good and ill, has been pushed – floating in a yellowish plasma – and myself outside of that "box," flowing in that shadowy light. Ah, the beatitude of escaping! I know I have to go away fast, that there is the danger of again being absorbed into that "box," but I am not courageous enough to run completely away from it. I had a feeling unknown to me before, for I have no way of finding this space's cardinal points, and I know that inside the "box" is a more comfortable warmth, but I cannot stand the limitation of that "box." I am going away; I am farther and farther from the "box," looking smaller and smaller. I am sure that there are

others out there like me, but I cannot see them, perhaps because my eyes are not used to this light unfiltered by any limitations. I discover I have a sort of humor. I laugh while learning that angels, devils, etc. do not laugh, ever. They manifest through a constipated seriousness.

The second document on that disk, a short story, exposed the death circumstances of a person called in French “Le Corbeau.” This file was a confirmation that Marque had found out all he knew about the future via Corbu. The third document was a poem written in a classic style, in which Marque had described his own death and the circumstances surrounding it, leaving a white space in the spot for the killer’s name. The last document was much longer and contained the sequel to the novel. Here she discovered a strange sentence: “I do not believe in reality; writing is an act of violent manipulation of reality through the magic of the artistic image.” The plot left Romania for an exotic geography. The novel had been written in the “fan” manner, an epic architecture described in *The Civilization of the Novel*, proper to the Chinese novelists of the sixteenth century. That kind of novel had been imagined and built in such a way because the Chinese language lacks the past tense. It had always started with a character very well described and extensively followed; at one point this character met other characters and the plot leaped to another character, completely forgetting the previous one. In the fan epic architecture, this sort of amnesiac narrative mechanism could infinitely replicate. Reading Marque’s novel, Angela met real characters she knew, others unknown to her, and known events with unexpected meanings. She discovered herself as a character called Ana. She stopped breathless on the page containing her conversation with Tim at The Blue Note. A sentence did not belong to her.

“Don’t you think that Marque had access to secrets he dared to make public?” Ana asked.

“Which secrets? What secrets?” Tim wanted to know, apparently embarrassed. He obviously knew everything, but he thought that she needed some preparation to understand, it wasn’t the moment to reveal those things to her.

“Do you think I am crazy because I read too much?” She continued.

“Are you talking about Foucault’s Pendulum?” Tim pretended to be bored.

“Do you think that someone gave Marque the strategy for Romania? The entire plan?”

“Don’t you think that it could be something more mysterious than this? I want to say subtler?” Tim tried to guide her onto another path.

She saved the file one more time, turned off the computer and banished the whirl from her mind. She had never been so uncertain; reality and the dream, the magic and the real were mixed to confusion. Blurred, dumbfounded, stupefied.

Was Tim a messenger from Marque? Were the book and diskette a sign from Marque saying that he is alive? But why had Tim been killed? And by whom? Whom had Marque feared? And who feared Marque?

She spent the weekend trying to bring what she knew into some order. Marque’s chapters were written so well that she had to make an effort to detach herself from the aesthetic charm of the novel

in order to judge just the facts. In a way, Marque was right about Dokya, The Forbidden Library and the Great Hermit. He had gambled with his life to verify the spiritual mythology of country's anti-communist resistance; he got nothing. "Read Me" transcribed a desperate act of detaching himself from a rudimentary and repressive collective thinking, and a frantic bid to find something else. In a way she had gone through a sort of similar experience. But she had been frightened to go all the way to the end, and here Marque's attempt needed recognition.

It meant also she had to review that Corbu described by Marque and set the size of that group of which they were part. But Marque couldn't belong to any group, because he could not identify with anything but himself. The way Marque described his own death or the staging of it proved his superiority over the others in any organization he belonged to, and that fatigue of being.

The novel had been built in hypertext, and could be read *ad nauseam*, unfolding toward the character the reader wanted, the event the reader wanted, leading to circumstances that seemed self-created; the choice of the reader was paramount; a reader sucked so deeply into the text that at some point he became a character in it. That way of writing showed a challenge she was ready to accept.

She spent two full days not even looking out the window; time was running ghastly fast, hungry for the present and the future as if the past would not be enough. At one point, when she turned on the computer, surprisingly the amount of information on Tim disk had increased. She opened the novel's file and found the last sentence she had read; the continuation was a narrative spelling out the story of what had happened to her since meeting Tim. It was like a game. If the first disk on which she had loaded all Marque's files had destroyed information once read, the second disk seemed to self-produce it and foretell the future.

She refused to know beforehand what would happen, because actually there wasn't only one future. It depended on which one she would choose. However, she was curious to find out more about the self-creating text on that disk, and she identified an external source that controlled her computer and the disk too. That software's commands generated text. From a certain point on, Marque's novel was improperly called Marque's, because it was self-created in the computer of each person having access to the disk.

She activated INS, the insert or "type over" key, and wrote over those sentences relating her future – the best and most effective way to delete a digital text. On the screen appeared "Give UP," but she didn't. Then the address of the University of Minnesota server appeared on the screen when she saved it. She closed that file, and accessed the URL. A database bearing Marque's name showed up. When she tried to access it, she was directed to another server from South Africa.

She traveled in cyberspace, on the other side of the earth that was not sleeping at that hour, and finally reentered the cyberspace of her own. A database called "Marque" redirected, forwarded to another URL; she did not believe her eyes, she was reading the internet address of the law firm server, where a folder with Marque's name had been created, too. A file called "Experimenting with ubiquity" was an essay on the metaphysical implications of the ability to simultaneously be in different places and the fulfillment of this state of mind in cyberspace. "Ubiquity is a dimension that only gods had lived; now man can experience it too, tasting a grain of eternity. What else is

cyberspace?”

Another file had Corbu's name, but the person in it had no connection with the one that lived in Romania. That person was part of a government group selected to find a solution to the world's future crisis: overpopulation and pollution that would make wealth useless and life on earth unbearable. Something new was needed to ensure the human species' biological existence. She left that document for another one called "What is going to be?" Prompted to another web address, she found there a few words written in the old Greek and old Slavonic alphabets—actually very close, as the Slavonic had been made up after the Greek one. Forwarded to another URL, she had to input a login name and a password. She used those words written on the previous screen with Marque's files. She accessed the database, frightened by the strange lines browsing the screen. Sailing from one table of contents to another, she read the names of the folders. They were projects by countries, divided by years, as well as geopolitical plans concerning regions of the world with various courses of action. After strolling through the files of different regions and years, she saw the variants of the 1989 and 1990 revolutions; an Index contained an exchange of views on those plans. It was not hard to grasp that she was reading variants of political choices long run on powerful supercomputers. Angela pounced greedily on the variants that dealt with Eastern Europe in 1997.

It was slippery, impalpable, in a visible state of transformation! Hypertext and Virtual Reality were anything but fiction; the only thing that would offer any certainty would be to grab that "reality" and make it real. How? She pressed the "print" key. It took a lot of time to transfer most of the files onto paper. When she got out of the Internet, a short message from an unknown sender warned about "failure to properly save the documents." The files have now vanished. She was caught. Angela opened the windows. It was dawn, the time when her day had always started. Going through the headlines of the newspaper retrieved from outside her door, she thought she must make public the downloaded and printed files. Marque's mistake had been writing about them in veiled form; he had also published that book with an obscure publishing house. Perhaps he had no other choice? Who would believe him? He wasn't a journalist, but a university professor who played with a dangerous reality taken as an intellectual joke. But where would she be able to publish those files? Who would believe her? Find her story credible?

It was lunchtime in Europe while New Yorkers enjoyed their last hour of sleep. The first name in her mind had been Hector's.

It wasn't easy to live in two simultaneous worlds, on two different planets. One could very well have said that she was a bridge who had assumed the fatigue of carrying back and forth the thoughts and aspirations of different beings; a carrier burdened by the weight of heavy traffic between two continents, passing through her mortal body, through her fragile and mortal flesh. Her homeland was not the one left behind, or the one in which she lived, but the one within her soul and spirit. A personal homeland, called ANGELIDA, with its tongue called ANGELICA, with its history, present, and perhaps future. A homeland anchored in the concreteness of the world through her insignificant body, but in spirit as comprehensive as a continent-country.

Time sneaked shamelessly through all mortal beings. Beyond successive metamorphoses and revelations, only the present remained to all, as a way to relive the past and plan the future. What

mattered was that they were creatures existing simultaneously in daydreaming, dream, and spirit! Oh, the taming of dream! Reality did not show more than a poor glimpse of what they were, and yet it constituted the objective measure of judgment.

As she tossed the pages coming from the printer into a folder, she decided to ask for protection. But before taking any action, she needed to breathe the morning freshness. In the nearby park, the leaves were still loaded with the night's dew. Orion Café on 40th and Skillman was open for breakfast. At the other end of the island, Manhattan loomed, a haughty, disdainful, and challenging force. If she did not want to leave her bones in the ground over there, she had to hurry up. She called Graham. He was the only one who could advise her on the safest and fastest procedure.

"I need to see you right away, before I go to the office. Grand Central Station."

In the crowded subway she tried again to follow what had happened to Tim. Was it possible that he knew he was going to die, and that's why he passed the manuscript and the disk? She sensed relief when she saw Graham from afar, advancing along the subway platform toward their meeting place. He was dressed as if he was going on a mountain hike; his sleepless and tired face showed frank nervousness.

"What the hell is this?" His fresh voice contrasted with his bizarre appearance, something between disguise and negligence. As always in the past, Graham's appearance was deceptive. She would have said it to Graham, but her instinct warned her, as always. She turned and ran.

She heard her name called and turned her head. Two men were elbowing their way through the crowd to reach her. She thought she saw James and paused for a second, but Graham, running in step with her, pushed her into a corridor, and from there onto an escalator running down to a platform where a train was ready to depart. He managed to open a pneumatic door and dragged her onto the train that picked up speed, literally tossing her onto the wagon's floor. After a few seconds of bewilderment, Angela half rose, crossed her legs under her, as if that were the most comfortable and safest place in the world, carefully checked the contents of her purse, which looked intact, and exclaimed in admiration: "What a great escape!"

Her hair, come loose from the clip that had held it tightly to the back, flooded her face. "Did you see James here in the station?" she asked perplexed.

"You are crazy," Graham replied, reaching for her hand to help her stand up. But because she didn't want to, he sat on the wagon's floor, trying to judge what had just happened. Obviously, those guys were neither FBI nor CIA. He had entered a story about which he knew nothing. Leaning against the wall of the car, Angela laughed, pointing at him. He was funny, sitting down there, nervously gobbling a chocolate bar fished from a pocket of his jeans, but he said nothing. He was hungry, he had not had breakfast that morning, and an empty stomach always made him a very bad person. He gave up looking at Angela, even though she had been truly charming, more delightful than ever, sitting on the wagon floor running to an unknown destination, because another thing bothered him: those guys could have boarded the train just as they did. He loaded his gun.

"Please give me some," Angela begged, "I need something sweet." The story she had entered revealed nightmare complications, but how to get out of it? Her hands had a visible tremor; she was

going through a hypoglycemic attack. She quickly swallowed Graham's chocolate bar.

"I wouldn't have thought things would happen so fast," she said, as if in apology. The train came out of the tunnel. The harsh light of day flushed their tired faces.

"What's so fast?" Graham tried to make her speak. The Amtrak train set forth on the Northeast route.

"Damn it," she avoided answering. No one and nothing was safe. She needed a few moments to decide. At that moment she wanted most of all to be somewhere in the mountains, in a cottage, writing her report about those bastards who played with the continents like bowling balls.

"Who?" Graham insisted.

"Those running after us."

"Why did they run after you?"

"I have no idea, but I sure want to find out," Angela said, standing up. Graham followed her. They had to get off the train at the first stop and go back to New York City.

"That it's very complicated is a simple supposition," she shrugged, regaining her self-confidence. Wasn't it perhaps much better to deal with those jerks and give them the disks and end the entire affair? There was no way to fight them. And in general, she no longer was interested in fighting, except for herself and her personal inner homeland.

"Look," Graham said calmly. "The danger has passed, and I am ready to listen to your explanation. I don't give a fuck for those guys. But you are fucked up." There followed the sentence Angela hated the most; she could hear it in her sleep, a phrase slammed in her face by everyone she met on that complicated and frightening continent:

"What's your story?"

She was in no mood to answer.

"Why do you interfere with things you know nothing about? They'll get you!" Graham made a sign with his hand around his neck.

"Do you think so?"

"I'm positive." The Acela Express slowed down. Benches, flowers hanging from pillars' pots marched through the train's windows. A familiar figure on the station platform seemed to scan the wagons entering Newark Penn Station.

"Don't be so sure." Angela tossed off those words, not thinking about what could be next. Her eyes lingered on the platform. "Don't you think it could be the other way around?"

Graham opened the wagon door. Down on the platform in front of them, James reached up his hand to help her off the train.

By the first wagon of the Acela Express, Angela and Graham's pursuers saw the scene and remained motionless.

"That only happens in thrillers and spy novels, right?"

She laughed with abandon, and Graham, jumping down with his long legs onto the concrete platform, dutifully nodded.