

**+eZine**  
of Modern Texts in Translation



Translation  
Café

October 2019

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translated into English by  
MTTLC graduate

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The texts are translated from or into English, and belong to all literary genres – fiction, poetry, literary criticism, as well as the drama, the essay. The focus is on Modern Literature, broadly meaning the 20th and the 21st centuries: Romanian, British, and American among others.



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## Provisional Government

### 5.1. Chapter 4 - The warning

Casting anxious glances all around, Sorin clears his desk of papers, paperclips, pens. While he is throwing the last files into the cupboards, banging their doors, opening and shutting them, he points out that the noise in the office can be heard from the corridor and one of the bosses might come in to check what is happening! Then he carefully lays on his desk the leave of absence signed by Eleonora, his free pass from the Building, and flops over it the wooden vase with dusty immortelles, gifted to him on one of his birthdays, a year ago or maybe seven. Perhaps, right after his leaving, Titus Marga will open the door and will shout angrily from the doorway:

– Sorin Olaru? Where does this man keep disappearing? Find him right away!

Then, like a well-trained orchestra, we can answer: he has left to get the visas! for the contracts to have them signed! Here`s his signed leave of absence!

All his departures are justified by an official paper. And all of them have something fishy.

I hope nobody suspects that sometimes he leaves so hastily just to have sex with me, in the studio available only for a few hours, which belongs to Florinel Gheorghe, the university lecturer. The right-side neighbor plays a Dalida tape, *Aime-moi, mon amour, aime-moi*, we are dancing naked and we are looking through the seventh-floor window at the fishermen squatting on the lake and at the green-yellow rape field, *serre-moi, serre-moi doucement dans tes bras, je ne veux pas savoir où tu me conduiras...*

By the year 2000 we will have implemented the Prrrogramme of the Ay-merging of the Multi- Laterally-developppped Shocialist Shociety. The thunderous applause and the chants Ceauşescu-heroism, Romania-communism, Ceauşescu-heroism, Romania-communism coming out of the transistor spread so unexpectedly that the whispers ceased. That is why Sorin kept fidgeting in the office! In order to prevent the criticisms that he used to let his subordinates unsupervised, he turned up, at full volume, the radio



which, on both programmes, broadcasted the Party`s Plenum. Until lunch break, when the broadcasting and the flock of participants are guided over to the coaches which are meant to take them to the Party`s closed circuit restaurants, no one will have the courage to turn the radio off! The speeches and the applause will echo along the corridor and will spoil the enthusiasm of those willing to enter the office, for a chit-chat or a routine control.

I pretend to read, but I can feel Sorin`s movements, without even raising my head. I failed to meet his gaze and I fight against the familiar panic, holding an immobile expression. And for some time now, everything he does annoys me and disappoints me. A vague gesture, standing in the doorway, a greeting to all of us. He closed the door a second ago and I jerked upright. I move slowly behind the cupboards, behind the desks, tiptoeing, walk to the window trying my best to step as slow as I can, the window is open and I hope to catch the glimpse of him leaving the Building, he must have given up waiting the elevator. I examine carefully the sidewalk, searching for him on the alley from Lenin`s statue, under the autumn-faded sky. Around, the skimming flight of the swifts over the Building, their long tweeting and their black lines, weaving continuously between the soft walls of the sky that turns into dusk. The alleys with red flowers are deserted and there is no sign of Sorin, only the smooth asphalt and the void ready to gulp me down, if I slip. I feel that I`m being watched, but I pretend to be busy around his desk, I pick up the leave of absence under the vase with immortelles and flip it over between my fingers trying to find out how long he will be gone. But it is not a leave of absence, it is an old calendar piece of paper. Now I am sure he won`t come back, as I assumed since he cleared his desk.

The day faded away suddenly. I crumple up the paper in my sweaty palm, overwhelmed by the fear in which I found myself, I personally take Sorin`s leave of absence to the registry, I pull myself into the noise full of smoke and applause of the office and run off the stairs, without paying attention to their mocking laughter, you, stupid girl, why would you take the note to the registry when he left it on the desk on purpose, under the vase with immortelles?

I want to meet him and try to talk to him, even if he loathes whispering in public. Everything that has been happening to me for years, has become an excuse to whisper in our borrowed studio, on the payphone in front of the Building, looking around



afraid that someone we know might see me, or on the landline, when Petru is away for his didactical qualification, and we use encrypted talk, to prevent the operator from understanding us. I don't even know when I pretend and when I tell the truth. But Sorin's soft voice brings me the smell of his skin, the pleasant weight of his body that dilates my arteries and all of a sudden, a hot blood rushes to my head and makes my temples hurt. My mood in the next days is cord connected to his rush or his talkative mood.

So here I am, leaving behind the room filled with smoke, voices and applause and nobody calls me, such a relief! I slip on the greenish mist covered corridors, an odor of dust and canteen stew comes out of my clothes. My face is pasty, brown, after living ten, twenty years in the same office. Male silhouettes with elbows jutting out of their fuzzy checkered jackets, with their bellies overemphasized by their rayon sweaters slide too through the greenish air. And female silhouettes with white, two finger-long hair roots and sagging buttocks broadened because of the wooden chairs.

I walk quickly, more quickly and the greenish light darkens, and the silhouettes become scarce, now there is no one on the corridor beside me, I'm a soft electric ball of anxiety that rolls down the stairs, didn't Sorin go out of the Building and by the time I get down, he will have gotten on the bus?

I head to the basement, wandering on the low, tangled corridors, I climb other stairs, climb down; I've entered another unfamiliar Building, afraid that I would not be able to find the heavy front door, that I would be wandering through the hot water pipes that gurgled over my head, through the cobwebs woven on the low ceiling. I fumble through the mesh of hot water pipes, the floor is wet, the water babbles and it has reached my knees, my hips, a pipe has broken and the corridor is flooding, don't leave me here, I yell, can't you see that it's me, the one you've been holding naked in your arms for years in borrowed rooms, and after your throbbing flesh goes still in my arms, you tell me: you're the only one I have ever made confessions to! you're the only woman I have ever loved; too little for a man's life, don't you think?

I'm gasping, pushing with both hands the heavy door of the Building. There is no wonder I found the exit from the dark basement when I was about to drown. I'm blinking, blinded by the white daylight, and run off on the wet earth; probably, it is



flooded by the broken pipes in the basement where I have been wandering. I shouldn't keep going through this soft mire, but I'm in hurry to reach him. I can't see him anywhere, though he wouldn't have gone too far.

I'm running over the open field shrouded in the whitish mist. He must be somewhere in front of me and I will see him only when I get closer. Sticky pieces of earth hang from my high cork sole sandals, I can hear the obscene splash of the boots when pulled out of the mire, the mud squelches, the water gushes on my forehead and dripping down my cheeks, my armpits and palms are wet. I'm dwelling on the thought that it would be better to make my way back, resigned, towards the Building that I can see sideways, projecting itself on an incandescent sky, enormous. I cannot reach him, I still do not give up, I shuffle forward, the mud is up to my ankles and it hangs heavily to the overcoat; is it about to swallow me?

The more I walk, the more the mud deepens under my footsteps; I'm so tired, I'm so tired of him, of my anxiety, of everything! The more I struggle, the more I sink, it would have been better if I had returned earlier! It would have been better if I hadn't chased him, how stupid I was to leave the room filled with smoke and applause and leave the others! I am going to suffocate in the mud that will cover me entirely, with a slight, bubbly, fizzy splash; in which movie did I see this?

I have managed, I don't even know how, to pluck my feet out of the mud that sucks me and after the terror I have gone through, I find myself cured by him, carefree and safe and sound. Bewildered, I contemplate the shrivelled traces of mud on my overcoat, what am I going to say to those who will lift their eyes from the scribbings on Romania's exhaustive Treaty when they see me, standing in the doorway? After all, who is Sorin Olaru? How did he become my only hope in this alien world?

She is awake when the clock rings and she tries to chase away the dream she had. Her nightdress is wet. Her soft wet hand is groping feverishly for the snooze button, while Petru is muttering sleepily by her side, pulling the covers over his head. When did he come last night? That feeling of victory when she hit with closed eyes, the alarm clock's steel drill, and she instantly stopped it. The soothing feeling that it was only a dream. It was just a dream, stop thinking of it! She has to stand up and tiptoe, not to trigger Petru's humming, a moving pile under the swollen blanket towards she throws furtive, fearful glances.



After the stale air of the apartment, the vivid cold morning invigorates her blood and quickens her steps. She will enter the Building in an hour, keeping beneath her eyelids this pink-gold cold that surrounds the black houses and she is going to keep it all day long even if she will sign with her hand trembling with anger and humiliation on the late-for-work list, guarded by the doorman's cap. She takes a deep breath and she is still enjoying that it was just a dream when the jolting bus pulls over the gutter and the crowd gathered on the pavement rushes desperately towards it.

She is trying to make her way through the hostile crowd, wrapped in fusty, mothball, Lăcrămioara cologne smelling clothes. She's lost the staggering politeness of the early years that always made her linger clinging to an unsteady banister, on the last rung of the ladder, risking to be pushed away at a somersault or to get down, mad with rage; now she pushes fiercely as well, with tight buttocks and throws her purse on the first empty seat with a trained dexterity, that's it! From now on she will enjoy the comfort of privilege and she will look carelessly at the hands that clench around the bar desperately, at the sleepy swollen faces that are wobbling over her seat.

She is looking stubbornly through the window, looking away from a bent back, from the white hair tumbling under the cap or the wet headscarf, a reproachful, venomous look, at dawn we are all equal and free to stamp.

Through the stained window the outside air turns rose-gold, like the clouds in the blue sky, white at first, then slowly injected with pink. The train smoke is pink too, the one that has just passed heading to Constanța, even the cooling tower steam at Grozăvești are pink, those behind the quay destroyed by the cranes. She avoids again to think about the unpleasant dream and chooses the memories she wants.

You're so beautiful, Lety, Sorin pulls the sheet up to his neck and he raises the martini glass, while she is going, naked to the bathroom, counting as if she were at a dance lesson: one-two-three and she feels as gracious as Lenin's verdigris bronze statue, stained with wandering bird droppings. His teenage, insecure gestures make her remember her fears and gladness. And she speaks. She is finally speaking to someone, naked, in bed, with her cheek on the unfamiliar pillow on which other eyes and other strands of hair have been absorbed, she does not want to think about that price, because here's where loneliness ends. This is the



point where her love for Sorin begins and ends, she comes to the city outskirts to mingle the events of their brief lives together. She can suggest to him, through her stubborn silence that she is oppressed at home, although her feelings for Petru are a mix of loyalty, hatred, fear and what else? What Sorin thinks about her family stories is something she will never know.

If it hurts so bad when he looks at the clock thrown beside the bed or on the chair where socks, shirts, tetra underwear and her new bra, Triumph, are shoved anyhow, it is certainly her fault. Perhaps she did not set the pace for his body movements, otherwise she would feel only a pleasant relief and nothing more, *mens sana in corpore sano*. It is still her fault that she's pouting, while he hurries, continuing, however, to be gentle. *Mal-aimée*, the term that he has just told her, has a vernacular equivalent, namely: she is simply sullen. If at 13.20 she feels abandoned in the desert because only at those last few moments, in an exasperated haste and irked by her sullen face expression, he said they would meet in a week, it is all her fault. If she looked carefully at his face which is just as messy as his clothes, she would understand how harassed poor Sorin is!

If she does not know what he thinks about their future it is still her fault, because she settles for his naked body and his approving gaze. She keeps hoping that she will tame him like a skittish animal, she avoids asking straightforward questions, the same way she avoids telling Petru that she finds it increasingly difficult to sleep with him.

Too bad that Sorin's stories are more political, he follows them avidly in the unfolded newspapers on his desk, on the transistor radio. He is really obsessed with Ceauşescu.

–Why do you think, Lety, that when Soviet tanks entered Prague, the Comrade was roaring about the right of every Communist Party to establish its political line? Why?

Sorin gets nervous, gets out of bed, gesticulating while holding a glass of Campari, why?

–He was roaring because he was desperate! He cared about himself, not about us!

How did Letiția forget the meeting in the Palace Square? Where was she in August '68, when no one laughed at the Comrade's babbling anymore? Oh, she was in the mountains, at Sâmbăta Mare, a holiday chalet, in Făgăraş, with Petru, but even so, it is not a good excuse!



– The theory of the lesser of two evils! Is anyone better than him, who? say those who support him and trust me, there are plenty. At least he had the courage to face the Russians, this is the argument! Do you realize what a revolutionary he seemed when he criticized Moscow because it had foreign leaders who did not have any idea of the Romanians` life! That`s what he said! He implied that only Dej and his old guard were guilty of crimes and prisons of the 50s and he couldn`t be accused of anything!

– I doubt that people care about it, she grimaced.

– You doubt because you have no idea how popular he became after he opened new positions in the Party! He pensioned off people of the Comintern and replaced them with a young generation of activists! But you don`t look around, you don`t listen and you want to write prose!

Sorin pinches her nipples, rolls her over holding her in his arms, she feels his erection inside her buttocks, she pulls away from him embarrassingly.

Sorin pours another splash of Campari and opens the newspaper on the table: *Romania and France understood the truth of the utmost principled and practical importance of our times, namely that countries with different social and political systems can work together to their own development.*

– Why do we waste our last minutes with this chatter? she pouts.

– Make an effort, Lety, to understand how the West thinks, the West which we consider our salvation! You are an interesting outlet, and what happens to you is your own business! In fact, this is what they imply here! Who do you think drew my attention to this passage? Lilica Stanciu!

He continued in a didactic voice. He takes the cigarette from her mouth and puffs out several times, the idea of collaboration between the two systems is not new, before Churchill`s speech about the Iron Curtain, the republican Harold Stasseni had told Stalin pretty much the same thing...

She who always gathers pieces of his mysterious life, instantly imagines the theatrical Lilica Stanciu`s voice: How do you interpret this passage, comrade Olaru? Beside Harry Fischer, whose suicide attempt to say what it crosses his mind, as far as Sorin



is concerned, it proves the low social intelligence level of educated people, Lilica Stanciu is their only colleague who whistles inside a church. When she speaks, Sorin does not change the subject and lets her run her course with an indulgent smile, as he would do with a spoiled child. Comrade Stanciu, her husband, is a director at the Central Office.

Lilica asks Sorin uncomfortable questions in order to embarrass him, since he is her boss, or does she tease him because she is into him? Hard to say, in their office they make challenging jokes. It was Lilica who started it and Dorina accompanies her and laughs with her large white teeth. And her face shows an unexpected shade of cruelty.

Or perhaps did Letiția misinterpret? Because when you hear Dorina's rough vigorous voice and meet her frank gaze, you perceive the subliminal signal as well: you can always count on me! Apart from the sullen Petru, Letiția does not know anyone who does not like Dorina, she is almost like a family member for many of her colleagues.

– Lilica fusses over behaviour, but overlooks that she enjoys political immunity due to her husband, whispered Dorina.

In the restroom, Lilica Stanciu was impressed when Dorina showed the bruises made by her husband, who had beaten her because she no longer wanted to sleep with him. It had been her mistake, said Dorina, she had married him after a date arranged by her parents, he was a good match, an IMGB engineer with an apartment in the capital. Her Bucharest ID card had been issued quickly, so had the wedding feast and they made enough money for a Dacia 1300, except that she could not stand him in bed. Dorina wanted to finish her driving school and then, helped by Lilica's husband, she divorced quickly. She visits now daily Lilica at her place and tells everyone she knows how sweet is little Zoe. Rumour has it that the girl is baptized by Zoe Ceaușescu, but it is probably false, the Comrade's daughter could not attend a religious ceremony even with the baptismal font and the priest at her place, as people with positions in the party usually do.

The bus is no longer so crowded and Letiția shakes her head angrily trying to get rid of all the damn gossip in the institution as well last night's dream! Sorin is generous and sensitive and the love from 9 to 14.15 or from 12.30 to 16.00 is her absolute bet, as written on her notebook hidden under the mattress. That is why she runs to the city outskirts when she escapes from the office filled with noise and smoke, or from the queues for Van Houten cocoa or for green olives from Greece and political education



sessions! Except that their life flows between rumpled sheets: sometimes he gets up to refill their glasses near the bed, drink! he tells her, and the world liquefies, it expands and its edges disappear rapidly, it's a jumble from which you could slip on, escaping from their love nest and from the hours dedicated to love. She leaves with a bitter, metallic taste in her mouth. Then she experiences liver aches in the night, the empty half of the bed, thank God that Petru has not come back yet to ask her: what's wrong with you? The headaches, sore throat, thirst, vomiting in the toilet. But Petru would not notice anything even if he were at home! He did not notice that Letiția gets from Sorin every year for her birthday L'Air du Temps by Nina Ricci. He does not know that she got a Credit Union loan to buy Dior Eau Sauvage for Sorin's birthday, as always. He's vaguely realized that she brought less money and reproaches her she is a big spender.

But Letiția herself chose to ignore Petru's actions too, because, from the very beginning he warned her that he is used to freedom. However, never again will she drink Romanian Bitter or mix drinks, or ...

And the meaningless days go by until their next meeting. Even if he is in the same room, she feels the invisible line that separates their laughter and their words. She also sees his cautious movements that offend her, though she understands them. She despises his cowardice, but she is addicted to his gestures that dictate hers too. The adrenaline invades her blood that suddenly goes crazy and her mind screen flickers, disturbed by a single fear, do they know, do they see, do we show something? Sometimes it hurts so much that she has a spur to underestimate her body. But she is too aboullic to accept other men's approaches and she is too fixed on the fidelity that Sorin claims about each time they see.

I cannot understand why he does so, keeps Letiția repeating. But what is to understand in our lives or in each other's life? Nothing. We are made of gestures, actions, impulses that contradict one another. It would be hard for her to say when the need for truth started. She would like to have someone to share with the fear she felt when she wanted to tell Petru everything and she realized it would have been a big mistake. Poor Letiția! She would have torn apart her protective net, devastating all around, without even helping someone, not even her.



The unpleasant dream revives, but she chases it away, meanwhile, the bus is not so crowded anymore, here it is the Building. The gray air and then deep blue of the night has turned violet, a bluish, dense violet. Suddenly, the distances between the windows of the Building and the dark stain of the Park becomes an infinite contour. The too straight alleys, the dull walls, the odd, undefined and silly shape of the Building is still obscured in darkness. Here, in the morning's cool air through which she advances, everything starts calmly and equally, for a few minutes, everything looks as she wants - sleek, new, untouched by rain, sun and time. Letiția is happy, she is not late for work. And, after work, she goes for a coffee with uncle Biță, the most cheerful relative of hers.

– Any little brat in the West goes wherever he wants, all around world! If he doesn't have money, he hitchhikes because it's fashionable! But he doesn't need to struggle for that damned passport like I've been doing all my life! But I won't give up, no matter how many times I get refused! I don't want to die like my poor brother Ion without getting abroad! It isn't enough to know Europe's geography only from books, to have vainly learned the story of every street in Paris! If you only knew how many times I dreamt of walking down the Place de la Madeleine! Since I was helping my friend, Radu Cioculescu, to translate Proust! So it happened with Traian Branea, your father's brother, God rest them in peace! I feel sorry for their youth, they were both scholars! But these aren't stories for you, Letiția! I was talking about the translation of Proust with which Radu Cioculescu had been struggling until I came up!

Did Biță really help to translate Proust? Some time ago, Letiția would have immediately swallowed such a story, but now she doubts about uncle Biță's stories. On his desk, she saw only the institution legal expert's stapled and filed documents, next to the perfectly sharpened coloured pencils and pens brought from abroad. She was no longer impressed by his rented room in an interwar building, as she was in the summer before her student life, when she had lived there. Not even the heavy curtains, or the cubist furniture, or Magdalena Rădulescu's paintings and the icons on glass, Christs crouched under enormous bunches of black grapes. Biță was still up to date with the news of the exhibitions and libraries and had congratulated her condescendingly, I saw that you try to publish, indeed, do your best, although here one cannot write real literature ...



– Radu Cioculescu had the map of every street in Paris, and I had marked with red Place de la Madeleine and the boulevard Malesherbes, come again? I thought you were smarter, Letiția, my poor brother Ion, thought you were quite a scholar! Don't you know that the house in which Proust lived in is on the Boulevard Malesherbes? I mean I hope it's still there ...

– Did you mean Place de la Madeleine or Place Pigalle?! Where do you actually want to go if you get a passport?

– Is this a sample of your knowledge, Letiția? I am not scandalized, and your poor uncle Ion can no longer bear your nonsense! But you shouldn't make dad jokes in front of Victor who may reproach poor Margaret that you are not educated as a family girl! He is a megalomaniac like the entire Branea family! Not to mention that your lame joke about Place Pigalle would be great for your grim husband, I don't need surrogates! Romania lacks anything but cheerful little girls! I want to see Paris in the name of my generation's dreams! In the memory of my poor friend! The name Radu Cioculescu, it doesn't say anything to you, Letiția? You barely heard of Proust! Nowadays, young people rush to write, but you don't read at all ...

– Your first trip to the West! Your first and last! Isn't it? the niece tried to mend it.

But his uncle's smile had disappeared.

– Oh! What are you thinking? No way! Biță replied. What do you want me to do at my age in the West? That is a cruel world, at 50 years old they leave you in the streets!

– But didn't your Export/Import director help you to get the passport long ago? Did your charm fail to persuade her? Weren't you two in good terms? insisted Letiția, realizing she kept blundering.

She couldn't get out of trouble without teasing him.

– Maybe in too good terms! he forced laughing.

He was still a charming man, even if his grey-bluish, fine wool sweater showed bigger shoulders and a slightly protruding stomach. However, it was still a pleasure to hug Biță and at her arrival, Letiția had recognized the same Eau Sauvage, most likely bought from the Horsetail, the shop Miraj from University Square. Which of his many girlfriends had made the gift?



– Now, when I get closer to the retirement age, I hope to be allowed to go on my first trip to the West! I proved to be a reliable citizen of our democratic popular regime!

Letiția raised her eyes, astonished. It would have been hard for her to say whether her uncle had spoken ironically or as for a foreign, suspicious ear. Except that there were only the two of them. Had somehow Biță begun to fear her too?

– Why are you looking like this? he asked, his look had darkened and his voice was trembling.

Perhaps he was already sorry for telling her about the passport application. And why wouldn't he be afraid, after all? How could he know his niece didn't gossip at work or whispers to Petru about it in bed? And Petru, scared that Biță would burden more his wife's file by moving to the West, he could sneak a preventive information who knows where! Then, forget about your passport, comrade Barbu Silişteanu, aka uncle Biță.

She did not take Sorin into account, not only because uncle Biță had never heard of him, but also because she was more convinced about his discretion than hers or Petru's.

Letiția relaxed in the armchair, pulled out from her purse the Kent packet she had from Sorin, handed it to Biță and changed the subject.



## 5.2. Chapter 5 - Coincidences

Would you interpret as an ominous sign the fact that his first act of exposing himself next to her publicly was the funeral of a colleague at the office? You shouldn't. It is known that lovers go enthusiastically at weddings and solicitously at funerals: since they can't risk appearing in public they are happy to lose themselves into the loud and blind crowd - they hope. The family in mourning can count that they are not going to disappear on the way, before the end of the ceremony, through discreet schemes they succeed to get closer and walk so slowly that they fall behind the group. Their apparently random touches make their lower belly shiver and their breaths merge hastily to become one. If the ceremony continues at home, you will meet them there, dazed, answering questions or, on the contrary, taking over the conversation with their excited verbose. In time, they've learnt to exchange looks, a wink hidden under the eyelashes, which they believe unnoticed. But they are always seen.

Sorin and Letiția stood as far as they could from Mr. Hariton's flowery bier, avoiding to take a look at his almost purple lips parted over the glassy teeth and defiant look; he had reached the pinnacle of his candid self-esteem. Someone in the convoy was eulogizing the dead, in a pious voice, but in the same way that they had gossiped about him in their offices.

– The worst day of his life was after August 23, when he opened the newspaper and saw who else the Comrade had decorated in honour of the national holiday. He knew most of them and kept it all morning! He read the orders and medals and told us about each one, one had been his schoolmate, the student who always got flunked, another was illiterate, he had been brought to college when he had been rejected because of his file, and so on. After he finished, he went down the corridor and told others in other offices that story, even the cleaner knew it. At 3 pm his chatter stopped, perhaps only then he realized that the others had succeeded and he was still working secretly on the doctoral thesis. He became morose and he no longer said a single word.

Contaminated by speeches and crying, their shared joy of being together, the two of them, rivalled with something serious and strange, but never again did death lie further away. Their soulful eyes betrayed them when each of them tried to imagine a similar scenario. The illuminated alleys of the cemetery were sifting yellow leaves like in a rustling rain, while they were getting lost



among tombs, careless and sensitive, talking frivolously about life and death, their faces stuck together and the shamelessness of their joining accompanying their slow, melancholy steps.

Therefore, it began at Bellu. And it continued on an unfamiliar corridor, on the last floor of an ancient building, where the creak of a rickety wooden floor warned them if someone was coming. Then they stopped from whispering and with an effort of will, they pulled back their heads that, once the danger was gone, touched again. They hurried, as they would do for years, always looking for a place, a moment where they could be alone. At the beginning they had only twenty minutes, the break of the meeting where chance had brought them both: one of the millions of sessions devoted to the new speech on mandatory processing that the Comrade cranked out at the last Plenary.

But do things happen by chance in life or does someone High Above move you like a pawn on a chessboard at the start of an open-ended game?

Sometimes someone close to you might include you in the game - for instance, Sorin Olaru. As a secretary of propaganda, he could have written down in the convening list the eternal truant Letiția Arcan who always dodges the mandatory tasks, do you agree comrade director, to let her waste one Sunday at the political informing on the Capital? Is it a good idea? It's solved then, with your permission let us proceed with the quarterly report!

It is unlikely that things happened so, considering his discretion and Sorin's lack of cruelty when he started this relationship.

But there was such a scene in a draft of Letiția's novel.

Letiția had not taken part, placid, staring at the blackened gold of the baroque moulding on the ceiling, in such a meeting, with speeches interrupted by applause for every quote from the Comrade's speech. Stout men, with a fat nape and jaws sagging over the stiff collar of the shirt, stretched by whalebone, women who used Farmec hairspray to backcomb and stick their hair, with curves highlighted by the terry pleated skirts and feet pressed into Louis Quinze tipped shoes, they all stared at the presidium table wrapped in red. Only she, a poor wild animal locked in a cage, was fidgeting in her chair, impatience twitching in her ankles and in her suddenly inert hands when the applause moment came. When they announced the break she had wobbled desperately,



as if pressed by an urgent need, trying all the doors. Finally, she had understood that the only one that led to the street, the glass and wrought iron door, with floral, art deco, was guarded by a spiteful doorman. He took out the key to unlock only in front of some faces that he greeted respectfully.

She ought to have been grateful that she was in a heated and normally ventilated room, not in the unheated and windowless basement of the prison, with the chamber pot in the middle of the room, full of urine and feces, among skeletal men, reeking of stuffy skin and of cruor, after investigations. She would think over two decades that the same thing had happened to her despicable father, Victor Branea.

She had not had to stay in the cold and slush, hopping for hours from one foot to another and constricting her sphincter muscles as much as she could, waiting for the moment when the endless parade would pass past in front of the official tribune and she would shout Staliiin! Staliiin! Long live November 7th, the day of the Great October Socialist Revolution! and only then, after walking another for half an hour, to finally catch a glimpse of the saving shape of the public toilet. A sample of a patience that her mother and uncle Ion had told about, in decent terms.

When there were forty-three degrees outside, congested in the sun and with swollen feet in the cheap and hard sandals, she hadn't had to look after the pupils selected by their parents' files, whose prone bodies, viewed from the official tribune, would draw the slogan that the loudspeakers would roar throughout the stadium, Ceauşescu - heroism, Romania - communism, Ceauşescu - heroism, Romania - communism, as her friend, Nana, would tell her later. But Letiţia Arcan had not been aware yet of the fact that she was part of a more fortunate generation than the previous one. And, of course, she had no idea of what was to come.

When she was exasperated, Sorin Olaru popped up in front of her, who had left the queue at the buffet to whisper:

– Be patient, my dear madam, we will not leave the place until tonight! And please note that the sandwiches contain genuine Prague ham! There are also hot dogs, Pepsi, Chinese chocolate and even mandarins!



The queue they had both joined was advancing slowly, Letiția stared at the blackened wooden panelling in the lobby, and Sorin had begun a story about the painting of a painter from a hundred years ago, that represented the room where they held our meeting, back then, you won't believe, Lety, there was a salon with Venetian mirrors and even a small theatre stage! A hundred years ago, ruler Cuza had made this house a gift to his mistress, Maria Obrenovici, so it would not be a bad idea to visit it! Have you thought about writing a historical novel, madam? It would sell pretty well and censorship is less attentive to these topics! We have time, the break will be long, in the second part of the meeting we expect that Dumitru Popescu himself will be here, I suppose, madam, you know who I'm talking about! He writes the speeches you are parroting, Lety, at the political education meetings! Don't you parrot them? Did you just hide in the last row of seats, like now? Shame on you, a writer should be interested in such a character! Dumitru Popescu is more educated than others and he has not managed yet to send anyone to prison, as his predecessor has done! You asked which predecessor, am I right? I hoped at least you heard about Leonte Răutu, madam! The chief ideologist of the 50s! Now he leads the School of Party Cadres, so his rival's way is clear! What do you mean by what rival? Who are we talking about? About Dumitru Popescu, a young wolf, arrogant and dangerous, why? Because he permanently improves the cult of the Comrade! Have you noticed that in the newspaper the Comrade's photo is getting bigger day by day? Do you live in a fool's paradise, madam?

Sorin Olaru is unlikely to have delivered such a risky speech standing in a crowded queue at a buffet outskied by the Homestead Party where there were even farm products that supplied the Comrade's meals. More likely, the monologue had been kept in Florinel's studio or in the two-room apartment; there, his standing was increasing faster than the welfare of the people, a subject debated during the class that he attended, namely the Scientific Socialism class; this would take further Sorin and Letiția in the future years.

However, in one draft of her novel, Letiția placed him here. And perhaps, in order to make the scene more dramatic, she introduced in the wooden panelling hall the Art Nouveau floral stained glass windows too, some young people with brutal faces, short haired and dressed in one size costumes that were swarming around the groups. Towards the end of Ceaușescu's rule, the



guys in the Victory Avenue are easily recognisable since they will be planted every ten meters from his home in Primăverii neighborhood to the Central Committee in the Palace Square. They were said to be abandoned and unwanted children, trained by the 5th Directorate of the Security, the Comrade`s guard Service. The lack of compassion that they would have been raised with made them fiercer in their loyalty than black Labradors, Corbu and Şarona that the Queen of England had offered the Comrade during her visit to Romania. Besides Elena, these dogs were the only beings that the Comrade trusted.

Only that in the early 70s, when the scene in Letiția`s novel happened, the orphan children of the Decree were still screaming, tied in the bedding soiled with faeces in the sinister orphanages because it had been only a few years ago since the decree had banned abortions. However, it would have been pointless to dismiss the boys in the Victory Avenue and bring them to a routine political information. In their silly minds, the eavesdropping was useless, and they did not need the microphones hidden under the lapels of the cheap suits since the walls of any institution concealed the ramifications of the listening stations.

Who did not know this would find it out in the rough days of December 1989 when the Romanian Television, calling itself Free, would show some shots of the broken listening devices in Bucharest institutions. Relu Morar, Letiția`s former colleague, the husband of her friend, Nana, would tell the two enthusiasts that the removed microphones shown on TV were probably obsolete and they would be replaced by updated versions.

The sensational revelations of the 90s mixed with her own more confusing memories the same as it happened to those who had lived under Communism.

Perhaps the listening station of the building would have been located on the last floor, the one originally meant for the servants, where Letiția and Sorin had hidden. But that was the least of their concerns. Sorin opened the packet of Marlboro bought from the buffet and after he had puffed out clumsily, he tucked the wet end of the cigarette into Letiția`s mouth, with a suddenly commanding movement which, like the light in his suddenly cold gaze, contradicted his usual way of being. While Letiția was looking around for an ashtray, his cheeks and ears flushed and his voice became uncertain, would she agree to meet one of the following days, in a quiet place, without alien glances that interpret?



Let's meet after all, why not? That's how her apathetic response may have sounded in her mind. She did not share anything related to her home with anyone, but in the morning she used to have deep dark circles and red eyes. What did her eyes see? They were blinded by the office boredom and the quarrels with Petru. The notes she made in her notebook under the marriage bed mattress would keep only the stressful creaking of the wooden floor.

So Letiția must have given Sorin an inexpressive look. Two neutral eyes that from now on will see more than her more excited mind will allow them. Neutral eyes, but warmed by the former friendship, the only feeling that neither suffering nor degradation, nor time touch if therefore you know how to protect it from the greedy mixture of the bodies. Friendship warmed the carelessness of the beginning and she would keep it in her memory surrounded by the intense dazzling yellow of the October foliage, by the excitement exploding in the colour of the misleading provisional summer. A gust of wind and there will be nothing but the wet black skeletons of the trees cleaned daily by the morning frost.

Taking her silence as a consent, Sorin checked his watch tellingly, wouldn't it be safer to go back into the room? In the penumbra of the corridor her disappointed eyes had blackened. She frowningly climbed down the narrow wooden staircase and the wide marble one the same as she would descend the stairs of some peripheral block of flats when Florinel was due to come back home.

In order to comfort her, Sorin had resumed his story about the past of the house.

Erected inside the former Princely Court, behind the Victory Avenue, near Dâmbovița quay, the building had two high storeys and a loft. Apart from the bedroom, only the large salon had been finished, upholstered in dark red with a lot of gold on the baroque mouldings and enormous Venetian mirrors. The architect intended it for future balls, chamber concerts and even small French plays. The rooms were spacious with very high ceilings. The blue stained glass windows with purple irises in the hall will be added by another owner, over several decades.

That unusually warm night of February 11, 1866, when a stinging rain had laid a damp fog over Bucharest, Cuza was woken up by Maria Obrenovici's frightened whispers, in his white and pink boudoir on the upper floor in a smell of French perfume and sex coming out of his canopy bed. After the extended party on the previous night he had slept less than two hours, he had a heavy



head feeling and bad breath and looked dazed at the revolvers and golden candlesticks that the conspirators were holding when they entered, one by one, through the wide open door. Maria Obrenovici had jumped out of bed and had hidden in the bathroom trying to cover her heavy breasts with the negligee while her hands were trembling.

The former officer Alexandru Ioan Cuza with mandate of ruler of the United Principalities for another six months, was examining them desperately. The Conservatives were there, as well as his irreconcilable opponents and former Liberal friends that had risked relations for him to be elected Prince the same day in Moldavia and Wallachia: consequently, they had made possible the provisional union of the two principalities through diplomatic cunning.

Cuza regretted in vain that he had disobeyed Bibescu's warnings, the chief of the Police. He had told him in advance that Brătianu and Carada who were still in Paris, had been courting for two years second-hand, impoverished, kingdomless princes in order to place the United Principalities between the network of the European monarchical families. And in the end they had decided on a Hohenzollern who, they hoped, could face the opposition of Russia, Austria and Turkey.

He shouldn't have given free hand to the conspirators, he should have exiled them all and become monarch for life! He pulled the bell cord until it broke, but no one showed up. He knew people had a price, therefore he should have expected the guard, servants and the butler to have been corrupted long ago. Now he was paying the price of Maria Obrenovici's palace and that of his confidant, Carol Liebrecht, equally impressive though, and also the business of the interest group around him that faded away in two hours of deep sleep.

He was resigned to being just a temporary pawn on the chessboard of the small European state born through cunning on Europe's fluid map, despite the ban of the Great Powers, Alexandru Ioan Cuza reached for his red silky dressing gown, he pushed the elegant porcelain chamber pot under the bed and signed his abdication on the corner of a secrétaire, making room for Carol of Hohenzollern.

History will avenge me! allegedly would have shouted Prince Cuza if in his teens he would have read like Letiția Branea and Sorin Olaru *How the Steel Was Tempered*, *The Young Guard* and other Soviet novels released by the Publishing House The Russian



Book led in the 50s by a follower of Zhdanov, Pavel Lukaci who later became Eleonora Oprea`s protector. The blind history was indeed to avenge Alexandru Ioan Cuza. 83 years later, Petru Groza, the last descendant of the German dynasty of Hohenzollern, which had covered the Balkan past of the country with its coat of arms, would also sign on the corner of a secrétaire the abdication act, after he had seen the revolver bulging in his prime minister`s pocket. Groza`s real local bosses Ana Pauker and Dej and their bosses, the Soviet counsellors, had not had to be present at the moment of abdication. Then, Stalin`s Russian Empire had pushed their borders to Vienna and still hoped to conquer the West, shrunk like the shagreen.

Living in the house on the Rhine, in Heidelberg where a plate indicated the apathetic passers-by that there had been living for the rest of his life a prince with the bizarre name Alexandru Ioan Cuza, impoverished, kingdomless and not of blue-blooded family, who had enough years to live and regret that the plotters had been one step ahead of him in the series of the coups d`état that would mark the destiny of the new country born under the Aquarius sign.

–I saw the plate about Cuza when I was in Heidelberg, whispered Sorin. But you know, madam, in many astrologers` views the fact that the Comrade`s zodiac sign, Aquarius, coincides with Romania`s will give him a great power over us? You have prejudices, Lety, astrologers` prediction is based on complicated mathematical calculations, it is a kind of astronomy! And in an atheistic state like ours, the Comrade receives daily along with the Security`s reports about people`s discontent, his biorhythm chart and the astrological forecast! There is a bioenergy therapist and astrologer in his group. The Comrade, who cannot bear to see churches, he demolishes them, hides them under the block of flats, celebrates Easter and Christmas at home only with his children, with traditional menu, ballads and folk songs.

It`s obvious that Sorin whispered this in Letiția`s ear in Florinel`s studio not on the marble staircase of the Party`s Headquarters that more than one hundred years ago Cuza had climbed down sent in exile.

Sorin would waste half of the time of their meetings with anecdotes about Ceauşescu. But he would not be able to foresee that the character of his stories would be the one who in the 1989, on Christmas, will shout: *history will avenge me!* before singing the



*Internationale* while the fifteen bullets prescribed even before the start of the trial, would hit his body corroded by age, diabetes and prostate cancer.

The story of the Party's Headquarters of the Sector 7 would prove to be more convoluted than Sorin told Letiția. She would try to untangle it twenty years later when she would keep wondering how she could sneak the coincidences between places and personal memories into her novel without seeming far-fetched or symbolic. For instance, you enter grudgingly a certain building, at a boring meeting, and all your future life will change from now on so slowly that it's impossible for you to notice.

Only too late, when the same building suddenly becomes part of your life, you'll try, as a matter of fact vainly, to understand: how did it happen precisely then and there? Why him?

Obviously, you won't understand anything: the more you'll get closer to something unidentified the more you'll experience an annoying feeling. And in fact, nowhere.

The house erected in the honour of Maria Obrenovici has been changing its owner for a century, passing from one person to another.

The last tenant, Caius Branea, Letiția's unknown uncle, had been arrested there in the fall of 1944, and imprisoned at Jilava, then followed the People's Court to judge him in the Trial of War Criminals.

Did Caius Branea, my uncle, really have ownership documents for the property? would Letiția ask herself twenty years later.

And she would find out that before Caius Branea a commissioner for Romanization had sojourned there, Vasi Stamatiu, a close friend of Horia Sima. It wasn't clear what had happened to Vasi Stamatiu right after Antonescu had abolished the Legionary Rebellion. Some rumors claimed that he had been imprisoned together with other legionary leaders at Malmaison, the Secret Service Prison on Plevnei street, that after the trial he had been sent to the battalions of Sărata and then to the front, in the front-line, where they had lost his track. Other rumours had it that he had been let to fled with his leader, Horia Sima, across the Danube in Bulgaria, and from there to Germany.



Caius Branea had been brought from the provinces as a Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs during Antonescu's government after the Legionary Rebellion, and he had been living in the former house of Maria Obrenovici for several years. However, Letiția wouldn't find his name on any legal act.

On the other hand, she would discover later at the State Archives, a certain Samuel Fischer registered as the owner of the building. Samuel Fischer seemed to have been part of the category that the Nazis called Jews with economic value (WWJ - wirtschaftliche wertvolle Juden). According to the law of assets control implemented on 9th September 1940 by Antonescu-Sima government, particularly developed against the wealthy Jews, the legionary commissioners sent their own police to arrest them for sabotaging the national economy and forced them to sell their firms and properties at a ridiculous price. The legionnaires competed with German businessmen who particularly came to Romania to take over the Jewish possessions in the "Aryanization" process.

While the property deeds were slowly issued in Romania, history was developing very quickly.

In her series of coincidences that she had no clue how to insert into her novel, Letiția had added that Samuel Fischer was the brother of Harry Fischer's grandfather.

After August 23, 1944, the Soviet Army Headquarters installed in Maria Obrenovici's former house. It was soon replaced by a central of the SovRoms, Soviet-Romanian enterprises particularly created to manage the trains with cereals, timber and oil and sent to the USSR paying the war debts. In the account of these debts would also go the National Bank's gold that during the war was kept in a cave near the monastery of Tismana during one of the five governors who would die in the '50s in the Sighet prison.

After a while, the SovRoms built special headquarters; in Maria Obrenovici's former parlour were held Soviet music concerts and Russian theatre performances under the auspices of the Romanian-Soviet Cultural Association. Then, the Soviet Army withdrew from Romania and Dej, not to risk anything, ordered the arrest of hundreds of thousands of potential discontent people including Victor Branea, Letiția's father. The Romanian-Soviet Cultural Association was abolished as well as the Publishing House the Russian Book. Pavel Lukaci, their leader, was appointed ambassador in Paris. When he returned as the leader of a newly



established institution in the Building and subsequently the counsellor of the Prime Minister Maurer, he had changed a little the spelling of his name: in order to highlight the Comrade`s new ideological orientation he signed his popular articles with Paul Lucaci .

The house built for Maria Obrenovici had become the headquarters of the Post for Foreign Affairs. In the stained glass hall and in the former parlour were put plywood desks: all the letters were received and sent here. Upstairs, the elite Department of the State Security with the task to Control of the Correspondence sweated blood.

Several years later, when Letiția`s unknown uncle, Caius Branea, the former Secretary of State during Antonescu`s government, which, miraculously, was still alive, though barely recognisable, was freed from Aiud prison to inhale the Bărăgan air of his forced settlement, the *thaw* had increased the flow of the correspondence with the West. The director of the Post for Foreign Affairs received together with the rank of general a new office and a more efficient technical equipment to control letters.

Dej died and Ceauşescu was elected. The competition between the institutions for Maria Obrenovici`s former house had been won by the Party Secretary of Sector 7, an activist of his new team.

These were uninteresting stories to Letiția who began to date Sorin in a city outskirts studio a month after the meeting mentioned above.

Meanwhile, the winter settled in, she arrived at their date with frozen feet, her boots were wet due to the brown snow ground in sugar-like clusters, after she had tried to keep her balance on the narrow mirrors of the ice tongues and had trembled in the bus station, waiting for trams and buses. Along the sidewalks the solidified silver grey snowdrifts of oxidised snow were lying coated with a thin frozen layer as a powdered sugar. Only the trees on the periphery still kept their branches doubled by frost and snow, and the sun in that frosty day projected their silver silhouettes onto the milky grey sky.

Caius Branea had remained just a faceless, unidentified name to Letiția, which she must avoid in her discussion with Gallocik, the chief of Cadres.



—When my father came back to my mother, this brother was already dead; I have never met him, so I have nothing to say about him..

Letiția's voice was shaking, although she had told the truth. Braneas's successor was staring at the tiny mouth with grey moustache of the chief of Cadres to avoid looking into his cold eyes and under the table, as usual, she had clenched her sweaty palms. Letiția mistook Caius for Traian and the other way round, the two unknown brothers of his father, most part of the Braneas' pictures had gone during the bombardment that had buried alive aunt Ștefi or during the house search after she and her mother had left to uncle Ion's.

Sorin has not heard yet the name of Vasi Stamatiu and he heard about Sorana Iovănescu without being interested in that she was a cousin of his mother Nelly, who died long ago. Discreet, as well as she educated him, Nelly Olaru didn't mention anything about the brothers Branea, some acquaintances of her youth who then had big problems, God bless them! you reap what you sow.

There was no doubt Nelly Olaru was right. Who hasn't got identity problems due to the bad file after August 23,1944? The plastic surgery fashion hadn't been launched yet, the one that absorbed fat and wrinkles, lifted flaccid skin and flat buttocks, shortened noses and chins, that increased penises and breasts, but they would perform plastic surgery on biographies.



### 5.3. Chapter 6 - Shifting and unsettled country

– How do you want to turn back time if the Russian tanks entered Hungary too even if they don't let themselves be stamped on like we do?

Virgil Olaru, once the economist of the British oil company Standard Oil, now the second accountant at ICRAI Găvana, a suburb of Piteşti, closes, disappointed, the cooler's door.

– Here we go again, you are talking nonsense in front of the child?! Nelly frowned. Who, besides you, does still believe that better days will come?

Sorin keeps playing chess on his own since his restless father has abandoned his position and has tuned the radio on Radio Liberty as he's always done at this time. The crackles sound like weapon shots, it jams more often since that Hungary thing, says Dad. Virgil Olaru puts his ear against the old Telefunken hoping to hear something and Sorin passes from one side of the chessboard to the other and plays fair and square both with the white and the black pieces, he keeps an eye on them, but he also understands what his parents are saying. He knows that the Soviet tanks have entered Budapest and boys a little older than him threw stones at them... „it is revolution in Hungary”, said his father, „why do you fill the boy's head with nonsense?” his mother upset. And at the newsreel before the movie they talked about the fascists and the imperialists who started the counter-revolution in Hungary, about the US imperialists who stood behind them and about the traitor Imre Nagy who would be punished as he deserves ...

Sorin moves now on the other side of the chessboard, he moves the black rook, the queen, the knight, does he checkmate himself? not yet, he would love to be in Budapest and throw Molotov cocktails at the tanks, but without being arrested and hung as it would happen to those boys! Do they keep them in jail until they become adults in order to hang them?! Do you realize what criminals they are?! Traitor Kádár who took the Russians' side, but the West? What's happening in the West? asks his father. Stop



listening to that bloody program, you'll lose your mind! his mother whispers. On Radio Liberty they bark because they need a pay check, only fools take it for granted and don't hold their tongue!

Nelly Olaru takes off her cap dampened by the outside rain, lucky that the way from school to home is short! It's been a while since she hasn't gone outside with her glass eyed fox fur around her neck, hood and hat to face the mocking gazes in the street, and in her round boxes on the closet she keeps the denim and calico clothes for summer, sprinkled with lavender. But she loathes her proletarian headscarf so that in the fall she covers her head with the brown cap or with the beige one and in winter she keeps her perm under the angora wool hat that a mummy knitted in the same favorite colours.

–Why are you faffing around the cooler? she scolds her husband. It's empty and it's a waste of space, I have told you when you have brought it! Not to mention the extra expense on ice! You should have refused madam Fischer politely, thank you, you are very kind, but we don't need it, the child is at boarding school and he comes only for holidays, my wife works extra hours, I'm on a diet, I eat less and fresh food, but for a big family this cooler would be a Godsend! Call a spade a spade, politely but firmly, not as you usually do; you kept company with them for some old stuff and then you didn't know how to thin out! What do you need their genuine coffee for? You already suffer from sleep disorder and take a fist full of Carboxin! What was the point of complaining to each other? Poor Traian helped them during the Rebellion so he couldn't do anything for their uncle, Samuel, that's it! And Fischer would have tried to save Traian from the Security but he hadn't succeed; why do we always keep coming back to what would have happened and never happened? Tempi passati! I have told you that when Fischer retires, they will be freed! Should you have warned them not to write from Israel as they all do when they go to the West, they forget that any letter that comes from *Abroad* is read with a magnifying glass here! Did you like it when they questioned you just before you received your postcard from Haifa ?! What are you saying? You were looking for your sawdust wine from MAT in the cooler, aren't you? If so, I remind you that last night you finished the last bottle...

Virgil looks at the peg, at the door, the pub is two streets away. But Nelly is right, what's worse in a lousy town than to be seen drinking at the bar in the noise of broken shot glasses and curses, in the stench of tzuika and unwashed bodies?



–I had bought more bottles, for God`s sake...

That`s all. That's all you can hear from him when he is in a rage. Virgil Olaru has never cursed. He raises Sorin, his adopted son, alike. The stomach pains will turn into gastritis, gastritis into an open ulcer, the ulcer into cancer. But not even when he was writhing in pain did the nurses and the devoted Nelly hear any curse.

–I`m sick of everything, he finally whispered to Nelly.

His healthy teeth that all his life he had been proud of gleamed grimly on his shrunken, shrivelled face, a scalp ready to dry.

Everytime Nelly remembered this moment she would always be equally surprised that her Virgil seemed not to fear death, he who had lived in fear most part of his life. He didn`t fear the Sacrament like the other dying and he really wanted to confess. But he wanted nobody than the Pious Sofronie whom he knew since he was a layman, his name was Corneluş Iovănescu, Nelly`s youngest cousin. When he got out of the dying man`s room, the Pious seemed confused and asked Nelly to send Sorin over to him more often.

But when did Virgil`s lifetime fear begin? Nelly kept postponing the answers to the later questions that her son hadn`t got to answer directly to the one he remembered pouring wine firstly, then soda in the glass always filled, staring at the chessboard and who kept his lips thinned by the age tight over the healthy teeth, but blackened by the three packs of Mărăşeşti cigarettes he smoke daily. Sorin will always remember Virgil Olaru standing on the porch of the house with a faded cap tucked over the grey hair, with the chessboard in front of him, the glass of molan by its side gazing at the small plum trees in the yard. Sometimes he muttered something about the destiny of this *shifting and unsettled country* to Nelly`s dismay, who hissed slowly: quiet down! quiet down! the neighbours! Then, with the intonation of a child who wanted to do a trick, Virgil excused himself for that: but it`s a quote from a chronicler, Nelly! Miron Costin! Neculce! You learnt about them in school!

Actually, the quote was from the less known Simeon Dascălu and Virgil hadn`t found it in his chronicle but in an article by Constantin Noica, among the pile of legionary publications- Axa, Buna Vestire, Cuvântul - which Costică Iovănescu, Nelly`s uncle



had subscribed to before the Rebellion. Virgil had liked the expression *shifting and unsettled country* and repeated it all his life, though he had no idea where he had taken it from.

On each visit he used to make in the Argeş places where, after 1947, the Olarus had wandered, Iulian Iovănescu, another cousin of Nelly that Virgil had dubbed the *Bolshevik spy*, boasted that one of his men cleansed the Iovănescu's file from Cadres of any trace of legionnaires. In the early 30s, after he had graduated in Law, Iulian Iovănescu had given Communists a hand in their trials where he had got after a former colleague, Milică Bodnăraş, had recommended him : a bit strange artillery officer that after an argument with a captain while playing cards would desert later in Soviet Russia.

Iovănescu's clan gossiped that Iulian had had a record at the Safety Police and that's why he kept a low profile when suddenly they heard he had answered promptly to Marshal Antonescu's call, *Romanians, cross the Prut River!* Very soon, his family, surprised that anyone suspected to be a communist went to war against the Soviet Union voluntarily, found out that the name Iulian Gh. Iovănescu was in the fall of 1941, the first on the list of missing. Later, some said that it had seemed strange that Iulian's mother didn't lose her temper, though she did everything by the book, alms and memorial services.

After the memorial service of the fall of 1944, Iulian Iovănescu had appeared in the city, safe and sound and high-spirited, political officer of the "Tudor Vladimirescu" Division of re-educated prisoners and signed as Iulian Gh. Iovănescu under the title of chairman of the Executive Committee of the Popular Assembly.

Iulian Iovănescu came at the meetings with the gun, as only a few years before the legionnaire Vasi Stamatiu had done too. And he spent the nights with all sorts of fellows from the city outskirts at parties where, after drinking too much, he began to boast about his friend Milică Bodnăraş. Those who didn't believe him convinced themselves that he didn't lie when he got a call from the empyrean of the Central Committee: „the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Popular Assembly is expected to come urgently to Bucharest, here is the Comrade Minister of Defence's chief of the Cabinet!”

Only that comrade Iulian Iovănescu was nowhere to be found, as usual. He was just changing the ballot boxes between them so as the Communists won, Virgil had commented venomously.



In the late '50s, Iulian Iovănescu was not as influent as in '45 anymore, but he had still kept in touch with the powerful men of the day. He showed up at Nelly and Virgil Olaru`s door, in one of his mysterious trips, “I`m coming over just a few minutes to see you; there was no way to let you know; when you get a phone, I`ll let you know in time.”

Paunchy, tall, arrogant and big mouthed, Iulian opened the car door chivalrously in order to let his trip companion get out of the car; there was never his Russian wife who was a teacher at Bălcescu highschool in Bucharest, but the eternal stumpy woman with short skirt over the plump buttocks, oxygenated hair and voice thickened from smoking.

–Marieta, my secretary and my guardian angel! He is Virgil whom I have been arguing with for a lifetime! However, Nelly and I have never argued, she is my dearest relative after my mother! Oh, silly me, there`s no need to make the introductions, you`ve met last time!

–He`s showing off because he comes to a pauper house and he has always had bad taste in women, Virgil commented meanly after he saw him leave.

But his eyes had gleamed at the Russian vodka bottles, caviar, cold cuts and jams bought from the shop for the Soviet personnel that was on Kiseleff in Bucharest, that Cousin Iulian, nicknamed by him „the Bolshevik spy”, had taken out of the car trunk.

Iulian didn`t lie that his dearest relative, apart from his mother, was his cousin Nelly. She was the only one from the Iovănescu clan who had treated him right when he had come on the Soviet tanks. They had spent their childhood together and, with her practical sense, Nelly Olaru had understood the direction things headed to faster than others, who turned their backs on Iulian and on the tiny Communist Party that after 23 August 1944 was seeking desperately new members.

When Virgil would hear later that Iulian bragged that he had cleansed their files of legionnaires, he would pass his hand over the unshaven beard against the hair growth, half already white and he would roll a cigarette, avoiding to light it as a sign that he wanted to contradict him. But Nelly would push his knee under the table „Should you start again with your memories at Dealu Monastery that then it`s you who will not sleep tormented that you haven`t kept your mouth shut in front of your Bolshevik spy!”



The future legionary leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu had been Virgil Olaru's colleague at the Military School at Dealu Monastery, an underachiever, said Virgil.

– My brother Anton and I redeemed our modest family situation by good grades. Others came from rich families, they had their club even if they didn't like to learn. But nobody seemed to notice Zelinski, that was Corneliu's name in the school register, his father hadn't changed his name into Zelea Codreanu yet! Virgil liked to remember.

Nelly beckoned to him: quiet down! quiet down! the neighbours she feared couldn't hear Virgil's stories, but Sorin who came there on holidays heard them. The child always enjoyed it when he came home. He played chess and backgammon on the porch with Virgil or he lingered with a book in his hand.

Two decades later, Sorin would tell Letiția what he heard from his father long ago.

– You know, Lety, that my father was Zelea Codreanu's colleague at a prestigious military school? Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, you know him, right?

The legionnaires' leader! The Captain! My father was the first in sports, but when it came to dexterity, his twin brother prevailed. I hadn't told you yet, Lety, that my father had a twin brother, Anton? I didn't meet this uncle of mine, he died young. In war ... in Tatra!

Sorin's bright eyes faded and he hesitated. He had parroted the text from his Cadre's sheet, but he realized as he was speaking, that he was hiding uncle Anton's captivity in USSR from Letiția. A second, but only one second he felt guilty, though what was his fault? Virgil and Nelly had taught him not to tell anyone what he heard at home, particularly family stories.

The Olaru twins, Anton and Virgil, hadn't met their father who had died in the other war. Their mother, a widowed schoolmistress sent the boys to the Military School at Dealu Monastery. The war orphans were exempt from military school tuition and with a degree on behalf of the Romanian Eton, the youngsters Olaru could step into life with an excellent education and influent relationships, thought their mother.



However, during the last grades, Virgil, the most shrimpy of the twins realized that he wasn't cut out for a military career and started in parallel the economic studies. Having his diploma in his pocket he left the army and with Traian Branea's help, his friend, he was employed by Standard Oil where his family had shares. With good prospects of gaining a promotion and married to a girl with a spectacular dowry, Anton Olaru, the most robust of the twins, would disappear forever in the mines of the Donbass or in the concentration camps in Siberia together with the entire Corp 1 of the Iaşi Army, taken as prisoner on 31st August 1944.

Although a week before 23rd August 1944, Michael I of Romania had arrested the marshal Antonescu and had turned weapons against Germany, the Soviets, the enemies of yesterday, today's allies, took more Romanians as prisoners until the early September.

Virgil Olaru would find out the news about his brother Anton about eight years later, contradicting each other: Anton Olaru had starved to death in the Soviet concentration camp: he had deserted and had gone to Japan, to the United States, where he was a coach; he deserted together with two other prisoners, but they had lost in the snow forest, they had starved to death or the animals had eaten them; he had married a deported Estonian and she had got on the island Kardla, near Finland, he was doing fine, but preferred not to write to his family anymore: he had died in a mine in an explosion: he had deserted by himself and his feet froze and gangrene set in and died in torments, he had married a guard woman of the women concentration camp and now he was a Soviet citizen etc.

How could you know if those who always came up with another story, claiming that they were together with Anton in the concentration camp weren't provocateurs sent to pump you for secrets? Nelly gave the skeletal men, toothless and with a hawking look that knocked suddenly at her door bread and a bottle of tzuika and sent them away in the blink of an eye. Virgil was convinced that his brother lived somewhere in the world, but he didn't repeat that to Nelly to avoid her disapproving gaze.

In their Cadre's autobiography, Nelly and Virgil Olaru had stated that Anton Olaru had died in 1945 on the Western Front, in Tatra. And they had taught Sorin to do that too.



Sorin gave Letiția a sideways look, but she didn't seem to have noticed his lying by omission as she termed Sorin's secrets in her notebook hidden under the mattress. She even tried to anticipate.

– Did they become friends? Did your father become friends with Zelea Codreanu? she asked him, raising on her elbow.

– Oh, no! What friendship!? I told you that everybody ignored Codreanu. My father used to say that that was why Codreanu then did everything he could to be worshiped! Okay, it was the age that lent itself to worshipping and many even believed he was inspired by the Archangel Michael! And after he was killed, for he had spoken about the sacrifice of life, about the Romanians' moral regeneration, they made him a second Jesus! Codreanu was killed before the trial by Carol's order, at least you know that, don't you?

– Something with a truck inside which they strangled many people? With a rope thrown from behind? Letiția asks shyly.

– Bravo, Lety, I see that you're better at history than at the actuality!

She chuckled, she tucked her nose in the sheet, she saw the young owner's yard and her with uncle Biță at the table, allegedly they were removing the kernels of the cherries for mother's jam, actually they kept telling more stories about people shot in the streets, on the station platform in Sinaia, with other people strangled secretly, there were only horrors happenings in the past, and now she was bored to death! Here's her mother coming from the kitchen, sweaty and with flushed cheeks.

– Why are you talking nonsense, Biță? Does Letiția need to know all these? What if she talked about those secret things at school? And what are you doing with my cherries? There's more than a half left!

– Don't worry, it's useful for her to find out more about the past!

Biță was caught red-handed and he rose from the table.

– I have to pack my suitcase, I have a train to catch in almost two hours, but Letiția is all yours! She is the Stakhanovite, she has broken rules over rules, put her on the panel as forefront of the production on a clipboard at the door, so the whole street can see her!

Biță went quickly upstairs to Letiția's disappointment and during mother's grumblings.



