

I

‘It is fascinating how unpredictable life can be,’ my father mused on one of our long walks. I loved those Sunday strolls in the cool of late summer afternoons, or in the winter when the snow scrunched under our shoes and snowflakes danced in the breeze and vanished. He had a warm, reassuring voice, and though I was a young adult by then, his way of thinking and the way he looked at the world and his life – detached, as a spectator – still intrigued and charmed me.

I thought of my father’s words as my taxi travelled eastwards on the way to Transylvania. It was December 1990. It had not snowed that year; the fields were dark and bleak, but I still hoped for snow and a white Christmas. Having talked non-stop for an hour, the driver had fallen silent.

A few short hours away was the border of Romania and its province of Transylvania. Not the land of Dracula and vampires, but of mountains and rivers and exquisite birdsong. The land where stories and legends are born. The land of my birth.

Yes, life is unpredictable, and what could have been more unpredictable than the event which had sent me on that journey: the collapse of communism. The eternal and invincible communism. Who would have believed it? Part of me still could not.

‘The ripples of History again,’ my long-dead father whispered in my ear as the featureless scenery slid past the window.

Twenty-five years had passed since we left that part of the world, since our family emigrated – well, most of us did. Twenty-five years since the red and grey roofs of Romania had vanished into milky mist. Moments after, we emerged into blue sky and sunshine. Ahead of us, freedom. And there, above the clouds, I promised myself and the universe: I would never, ever, return.

By the time the plane started its descent to Vienna, I could think only of the future. The heavenly West was only minutes away. The past was irrelevant. And it remained irrelevant for years. Now and then a memory would surface like a bubble in water, but it soon vanished. There was an Iron Curtain between me and my past life.

The years passed. Sometimes at night, when the wind ruffled the leaves of the elm tree in front of our house, I remembered the leaves of the oak trees whispering in the wind in my native land and images of that other life, our life in Romania, would come flooding in. Good times and dreadful times. Etched in my memory, imprinted on my senses. The hills, the grazing sheep, the smell of the pine forest, the trill of the birds were alive again. Suddenly I missed my native land. No, not just the land – I missed much more.

And as I watched the dark fields beyond the window of my taxi, this afternoon in 1990, those memories were with me again and I was transported to the other side of the border, to Romania, and a little flat in a two-storey block in the Southern Carpathian mountains.



It is 1962. My mother Roza is standing at the window, watching the street corner. From that window she will one day spot the postman and his bag where, carefully stacked among the many letters, will be the one we have been waiting for.

Outside the fresh snow sparkles in the sun. White and shiny against the pale blue sky, the peak of Mount Paringu looks over the hills guarding the Jiu Valley. Driven by a northerly breeze, a few clouds are heading our way. A winter silence has settled on the town.

In front of our window, on the strip of land between us and the main street which hardly ever feels the wheels of a car, my eight-year-

old brother Yossi and his friends are playing in the snow.

I am sitting reading a book. The brown tiled stove in the corner of our bedroom has long lost the warmth of yesterday, but Roza has no time to light the fire. She is keeping watch. And as she rearranges the little rounded combs holding her wavy black hair, sunrays escape around her big frame and fall onto the page of my book.

‘Maybe he’s been, maybe I missed him,’ she says, opening the window.

I reach for a blanket.

It is cleaning time. Roza grabs Yossi’s doona, bends over the windowsill and starts flapping it out. Yossi’s warmth from last night’s sleep escapes into the sky. One by one, sheets and doonas wave outside the window, pushing the cold air in. On the table, the pages of Yossi’s book fluff up like the feathers of an angry turkey. It is freezing, but Roza does not feel the cold. She is on the move.

I am trying to read. It is not easy, because Roza is coming and going, like a hungry sparrow looking for food. And my book, *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, is a reflective sort of book; you need silence to enjoy the main character’s ruminations.

Outside, the sun has retreated behind a small grey cloud. In front of the window snowflakes swirl in the breeze. From the distance comes Yossi’s happy laughter. It leaves a smile on Roza’s face.

‘The postman must be late,’ she interrupts again as she piles bedding on the windowsill to air.

What if all those doonas and pillows would roll out onto the street? Nothing ever did, but you never know. Mr Bogdan is on his usual walk at this time of the morning. The image of Mr Bogdan – well known for his slow uptake – hit by a flying doona, trying to disentangle himself, and a panic-stricken Roza running out to save the doona, save the doona, not to calm Mr Bogdan, makes me chuckle. But this is only wishful thinking, because everything is sitting under the wide awning in perfect equilibrium while Roza dusts the room. She moves slowly, her thoughts miles away. She slides a cloth over the radio, then over Yossi’s desk and books. She shifts the cloth to the

Louis XV chest of drawers and the painting hanging above it: a train approaching the viewer, its headlights piercing the dark. Behind the locomotive, the barely distinguishable contours of carriages, like an unending caterpillar, seem to go on forever into the night. Trains, nights, travels, destinations, freedom. And as if Roza can hear my thoughts, 'No, not yet,' she says.

She makes the beds, shuts the window and disappears into the kitchen.

Three more days of holiday, five more months to the baccalaureate. Unless – unless the postman delivers. Unless the passport arrives. Unless we emigrate to Israel. We could get that letter today. But will we? We have been waiting for five years. But today I feel especially hopeful, so I too go to the window to check for the postman. On the main street Mrs Luca, our upstairs neighbour, is walking towards the town centre. Behind her trails an old woman with a bag. No sign of the postman.

From the kitchen, accompanied by clashing pots and pans, comes a tune from *The Merry Widow*. Roza often sings in the background, songs from Kalman and Lehar operettas, the odd Schubert song in German, but at times she sings heart-wrenching Romanian songs of loss and heartbreak, of unfulfilled love, songs which would make most people cry. She sings from the soul, she sings as if she is singing about her own life. Sometimes I join in: 'Why did I leave you behind, why did I leave my home?' But usually she sings light-hearted, frivolous songs, like today. She is experimenting, trying to outdo herself. The high notes climb higher and higher. Suddenly the merry waltz stops. Roza is back, heading to the window. 'He just turned the corner.'

The postman, a tall man in a heavy grey coat, appears from behind the next block, across his chest a shoulder bag bursting with letters. Roza leans out of the window. I stand behind her, all eyes and ears. If our will could make things happen, we would get the letter today.

'*Buna ziua!* (Good day!)' Roza greets him, big smile on her face. The postman looks up, nods and walks past. 'Anything for Leitner?'

'Nothing,' he says, and disappears around the corner. But Roza

is not convinced. Maybe he did not check the names properly. She is sure he did not – didn't he do that the other day? He gave her someone else's letter. Her hopes rekindled, she goes to meet him in the stairway, but the encounter does not prove any more fruitful than those of the last five years. There is no letter, there are no passports – not yet.

And so the wait for the postman was over for that day. It was January and no passports had been distributed since the previous August. But the day before, years after they applied, the Segals got their much-awaited letter: 'Your passports are ready to be collected ...'

There were no private phones in town, but within hours the whole community knew because Mrs Cohen told Mrs Muller who told Mrs Izsak who happened to meet my mother on the street and gave her the news, who told Mrs Steinberg who met Mrs Klein on the way to her husband's office, who told her husband who told Mr Bieber, and so it went.

The speculation started. 'Who is the next lucky one?' My father, Stefan, would not speculate. He had more important preoccupations: his work, his children and what went on in the world. 'Political events control people's lives,' he used to say to us. So that evening, as he did every evening, he sat on the edge of my bed and turned the radio on.

'Good evening, dear listeners,' the Voice of America greeted him in Romanian, and a smile flashed across his face. But barely a few minutes had passed when the Romanian jamming cut in, and the battle between Stefan's resolve to find out what was going on in the world and a government which was just as determined not to let him, started. This was not a fight he could win, so after a while he stopped adjusting and readjusting the dial, moved closer to the radio, glued his ear to the speaker and tried to catch what words he could, what the latest utterances of prime ministers and presidents tens of thousands of miles away might mean for us, behind the Iron Curtain. Khrushchev, Gheorghiu Dej (the Romanian President), names and more names and snatches of speeches escaped through the noise,

which dipped and climbed like a wave. Stefan's face strained with concentration. Good news?

'Nothing relevant to us,' he summarised later at the dinner table, and the conversation turned to passports.

'We're next,' Roza said, as if she had finally worked out how the authorities decided who went and who stayed, who got out and who was condemned to wait. We should be, but will we? There was no way of knowing. What was the logic behind it? I could see none.

'We must be,' she added. But I could hear the Izsaks, the Mullers, the Steinbergs saying exactly the same thing. I could see them sitting at their dinner tables, nodding in unison. Why wouldn't it be them, why would it be us? But deep inside I pleaded with the postman to ring our doorbell in the morning.

7

As our plane left Romania that day in 1965, I swore never to return. Like my ancestors of thousands of years ago, for whom every bolt of lightning was a punishment from God, I swore that I should be punished if I did not keep my promise. But here I was, breaking all my promises, infringing all my contracts, travelling to Romania. I am not religious but at times I can be superstitious, and the promise I had made a quarter of century ago amplified the apprehension and anxiety I already felt about this trip. But the pull was much stronger than the uneasiness.

I was here with my husband, Alex. I would not have dared to come alone. Our teenage daughter Tamara was with us too. I worried about her, I worried about both of them. I did not know what to expect from an ex-communist country.

We had planned to catch a train, but a swarm of Budapest taxi drivers surrounded us as we walked towards the ticket office. When they realised that I spoke Hungarian one of them said, 'Madam, I wouldn't do that.'

'Do what?'

'Go by train.'

'Why ever not?'

'I can see you're not from here,' the grey-haired moustached man said. 'Where are you from?'

The taxi drivers kept looking at me, waiting for the verdict.

'Australia,' I replied and then realised the local translation of what I just said: *Rich!* Too late, our fate was sealed.

‘Well, that explains it,’ one of the men muttered under his moustache.

‘Explains what?’

He said nothing.

‘Tell her, Bandy, go on,’ the round-faced stout man on his right urged. Bandy obliged.

‘Dear Madam, the trains are dangerous, Gypsies will rob you, they might even stab you. You don’t know what it’s like.’

As my gaze shifted from one man to the other, and there must have been at least half a dozen, each nodded in approval. I did not believe them, but what if they were right?

‘It happens all the time. Trust me, Madam, I wouldn’t take the train if I were you.’

The men nodded again. I was unconvinced, but what did I know? Twenty-five years had passed since I left that part of the world. Anything seemed possible. So why take risks? I turned to my bewildered family to translate. Whether they believed the stories or not, the prospect of sitting in a warm taxi looked far the best. So I sat next to the driver, Alex and Tamara at the back, and the taxi started eastwards.

We had been driving for hours, my reminiscences interrupted by the driver’s worries about the economy, about his children’s future, about Hungary. Barely a year had passed since communism had collapsed in 1989.

‘Life is hard here, prices are going up and up. Some say it’s the transition. Who knows? Who knows anything nowadays?’ And he fell silent to contemplate the incomprehensible nowadays.

The wheels of the taxi kept swallowing the miles. The road ahead, flat and straight, chased the horizon in an endless pursuit. The *puszta* (steppe), green and teeming with life in spring, looked desolate that winter without the cover of snow. The contrast to my native land over the border could not have been greater.

Hills, mountains, small rivers making their way noisily among the trees. Romania! *What if something happens? What if they won’t*

let me out? I reached into my handbag for my Australian passport like an anxious child for her soft toy. I felt its comforting rough covers and started to relax. I would not get stuck in Romania again, I hoped. I hoped, because as irrational as this might sound, that fear had never left me. I zipped up the pocket where the passport was, then the main zipper, folded the top part of the handbag back on itself and clicked it in place. I was lucky, enormously lucky. I could cross borders ... I was free.

'I'd better get some petrol soon,' the driver said, unaware of my little crisis. 'Who knows what it's like over there in Romania.'

As he debated with himself where he might get petrol and food, a small shed appeared next to the straight stretch of road which ran into the twilight. Stuck on one of its corners was an oversized sign: *Café*. All around was the unending *puszta*, a perfect scene for a surrealist painting.

The bell chimed as we opened the door. Inside were three empty tables. Above the counter, bottles and bottles of heavy spirits. I looked for the table closest to a heater. There was no heater. The waitress, a small woman in her mid-twenties, did not seem to feel the cold. She was wearing a miniskirt and high boots. She took our order matter-of-factly, in a way which made it clear that she was there to serve, not to enjoy her job. And since customers meant work, there was no reason why she should be pleasant to them.

The steak turned out delicious, the chips a tad greasy, the pickles divine. My English-born husband couldn't have been more appreciative. Tamara did not mind the food but she did mind going outside to the toilet in the sub-zero temperature.

We returned to the taxi.

The *puszta* had merged with the sky. The border seemed to be further than the driver anticipated and he was in no mood to chat. I was grateful for his silence. On the back seat, Alex and Tamara kept whispering to each other.

I was trying to recall my last meeting with my brother Tom, but the same few images kept displacing all others: my father standing

with Tom on the platform, me climbing the stairs to our carriage. The sound of the whistle, the nauseating taste of smoke, the fear that my father would miss the train. My father embracing Tom again, then rushing towards me, Tom left behind, standing on the platform, my father climbing up, panting. The train moving, me and my father at the window, Tom standing in the same place, his image smaller and smaller, Tom a dot, then nothing. My father must have recalled those moments for the rest of his life. The dot turned to nothing, the past turned into the future and he never saw Tom again.

‘Good road,’ the driver said. ‘Not sure about the other side of the border.’ The road was still flat as far as we could see.

Suddenly a long queue of cars materialised in front of us. It was the border crossing. The queue seemed frozen, just like our surroundings. Some people stood next to their cars, chatting. We too stepped out to stretch our legs. A couple of hundred metres away was Romania. I was too anxious to have a conversation with anybody.

‘Patience,’ Alex said, ‘patience.’

We got into the car again and jerked along in starts and stops.

‘Look!’ The driver pointed into the distance. The head of the queue was now in sight. On the right, three militiamen. Militiamen in long dark-blue coats with epaulets and dark-blue caps, the same uniform as when I left a quarter of a century ago, were walking up and down the queue collecting passports. I broke into a sweat. *Keep calm*, I told myself and took a few deep breaths. But I could not help it, the fear was overwhelming.

‘What’s wrong?’ Alex asked.

‘Nothing.’ I could not explain what I felt. Not in a sentence, not in ten sentences. I wasn’t sure a Westerner would understand it anyway, even if that Westerner was my loving husband. Besides, I did not understand it myself. The years of anxiety and dread seemed to have grown roots inside me. Insidiously, without me knowing.

I looked at the militiamen again. ‘You need to bribe them,’ someone had said to me back in Australia.

‘Bribe them, why?’ I find the act of putting money in someone’s

hand, when it's not asked for, when no transaction is taking place, impossible.

'They do expect it,' she said. 'Following the rules, letting one through the border crossing smoothly is in itself an act which deserves gratitude.' Again and again my mind went over everything in my suitcase: my clothes, Tom's presents – singlets, a jumper, salami, cheese. Nothing which could be construed as illegal. The food? No, not in Romania. Nothing illegal, I told myself again. Nothing. But there was still the unforeseeable event, the unpredictable logic, the logic which never made sense in that country. Alex and Tamara seemed blissfully unaware of my turmoil.

A militiaman came to collect our passports. 'There you are,' I said in Romanian and handed mine over. He looked at its cover a moment too long for my comfort, but nodded approvingly. Good start, I thought. He opened the covers and searched for the Romanian visa, looked at it for a while, then his face turned into a frown. 'It's not valid!'

My knees went soft. *Bribe them*, a voice in my head said, *bribe them*. I reached for my purse inside the pocket of my coat, my mind racing: should I put the money in his hand? His hands were busy leafing through my passport. In the pocket! In the pocket of a militiaman? *It's a trick to implicate you*, another voice said. I abandoned the purse and resolved to argue, convince him that he was wrong. Argue with a militiaman? No, never! You keep your head down and shut your mouth. Just do what you're told. I saw myself turning around, the long journey back to Australia. I saw Tom, the Tom of my childhood, waiting for me, checking his watch and waiting. An hour, two, three, waiting for my knock on the door. I couldn't do that, I couldn't let him down.

'What do you mean? Look at the visa: one month!' I pointed it out to the militiaman.

'One month from the date of issue,' he said slowly, emphasising every word. The visa had been issued six weeks ago.

'How could it be from the date of issue?'

As we debated what is a valid visa, a second militiaman arrived. He was courteous. He took my passport and disappeared into the shed. We stood in front of the small covered window, waiting. Behind, loud voices were punctuated by unending stamping. Whatever they were doing seemed to be taking forever. I kept shifting from foot to foot to keep warm, to dissipate the tension.

Finally the polite militiaman emerged from the shed and handed us the passports. Romania had agreed to let us in.

The taxi crossed the border. The road was dotted with potholes. Now and then a car drove past. The villages were sunk in darkness. Here and there a faint light inside a house, then night again. Was this really Romania? Had I forgotten what it was like?

Suddenly three big shadows materialised in front of our headlights, three women walking arm in arm in the middle of the road. Taken aback, the driver turned the steering wheel probably more than he intended, the car landed in a pothole and swerved sharply to one side. Shaken, he cursed the women, Romania and taxi driving. In the next villages more women appeared and disappeared in our headlights. Like ghosts.

The road smoothed over. We started climbing the Western foothills of the Carpathians. A few snowflakes met our headlights, then more and more. It was well and truly snowing. The surroundings were sunk in darkness. But in my mind's eye I saw my memories, the white mountains, a few wooden houses, thin smoke leaving the chimneys and trickling up into the air, scenery I have not seen anywhere else in the world. Not the pretty landscape of the Swiss Alps – the houses in my memory were not the fairytale sort, but soulful and moving, like an old woman's sad life. And yet, how I loved that scenery and how much I longed to see it again.

The driver stopped talking; he must have been tired. I hoped that he would have the stamina to take us to our destination and make it back home.

The road widened. A few houses flew past and then the sign *To Cluj*. The back seat had fallen silent but I was not going to initiate a conversation, not now.