

Stories from *Leaving- Memories of Romania*

In between Father and Mother

I wake to loud voices in the kitchen. Through the closed bedroom door I can hear Tata and Mama shouting in anger. A faint light from the street lamp comes through the thin curtains covering the bedroom windows, but it is not enough to make out things in the room. Maybe it is still only evening, and the whole night is ahead of me? My older brother Ferkó, who sleeps alone in a large twin bed, is not moving.

I feel alone and miss the comfort of Mama's warm body. I reach over to Tata's bed, thinking that I might somehow find him there, even though I can recognize his voice in the kitchen. This darkness surrounds me tightly. I wait patiently, hoping that the voices will stop and Mama will come back. But Tata's anger pounds through the door like a weighty hammer. I've never heard him so angry. I cover myself with the thick woolen blanket and shut my eyes, trying to force sleep to come. If only I could not hear them! But they go on and on.

My parents have twin beds pushed together, and I am supposed to sleep in the middle. However, being in between the two beds is not comfortable, so I always end up on Mama's side. I have been there ever since I can remember.

Tata goes to bed early because he is the first to get up in the morning. I, on the other hand, often go to sleep with Mama, feeling her surround me like a soft and secure comforter, her left arm folded over me. I like playing with the soft skin of her bent elbow. Tata is always close by, though at arm's length, and I can usually hear his heavy breathing. His pinkish dentures are on the night table in a clear glass, his face is puckered up, and his lips tremble ever so slightly as he snores.

I don't think Tata likes this sleeping arrangement with me in between the two of them, especially now that I am eight. One night when I was much smaller I woke up

realizing that I was in his bed, while he and Mama were together in the other bed, whispering. Feeling like I had lost my rightful spot, I started whimpering, pleading to be allowed back by Mama. It was really dark, but I remember after a while Tata lifting me with his strong hands and depositing me by her.

“Here. You can have him,” he mumbled while Mama embraced and kissed me softly on the hair as I found my usual spooning place in her arms.

“Sleep sweetie, sleep,” she whispered in my ears. Enveloped by her warmth and soft fragrance, I felt victorious as I fell asleep.

It is dark now, and the loud voices in the kitchen will not stop. Why are they fighting?

Tata almost never raises his voice towards Mama, and when that happens, she never returns his shouts. She turns her back on him and on us too, and spends days in the kitchen nook, working quietly and crying softly. She can cry for days. I am so afraid now that I finally get up, walk over to the door and open it slowly. The strong kitchen light hits me in the eyes, and I can barely see. My parents stop, surprised, but turn back to each other almost immediately. Tata is by the kitchen stove in his long cotton nightshirt that reaches almost to the ground, moving his arms as he yells. Suddenly, his right hand rises and he slaps Mama across the face. It makes a very loud noise. For a moment they are both suspended, as if in disbelief.

When she starts crying softly, I run over and embrace her legs, her robe smooth on my face.

“I don't care if you leave,” Tata shouts. Then he turns around, walks into the bedroom and slams the door behind him.

Mama collapses back on a kitchen chair and lays her head over her crossed arms. I do not want her to cry, so I hug her. I caress her hair. I softly kiss her. She lowers her head onto my shoulder in a familiar gesture and goes on crying.

“Are you going to leave?” I ask. I wonder where she would go in the middle of the night. We don't have any relatives in Cluj.

“Yes,” she whispers quietly, weeping on my shoulder now. “I cannot live here any longer.”

After a while she looks me in the eyes and strokes my head. “I must wash and pack my suitcase.”

When she gets up from the chair, I hold onto her arms, not wanting her to leave. Finally, I plead, “Will you take me with you? Please take me with you. I want to come with you.”

She looks at me sadly and hugs me. After a long silence she says gently, "Let's go back to bed, Misike."

We enter the dark bedroom with her hand weighing on my shoulder, as if I am carrying her. Tata is still awake, but his body is turned away from us, facing the window. I can hear his fast, angry breathing. I snuggle up to Mama without saying a word, close my eyes tightly so I won't see him and fall asleep in her arms.

Blue Jeans

May 1st, the Workers Day, and August 23rd, the National Liberation Day, are special, and Father and I always spend the whole day together. Father has to participate in the twice-yearly marches past the city authorities, celebrating the communist leadership and all their accomplishments. This is always a happy day for me.

Early in the morning, I put on clean shorts, a white shirt, and around my neck, I tie my red triangular Pioneer scarf. Father also dresses nicely: a clean short-sleeved shirt, freshly ironed pants and highly polished shoes replace the half-destroyed boots he always wears for work. After a slow breakfast, he and I walk over to Napoca Street.

Most of the city is gathered there in groups that are formed according to types of workplaces. Father and I look for the workers of *Aprozar*, the state enterprise he works for, and when we find them, we receive banners and pictures of our national leaders whose names I recognize but do not know much about. Attendance is taken by someone, and we all practice shouting as loud as we are able slogans in the leaders' praise. I am happy and excited out there, surrounded by the crowd and feeling the spring sun warm me. I like being with Father. When the time comes, we start marching, holding a placard up high. I walk beside Father, feeling his strong, rough hand envelop mine. When we arrive at the bleachers, built in front of the Romanian City Opera especially for this occasion, we start shouting the slogans and waving the pictures.

"Look straight at them," Father says, pointing to the people on the bleachers.

From up there, unknown faces are looking in my direction, smiling and waving their hands. Then, a few blocks down, as the crowds disperse, everyone going their own way, and we head as fast as we can for Union Square,

where we take the trolley to Hoia. This is a wide meadow on a hill, a few kilometers out of town, where we just lay in the grass, drink beer and lemonade, eat *mititei*—Romanian hamburgers—and watch folk dancing and puppet shows the entire day.

One spring we push our way into a bus to Hoia so full we barely fit in it. We get off twenty minutes later: tired, sweating and happy. Tata takes my hand, and we start off up the unpaved dusty street, with no sidewalk. I can feel his rough hand full of tiny cuts, with wide palms and thick fingers. His hand is always warm and solid, even in the winter. As we reach the top of the hill, the early May sun heats the crown of my head and my shoulders. Tata breathes heavily, and he wants to stop for a second and let others get ahead of us.

“There is no hurry, Misike. We have the entire day here. Your mother is not waiting for us with dinner.”

“What is Mama doing at home alone?” I ask. She never comes with us to Hoia, and she must be lonely.

Tata does not answer, and we start walking again. We turn to the left and face a large meadow sprinkled throughout with small groups of people sitting on the grass, mostly gathered around a podium in the middle of the meadow. Ahead of us the road full of people follows the edge of the forest over a hill to more meadows, with more podiums and more music. On the right the wooden water mill of the Folklore Museum is closed. The familiar sound of folk music blasts out of two huge loud speakers by the podium, and a small group of people are folk dancing on it. We head towards it, and on the way Tata stops at a stand and buys himself a bottle of beer and me a couple of *mititei* and a bottle of green lemonade. We find a place not so far from the podium on the sloped hill about eye level with the performers—which surprises me since Tata cannot stand loud music—and we sit down on the grass. A group of about fifteen dancers, men dressed in colorful peasant suits, hats with flowers and short sticks in their hands are performing a dance called *Călușarii*, from Oltenia, a southern region of Romania. They dance in two rows, facing each other, jumping over their sticks and feigning a battle. I watch their familiar hopping movements to the fast music while I tap the rhythm with my fingers and imagine myself as one of the dancers. I would like that.

After finishing my *mititei* and lemonade, I lay my head on Tata’s lap and look up at the sky. It is mostly blue and wide and silent, while the music by the podium is jumping at a fast pace. High up there, the strong wind blows the white puffy clouds as if hurrying them somewhere,

maybe towards the city and out of my sight. Tata lays his heavy hand on my shoulder, arranges my body a little so my head fits comfortably. I like the friendly weight of his hand on my shoulder and cover it with my own hands, recognizing the dry thin skin of the back of his hand. We just lie there silently, staring into the deep-blue sky and smelling the fresh green grass around us.

“Tata, do we have any relatives in America?” I ask after a while. He does not answer immediately.

“Why do you ask, Misike?”

“I don’t know. I was just wondering.”

“I don’t think anyone survived when I returned from the concentration camp. Everyone died there.”

“Did your sister, Blanka *néni*, also go to the camp?”

“No, she was not deported. She was lucky.”

“Who died there, Tata?” He remains quiet for a long while. Then he whispers. “Listen to the music, Misike.” He seems to be somewhere else.

We keep quiet for a while, not knowing what to say, but soon I continue my questioning. “Tata, how do you know that everyone died?”

He looks at me gently, but I feel his heavy hand on my shoulder tighten a little.

“Actually, I don’t know. Maybe someone did survive.”

“Could they be in America?”

“Why do you ask, Misike?”

“Maybe someone could send me a pair of blue jeans from America.” There is silence for a while, and I wonder what he is thinking about. He slowly caresses my shoulder. “Would you like that?”

“Yes, very much. I would really like to have a pair of blue jeans. None of my friends has one yet, so I would be the first one. And they are fantastic.”

“Misike, do you know something? Maybe someone did survive and I could try to find out. Would you like me to do that?”

“Yes. Please.”

“I will write to America, Misike,” he whispers. “I am sure we will find someone to send you a pair of blue jeans.”

A new group of dancers come up onto the stage. I look at their wide cotton pants, embroidered at the bottom, and their tight vests. I like folk music, but not the way they dress. I don’t like peasant clothes. Maybe Tata told me the truth, and I will really get a pair of blue jeans. American blue jeans. Wouldn’t that be great! I close my eyes and slowly drift away towards the city along with the white puffy

clouds, wearing a new pair of blue jeans as all my friends,
from the ground, admire them.

