

Buried Children

By Daniel Farcas

In an effort to increase Romania's population, the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu authorized Decree 770 in 1967 that criminalized contraception and abortion.

Abandoned and unwanted by their parents, thousands of children ended up in state orphanages where they were neglected and abused, and later become homeless on Bucharest streets. This is the journal entries of one of them.

This book is dedicated to the 3000 American Families that adopted Romanian orphans after the December 1989 Revolution.

Buried Children
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Chapter 1: Born in Hell

Sector 6. Orphanage Bucharest, Romania 1980's

“Never fall asleep in the basement”. They all say that.

“Vlad did it, and when he woke up everything was missing: the nose, the ears, two fingers...”

Vlad was truly disfigured, but he didn't say why, and if you stared too much at him he would whack you, and nobody had the courage to ask him about what happened in the basement.

It's pitch dark in the basement and the concrete floor is so cold that you have to keep walking or your bowels will start hurting and then in a week you're gone. The cold starts crawling inside you and you would like to lay down just for a moment and rest, and then you will get up immediately, but you don't do it because you know you're not going to have the power to rise from down there if you do.

Sometimes you fell asleep on your feet but you have to wake up immediately or the rats will come to gnaw your toes. You don't hear them but you know they watch you, there in the darkness and their belly is hurting of hunger too.

You throb! It seems you hear steps and the wizened old woman is coming down to get you out of this dark hole, but is not true, you deceive yourself and suddenly you feel the need to eat something, anything or your stomach starts to eat you. And what's the worst is that you don't know how much time has passed, sometimes you believe it has been weeks since you have been down here, or other times just few hours and you ask yourself how long the old hag is going to keep you locked this time. Did she forget about you? Or is she waiting for you to die?

You start to cry. “Cry as much as you want”, you're telling yourself in your mind, “...nobody hears you anyway”.

Some of us start shouting for help or kick the basement's iron door, but you only anger her if she hears the echoes, and then it becomes worse.

I like to start thinking about my life.

My memories are vague, I don't know if I was born at a particular moment or if I always existed in this orphanage. Soon I realized that I didn't represent a whole lot of

interest to anyone, my world was reduced back then to an immense room in which we slept, ate, survived and especially suffered and back then I didn't believe that there was anything outside of it. I remember the shock I felt when they took me outside the first time. I saw for the first time the sky, the trees, the ground, and the buildings... the world outside as it was.

And so, I was born in a world where nobody wanted me: my parents, my relatives and even I didn't ever want to exist. But what did I know back then? Whoever was supposed to love me and protect me, they didn't, and they just buried me there in this graveyard of my childhood, with rotten carpets and cigar-smelling drapes, and forgot all about me.

But even here nobody wants you and you know it because they make you suffer, and that is when you realize that life is suffering, and death is the end of suffering. That is how you begin to imagine how you are going to kill yourself, how would that be like, nobody will mourn you anyway.

But you don't do it because eventually the basement door opens and for a moment you see the light at the end of the tunnel even though in it is the old woman's silhouette that we call Mama.

Outside, it is warm and bright and you wonder yourself why you have you been left down there for so long in the darkness. You step towards the bright light that intoxicates your eyes and you hate her, your jailer, with all your heart. The old hag that locked you up in that black hole helps you step over the door's big iron threshold and says:

"Oh, poor you, what happened to you..." and then Mama kisses you forehead while you are dark blue and benumbed of cold, with red eyes from the lack of sleep.

This is how they like to be, with one hand they pat you and with the other they slap you. And it works... you always feel closer to the people that beat you, you love that wizened old woman as if she was not the one that put you in that hell.

As you go back in the room, the others look at you with pity, they all know how it is like in the basement, in fact the basement is the first thing they remember and the first thing they want to forget.

You are sleepy and all you want is to fall asleep, but you are not getting away that easy because they are coming: Horse, Blackie, Crow, Scabby, Burned, Nicu, Spot, Tuca, Mariuca, Carrion, Nelu, Vlad, Jail, Crazy, Stammered, Sleeper and One Eye, and they too

like to hurt you, because this is the way they have been taught, it is the only joy they know. We don't have names, or if we do, we don't know them. We only know the nicknames that others give us.

How old were we? I don't know that, but I know we didn't know how to count anyway.

Finally, later on, when we fall asleep, the old hag followed us even in our childish dreams.

The old woman is evil but the Janitor is worse.

The Janitor is an old sailor that lost all his life savings gambling. You need to run away from him or he will whack you with the first thing he lays his hands on, that is how One Eye lost his right eye when he got hit with the rake. During the night he comes and whacks you in your sleep and you wake up in the morning with the clogged blood on yourself and you wonder what happened.

Back then everything looked normal and you accepted it, this is the way things are and people like us couldn't do anything else than survive even though those moments will hunt you all your life and you don't know it yet. Later you realize you want to take revenge on those people that wretched and hurt you for so many years and did not let you have a normal life, but you can't, because this is how pain is, this is how life works.

You become yourself one of the demons that tormented you for so many years and start torturing others because now you become one of them and you like it. But even here, there is hope, not a lot, just enough to make your life feel a little more bitter. We don't believe in that merciful and gracious God that the pastor is preaching about on Christmas, we don't believe in the God that protects the innocents, but we all pray for a mother.

Sometimes a young woman enters the room and she looks at us and we look at her and ask ourselves: What does she want? She leans over and pats one of us and gives him a candy, and then we all plunge and cling to her neck and yell: "Mamiiiiiii....." She hugs all of us and then she starts to cry. Later we hardly let her go and she promises us that she will return but we all know that she will never come back. Who wants to come here again?

This is what hurts the most, to see what is missing from your life, your heart starts to cry. In fact for people like us, ignorance is bliss. You realize that not everybody has sad

memories that they don't want to remember. Some people have the most beautiful stories to tell, with parents and siblings, and friends and soft beds in homes by the beach.

Suddenly, the hate entrails you, and you realize that everything depends on luck.

You could be born in one of those families and have parents, and live the dream they call a normal life.

Sometime you start to hurt yourself just to be sure that you still feel something. Tuca's forearm is her diary of self-mutilation, she cuts herself after each suffering.

In the morning, the Janitor comes and he is looking for little girls, usually he chooses Tuca maybe because she is the oldest girl or maybe because she got used to it and she doesn't cry and scream anymore. He picks her up and puts a lollipop in her mouth and then locks himself with her inside his closet, and after a while he comes out holding her hand and pats her head and gives her another lollipop. This is how the girls begin fearing that closet, when they see how bad Tuca hurts when she gets in there.

One morning when she came out of the closet she was hurting so bad that she was praying to die just to feel a little bit better.

But what we are all afraid of is the old paper press machine, made of wood, iron, steel and brass. The Janitor used to put our hands in the machine and spin the lever till he would hear cracking sounds.

"If you cry and scream, I'm not going to hear them crack..." he used to say, "...just be quiet till I hear the cracks."

Spot was disfigured by the children living over the other side of the fence, they threw a brick to his head and he was left with this big white spot that wouldn't grow hair, which is why we call him Spot.

Burned had a kitchen accident when his drunken father spilled boiled oil on his face. His mother brought him here after that and she promised him that she would take him back home shortly, but she never wanted to see him again.

For kids like that, there is no one that will take them home, not even The Unclean One, or this is what the priest told us.

Jail's father went to jail because he killed his mother, Jail was still hoping that one day he would come back and take him home.

Blackie and Crow were sisters, they came here when they were young but they still

remembered living in a tent with lots of cows. Their skin was dark but their eyes were bright green.

Carrion had this skin disease that made his skin fall like flakes, nobody wanted to touch him or talk to him, and he was always sitting in the corner.

Crazy was really crazy, even the old hag and the janitor were afraid of him sometimes.

He would get this demented glow on his eyes every time he was about to do something insane.

Nelu was deaf. I don't know if he became deaf after he got here or if his parents brought him here because he was deaf. But he was deaf. He was always carrying with him a matchbox full of flies, he had this weird dexterity and he could catch flies in his closed hands and put them in his matchbox.

Sometimes he gave the box to people when they asked for a match to light up their cigarettes.

Nicu didn't have that name in the beginning, but we started calling him Nicu because he looked a lot like Nicolae Ceausescu, some people were saying that he might be his grandfather since Ceausescu's sons slept with a lot of women. And, now, every time Ceausescu was on television we used to yell at him: "Your grandpa is on TV!" He even started to wear this dirty and absurdly oversized suit that he found later, picking through trash on the quiet street.

We did that so much that Nicu started to like it, and believe it, and he forgot his real name or at least he was confused when he was called by the name he had before he became "Nicu".

We were children, growing without love and surviving with just bread and water. But one day we grew up.

Chapter 2: Expulsion from Inferno

My sin was that I was born there, in that hell that I never imagined I could run away from. But even the underworld ejects something sometimes, just to let others know it's there, close to them.

“Vlad jumped the fence!” the Janitor yelled at the old hag coming in to get his cudgel. “What?” I throb quietly from the nostalgic liturgy in which we all fell sometimes, contemplating our own existence.

The Janitor never found him, Vlad ran for hours.

He was the first one to run away from the orphanage, before any of us even ever conceived the idea of escaping this bottomless pit of misery. He did well begging especially because he looked like a hopeless child, exactly what people like to see when they give money to beggars.

I couldn't jump the fence but I ran away from the hospital. What got me to the hospital? I can't remember, but I vividly remember walking threw these empty foul-smelling insalubrious corridors made out of cement echoing the heartbreaking screams and cries of babies tied to their cribs and banging their heads against the walls.

It was dark and there was nobody in that building with broken light bulbs: the kids were left alone in there. I walked towards the light coming from a window and found some stairs and then finally got out through the backdoor and breathed my freedom for the first time. I jumped on a trolleybus, sat down and got as far away as I could from that place.

I remember the first time I saw the downtrodden communist city with its thousand grey tall apartment buildings erected sad and depressed as in a recap of my gloomy dreams, build relentlessly by huge cranes with their iron arms burning in a silver colorless afternoon sun.

People with depressed spirits and emptied of their soul were looking at me with bleakness in their eyes. Families kept in darkness by the everyday rolling blackouts and in the cold by the useless freezing water heaters that never worked. Lightless streets deserted in darkness at dusk.

People fear the beggar, the soul who holds out his hand to a better world hoping for

crumbs of happiness coming from above. I see them, staring at me out of the window or in the subway, in silence and resentment. They rather raise dogs and cats than street kids.

They gather themselves in long lines in front of stores waiting to buy milk and bread, meat and eggs. They would stay in haunted silence in these lines for hours fueled by the hope that the food won't run out by the time they finally make it inside the store and also fearful of leaving empty-handed. The shelves are empty, the meat is scarce, and their faces are unpainted.

They can't complain to anyone or they will be arrested by the communist militia.

Sometimes, I just stay there and look at them passing by, a mother in a hurry, a guy with a motorcycle smoking nervously a cigarette, a really old couple walking lonely in silence, a drunk.

Spot once articulated his thoughts to me: "Look at these people, they only care about the roof over their heads. We are like an accident, a wreck that they slow down to look at. They just enjoy staring at our suffering; it makes them feel better about their own grim life. They are the real monsters, it's morbid and macabre. Sometimes I am amazed I can still take it..."

I guess their indifference toward us breeds resentment towards them later.

We try to stay away from the gypsies. They are poor and underprivileged like us but people hate them and they barely get any money when they beg, they have to steal.

Gypsies have their own language and beautiful girls with sad eyes.

We didn't have people that were friends, the stray dogs were our best friends, especially the puppies. They don't judge you; they don't know that you have been abandoned by society. They just see you for you, a friend.

The Bandit was this one big stray dog. Dogs can be found on any street in Bucharest, but this dog was really big, mean and strong. We called him The Bandit because he used to stay behind the butcher's shop door and snatch the meat right out the clients' grocery bag. Every time I used to see that dog I would freeze with fear and try to back away slowly, so he would not feel my fear, chase me and bite me. Lots of times I took my

jacket off just to have something to give him to bite in case he would attack me. He also had this loud mean bark that would paralyze you with fear.

Back then, each one was afraid of the militia and the secret police that was called securists. There was this one fat cop that everyone called Fatty, to whom we, the beggars in the North Railway Station, paid a part of what we got from the people's kindness. He only took bills and left us to keep the coins. I didn't know how things were working there in the beginning till he hit me in the back of my head with his big rubber baton. I instantly got the idea but my head hurt for a week after that.

Fatty was obese, almost bald and you could tell by his eyebrows that he was hairy as a bear under the dark blue uniform. He had one skinny son that he was driving to school and picked from school every day in his militia car with his lights and siren on.

He spent most of his time in a local bar, eating grilled ground meat rolls made from a mixture of beef, lamb and pork when he was not in the brothel next door spending our money on young peasant's girls freshly arrived in Bucharest from the country side, looking for a "better life".

And then, there was this really old woman. She was alone or maybe she had grandkids or something. We called her the Ghost, because she was always dressed in black as if she was mourning someone and she was very quiet.

She brought spoiled food to the church: old eggs, rotten meat... She asked you to say "Bodaproste" for her sickening offering which means: "Thank you and God forgive your dead ancestors".

People are evil, they want to see us eating their spoiled food and they want to see us getting sick. They bring us foods they don't want to throw in the garbage. "Let's give it to the homeless kids, they will be happy to eat anything..."they think in their mind and then they give you plates with inedible meals that smell and look bad. I just take them and tell them that I'm going to eat them later.

Somebody even gave me painted eggs four weeks after the Easter.

"Ungrateful!" they all yell at you, upset that you don't eat their foul smelling moldy pastries, "This is why you are homeless and nobody wants you! You are not listening! I'm not going to give you food or money again!" they scream while playing the act of the wounded Good Samaritan.

“I’m just trying to help an ungrateful homeless child...” they whine to the others around them.

They don’t fool me ...or God...maybe the others! Most of the time they fool themselves. Crazy got sick one time... He got sick really bad!

He lay there in the underground for weeks. His belly was hurting all over and he cried and screamed, and we all thought he was going to die, but he didn’t. He didn’t eat anything for a week but we brought him lots of good foods, he just lay there...and then one day he crawled out on his own.

Crazy still looked ill, but we knew he was now getting better.

“I knew it was spoiled...” he broke the silence with the first words he said in weeks, “...but I didn’t know it was so old.”

We were just happy to have him back.

“I had to eat, they were all looking at me...they would have made me feel guilty if I hadn't eaten...” he confessed to us.

After he got stronger, he went back deep into the sewer, to that abysmal place where all the city’s piss and feces are fermenting for years and he came back with a jar of that yellow- brownish zymotic poison. I used to get sick to my stomach just for thinking of it.

Somehow he gave the guy who poisoned him that nightmarish spunk. I didn’t know it until I saw the guy in church, all his skin was purple-beige, dark and frightening looking.

“You did this?” I asked Crazy.

He looked back at me with his still diseased red-yellowish eyes and didn’t say anything.

He kept it to himself, but I knew he did it.

The guy died two weeks later. I got an empty feeling inside me that day, a void for the first time in my life, not because I was sorry for the guy but for realizing how fragile life really is.

The food they brought to the funeral was good, though.

Vlad had fallen prey to the aurolac’s hallucinogenic pleasures of the huffing silver

spray paint from a plastic bag that lets you inhale the vapors and gets you high... it's was the cheapest drug on the market, very popular with the people living on the streets or underground. The first phase is disinhibition and sleepiness, just like alcohol, but if you inhale too much, you can get delirious especially in the beginning. It's the morning after that gets you addicted, I mean the squeamishness, the vomit, the headache, the apathy, and the depression will make you get the next dose. Nobody can stop using aurolac, they just go to the next more powerful drug.

When you take the drug, you don't need food or water, but then hunger strikes even though you are in that dream world.

The drug takes its toll and you have to eat something, anything. You suck and bite your finger, just like a baby is sucking milk from his mother's nipple, but you're eating your own flesh. The blood flows down your hand in little stripes, and then you rip with your teeth whatever meat is left on your finger and swallowed everything... the skin, the nail, the muscles. What remains is the white, shiny, clean bone. Soon it is going to dry out and fall off.

The silver dust is keeping you alive but in the same time is sinking you in the ground, Bucharest is pulling you underneath in the hidden city canals.

I feel I'm not like the other orphans; I don't like their vulgarity and I don't share their hate for the world. They've seen that in me already... and they want to crack me open now.

I don't think of myself as being special, just different, but aren't we all?

Beneath the street of Bucharest there is a quagmire that people call "The city of the living dead" made out of intricate subway tunnels and passages where homeless children cook, eat and sleep among steaming wet pipes that shields them from the cold outside. There is no law here, not the one from above at least.

We are built and united by suffering, misfortune and horrible memories of our own life that are going to hunt us forever. The portals between worlds are the manhole covers that drop you into a parallel reality where cockroaches are creeping around and the heavy musty air grabs your stomach and squeezes it until your brain starts to hurt.

You can find your place in there, but you have to reclaim it from the rats, pests, billions of worms and human dejections. In these catacombs we all finally find each

other, waiting to die.

We all need somebody to protect us, and if we don't have that someone, we will invent him: a parent, a big brother, God.

Carrion created an underground shrine to Jesus and decorated the dark walls with scripture verses written in white chalk on the black candle-smoked cement. He has been baptized in church by Christians that promised him a place in heaven. With that came his godparents, a young couple that he spoke about with great affection and respect.

He put up all these reddish-brown pictures of his baptism that none of us knew anything about next to a big religious icon stolen from a church. He used to call it his "window to heaven".

"You can't really steal anything from God" was his excuse for the appropriated artifacts, as in nothing belonged to man, everything belonged to God in the end.

"I am waiting for Jesus to clean me! He healed the lepers!" Carrion said with his eyes full open and full of hope staring at me blindly. "He healed the lepers!" he repeated ecstatically while throwing himself on a big dirty mattress. I was wondering how he managed to get this through the small manhole.

Carrion's full beard came, since I last saw him in the orphanage, and he is now tall in stature and has long hair. Dressed in those dirty ripped clothes he really looked like The Savior. It also inspired some respect, partly based on the fact that he believed so strongly, partly because he just might go insane at any moment and strike us in the name of the Lord.

I was speechless since I didn't know what I should say without offending him.

"The cross Jesus carried is nothing like the cross you carry. You are as bad as it gets." Vlad yelled at him and then turned to me, whispering: "He has seen the Oracle, and the Oracle gives him this vision that Jesus will heal him one day. He hasn't stop talking about that since then".

"But, hey, if you get people to believe the stories in the Bible...you can make them believe anything," Vlad said to me as if he was talking for himself.

"Well if God made Carrion, he has to be a pretty messed up God! He has a pretty sick sense of humor," he added.

“Jesus loves everyone equally” Carrion replied talking with a rough priest like voice. “This is what you want? To be equal to them? You are better than them, Carrion...” he replied fast.

A silent tension started to rise between them as they looked deep into each other’s eyes.

"Who is the Oracle?" I changed the subject.

They looked at me like they didn’t understand the question or as if I was already supposed to know some universal well know truth.

“The Oracle is not a person, it is a place, which is kept secret by a blind man who calls himself The Guardian.” Vlad explained while Carrion turned his back to us and left. The confrontation lost its momentum.

Vlad turned towards Carrion’s chamber and shouted:

“All those religious stories are for the rich. If Jesus had loved you he would have given you some parents by now.” Vlad was furious at Carrion while throwing himself in an improvised bed that he made out of multicolored garbage discarded pillows.

"Oh Jesus is so great. Every word I say from now on is Jesus!" he concluded for himself. "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" he said quickly then he took a short break and looked at me and he started again using a prophet voice "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"

“This is my church!” said Vlad proudly after a little while, showing me his room full of old lifting weights that he probably got from the city trash.

“Where is this Oracle?” I asked him.

“I have this idea...” Cray interrupted me jumping in the conversation while coming down the manhole“...that this is the lowest level that man can reach, you know: the sewer.” He threw his right hand in the air with a bad temper. “As you go up, first floor, second floor life gets better, like heaven” raising his hand and eyes more and more, and then he lit up a cigarette out of nowhere.

“When did he start smoking?” I remember thinking for myself.

“Don’t listen to him, he is an informant for the Romanian secret police” Carrion jumped in, smiling. I laughed. We were all relaxed now.

“Do you know anything about Scabby?” I asked Vlad.

He left his head down and his smile suddenly disappeared.

“He died a month ago... You know how he was picking up his scabs of his wounds and never let them heal to impress people with his blood draining down his legs when he was begging in the subway? After a while the wounds refused to heal any more and they were growing bigger and bigger. Some people told him he had cancer,” Vlad answered while he began washing his clothes in an improvised bucket made out of a garbage can cut in half.

There was a brief moment of silence while all of us tried to remember our last moments with him.

The silence was soon broken by Vlad.

“But let me tell you about Mariuca! A week ago, I was in the Uniri Square minding my own business, you know... begging for money, when I saw her all dressed up holding a new born baby in her arms and with a guy, I guess her husband or something, kind of peasant looking young man.“ Vlad was really trying to get me in the story.

“I go to her: Hello Mariuca. How are you? You know... and she is all acting like she doesn’t know me” he said raising his hand in the air sarcastically like asking: What’s her problem?

“It’s me Vlad! But she is like: I don’t know you! Leave me alone!” and he mimicked her expression.

“And then the guy she is with start asking questions: Who is he? How come he knows you name? Is he the baby’s father? Like I was her secret lover of something, and then he started to hit her. Bang! Again bang!” he said simulating the punches in the air.

He accentuated his last words: “While she was still holding the baby...everyone there was looking!” and he stood there waiting for my reaction to the whole thing.

It was a late autumn when Burned died, he was in Blackie’s arms but he died happy with a big smile on his face. We were all there around him surrounded by candles and in the silence that lies beneath the streets at night.

“Your mama came today from that village far away in the mountain to see you.” I told him trying to stop myself from crying.

“Is that true? My mama came for me?” he asked us with his eyes closing slowly down. We all nod our heads.

“Yes, but she didn’t want to wake you up, and then she hugged you while you were sleeping, and there were tears in her eyes and she said she was going to come back soon... she just went up to get some candy and chocolate for you” said Blackie weeping quietly while gently patting his hair, “You better rest now, so she will find you well rested when she is coming back.”

“You should have waken me up...I don’t want to fall asleep until she is coming back...” he said gently.

He looked at all of us one more time and stared at Spot when he spoke his last words: “See, I told you she is going to come! She loves me!” He died shortly after that in Blackie’s arms. We all stood motionless and silent for an hour.

And that is how we lost Burned. Later some people told us that he had been hit by a speeding car and that the driver didn’t even stop to take him to the hospital when he saw it was a homeless child. He crawled for a half a mile to get back in the sewer tunnels and that’s where we found him.

“There is no justice in society and even if there is, it has nothing to do with what is right!

Burned used to say. He reminded us of Spot later that day.

“It’s all pointless. Our whole existence, we are just shadows from the underworld...we are not real” he continued.

“Stop reading those books. They are going to poison your mind and just make everyone feel miserable” snapped Vlad at him.

Vlad, Spot, Carrion and Crazy were the only ones that could read and write. Crazy was actually trying to forget how to read, because he believed that he already read too much for his entire life and he thought he would become too smart somehow.

Vlad was always writing on his manuscript and never left anyone read it, he was very psychotic about even letting anybody get close to his bunch of dirty yellow paper glued together and tied with different colored strings.

Carrion was only reading “The Good Book” and Spot was reading anything since he found a lost library card in the streets. The librarian knew the guy on the expired card

wasn't Spot, but she took a liking of his love of literature and lent him books.

We buried Burned in the dead of the night, under a weeping willow in a public park in Bucharest, close to a high school hangout. He always told us that he wanted young girls to come by his grave so people would think of him as a big lecherous womanizer. Carrion wanted to administer the last rites, although Burned was not Christian and Carrion was not a priest.

Vlad opened a bottle of vodka and stuck the bottle with its neck down in the ground and whispered mournfully "One last drink!" then he recovered the bottle very fast and started drinking.

We covered everything with leaves. Next day it started to snow anyway, and it covered everything in white.

Witnessing his death was one of the most profound tragic experiences that we all shared. Burned's loss frustrated all of us, and his disappearance became an unspoken subject as if we were afraid to acknowledge that it could ever happen to us.

No one really dies anyway in this world. Your life is not yours, it is made from bits and pieces of memories of people you love and hate. You are a blend within everyone that ever existed in your life, you just believe that you are you.

Often I used to stop by his grave, sit on a bench and talk to him and let him know what was new with all of us.

Chapter 3: Where dreams collide

Tuca used to feel her pain the worst of us all. I remember walking with her through the old broken Bucharest streets, aimless, lost in the maze created by the old dirty houses with tumultuous histories. Those sad deteriorating bourgeois houses had been confiscated in the spirit of socialistic patriotism by Ceausescu's regime and filled with boorish peasants drafted into the capital's new industrial units.

She suddenly stopped in the front of an old rusty iron gate that she'd been looking at for a year now. The house looked deserted, the yard was choked with herb growing through the cobblestone pavement. There was a very old oak tree leaning over the roof and a neglected large stone fountain filled with leaves and muddy water.

I turned back intrigued and as I was getting closer to her when she whispered to me:

"I used to live in this house till it caught on fire, that is when they took me to the orphanage" she stopped for a moment touching with her fingertips the fence grating, "...I remember the gate and the house, I lived here a long time ago..."

One of the outside walls of the house looked really black with soot above the windows. "They took grandma to the hospital but they didn't brought her back to me. They said I

had to stay at the orphanage...just for a little while...till she gets better..."

I looked at her scared as I saw tears rolling down her puffy cheeks from her blue beautiful eyes.

"Let's stay here and wait for my grandmother, maybe she came back..." she said very peacefully.

"I always wanted to run away and join the circus..." I told her to ease her pain but she didn't listen. I used to make her laugh in difficult times but not now.

She stood there, still. Waiting for hours, until a young couple finally walked out of the house and then we left. She knew them, Tuca was sure that they had started the fire so they could move in their place.

That day I felt someone else's pain like never before and that made me feel in a way stronger. I still have that blurred image of her in my mind, a beautiful skinny young girl dressed in boy clothes leaning against the metal fence of her grandmother's house.

We used to talk down there in the sewer about a lot of things, trying to make sense of us and our meaning in this hopeless world.

“When you’re dreaming... What are you dreaming of?” Tuca took us by surprise, one night, before falling asleep.

“I, I, I... keep having this dream. The, The, There... is angel with a white dress and blonde hair floating towards me, whispering: My child, my child...” said Stammered.

Stammer started to smoke recently, to make himself look tough, and he was sitting under the manhole waiting for cigarettes half smoked that people sometime throw down the holes.

“Wha, Wha, What are you dreaming of Vlad?” asked Stammered looking at him through the smoke.

Vlad leaned his head against his dirty side of the wall and looked up to the moonlight and spoke.

“I dream of a shepherd house in a village up in the mountains, I know I was a born there in a family just like my father and my forefathers before me in an old settlement. It’s night and there are alphorn calling out in the evening as the flocks return to their pen. I am a shepherds' child coming home tired from working in the field that day.”

He closed his eyes and continued indulging himself in the story:” The sky is crystal clear and the stars twinkle and the moon feels warm although there is a cold breeze as is getting late into the summer. The sky is dark but the clouds are pure silver. There is a fine brownish dust into the valley raised by cattle and oxcarts.

Everybody is serene and contempt because we know that we are going to have a good harvest this year. A beautiful peasant girl is passing me by holding a wicker basket. She has big warm eyes and long silky brown hair. It seems that she doesn’t notice me but her heart is burning with love for me. She cannot wait to meet me after the whole village is falling asleep into the night. We have a secret meeting spot in the forest close to a whispering spring. I am waiting for her and she comes running to me, breathless, we spend the whole night in each other’s arms for the rest of our life.” Vlad finished while hugging himself with passion.

We waited for a moment as we all said goodbye to the beautiful pictures he painted in

our minds, then we all looked at Crazy in the same time.

“You want to hear my dream?” Crazy said melancholically laughing.

“My dream is not beautiful like yours is a dark inescapable nightmare that my mind created just to be able to survive another morning” and he continued:

“There is this road covered in mist with no sun but just enough light to see where you are stepping that everyone is traveling on. People go in one way or the other; nobody knows what the right way to go is but they just keep going.

Their clothes are wooly, dirty, loose fit and they smell. Nobody wants to go anywhere but they cannot stop because others are coming from behind and push them to go on. It is quiet, you can only hear the boots stomping in mud or maybe once in a while you hear a lost child screaming for his mama or old people coughing. They are godless, faceless and enshrouded in blackness and grief that is clinging onto them. Sometimes I see this childless insane woman, holding a puppet baby in her arms and talking to him.

I was born there on this road, I remember we sit there for a while just enough till I learn to walk and then we were all on the road again. Before we left, my mother carved my name in this tree along the road, an old oak. She said: “People should have a cross also where they were born, not just where they died.”

And then we walk for a while, I cannot remember for how much but along the way I lost my mother. She said: “Keep going, I just need a little bit of time to rest for a while and I will catch up with you.” And she cries and I cry but we both know that this is the last time we are going to see each other.

In the end I arrive back to the tree, the one I was born next to. Then, something happens. I look in a puddle and I see my reflection but it's not me is an old man at the end of the journey. And as I fall down in the mud looking at the cross my mother carved in the oak tree for me. My only thought is “It all has been in vain!”

“Ho, Ho... How about you Blackie?” asked her Stammered.

“You want to know how I got by Stammered?” Blackie said crying. “I keep telling myself that this life is a stupid nightmare, and one day I'm gone wake up surrounded myself by my mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, and they are going to tell me that all has just been a bad dream” she yelled at all us angry that we dare to ask her.

The whole underground went into a funeral silence, even the sound of the cars

passing above us stopped for a moment, while Blackie was crying in her sisters' arms.

“You know that is not gone happen. You will still be here tomorrow” said Vlad cruel after some time.

“We all have parents. Maybe they are up there looking for us!” Crow said to comfort her sister’s sorrow.

“Look at me! I have nothing to lose!” Vlad snapped frantically, “They took everything!

What else can they take? Who would want me know?”

“You take that hate! And you hold it in you and then one day, one day, one day you die” Crazy said, hopeless.

Everything froze in time. Our eyes called us together.

“Let’s make a pact here and now to kill our parents, to kill all those people that put us in here and make us suffer. That should be our dreams...” Vlad spoke again after a moment of silence.

He pulled out his knife and cut a straight line on the back of his right hand and then he grabbed my hand and did a smaller cut. I wanted to stop him but it was too late now and he already pressed our cuts together by squeezing my hand.

“Blood brothers! Our blood now flows in each other!” he yelled as I recalled vaguely Vlad telling me very excited about this ritual that he saw in a movie once, something about warriors.

“We have grown as little puppies without a mother, without protection with no one to care for us. It's time to make that bitch pay! Because this dog can bite now!” Crazy allied with him putting his hand forward so he can be cut too.

“Back then when we were children it was their time to make our life good, now it’s our time to make their life a nightmare!” he continued while grabbing my hand in his.

“Yes!” said Stammer passionately after he got cut too, “We...We are blood brothers!” he sworn loyalty to each other through our blood oath. I don’t know about them but my cut started to hurt in a real weird way.

"Deal," One Eye said, extending his hand to seal the deal.

“Well, we have to go back to the orphanage anyway, they have our files, we can find out who our parents are.” I said.

“I want to be a blood brother too!” Tuca jumped towards Vlad. Vlad enthusiasm stopped suddenly and we all got quiet.

“No! It’s only for men!” he took his knife and put it back in his belt.

Tuca was frustrated but she knew he was very firm in his decisions and ideas about manhood so she didn’t say anything about it. An awkward silence lied now between us.

“Let’s do it tomorrow! Let’s go to the orphanage.” Crow asked us, but it was too late.

As soon as the inspiring, emotional moment had passed, we all quickly returned to their beds. The meaning of what just transpired was not lost, merely postpone for now.

We all went to sleep after that with our own thoughts. I clean my wound with clean water and soap.

We didn’t go to the orphanage the next day, we were all too afraid to face our demons.

Chapter 4: The Oracle

Sometimes you see other beggars in the subway, younger or older, and you don't know anything about them. You look at them, they scrutinize you from a distance.

You're asking yourself: Are they after your begging spot?

We are all there waiting for the 5:20 PM subway trains on Friday, that's when the most people are getting paid. Everybody feels happy, they are generous to us. On weekends, when I see a couple, I go straight to him and ask if he can spare some change, most of the boys give me something just to impress the girl, especially if they are on their first date.

You have to be smart if you want to survive in this apocalyptic world of ours.

I like the bus, the trolley, the subway, and the underpasses: anything that catches them on the spot with no way to turn and run from the reality. If you look deep into to their eyes you will feel their shame, they will give you something. The soul knows that the rationality stinks, it knows that the emotions and feeling are led astray into a dark and deserted place there, alone. It's ugly.

I remember this young beggar...he must have been 10 years old. I always wanted to talk to him, to find out his story, to find out how he lost both his legs. To me, he was looking like a broken toy, riding a skateboard to get from one place to another. He looked clean; he must have had a family somewhere, maybe a mom. I wouldn't have traded places with him, but I envied him somehow.

There is also an old man who pretends he is blind. I know he can see because one time I watched him buy a lottery ticket from a vending machine and scratch it. He looks dangerous, we all stay away from him... there is always another subway train coming, let him go first.

We don't talk with each other, we are not interested in other people's pain and story... we can barely carry our own.

We don't have regulars, I mean people who give me money every day, except this young guy with a big scar on his face.

"Why do you help us?" I asked him one time, eager to know.

"Because I'm one of you..." he said as if he expected someone to ask him that at some point

“You? Are you one of us?” I asked, intrigued, “How come?”

“My parents made me just because they wanted to have someone to mock...they didn't love me, they abandoned me emotionally in the home instead of the orphanage like you...” he started confessing.

“They never cared about me or my health, or my future...by the time I was a teenager, I was a mental wreck. It took me a decade to get the courage to talk to a girl,” he kept going.

“But by then it was top late...Maybe having bad parents is sometimes worse than having no parents in the end” he concluded.

I didn't understand the concept of being abandoned in a house. Houses are such a wonderful thing. How can anyone be abandoned in one?

“Because of that I grew up weak, lonely, outcast by the society. Yes, maybe I am more sensitive than the others. But do I have to be run down by their cruelty and hate?” He was now talking more to himself than me.

“All children grow up with love, I believe. If one child doesn't receive love he should not be considered a man and go to trial as a two-year old even if he is in his eighties...” he said.

He never told me the story behind the scar.

Horse's mind sickness scared me the most, with his white eyes that seemed without an iris, searching like in a coma through the mountains of garbage of Bucharest's city landfill.

None of us ever talked to him after he left the orphanage. Somehow he ended up there, he lives in the garbage dump now.

For some, the Garbage Mountains are hypnotic, it drives them into a dependence of sub- existence and there is always more new garbage coming from the city.

I've been to that wasteland, I felt the decrepit smell that you will eventually get used to, and heard the call of the Garbage Mountains calling soulless humans looking to find their luck.

The first time you will get to the mountains, you will find something, just to drag you deeper and deeper into the thrills of waste findings and before you know it you will

become a “Searcher”.

There are stories among the Searchers of gold and money found in garbage bags. The Searchers hike silently among each other looking for something that will save them from their sub-existence. They don’t see one another anymore but they search from dawn till dusk.

They find their food and water in the mountains too. A half eaten sandwich or an almost empty water bottle is all they need to survive for another day,

“Horse found an engagement ring or this is what other searchers say in that garbage” I remember Crazy told me once.

“It was an engagement ring! I was there with him when he found it in this big bag with a wedding dress and other bridal stuff” Vlad jumped into the conversation.

“Horse put it in his coat’s pocket but it had a hole in it and the ring got lost again in the mountains from which it came from, that was 2 years ago” he continued.

When I saw Horse later that year I knew we had lost him to the Garbage Mountains, his face was blackened by dirt burned and impregnated in his skin by the hot summer sun and his hair looked like black wires coming from under his filthy hat.

“Horse! Is me Daniel!” I told him, trying to stop myself to throw up because of his stench. He turned his head slowly, shivering for a second and looked at me, he didn’t seem to remember who I was. He went around me stepping through the garbage in his clothes that now looked solidified by fermented filth with cockroaches crawling all over his back.

That was my last image of him, sitting there at the close of the day, still searching.

We are all searching, searching for something, something that will take us out from this miserable world of ours, money, love, anything.

One day I met the Geologist. He was an old beggar living in Bucharest’s North railway station by the train tracks or, in winter, you could find him in one of the waiting rooms. He used to be a professor at the University but he refused to swear allegiance to the communists and denigrated “the genius of the Carpathians,” Ceausescu. They cast him out for good.

His begging spot was under this giant shoe sign hanging in front of a cobbler’s shop

called “At the Big Shoe” and he lived in an improvised shelter that he had built in the garbage shack of his old apartment building. He surrounded himself there with his old books trying to keep his academic appearance despite the brutality and primitivism showed by his former neighbors.

He was known among vagabonds for his powerful stink of cheap cigars accompanied by his red, bloodshot eyes, yellow stained teeth and a wrinkled damaged face.

That day he had gotten enough change to play the slot machines and I was just passing through the railway station when I got hypnotized by the spinning of the fruity reels and I stopped to see them closer.

He was all fired up about something and he was chatting with the guy playing next to him. “The whole Iron Curtain is falling... Didn’t you listen to Free Europe radio yesterday? Then, he angrily started to count on his fingers: “Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia...the Russians, Gorbaciov is with us...the Americans, Bush is with us...”

He turned his head back to the machine screen and looked at me for a brief second as if wondering if he should know me from somewhere. He took another sip of his white plastic cup, pulled the slot machine’s lever and turned around to his sympathetic listener.

“I mean you constructed the “New Man” for the last 40 years. You mold these people to be the ideal communist and shape their minds. But you never thought of creating the “Moral Man”. You know... the one who cares for people less perfect than him...about what is right...”

Suddenly the rumble of bells and loud pinging of quarters hitting metal trays stopped him in mid-sentence. He had hit the jackpot.

He rotated on his chair towards me: “I like you kid... You bring luck.” He got a handful of coins from the payout tray and told me:

“Here, get me another coffee and get yourself a chocolate, too”. I took the money from his shaking hand.

He took a pause and looked shortly above his shoulder as I was leaving to see if I was going to run away with his money and continued: “Ceausescu lied to us and to himself. He should have known that people don’t want honesty, morality or common property.”

I hurried up to get his coffee from the espresso kiosk and came back just to hear him

finishing his conversation: “This “New Man” elite of yours with “good connections”, the recipient of “favours” is eager to step in and take his leader's place. They don't have principles. They don't have any decency and they will throw you and your family under the bus for just one leu.”

The guy he was talking to unexpectedly left without a word. “Ehh!” he said throwing his right hand in the air disgusted and frustrated “Come on! Let's go. I'll buy you a cake,” he told me generously.

We found a table overlooking the street. He lit up another cigarette and he smoke it fast, without taking any fresh breath of air and exhaling the smoke by his nose.

He fell back on his chair. He offered me a cigarette, I took it out of respect. I didn't smoke. “You see him.” he pointed to Carrion who was sitting at the intersection and held up an old icon of the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus to people passing by, “A nutcase!”

“He has seen something call The Oracle and...” I was telling him when the Geologist abruptly interrupted me.

“Do not go in there! There is only a hole in the ground full of methane gas that will mess up with your mind and make you crazy”

He lit up another cigar and then he told me:

“The story is that two geologists descended into the pit darkness about 40 years ago with flashlights and equipment but they never came back, even their bodies that were tied to the ropes were never recovered. The communist regime decided to cover the pit under the subway and utilities, and the hole was lost for another 20 years until one of the children living underground found it again.”

“How do you know this story is true? Maybe is all just a myth,” I said.

“Because one of the geologists was my brother...” he yelled at me, suddenly crying. I ate the rest of my cake in silence while he was still crying next to me.

Later he taught me how to fish money out of the wishing wells in Bucharest gardens, using a long string with a magnet tied at the end. Some of the Romanian money was made of iron but the most valuable ones were made of aluminum, and those were impossible to get with a magnet. He also gave me this big round ring like magnet that was guaranteed that is going to pick all the iron if you drag it on the bottom of the well.

The only trouble was to watch out for the park maintenance guys, who will beat you

to a bloody pulp for stealing what they consider “their rightful cash”.

We do not have the notion of time; there is no time down there in the underground. We eat whatever we brought from above and we sleep, and when we get out we find out if it is night or day, morning or afternoon.

Sometimes, we all sleep together at the same time. I like to hear their peaceful breathing. “Hey! Wake up! Wake up! Spot did hang himself in the subway”, Nicu screamed at us angrily and with tears in his eyes, shaking both me and Vlad.

We all woke up at the same time looking at him, still blinded by sleep. “What? Why?” asked Crow with her eyes barely open..

“He couldn’t take it anymore! “ Nicu cried crouching in a corner and rocking back and forth “I was there; in the other subway wagon begging... nobody did anything... they just stood there and looked at him hanging himself with a piece of cord. The wagon was full of men, woman and kids. Nobody cared. Nobody did anything. My friend is dead...” he said crying and rocking. I could see he was really broken hearted and in a lot of pain.

When did all this happen to Spot? I felt betrayed and furious; I felt that at least he should have lived for us. Didn’t he care of what all this will mean to us in the end?

“Spot, went to see The Oracle last night” said Vlad after a while. “What did he see?” I asked."

"I don't know...he didn't tell...but he came out changed" Vlad replied and he told me: “If my mother, ever comes for me, tell her that I live somewhere in a village and I’m married to a beautiful girl...but you dumb guys can’t remember the village’s name” and he put his head on Tuca’s chest.

She stroke gently his hair and put her head on his.

“Maybe the Oracle is a sham...But it is too late now and for him is no way back...” Tuca thought sadly.

“We are the rejects of the society. We were all supposed to be dead by now, but some of us survived somehow. That wasn't supposed to happen,” said Vlad and then he added some more: “It’s not a great revelation! Or a complaint! We all knew this,” he said pointing to all of us with an angered look, eyeing each of us.

“The Lord took pity on our souls and gave us His mercy!” Carrion got carried on

raising his cross, lecturing, but nobody was listening to him.

“For them, Spot was already dead. I don’t understand why you thought that someone would ever care about him.” Crazy said looking above us.

We all kept our heads down, listening to his rage.

“None of us has an identity card, none of us has any idea where we coming from. Do you know where his parents are? Where are his brothers and sisters? Do they know their son just died?” Vlad asked us, reproaching.

“There goes a boy who lost his mother, father and himself...” Blackie said.

Nobody said anything, it was just life and we accepted it the way it is. Nicu cried for hours, mourning his passed friend.

I took the decision to see The Oracle, I knew I had nothing to lose.

“You have to earn your own passage to The Oracle. In a way it is not you that goes to The Oracle, it is The Oracle that comes to you.” told me the Geologist once.

“O.K., before you go in there you need to bring a gift to The Guardian, like a meal from one of those luxury restaurants, then he will let you in.” Vlad said.

“There is a maze in there and only The Guardian can take you to The Oracle and bring you back to the surface, so you have to be nice to him.” Vlad continued.

I met him several hours later by the University subway entrance after I visited numerous restaurants looking for a dish that The Guardian might enjoy.

The Guardian’s story was that he used to be a great collector of antiquities and historic artifacts. He used to work as a curator for Bucharest’s Art Museum; old paints, statues, books, banquets at extravagant restaurants, the whole thing, but he also liked to disprove mysteries and at some point in his life he overheard about a malefic endless hole which can be found in the underground. The Oracle fascinated him and he decided to protect it at the price of his life, and so he became like us: an underground dweller.

Sometimes we used to hear this melodiously sound which rises and comes down in a creepy key note that scared us breathless, “The Call of The Oracle” we used to say.

We got in one of the old deserted subway serving corridors after jumping several gates.

He knocked on a small door twice with his fist and took a step back.

“Now you wait, and don’t knock again or you will get him mad and then he will not take you to see the Oracle or dump you in the maze.” A couple of hours after that I heard the door cracking open and a dim light pushing through along with a gravelly voice which imposed fear and respect: “You need to get in.

“I’m here to see The Oracle!” I spoke towards whoever opened the door while waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

I barely saw two eyes looking at me from the dark.

“We call it The Oracle because we need a name but its name should actually be the Nothingness...” he told me while making me follow his voice blindly through such blackness that I was afraid that I was going to walk into a wall.

The Guardian turned around to me and spoke: “Over there in the silence of the bottomless pit you will be able to look into the abyss, the nothingness that we all are coming from, and there is where the nothingness will look into you to see what you are. What is there is for you only; there is something different for everyone, a child memory, a lost lover, an afternoon with your grandfather. There is a truth to learn about yourself down there, some people come right back and others jump in to become one with the abyss.”

After a long walk of turns and climbs up and down, sluggishly moving on in total darkness as we sloshed through puddles of water under our feet, feeling our way along the labyrinth of old iron pipes and concrete walls accompanied by a dim sound of a subway train passing by now and then, we finally reached an old rusty steel gate weld shut. A stone crucifix was close to the door in which burned a small candle.

At first look, it seemed that there was no way in but then I realized that the right lower corner of the gate was bended and the wall near the hinge was chiseled just enough to crawl in.

The old man turned toward me and said, sounding like he was reading from a book: “Behind this door is the great abyss that was here from the beginning of time, older than

God. It's so deep that some people believe it is going straight to hell, other believe that it is a shortcut to the end of days, when everything will stop to exist...any way will tell you the future.” He ended the speech abruptly as if he suddenly got bored with telling his entire monologue.

“Put your right hand in this black puddle before you get in and leave your print on the right wall if you make it out you will put your left hand on the left wall.”

I stepped back for a second and looked and the right wall where I could see thousands of hand prints that transformed what was once a white wall into a dark-grayish mixed pattern. The left wall was almost empty, you could count maybe less than one hundred hands' prints.

“I will be back soon,” I told him as I was losing my breath.

“There is no time down here!” young man, “you may be there for hours or days.” I crawled in.

There I was, left in complete darkness, reminding me of the orphanage basement, except this time the decrepit stench alone could kill me. I waited and waited in the cold blackness, and nothing happened. The opening through which I crawled did disappear as if it never existed.

I started asking myself desperately: “Why did you do this? Why did you come here?”

I tried to make several small steps feeling the ground with my feet, I was afraid I was going to fall in the abyss. Then I stopped scared when I heard an old woman's faint laughing in a distance that in the beginning I thought was the subway.

A swarm murmur of voices came from above and I thought I heard the Janitor and the old woman talking about me. A few feet away I got a short glimpse of Spot's face for a second as if he was just turning around. I got really scared; I was feeling vulnerable and I was shivering.

I started crying while stoned with fear while I plundered into the darkness.

After a while I thought I could see a dim light and feel a wind breeze. I wasn't sure it was real or just in my mind.

As I stepped further towards the light I could hear the sound of water rushing over rocks and I could feel a gentle breeze of fresh mountain air coming towards me. The path was no longer paved with cement but I was stepping on small gravel and rocks. As I was getting closer to the sunlight I could see small hemlock saplings growing on the sides of the path.

I kept following the path that led me to a beautiful sun-dappled forest glen in the

mountains. The forest floor was covered with dried and soft, fallen leaves and pine needles. A couple of squirrels stopped for a second to look at me and then disappeared quickly from my sight hiding in the tree foliage.

I was so happy I had made it out that I hugged the first tree I could find and lay in the grass for a while, looking up to small white clouds floating gently across the blue sky.

I was sitting on a rock with my toes dipped deep into the river, my eyes closed, immersed in the sounds of nature when I heard a faint girl's whisper: "Daniel"

I jumped up and looked at her. She was so beautiful, looking at me with her big brown beautiful eyes.

"Are you my mother?" I asked her. "No." she laughed.

She came closer to me and I could feel the warmth of her body while she hugged me. I melted; it was the best feeling I had ever had in my life.

"I am dead?" I asked her, although I didn't care as long I could be with her forever. "No, silly!" she laugh again gently fondling my hair.

"I am your girl!" she looked deep in my eyes and I got lost in hers.

"Sometimes the best thing a girl can do for her man is to promise him that she will never leave him whatever will happen" she said while still playing with my hair.

"And sometimes, she had to be there for him even though they hadn't meet yet...she can be there for him in his dreams..."

She hugged me again.

"I felt you need it me. That is why I came to you in your dream..."

"Daniel!" yelled at me again the Guardian.

I jumped up and opened my eyes. I realized that all had been a dream.

"Oh, you're alive...I was about to push you in the pit" The Guardian said sounding disappointed, "Never mind, let's go!" he said pulling me like a sack of potatoes behind him.

"I don't understand The Oracle showed me an amazing life with a wife, kids and a house by the sea. That's impossible!" I told him while I was still trying to recover my senses.

"Life is nothing but a dream. That was your life, your dream.," said the Guardian.

And then he opened a door that was five feet from the Oracle's gate. The bright afternoon light hit straight my eyes and gave me instantly a deep headache and the vertigo.

"What?" I asked in anger. "Why didn't you use this door when you got me in here?" I asked revolted while he was pushing me through the door outside. He looked at me one more time before he closed the door and told me: "You can't see the Oracle again. Everybody sees it only once! But you can bring yours friend to see it."

He shut close the metal door with a powerful squeak, I never saw him again.

Chapter 5: Dusk of an Era

Our weapon of choice was called Tuberman, a blowgun. Tubermans were made from the water running white plastic pipes stolen from construction sites. We used to cut them one foot long and used them as barrels for our paper arrows.

The trick was to have a good aim, a steady hand on the blowgun and enough force in your lungs and in your breath to give the paper arrow momentum. Now, these were pretty harmless, till Crazy came up with the idea to put sewing needles in the arrows tip, and that was it. Crazy was a calculating man with an evil intelligence, he liked to make people suffer in silence. He was always thinking carefully of each step he made and he was able to suppress his emotions: you never knew his feelings about some things until it was too late to do anything about it.

Nelu became an expert at building Tubermans and Crazy got crazy good at firing them, he even got a practice target and kept on exercising till he became the best of us all. He used to shoot them at dogs, cats and young girls' assess.

And from that point they both worked as a team, feeling somehow contentment in their life for the first time.

A young unshaved man in blue jeans came to us one day in the subway station when we were begging. I remember his jeans because back then, only people with relatives in other countries could get them in Romania.

He got very close to us and gave Nelu and me a big warm smile. I got afraid when he started to whisper: "Here take these prints and give one to each man coming in." He gave us a big stack of small black and white printed leaflets.

Nelu took the prints, and it looked like he knew what he was supposed to do already. He probably had done it before.

"Look, I have one hundred lei for you when you are done," he said showing me a blue bill with the face of an old Romanian revolutionary starring back at us. I never had one of those big blue bills, but I always wanted to have one.

"I will sit right there and watch you giving them to the people" he pointed to a place that was half way between the subways exists. He looked me straight in the eyes and

smiled. I can never tell if people are being sincere.

“O.K.” I said, happy and amazed.

“You stay here...” he pointed to Nelu, “...and you go to the other exit” he told me pointing to a place by the stairs.

“So much money for such an easy job?” I remember thinking for myself.

I started giving the prints. People reacted weird and differently after reading them, some got scared and threw them on the floor, some put them in their pocket and hurried up the stairs.

An hour passed by and I was almost done giving out the prints.

“Do you know what these are?” an old man asked me leaning on his cane. He looked like a good man, a good grandpa. “No, I can’t read.” I told him ashamed.

“They are anticommunist manifestos, you better just leave them there and go away,” he said and then he gave me back the print that I just gave him.

“And lose my half of the one hundred bill?” I remember thinking in my mind, and then I started imagining all I could buy with that: cake from the sweet shop, peach nectar and some Sibiu salami. My mouth started to water while my mind was daydreaming.

I must have fallen in that food indulging melancholy when I was suddenly woken up by some ear-splitting yelling coming from the other subway exit. I jumped up just for a second to have a look.

I saw Nelu in the distance. He was surrounded by the blue-gray militia's uniforms, I hid behind a column so they wouldn't see me just in time. The guy in jeans was nowhere to be found.

Nelu was on his knees with a bunch of anticommunist manifestos spread on the subway floor in front of him and I noticed some blood on his forehead.

“Are you a spy? Are you a terrorist?” a young skinny cop yelled at him before hitting his head again merciless with the baton.

Nelu wasn’t saying anything, he was just standing there looking down waiting for the whole thing to be over with like he always does with us. That’s how he deals with his tormenters, he just let them hit him till they get bored and leave him alone. He always shrinks into himself wishing everything would go away.

People were passing by trying not to look as if there was nothing going on there.

“Boss. He doesn’t want to talk. What do we do?” said another cop talking into the station receiver.

“Bring him to the main post and ...” a scramble voice of an older man instructed them after a moment of silence. The subway was coming, I could feel the pavement vibrations under my feet and the noise engulf everything in the aggressive metallic sound.

I couldn’t hear anything after that.

The young man grabbed Nelu by the vest's collar as if he was grabbing a bag of potatoes or a farm animal and pulled Nelu forcefully after him.

He looked back for a second, reaching in vain to his bag and his dirty blanket that he didn’t have time to get. I have never seen a bull going to the slaughter house, but I imagine that if I ever see one, he will have the same look Nelu had then.

“We think they are all dumb animals, but they all know where they are going. They can feel and smell blood, desperation and the stench of death a mile away.” I remember overhearing someone’s conversation a long time ago.

I waited a while to make sure they were not coming back and went and got his things for him, but he never came back.

“What’s going to happen to him?” I remember asking myself back then.

Two days later I saw Nelu’s photo in the police station, severely beaten, they were saying that he died by slipping under the subway train or that maybe somebody pushed him on the tracks. Anyway, they were trying to find out his name, but they didn’t know that Nelu was already forgotten by all.

They never found out who he was, and nobody came to claim his body.

Nelu was really deaf, none of us ever talked to him and we never got to really know him or what was going on in that silent world of his. All I could remember about him was the image of the boy sitting in the corner with a blank look in his eyes and a dirty blanket in his hands. Looking back, I feel that I should have gotten to know him, but back then everything we cared about was our own survival.

I always thought of him as the watcher, the one who sees life as it is, always eager to help.

Nicu ran in, wearing his signature suit: “I know where she lives!” he said breathless.

We all looked at him anxiously. “What? Who?” one of us asked annoyed.

He took a second to catch his breath: “Mama, the orphanage Mama, I know where Mama lives... I’ve seen her building apartment.” And then he looked at us all to see how we were going to react.

The moment of silence froze us in place.

“We need to give her The Bandit” Vlad said with a big grin on his face while standing up, “We need to give her The Bandit ...”.He said it again and started to laugh.

We didn’t have a plan, Vlad had one, but we didn’t know it and he wouldn’t tell it to us. We all got along with his plan since we trusted him. Vlad used to be skinny and tall as a child but with his body building training he was starting to look intimidating now even for an adult.

We waited for the cover of the night. We knew she always left the orphanage just before dusk.

“You just stay here and watch for that old sow. When you see her, just run back to me as fast as you can and let me know” he told us.

Vlad refused to call her “Mama”, he knew what a mama is, and she was no mama.

Crazy and I kept staring at that corner, watching carefully. We wanted to see her, but we didn’t want her to see us. It was a late winter evening and it was dark, a street light was illuminating from somewhere behind the corner. As soon as I saw her shadow on the snow, I knew it was her but I waited till the moment her face came from around the corner before I started to run.

I ran as fast as I could, pushed the door open and yelled:” She’s coming! Mama’s coming! ”

Vlad had already prepared a piece of electrical cord and while holding firmly the Bandit jaws closed with right hand, with the left hand he began striking forcefully the back of the dog with the cord for a whole minute. We all watched Vlad pushing the insanely livid dog in the elevator and shutting the door closet. The barking gradually stopped and became a fading mad growl.

We all ran on the steps to the next floor and waited quietly till we heard Mama’s steps getting into the building apartment main door.

Vlad, Blackie, Crazy, Carrion and Tuca were watching from behind the steps, I didn’t

want to look but I realized that for the first time in our life we were watching the accident that was about to happen as Spot would have articulated it.

They told me that the Bandit jumped straight for her neck when she opened the elevator door. That is why I never heard any screaming, just the sound of Bandit's jaws opening with thirst and a struggle crushing sound. She never saw it coming.

"It's done!" Vlad said, "Let's go!"

Just before we ran away, I stopped, I had a look, I had to and then I saw her for the last time. There she was, the tormenter of my childhood finally lying dead in her own puddle of blood.

I felt that the times changed, we were beginning a new era, an era that gave us the power for the first time to fight back and take our fate in our hands.

Yes, she killed kids down in that basement for her torture pleasures, we knew them and we found out more later.

We ran out of the building through the back door and we didn't stop till we got to our place in the underground. They were so proud of themselves...

"It felt so good to hear her screaming in pain for a change!" Blackie burst out laughing. She and Crow were hugging and looking in each other eyes, rejoicing.

Tuca jumped on Vlad's neck and kissed him, she was waiting for a moment like this for a while now.

I stood there and looked at them celebrating the killing.

"Are we any better than her? Who gave us the right to do this?" I said quietly but just loud enough for them to hear me.

Everyone stopped cheering. I broke their momentum.

Vlad reached and smacked me in my face as if I took something that he had rightfully gained. "What do you think? That she seeing you as an adult now will somehow make her regret putting you through that torture and agony? Would telling her how miserable she made you feel during those years somehow be acknowledged by even a glimpse of humanity in her?" Crazy asked me.

It felt as if he had dreamed of her demise before.

"She was a demon. She didn't have a soul." Vlad yelled at me.

"My only regret is that she didn't know we did it." Tuca added looking at me

despising. They put her out of her misery. How, noble?

“God gave us the power now, to test us. We should have turned the other cheek, not kill her...” said Carrion hugging and kissing his silver cross stolen from the church while taking my side.

My new ally got everybody’s attention.

“Yes? When is the last time you talked to you godparents?” Vlad replied angrily to him “When they baptized you...” he also answered his own question.

“Shut up! Shut up!” Carion screamed jumping on his dirty mattress and taking a fetal position while rocking holding the cross to his chest.

They all got quiet. I knew they all felt somehow guilty even if they wouldn’t admit it. “One of these days, Daniel, you are going to turn them against each other...” Tuca told me later, “...and they are all we have!”

I couldn’t sleep that night, my mind didn’t accepted yet that she was finally dead. I just stood there looking at all of them sleeping, wondering if there was a purpose for people like us in this world. I ran and lost myself in Bucharest subway, travelling round and around aimlessly from one station to another, without a final destination. The passing lights of the subway and sleepless faces of people froze time for a moment just enough to confound myself in darkness and blind myself from the vindictive reality.

“How can they sleep so peacefully,” I remember asking myself.

That night close to dawn, Vlad talked in his sleep, as if something began to haunt his dreams, he started to mumble: “No! Leave her alone. You...” His sleep became agitated and he pushed Jail who was next to him. He suddenly jumped out from his pillow chair screaming and reached for Jail’s neck with both hands, trying to strangle him. He was in a trance with his eyes half open but full of hate and determination to kill.

Jail woke up and started to scream: “Help! Help!”

We all jumped trying to unwrap Vlad’s fingers from Jails neck. Things calmed down very quickly, everybody went back to sleep fast.

“Who did you thought you were choking” I asked Vlad.

He looked at me with dead soulless eyes upset that I dared ask him that question and wrapped himself back in his big dirty blanket.

He never told me who he thought he strangled that night.

Blackie came down the manhole one day and her eyes were radiating with joy. She was so happy, she wouldn't stop talking about him. She met a boy, Vladimir the soldier, that she had fallen in love with, she had that great feeling that anything in her life was now possible..

Love, is so pure, so powerful, that it numbs the reality and drugs your mind and you don't think of anything else but of the other one.

I saw her looking for a life up there, above the streets, smiling, building in her girly head the rest of her life with him. I wished I could have been happy for her then, but I wasn't.

We all are waiting for the hand that will pull us from the sewer, the dark. She was so lucky she was a girl, it was only natural that a boy would pull her out from among us.

“He took me to a sweet-shop. He is in the military training school but he will ask for permission to leave the unit every Sunday so we can meet.” I heard her emotive voice bursting with glamour as I was getting closer to our noisy group

“You are so lucky!”, Tuca said full of happy envy.

“That could also be her ticket out of here” I remember thinking about Crow, “They are sisters after all.”

“He sure has, two or three of you.” Vlad vociferated, bitter and cruel from his corner, but nobody was listening to him anymore. He never hid his feelings, he never lied.

That is the last thing I remember about that day.

After that her boyfriend was the only thing we could really hear about from her, day and night. I've seen them once, the lovers, in Cismigiu garden lying in a passionate embrace under a tree, kissing again and again, whispering meaningful things to each other. He was a military, all right.

Vlad and I used to go on a block apartments' roof, the roof access door was closed but we found a trick to get it open. We first stumbled into that place by mistake and got mesmerized when we saw the swallows nests. We kept the place as our secret and we agree without talking to never tell anyone else about it.

The texture and materials used in the nest making fascinated us, or maybe it was the way the swallows were taking care of their young ones. I never figured that out.

We were just above the tenth floor of the block apartment and people looked so small and insignificants when you looked from up there to them over the hedge.

“Look! Up here I’m God.” Vlad used to say. “I can take a nail throw it and end someone’s life.”

“Look at them, they are ants walking minding their own business when, Bang! It’s all over” he used to say while holding a nail by its head and aiming to people going by.

The story was they found a woman a long time ago dead on the streets and nobody knew what had killed her until someone said to look in her hair, where they found this tiny nail head sticking out just a little bit on the top of her head. No blood or anything.

“Every time I hear Blackie I’m afraid...” he confessed one day”...I’m afraid that it is never going to happen again for me...”

He never dropped a nail, when I was there.

The days went passing by and nothing really out of the ordinary happened for a year. I got used to my life down there in the sewer and with my wild friends. We kind of got a routine going and I knew nothing was going to pull us up from down there.

Then on a Sunday morning down the manhole came Mariuca, but she was not alone, she brought her son, he was three years old.

We all looked at her, she looked at us with her sad eyes and for a few moments we just stood there.

She was changed. She had authority and sacrifice showing on her face, the kind that you only get from making and raising another human.

“I couldn’t take it anymore. He was drinking and beating me every day. I had to run.” she exploded crying. “Look at what he did to my boy. Look at what he did to his son” he showed a big red fresh cut on his neck. I turned away, disgusted.

We didn’t say anything. We always hoped that if at least one of us could make it out of this decrepit world, all of us would make it in the end.

We all knew how she felt when she got a glimpse of the good normal from above for a moment, just to get pulled back among us again. In the dusk of our life the evil

perpetuates itself living in our kids.

“This is home mama?” the little kid asked innocently with his funny voice. “Yes.” She said weeping. ”It's home now, it's home”

Vlad and Mariuca never exchanged a look that day. Later she confessed to me:

“He was a man, and I was his woman, undoubtedly. He had some money from his parents when we met...” she said twitching her head to the right as if I was about to hit her, “...and then the money ran out...” she twitched again.

One day I was with Nicu in the Aviator's subway station. I was begging by the entrance and Nicu was begging by the exit when the Geologist showed up.

“Who is your friend?” he asked me while eating roasted pumpkin seeds. “Nicu” I said.

He didn't make a move to reach and shake his hand, just stood there impassive, watching us and alternated smoking his cigarettes with spitting the seeds close to us.

“You know that his father is Nicu Ceausescu. He is very proud of that” I said trying to introduce him and to put him in a good light but at the same time to break that weird silence.

Nicu looked up at him and smiled, expecting the usual congratulatory outcome when he unexpectedly got a tirade from the Geologist.

“You are proud? That killer and rapist... There is nothing to be proud of... Come with me!” he said grabbing him by the jacket's collar and pulling him like a sack of potatoes toward the subway exit.

He hauled Nicu two blocks away to an intersection. I ran just to keep up with them.

Than he raised his hand while Nicu flinched with a scared look in his eyes. He didn't hit him he just pointed at something, somewhere.

“You see that woman over there” he pointed to a woman sitting on the sidewalk in the big intersection. We both looked at her; she was all dressed in black even her head was covered in a black kerchief as she was mourning for someone.

“No! She is not begging,” he answered what we both were about to ask him.

He lit up a new cigarette crossed his arms and end up while he continued: “Ceausescu's son, Nicu, killed her daughter. She has been staying there at this very spot

where her daughter lost her life, waiting for him to pass by here again, waiting for a justice that will never come...”

The woman was looking left and right as if she waited for a particular car. He took a deep smoke.

“I was there when Nicu, “The Little Prince”, ran her over with his car and killed her... He was doing 90 mph. He didn’t even look back...”he said while puffing out.

Then he put his chin on his chest and with a child’s cry he added in a whisper: “Dina was only 18, she was her only daughter...”

Nicu stared at her for a moment as if he was looking to his own mother and confessed: “I know he is a rapist. My mother told me he even had a rape chamber where he brought the female prisoners naked... my mother was one of them...”

A day later Ceausescu announced that Romania’s foreign debt had been paid off. People were celebrating with parades in the streets.

I never saw the Geologist again after that day. It took me a year to realize that I hadn't seen him for a while. I used to see him everywhere by the bus station, in the subway or next to the train tracks. I always felt him as a fungus that grows on you and I thought he would be there with me forever.

Sometimes I was pretending not to see him and I would lower my head as if I was watching my step and pass right by him. He was the kind of guy you are happy he is not there with you with to give you a mental anguish with his sad stories. The winter got tough that year and we barely came out of the sewer, once every couple of days.

Then one day I began to look for him. Finally a train mechanic told me:

“What? You didn’t know? That old beggar that called himself “The Geologist” froze to death last winter over there by the train tracks, “ the mechanic pointed to the fence with his dirty glove and continued in a mocking voice “There was so much snow near the tracks this spring that he spent Christmas and Easter frozen out there”

“You should be more respectful, he was a professor! I replied angrily looking straight in his eyes.

“Professor in beggary!”one of his fellow’s colleagues said laughing with a satisfaction that only the low educated man can have seeing the fall of an intellectual.

I left. They were all laughing behind my back.

I always wanted to be a scientist, not because of the money or the respect but because they take the time to look at things, things out of this world that nobody else is interested in. It takes a special compassion to be interested in a bug, a plant or a rock, looking to understand the nature of things.

It rained that Friday morning, when Mariuca got sick staying in line to get milk for her little son, wearing only a dirty shirt. Cold winds blew weeping through the cement city as she waited and waited for the milk truck to deliver to the store. Finally she came in shivering from the winter cold, already running a fever with an empty bottle in her hands.

“They didn’t deliver” she said climbing down to her bed. Vlad came and sat next to her.

“Are you sick mama?” her little boy asked her several times with fear in his little eyes.

She curled up in the bed holding her hands around her stomach. The upper part of her body was on fire, the other half was freezing.

In late afternoon she rolled out of her bed dehydrated and shivering uncontrollably. Vlad left to get her some medicine.

“Mama is going to be fine” she mumbled to her little boy.

She went to the hospital, alone, coughing. I don’t know if she ever made it, but if she had survived, she would have been right back for her little boy. I cannot remember anything more about that day, as is my mind locked all the memories in a vault to be buried and forgotten forever.

“The judgment day is coming. Mothers are dying. Newborns are weeping ...” Carrion said a week later gazing at some black clouds up in the steel sky.

“I see Death lurking in the shadows, waiting to take a bite of people” he said while taking his place in his candle light up corner.

Vlad was sitting in his pillow bed sharpening his big shinny knife with a small stone since the day light shined through the sewer’s holes. He raised his head and gave me a strange look.

“We need to get prepared. Do you have enough holy water?” Carrion turned to me. I could here unrest coming from the streets above us too.

Crow was taking care of Mariuca’s little boy now. She never told us her son’s full name.

We never knew how to find his father.

Chapter 6: Judgment Day

Bucharest, December 1989

It was a cold frosty winter that year. None of us had the courage to go up in the screaming freezing winds and snow flurries after what happened to Mariuca and we were all already sweating because of the underground pipes crushing heat. We all had been starving for the last three days.

The wishing wells had been frozen for the last two weeks and I couldn't have fished out money from them even if I had had the courage to venture out of the sewer.

Tuca was passionately drawing with chalk disturbing pictures on her side of the wall documenting her miserable childhood and life. "She is talented!" I remember thinking that day that she could have been a great artist. A torture artist is still an artist.

I was dozing on and off, and at some point in time I heard Carrion praying in a corner: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." again and again with more thirst and hunger.

"Please, no more!" I screamed in my mind.

We were waking up among ourselves in semi-darkness barely making any acknowledgment of each other.

That day, I prayed to God for my salvation. "Please God, if you ever had any pity for me, save me from this hunger now!" There was no one else to pray to anyway.

It was dark and hot, the air was stinky and I was moving through the decrepit mud that surrounded me, knowing that in a little while I was going to become mud myself. I don't know how long I lay in that cryptic state. I thought I was dead for a long time when I was resurrected by singing voices coming from the streets above.

"Wake up! From your sleep of death." the voices of thousands of people reverberate through the tunnels metal and cement walls.

I fought to get the strength to open my eyes.

"It is now or never! Make a new fate for yourself" the voices were sounding louder and louder.

"To which even your cruel enemies will bow..." so passionately the people were singing the national anthem.

I lost my hearing for a few seconds, something happened but I didn't care anymore.

My first memory after that is seeing dense smoke and isolated rays of sunlight pierce through the manholes and bright red blood gushing down from the street, getting Carrion soaked in blood which burst him out of his hunger-induced coma yelling: "The Judgment Day is here! Jesus! I am here! Save meeeeeee...!"

He strained the muscles of his skeletal body and jumped to his feet splashing blood everywhere.

"Where is my cross? Where is my blessed cross!" he yelled at us as if we were all supposed to know where he keeps his things.

"We fight! We die! But we want to be free!" the strong tonality voices rushed in again.

Someone shouted just above us: "Run! They are shooting again, the tanks!" and somebody else yelled backed: "Keep the children in front; they won't shoot if they see the children."

And then the thunder of the tanks guns resonated through the underground, shaking and cracking the walls.

My ears went deaf again, or it got really quiet for a while.

"Help me I need to get out! The Lord needs to see me!" Carrion screamed as he was trying from all his strength to push up the iron cast cover buried now under dead revolutionary bodies.

Carrion rose from beneath the death from the manhole and picked a flag and started to waive it towards the sky with his left arm while holding his big silver cross up in the air with his right hand finding himself in the very fight between good and evil.

And then I saw the power of his faith as he was standing on a pile of dead bodies in the middle of all that carnage screaming: "Take me Jesus! Take me!" while looking up in the sky.

His hair covered in blood was dripping all over his naked body.

A couple of good Christian soldiers knelt in front of him and one of them cried out "What did I do? I killed children. I will burn in hell for this! Jesus, forgive me!"

"You killed innocent kids! Children's assassins!" I could hear people's voices getting closer and closer to us.

On that day of 21 December, 1989 a homeless boy named Carrion with firm belief in God stood there in the middle of all those flying bullets looking up to heavens. He was fourteen years old, crazy, and we all loved him.

That was the last time any of us saw Carrion, later some people told us that he was really the Savior and that the sky opened in that moment and that he took back his rightful place by God's side in Heaven.

And then it happened, the Romanian military suddenly changed sides and fought with the revolutionaries against the communists to overthrow the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

"It's a Revolution!" Vlad yelled excited while looking above the sewer drain cap. "What is that?" I asked him, curious.

"I don't know! But that is what I heard people shout outside: Revolution! Revolution!" he started to chant imitating them and throwing his right fist into the air while crawling out.

I finally got the courage to raise the manhole cover just a bit to have a peek. Vlad and Crazy were already out lost in smolder.

Debris was scattered across the square: chipped parts of vehicles bodywork and engine, glass, ripped pieces of plastic and reddish broken bricks. There was a hectic chaos: mist and smoke, mixed with death and flying bullets. Soldiers in brown-gray uniforms were running aimlessly with machine guns. Tanks were driving and blasting buildings. All around me were wounded people with broken jaws and noses, eyes falling out of their socket and intestines pouring out slowly of their abdomen.

In a corner there was a sniper looking up to the building roofs looking for other snipers, I guess.

A man with a knife was hatefully cutting out the communist symbols of the Romanian flag, the hammer and the sickle.

Vlad was a few meters away from me, checking a young dead military's pocket. He threw me a packet of biscuits that he had just found in the chest pocket, next to a small vodka bottle.

"Are you stealing from the dead now?" I asked him.

"Let God judge me! This man doesn't need it anymore" Vlad snapped at me, angry

that I dared to judge him while he was taking the last sip from the Vodka bottle.

He and Crazy were picking the dead people's pockets.

I followed them into the smoky square but I didn't look for anything to take, my heart wasn't in it. I just looked out for them so they wouldn't get shot or run over by a tank.

"I got a gun!" Vlad whispered happily, showing us a pistol that he had just found. "Look, I even got some spare bullets!" He revealed to me his right hand full of small silvery bullets.

"Yes, I got some grenades, too" replied Crazy, walking crouched to the next dead while looking around.

And as I was looking where to step, to evade walking on someone's entrails, I saw a black booklet with golden writings. The wind blew just enough to flip the pages and when it got to the last one, I could see a photo of myself.

I stopped there for a second, standing hypnotized and breathless. I didn't know what that was, but in that moment I felt it has something to do with me.

"Let's go! The tanks come back" Crazy shouted out in my ear, pulling me from my contemplation as the first tank made its presence known by the sounds of its caterpillar tracks crushing the old street cobblestone.

"Run! Come on!" screamed Vlad as he was holding a bunch of wallets in his pulled up shirt.

We had to run towards the safety of the underground sewer, towards the incoming tanks. Other people, freedom fighters and militaries full of passionate heroic spirit, started running chaotically next to us. In all that confusing smoke they thought we were also revolutionaries willing to die for freedom. Somebody screamed: "Look! They are not afraid. Follow them! Freedom!" More joined, shouting, exhilarated as the uprising came running, passionate and hectic, after us.

Vlad was the first one to reach the manhole and lift the heavy lid, so Crazy and I could jump in.

"Hurry!" he yelled as the tanks' guns were repositioned to shoot towards us.

I felt the time freeze all around us. Fear eviscerated me, mixed with a weak sensation in my legs and arms while I was waiting for the tanks to fire.

Crazy got there first and went down the ladder fast; by the time I came down I could

hear the tank metal mechanism charging. Vlad jumped down on my head as he pulled the manhole cover closet. We both came tumbling down the ladder on Crazy's back when the first tank fired its gun.

We got up on our feet, none of us was hurt.

"You know, I'm not sure...but I think there were civilians driving those tanks..." Vlad said confused. I remember wondering: "Why did they fire on other civilians then?"

We looked at each other, surprised.

"You can shoot me now... let's get it over with." Someone up there yelled.

We looked up and listened to the sound of the heavy machines driving over the dead bodies breaking and snapping bones and scalps against the street cobblestones.

"How much did you get? I have about 300 lei!" Vlad pulled us from our horrific contemplation and I realized that he had been counting his money all this time.

There was still screaming and death above us when Crazy said: "I got 225 lei and some coins. How about you, Daniel?"

"I got something...he looks like me..." I told them, showing them the black document with golden writings. They all looked at each other and start laughing.

"Daniel, you are an idiot." Vlad said with affection. "Look, it is a Belgian passport" he said after he looked at the cover while he kept on laughing.

"He looks like me..." I said but by now nobody was listening to me anymore. They were all splitting the sandwiches and the biscuits that we collected from up there.

After some time when the screaming stopped and we were full of food, Vlad said: "I'm going up again, who is coming with me?"

"Don't get yourself killed out there" Tuca told him with a warm feeling in her voice. "Oh. I'm not a hero! I'm never going to die for a country that abandoned me in the gutter! It's my time now," he said with a big smile and a glint in his eyes.

"We have an American girl who was arrested here with the revolutionaries..." a shy voice declared.

The old Romanian secret service agent turned back and looked surprised at the militia that was holding a black U.S. passport.

He stared for a second at the ceiling and closed his eyes.

“Really?” he said more to himself, “Bring her to me” he ordered to the militia who was handing him the passport. He smiled and leafed through it till the militia came back with a young girl, she must have been in her early twenties, maybe younger.

“Please take a seat...Miss Mariana Farcas” the secret agent spoke in English with a heavy Russian accent.

He didn't wait for her to say anything and he continued:

“What, you are surprised that I speak English? You know that they teach us English and Russian in schools? Since the fifth grade...” he said with a big smile while getting closer to her chair.

Mariana felt and looked tired. Her brown eyes were ready to go to sleep.

“Now, please tell mewhat you are doing with these revolutionaries, these terrorists that are trying to attack, unsuccessfully, the national security of Romania” he suddenly yelled at her.

Two other cops entered the room, one was obese and he was sweating. It was kind of rare to see someone corpulent those days, when food was scarce and all you could eat was given in rations, but he was managing somehow to get plenty of food.

They looked at her standing there on that chair, unresponsive, almost sleeping, till the overweight cop started to suggest the agent talking in Romanian:

“Maybe a night in the cell with Vasile, the Rapist, will make her more talkative...” he said laughing.

They all laughed.

“You know what I like about Vasile, the Rapist? He makes no discrimination, women, men, cripples, gypsies they are all the same to him...he loves everyone....” he continued in a mocking voice.

“Remember Dorina?” the other cop said and started to laugh while looking at the others for approval.

Mariana gave them a moment so they all could start laughing and in the middle of all that chuckling, she stood up and strongly hit the metal desk with her fist and yelled in Romanian: "Or maybe CIA will put a bullet in your brains..." and she gave a stern look to the secret service agent.

They all instantly stopped laughing, shocked. An American speaking Romanian? That

was unexpected, even for them. Mariana could see the old agent swallow her words with fear.

He looked at the other two cops and nodded, closing his eyes. They left the room and closed the door slowly, scared.

“Ceausescu’s regime is falling...in a couple of days you and your office will be history,” Mariana continued unaware if he was listening to her.

The secret service agent pulled his firearm out carefully and kept measuring what to do, finally he raised his head and looked at her and with a short hand movement he slapped her with the back of his left hand.

The slap took Mariana by surprise, she lost her balance and fell down to the ground. She looked up at him, she didn’t expect to get hit by someone high ranged like him.

He looked down to her with contempt, hating her for having the courage to threaten him. “I am an American citizen and I have rights...” she yelled.

He took a moment to look at her and then he threw her passport in her face.

“You are lucky you are an American citizen, Miss Farcas ...otherwise you wouldn’t see the light of day again in your lifetime in this country...and you can say that to your CIA...”

Mariana raised up, scared unsure of his intentions as he was coming towards her. The old secret service agent opened the door and said:

“You have 24 hours to leave Romania, madam” with a short mocking bow.

Later that day when all the shooting stopped I got the courage to climb again to the surface.

The tanks were aligned in a straight line now, facing the immense crowd of revolutionaries, shining in the evening twilight and the blurring streets lights, like giant dark killing machines bowing down on their knees to their victims.

“Come down God and see what is left of us!” I heard a fade crying lost somewhere in the smoke.

“They stole my son...they stole the light of my eyes!” someone else was shouting to my left. Somewhere behind all that I could hear a church’s bell ringing in a high tower far away. “We were soldiers once and we didn’t shoot our brothers!” an old man was

lamenting next to his dead son while lighting a shaking candle above his head. “I begged you not to go with the revolutionaries!” an angry mother was yelling to her dead daughter “I begged you!”

“The mothers and wives came to claim the dead” said Crow sadly. “Even the streets are crying... if you listen very carefully there is a deep black feeling coming from the streets.”

Once in a while, in all that racket, I could still hear street dogs barking in a distance.

I fell asleep that night, listening to their cries of suffering, thinking how strange it was that these many people who were well and healthy yesterday were dead now.

I woke up next day as dawn crept over the newly liberated Bucharest. I heard loud shouts of happiness pouring with uninhibited enthusiasm and pure joy. They cleaned the streets of bodies so fast! I saw young beautiful girls tie ribbons with the Romanian tricolor flag on soldiers' arms and exalted people carrying the defiled portraits of Ceausescu while chanting: “Ole! Ole! Ole! Ole! The dictator is gone!” Trucks with revolutionaries were driving in all directions waving the new Romanian flag.

The big square was full of happy people chanting the new Romanian hymn “Wake up Romanian”. A middle aged man with a megaphone was sitting on the roof of a car and announced that the carnage had finally stopped but there was still a part of the secret police that was loyal to the dictator to Ceausescu.

People from a tall building were throwing books down in a big pile where people with torches were waiting to set them on fire.

“Burn the books! Burn them” Vlad approved, nodding while running to help “They only bring evil and death.”

Vlad was feeling accepted for the first time in his life, nobody knew or care that he was homeless. Everybody was wearing dirty ripped clothes and celebrated the victory.

“We need to get up there!” Crazy shouted at me to make himself heard as he pointed to the tallest building, somewhere to the last floor.” That is where the greatest good is...”

None of us knew his name or where he came from, we just called him The Martyr.

All we knew about him was that he had been in jail for thirty years and when they let him go, he had nobody to go to. His parents died soon after he went to jail and he didn't

have any relatives that would take him. In a way he was like us, homeless and unwanted.

He kept mostly to himself, into his world. He never paid any attention to any of us.

The Martyr didn't beg, he just stood there in front of the train station in his dirty prison clothes that he refused to change for any other clothes proud of his deep wrinkled face and his grey hair cut close to his scalp. People threw money at him, bills and kind words and once in a while a warm meal.

"Come, they are taking down Vladimir Lenin's statue, let's go and see." Crazy announced, breathless.

We all jumped in the first bus that went to the new Free Press Square, it used to be called Spark House in Ceausescu's time. We didn't need tickets for the bus. As homeless kids, the worst thing that could happen to us was to be thrown out by the guy who comes and controls to see if you punched your ticket at the first bus stop and even then, we just waited and took the next one, which happened a lot to us but we didn't care. It took me a couple of minutes to realize that the Martyr got in that bus with us too. I stared at him for just a second, he didn't raise his head to confront me.

The statue was not a statue anymore, but a sign of communist repression. A big crane was taking down the gigantic bronze man out of his pedestal in cheering and applauds of the people, leaving behind only a plaque with the "Vladimir Ilici Lenin" name.

And then out of nowhere the Martyr turned his sad eyes towards me and started talking to me as if I was one of his old friends:

"The society failed me and those people there in the morgue... students, intellectuals getting shot in their hope for a better life, or how the communist call them "the terrorists". For them, the revolution was moral and they died fighting for what they believed."

I froze for a moment, I didn't know what to say. Why did he choose me to confess his thoughts? I got afraid for some reason. All I knew at that time was that the communists were bad and we should celebrate that we finally got rid of them.

Later that evening he told me his story. His wife betrayed him and she brought the secret police, the securists got him at one of his underground anti-communist meetings. He lost everything, his parents' land was given to collectivization, and the house where he grew up in was now a school.

”There is nothing to go back to,“ he said in a bitter and cruel tone. He didn’t feel proud, he felt cheated and deserted.

“The communist rich elite didn’t die, they exploited the revolution and now they have more power and more privileges in the new capitalist era, and they control the wealth of Romania. Nobody bad really died during the revolution except the innocents and Ceausescu, what is left for us is to live in misery...” he protested in vain to me. I felt bad for him.

The Martyr didn’t want to sleep in the sewer with us. He said to us that the dark tunnels reminded him of Jilava’s penitentiary black tar walls he shared with fifty other men and just one toilet.

One night I showed him the passport I found. “It’s Belgian...” he said “...and he does look exactly like you. On a good day, you could go straight through customs and fly wherever you want!”

He was probably wondering if I stole it.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked me curiously. “America!” I answered quickly.

“Did you see them? The Americans?” he laughed. I didn’t know what he was talking about.

“They are coming. They're bringing aid to help us, clothes, food, ideology...freedom!” he was talking probably about something he had seen on television.

“I was there! In America in the 60’s...” he remembered for himself “...young kids who bike to school, cool white sneakers, a father on the block playing baseball with his young son in the middle of the street on one of those lazy late Sunday afternoons, Fords and Chevys, jeans... My mistake was that I came back to the inescapable Romania to take my mother with me after I applied for the refugee asylum and the communist called me a traitor, an informer, and they threw me to rot in jail. “

“America is not just the movies you see on television or at the cinema, America is not just Hollywood’s California or New York,” he said.

He told me that all his life he had believed that the Americans would come one day and free the country from communists: “We waited and waited...but the Americans never came to save us” he cried out to me. “Now is too late...we freed ourselves.”

Later in that Revolutionary evening, when Blackie and I were going by the Municipal Hospital in our way to our sewer home, a doctor came out looking for people to help him on the street.

“Come, we need all the help we can get. Nobody wants to help. They rather be outside celebrating,” the surgeon said. ”Even the nurses!”

“We got twenty wounded and about fifty dead from the Otopeni Airport that just got here,” the doctor was talking more to himself, “young boys, barely in their twenties. Everybody shot at them, they thought they were terrorists.”

We ran after him through those dark long hospital corridors that reminded me of my childhood. There is always so much suffering between those walls, I should have just grab Blackie and run away then but the doctor said he was going to pay us.

“You see this one!” he said pointing to a young man’s dead body lying peacefully on a stretcher.

“He came in last night wounded, I operated on him and he was going to be fine, then the secret communist police came last night and shot him in the head” the doctor confessed to us in frustration.

We were running just to keep up with his fast pace.

As soon as we got inside the morgue, the cedar smell of the new cut crosses lying on the floor hit me, they were made simply by nailing two unpolished wood boards together. The names on the crosses looked like were written clumsy and in a hurry with a paintbrush.

“You have to start from there and...” the doctor stopped suddenly from pointing hospital beds. Blackie was just frozen, only her upper lip was trembling and her eyes were locked somewhere behind me. I got suddenly terrified and watched her walking slowly as she was about to faint near one of corpses in the room. It was the body of a young boy, very young, too young for what had happened to him.

His face had a disillusioned look written by the moment of his death, the kind of look that would tell, “I need more from life, I wanted more.”

He looked as he had fought his death all the way to the end. Blackie put her fingers on his wide-open eyes and gently closed them.

I felt so bad for her. I hate myself because I didn't know what to do back then, she was there crying while holding that dead boy in her arms. Maybe, if I would have gone to her and consoled her, things would have end up differently.

I helped them with the wounds and the dead until night fell over the city.

Blackie was the only mourner that remained there throughout the night, when everybody left and the cruel silence came. A sergeant came to her and put his arm on her shoulder looked into her eyes and told her: "Heroes never die!" and then pinned a shiny medal on her lover's lifeless chest and saluted him.

"He was shot while he was shouting: Freedom! He was one of my boys," he added, "There were guns blasting from all directions in the cross fire and then I saw him lying on the asphalt. They didn't let us help him. They took us as prisoners and they let him die there like a dog..."

"His very last words were: Blackie, Blackie...." The sergeant turned around and left.

There was nothing glorious there, just a corpse and a mourning love. A country that has orphanages has no heroes. When did we start killing our kids?

Blackie said while rocking with him in hers arms, "He was my man, my world, my everything..."

She stood there with his inert arms wrapped around her in his coffin, lying next to each other and they were both sound asleep when I left that room.

I do not think Blackie really wanted to understand what happened to him; at first she just crawled next to his corpse in that black wooden coffin and started whispering his name in his ear, Marius, as if she was trying to wake him up. Before I left I could hear the cold night wind moving the shattered windows with a pitchy-grave sound.

When they came to take the coffins in the morning they found Marius coffin closed, no one knew she was still in there next to him.

I believe they got buried together in the same coffin in one of those mass graves they showed later on television, laying in each other's arms for the eternity but some people told me they were incinerated and all the ashes were thrown back in the sewer. So that I feel in a way she is close to us again.

I never told Crow what happened, I was too afraid she might blame me, I didn't tell her in time to save her sister anyways.

Crow looked for Blackie for weeks. I don't think she ever gave up the hope of finding her sister. Every night after sunset she used to walk through the lightless streets of newly freed Bucharest whispering her name over and over again: "Blackie, are you there?"

The snow came two days later, the white layer of forgives that covered and cleaned the bloody streets. Newly liberated Bucharest seemed normal again.

I remember that Christmas day in 89', when they executed Ceausescu. We were watching cartoons on TV through a shop window when suddenly the screen went black and then they showed the ruling dictatorial couple, a firing squad and images of their bodies, a black winter coat riddled with bullets. The dead dictator with his brains blown out... and his lady. Their last wish was to die together. Cartoons started again shortly after that,

I remember that moment every time I saw that image again and again every time someone was ripping Ceausescu's picture out of the schoolbooks. He used to be on the first page of every schoolbook and manual.

"They killed my grandfather", Nicu sobbed, "Ceausescu! My last hope!" At that moment, Nicu took out from his pocket a black and white picture ripped from a newspaper of Ceausescu and his wife Elena at Disneyland, surrounded by Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Snow White. And then he started to sing quietly to himself an old patriotic song dedicated to comrade Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena about his burning love for them, teaching the people and leading the country towards a prosperous tomorrow. Nicu always hoped Ceausescu somehow would find out about him and take him, his grandchild, away from the sewer. I hated him because he had that hope in his heart. I hated everybody with any little bit of hope. That was the last time I watched the Romanian national television. Communism died that day. But sometimes I wonder what else died.

Crazy was shooting with his Tuberman only after girls now, careless of what was happening around him. He felt free like everybody else, he felt liberated.

Later that evening they also announced they were going to free all the political prisoners from jail. Jail was ecstatic "Daddy is coming back. Daddy is coming to get me." He started jumping up and down.

“They took him three years ago!” he started to dance for himself celebrating in his mind. The streets were flooded with the smell of newfound freedom.

Vlad burst throw the manhole ecstatically: “I got more food!” He threw down a big bag full of food and he jumped down". We all ran to see what was inside the bag. Vlad was proud that he could be a good provider.

While she was eating, Tuca asked happily: “Where did you get all this food?”

“This guy in a suit came to me and he gave me vodka and paid me to stab an old man in the back, a communist, just once!” He said showing one finger.

“ He told me: “You can have all this money, all you have to do is to stick the communist one time in the back and then run back in the sewer.” He told he would take me to the bordello after that. And when I did it, it feel so good that I couldn’t stop, and I did it a dozen times...”

He was proudly showing us his big shinny knife with blood still on it.

I was the only one shocked, well at least the only one that stopped eating.

“The more worthless they think you are, the more surprised are when you kill them!”, Vlad said stepping energetically back and forth.

“You should have seen his face expression: What me? Killed by a homeless? How is that possible?” he said laughing while biting from the salami.

“The only thing I could think about after that was: Which communist I’m going to kill next” he busted out like a great hero.

“You don’t have a God?” I asked him, angered.

They all looked at me, Tuca gave me that reproaching look again.

“Money is the new religion, and temples are build all around you” Crazy said while he was looking up the bright colorful square that just a little while ago was empty and gray.

“This thing!” he pointed nervously to my head and tapped furiously my temple “...this thing, is what keeps you in the sewer” Crazy continued.

“Sometimes God reaches in the underworld and pulls out a virtuous,” Tuca jumped in Vlad’s defense.

“Our human society seeks to heal itself. We are the Moral Hygienists of today’s

world. We are the leaders, the ones that know how low it can get” Crazy said raising up in the middle of us and taking a bold posture.

“Yeah! Like he said!” Vlad approved, uncertain of what Crazy meant.

“It is from my experience that the lies don’t anger the man as much as the simple real truth does...social debt.” Nicu added while indulging in the taste of foods that we never had before.

I stood there thinking about Mama, the Janitor and all those other people that had hurt us. Did they win by transforming us in the monsters they once were?

“It’s unrelated but I also helped load heavy bags in trucks at the market and in the end of a hard day’s work I suddenly realized the truth: there is more money in beggary than in hard work.

People don’t want to see us work, it’s a social; thing.” And with these words, Nicu ended up the discussion.

I never felt lucky. I never felt I deserved to be lucky because I thought I was cursed forever, this is how you feel when you start your life in an orphanage. Every time something good was about to happen to me, I would run away. I was afraid of good. Also I believed that the good luck wants revenge eventually for not taking advantage of it and becomes a bad luck that follows you everywhere.

But that day was my lucky day. I never realized that till years later, that she was the girl the Oracle had shown me.

She was an American girl, but that kind of girl that makes you love America.

The first time I saw her, she was seating on one of those big humanitarian aid trucks that invaded Bucharest, dispersing bags of goods. Everybody was pushing, elbowing and shoving each other to get as much stuff as they could carry home. They didn’t care what they got as long as it was something from America’s humanitarian help: clothes, food, or even a simple pen.

We had all imagined the Americans as a mixture of gods and movie stars. I stood still, motionless, stricken by her presence there, like under a spell.

And then, she turned her head to me and looked at the only soul out there that wasn’t moving in that square teeming with people. We had the look, the look that you will

remember forever, even if forty years will pass and you will be in your home putting your grandkids to bed and you will still remember that sudden connection that you had with someone. It was that kind of look.

I waited, she knew I was waiting for her and I could feel that that it was making her happy in her little heart.

She got down and came straight to me when they finished giving everything away. I was both excited and confused. I never imagined that I could feel like that, but I was happy because I was living this feeling for once in my life.

I don't know what happened next. My mind was blocked for several minutes as in a coma when abruptly I woke up in reality and realized that she spoke Romanian with a funny accent.

"Oh, I'm just a small town girl, living in a lonely world..." she said, smiling and looking at me with a silly face while answering to a question that I apparently had asked her.

Her hair was war reddish and her eyes were brown. I was mesmerized by her, I wished I had the power to smile back to her but I couldn't get the strength to do it. I felt paralyzed with fear.

"What's your name?" she asked me. "Daniel." I answered softly,

"Daniel... you remind me of my grandpa" and she tilted her head a little bit. "Was his name Daniel, too?" I asked.

"No!" she laughed, "But he has kind eyes. Like you."

She liked something about me? Nobody ever liked anything about me...

"There is something magical about people, because they have the power to be happy after they have been through so much pain, through communism..." she stopped when an older small man came closer to us and she politely got closer to him to hear him.

He looked left and right.

"Do you have any, hmm, adult magazines?" the old man asked her whispering while still looking around to see if someone was watching. Back then, the naughty magazines were not published in Romania and people with connections smuggled them into the country, You just need it to find one, a dealer.

"No!" she said taking a step back a little bit frightened and surprised. "OK..." He left

quickly, frustrated.

We took a few seconds to have the power to pass that weird pause. I smiled, she smiled back.

“Do you want to know my name?” she asked eventually.

“Mariana” she said, smiling silly again. Her name sounded so Romanian to me. Mariana was able to see the hidden beauty within us.

“There is no such thing as right or wrong / But ones who’s weak and one who’s strong” she used to quote one of the poems she wrote.

As a child she grew up in a small town in South Carolina by the seashore. She spent her summer vacations with her Romanian grand-parents, they had big shelves of magazines from the old country and spent many days absorbed in the realm of their ancestors' natal land. Mariana believed that by knowing more about her origin, she would learn more about herself.

I fell into a deep sleep that night. It was a time that my mind needed, to understand that someone like her could exist in this world. I really had to dream of her, take her out of this world to know that I loved her. And just for knowing that she existed, if I was to die tomorrow, I would die a happy boy.

Chapter 7: Sacred Times of Revenge

“My son died!” Fatty cried out angered, “and this piece of garbage lives?” he added, grotesquely contracting his face muscles to show hate and disgust.

He came out of nowhere while we were on the fourth floor of a deserted block apartment construction site looking for rebar to rip from the walls and sell as scrap metal.

Fatty had really red eyes with big veins sticking out, I saw that when he was staring at all of us, he looked as he had been crying for days. I never found out to this day if his son died at the revolution or for some other reason.

We all froze up, not just because we got scared, but because we felt that something macabre was going to happen and we thought that if we held still and didn't catch the militia's attention in any way we just might survive this. Just like one of those bugs that stay still when you turn on the light in the kitchen waiting to see if you are coming to kill them or they are blending in with the floor before they start running.

He had brought with him a new militia, Costel, very young, the kind of guy that would make you believe that he still believes in justice and the protection of the innocent, dressed in a slightly oversized uniform and new shiny boots.

Crazy moved very slowly towards the construction while none of us realized that he is doing that, and jumped in with a big bang. He was lucky, he did slide all the way down through the big tube and we heard a loud thump and cracks coming from the end of it.

He made it out in the end, he was safe. We all heard him running away and cursing.

Fatty got instantly mad and he raised his black baton looking for someone to hit, when Stammer burst running towards the hallway's steps. But he didn't make it. The new young skinny militia Costel caught him by the coat and threw him in the middle of the room on a pile of broken bricks and boards.

I will always remember his last look, trying to get up and looking up with fear briefly at me as if he was saying: “This is the last second of my life.”

The first truncheon hit Stammer in the neck and took him down to the ground again and the next four strikes sounds reverberated in my ears as cracking sounds.

All I could think about at that moment was: “Who is going to be next? ”

Finally Fatty got tired and broke into tears while he was still hitting Stammer's head

that looked now like a bloody pulp with no eyes, ears or nose. Costel said something to console him, but I don't remember what. I ran away. We all ran for the stairs, tripping, pushing each other towards the exit, towards salvation, leaving behind Stammer's carcass and our hopes for better life in the newly liberated Bucharest.

They were still there. I remember thinking to myself: "Whom should I tell about this? The Police? The Priest?" I was too afraid to tell anyone but God.

Nobody would care anyway, nobody listens and life goes on without Stammer.

"Liberty! Freedom! Victory!" they both shout while giving the two-fingered V salute, a new celebratory gesture. V for "Victory! The dictator is dead!"

The celebration of Ceausescu's death brought everyone peace, as if the greatest thing that could happen to Romanians had just happened.

None of us got caught up in the revolutionary fever after what happened to Stammer but Crazy got closer to the car screaming and yelling: "Victory! Victory" in a kind of weird and creepy way.

Crazy pulled the nail out of one of his grenades and threw it in the back of the car with a quick hand move. I could see the grenade bouncing a couple of times on the back seat between the children's chairs and finally falling on the car's floor before I realized what it was.

The parents' head turned instinctively, looking to see what Crazy had thrown in their cars.

Suddenly I could feel the blood from my brain drowning into my legs when I realized there was nothing I could do to stop what was about to happen. I remember thinking that I had four maybe five seconds to run away when I felt Vlad's strong hand grabbing my arm and pulling me into motion to run with him.

My legs felt soft and stuck, he got me running but I felt that time was slowing down and that cold metal grenade was touching the back of my head somehow, as if it was about to explode within my brain. I knew that I was going to die for sure if I didn't get far enough from the car, but by the time I became conscious of it, we were already running around the street corner.

The blast was short and powerful. I looked back and I heard undistinguished

screaming and saw pieces of car's windows and other debris flying through the air.

We ran again about five blocks. Crazy was the first one to stop, holding his left hand on his groins and leaning on a wood fence.

"Why did you do that? Why did you throw the grenade in their car?" Vlad said nervously, confused and breathless. Even he hadn't seen that coming from Crazy.

Crazy laughed and looked up to us:

"That family had so much freedom and now they are going to have more! I hate everyone who's happy; they don't deserve it..." he said sitting down with his back to the wall, "That got me so mad!"

We both stared at him, mainly disappointed. He didn't like our look, he turned his head from us and looked somewhere else over the fence.

"Listen! They had their fun while I was suffering." Crazy tried to explain. He pointing to himself in anger while citing a well-known Romanian proverb: "Let the neighbor's goat die too..."

He had known these people for a while and his envy got so powerful that he couldn't take it anymore. "They were passing, by my begging spot, in the market, by me, every day, happy, eating ice-cream...they never bought me any...or gave me any money..." Crazy kept justifying more to himself than to us what he had done.

"There were kids in there..." I said softly but Crazy didn't want to listen to me.

"They just stood there looking at my suffering and I was there next to them. They allowed it to happen and they did nothing to help me... they pushed me. They bullied me with their indifference. Well, help me or kill me, because if I come after you... I will kill you!" he said getting more and more agitated, gesticulating.

"Make no mistake! We are at war! They are out to kill us with their indifference towards us! They're killing children...Do you know how many times I thought of whacking myself because of them?" he continued.

Vlad just left as a silent ambulance was speeding by us.

January 2

I saw Mariana again today. She didn't know and she gave me hug.

I made jokes, she laughed and looked me in the eyes. They were sad jokes, from a sad

soul.

I made a stupid joke and hit on her, laughing. Why was she still here? She looked into me deeply this time. Why was everything so quiet all of a sudden? My mind couldn't accept it.

She listened to my stories and found meaning in them that I didn't know. Tuca brought her into the gloomy, dim sewer. Mariana liked Tuca's drawings on the wall, she took lots of pictures, and she was fascinated. I like the drawings too but I never told anyone.

Did I really imagine that this could happen? I looked at her when she was looking away. Will my mind ever accept?

She touched me! I acted as if it was no big deal. I shivered inside.

I can't write anymore. This is stupid!

One night Crazy crawled next to me and confessed:

"Did you ever hate God so much because he made other people so happy?" he suddenly burst into the silence of the night.

"All I understand is that God is testing me, over and over again," he continued. Everybody was paying attention to us.

"You killed that family..." I told him but I didn't know for sure what actually happened to them.

Crazy took a second for himself, to think how he could explain to me what he felt.

"Yes I did, but God didn't stop me or the grenade. No miracle happened...I wanted to test God for a change...He tests us all the time." he whispered.

No one said anything. They were all listening to our conversation.

"Sometimes I look at their faces, children the same age as me and you, us... What did they do to deserve a life so much better than mine? They are spoiled and stupid and they ignore me when I beg them for money, and they still get a new bicycle on Christmas. I hate them, I hate them with all my heart..." he was getting more and more revolted, quietly.

"One day I'm going to meet Him...and He will have to answers for all He put me through..." he was almost crying by now.

I felt he had some remorse about what he had done but all that was buried under a mountain of pain and hate.

“And now that I got the power, me, the ugly little homeless boy...that grenade. Why should I be any better than them?” he asked me.” Why shouldn’t I enjoy their pain, their desperation for a change?”

“But they never did anything bad,” Vlad said compassionately.

Crazy raised his voice with a menacing look in his eyes: “Because they never had to lie or steal, they had everything given to them on a golden plate. Never tested by God. Unwilling angels, they would be as bad as you and me if they had been in this place.”

Crazy kept silent a moment and then he continued:

“Did you ever imagine that maybe their indifference against us caused God’s anger in the end? All those deaths?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The Revolution I mean. If it would not have happened we would all have died of starvation.” He was looking for a meaning, “Maybe we, down here, are more precious to Him than all those up there.”

He got us thinking. He put a seed in our heads.

“I don’t care anymore.” Crazy voice blended into the night, ending the conversation.

I felt that he was afraid that there was no God after all and no Heaven. The world didn’t end and the skies didn’t fall. God didn’t do anything about it.

I wanted to lose myself in the objects around me and become an object without feelings, moved, pushed around, hit. I didn’t care. I didn’t want to feel anything anymore. I just wanted to watch, emotionless, how times go by.

He really got me thinking on that at least.

We all went to sleep philosophizing about our meaning in this world.

I just wanted to sleep and sleep till I woke up in the marvelous world of the future, when there would be no more homeless, no more disparities.

“Let’s go back to the place where everything started, let’s go back to that orphanage cemetery” Vlad said out of nowhere, taking everybody by surprise the next day.

We all looked at each other to see our reactions. Did we want to go to see our

childhood graveyard again? Did we want to see the Janitor again? Just thinking of going back to that place scared me motionless.

They all felt better knowing that Mama was not there anymore.

“We have the revenge demon that lives in all of us” he yelled at us, seeing our hesitation.

“That demon will grind your soul, will change you if you don’t give him the satisfaction he wants. He will make you hate everything and everyone in the end...” Vlad continued his speech.

He was right. I craved revenge in my soul, but I was still afraid of the Janitor, I still saw him as an undefeatable God. Who can kill a God?

“This is our time now. We have a gun now,” He said, raising frantically his gun into the air and pounding his chest with his other hand.

“Yes, the demon!” Crazy realized “But we didn’t put him inside us... they did it with their starvations and beatings...and he screams to get out!” he got up, ready to go, getting one of his grenades with him.

“We should all go together, as brothers and sisters. Maybe we don’t have parents but we are brothers to each other. We were all born from the same pain and suffering...” Tuca agreed, giving courage to all of us.

“When is all this going to end?” I remember thinking to myself.

“Yes! Let’s go!,” Nicu decided “They have our files, our life stories, our parents’ names...”

We were left full of fear and hesitation but also with the excitement of the confrontation that would follow. Vlad took out his shiny knife from his belt and gave it to Tuca just in case she was going to need it. One Eye was too afraid to come with us and Crow said she needed to stay and take care of Mariuca’s kid.

Right then at that moment, I realized that each of us had different nicknames for that little boy, but none of us actually knew his name. Crow called him “Love” like she called her mother.

In the end it was Vlad, Crazy, Nicu, Jail, Tuca and me. We barely looked at each other in the bus that took us *there*, we all knew what we were going *there* for.

The orphanage wasn’t changed. It just looked smaller than we remembered it. Same

scared eyes looking at the world outside, just like us, not so long ago.

As we got closer I thought I could see myself in there, tied to one of the beds as they used to do. A much younger boy, or maybe one of spark of memory dying in my mind at that moment.

Vlad went right in, proud of himself, authoritarian. In that moment, I understood why Tuca loved in him.

Crazy followed him with the grenade in his hand and then Jail with Vlad's Tuberman. At this point I don't think Crazy cared if he would die holding the grenade to his chest as long as he could take the Janitor to hell with him.

I was the last one to enter the orphanage and I was shaking from all my bones while I followed them into the Janitor's and Mama's room. I had never been to their room before, they didn't allow us. Well, at least, I didn't.

When I saw the Janitor, I froze and I fought with myself to keep my breathing normal. They were already around him, talking with him and I stood behind Jail, so he would not get a good glimpse of me.

"I'm not the six year old boy that you can beat up every time you feel like it anymore." Vlad said, affirming his stature.

The Janitor laughed, he was older but he still looked as strong as an ox, but by now Vlad was as tall as him and hopefully stronger than him. And also he had a gun.

"You know there is no way you will get away with this." He looked back at him, fearless. "We have a surveillance camera at the gate now, and I know what you did to Mama..."

"I don't care, you're going down today," Vlad said while stretching his big long muscular arms and looking at him, ready to start the fight.

"O.K. let me have one more shot of this rachiu." The Janitor said still sitting relaxed on his chair, closing his eyes.

"What are you doing Vlad?" I remember asking for myself, "You were supposed to shoot him, not start a fist fight with him!"

"You know, you kids were the last ones that jumped the fence. I put an electric wire on it after you jumped..." he finished his drink and reached for the bottle to refill his little glass when he continued "...of course we had a couple of burned ones over the years..."

he laughed mimicking the kids getting electrocuted while we all looked away, disgusted.

And then, suddenly and silently, the janitor tried to take down Vlad with the rachiu bottle, aiming for his head.

He missed and Vlad flinched just in time to pull his gun out and shoot.

They both fell on the ground at the same time, entangled and contorted. A heavy fall of two Gods resounded through the room.

“You shoot me!” the Janitor moaned quietly, but surprised. I was relieved. He was shot somewhere in the hip. Vlad pushed himself up dizzy from the Janitor’s grip and looked at the fallen God.

“Tie his hands!” Nicu jumped with a piece of rope he had prepared, fighting to get a loop around Janitor’s hands. They all hurdled on him to help Nicu tie the first knot.

“No! I will not allow it!” the Janitor screamed, upset, “You will break my arm! Let me go!” but it was too late. They had already tied him up tight although there were a bunch of loops hanging loose.

We stood there looking at him collapsed on the floor. He didn’t look so big and scary now. Suffer!

We only did what we all learned from him: to hurt people and take pleasure in it. “Remember the old paper press machine?” said Vlad with a big grin on his face, while turning to see us “I want to break his fucking head with it!”

The old paper machine was still there, waiting as a guillotine waits to be used again on its victims. But this time, Vlad became the executioner when he shove the Janitor’s head in it.

“I should have killed you all a long time ago” the Janitor said with his face between the planks covered in a mix of sweat and hair. I could feel the smell of his blood dripping down his leg filling out the room, I know other people don’t smell blood but I am one of those who can feel its stench.

“Yes but if you would have killed us, you wouldn’t have been paid for taking care of us anymore, so you chose to torture us instead.” Vlad said squeezing the machine’s handle tighter and tighter.

Everybody was waiting ecstatically for the cracking noise, but me. Maybe.

“Shame on you! I raised you! You are my children! Why are you doing this?” the

Janitor was crying and begging for mercy.

And then at that moment I saw the humanity in him: his fear of his own death. And it moved me. He didn't really want to die and looked for a way out, he looked at me.

"Stop it! Vlad!" I screamed and jumped on his back and put my right arm around his neck trying to pull him down, vainly.

Vlad got angry but he finally stopped turning the press handle and he pushed me in a corner then grabbed my shirt collar and started hitting me. He hit hard, like a hammer.

"No. Leave Daniel alone!" Crazy run towards me and jumped between me and Vlad, "This is not what we came here for..."

And there in the middle of our uproar, we heard a simple crack that stopped us still..

It got quiet and I could hear the wind outside. Vlad let go of my collar slowly as we all tried to see what happened.

The Janitor was hanging dead with his head smashed into a formless mass. His blood was dripping from the table making a rainy noise. Above all this was Tuca, crying and shivering from all her muscles but still holding the handles. We were all lost in the aftermath of the trauma.

"He's dead," she said with a big smile on her face, looking at Vlad "He's really dead! I did it!" and she started laughing and crying at the same time while running in Vlad's arms.

Nobody said anything, Nicu took the files he came for quietly and we all left the room.

We got back to the safety of our underground sewer.

And there they were... our life stories, wrapped in that gray-brownish paper that they called "The Files", staring back at us, merciless, holding the truth of what we are and where we are all coming from.

"Read mine first, please..." begged One Eye, shoving his file in Crazy's face before anyone else. We all frowned at his impudence, but nobody said anything.

Crazy opened the file slowly as the old paper was starting to split in the corners. There were only two pictures and a half of paper sheet typed with some official signatures and stamps.

We all stared at a timeworn picture taken by the seashore with an elderly woman sitting on a big rock and holding up a small child next to an older child. The small child was the only one not looking straight at the camera so we couldn't see his face very well.

"Look at this picture, your clothes are so clean and beautiful..." Tuca said pointing at the other picture in the file that was One Eye's only child's portrait.

"They look like rich people, look at their clothes... You must have been rich when you were a child" she sustained in a deep meditative voice.

"And you had two eyes," Vlad continued with what none of us never dared to notice.

We shared a moment of awkward silence. One Eye should have come with all of us to face the Janitor, but in the same time Vlad was too cruel to him. I always thought of One Eye as a good friend that was there for us, overcompensating his handicap with his kindness, as if we could somehow help him overlook his own burden. I knew he was afraid of fights because he ran every time one was about to start.

"It says here that this is your granny and this is your brother Mihai... you were one year old and your brother was three. You lived in Constanta, somewhere close to the Black Sea when your mother and father died in a car crash..." his voice became faint toward the end.

"But I have a brother!" he jumped out, happy. "I have a brother!"

It got quiet again with all of us staring at the picture as if we were trying to absorb the whole story in our mind. I was already dreaming about the sea and the beach when Crazy began talking again:

"There's an address written here on the back... I can't make the number anymore, but the street it's Aleea Daliei....and look, there is a phone number...you can call them...", but he never got to finish the sentence because One Eye pulled the paper out of Crazy's hands and climbed up the manhole and ran to a public phone.

Everything happened so suddenly that nobody had time to say anything. "Read mine next! Please!" Crow said.

Crow and Tuca were holding hands when Crazy opened her file, she screamed when she saw a picture of her dead sister Blackie falling from of the file. She tried to reach for her sister's face as if she was there in flesh and blood when she fainted in Tuca's arms.

We got scared seeing her lose consciousness. We didn't want to lose anyone

anymore. We were so few anyway. I spend some time with Crow waiting for her to give me and Tuca a sign that she didn't deserted us yet while the others were reading their files.

"I don't want to open my file" Vlad said to me, "I need to wait till the moment is right"

Crazy interrupted Vlad:" This was Burn's file, you see... he was telling the truth he had a mother, this is his picture, he was a Hawk of Romanian Homeland, he told us the truth..." "How about you Crazy? You want to read your file?" I asked him.

"I already read it...there is nobody to go back to..." he answered, disappointed.

"My parents died in the great earthquake of '77, people found me in the wreckage of a crumbled house. It said that none of my relatives wanted me, so the authorities brought me here" he kept his head down, "Oh!...and there were no pictures in my file."

"How about Nicu?" I asked them while looking at him. He was sitting in his corner rocking back and forth.

"We couldn't find his file... he will never find out the truth..." Vlad said.

Nicu looked up to me with tears in his eyes as if he knew we were talking about him, I felt bad for him.

"Now I'm sure that the communist secret police took his file. Nobody will have any proof that he is Ceausescu' grandson," Cray said, looking unwilling to admit it.

We all looked at him at the same time. He looked at us confused, with tears still pouring from his eyes, asking himself why we stared at him.

"So he is really Ceausescu's grandson? Really?" I asked out loud. A bizarre moment followed.

"Here is your file!" Crazy slammed a heavy, full file in my hands unexpectedly. The file looked like it had been through a lot of hands in his way to me. "This is Sleeper's file" Vlad showed us the last file.

"Sleeper never found us, he never found the safety on the underground sewer. Often I wonder what happened to him after he left the orphanage..." I said quietly.

"Everything goes...when life is like this...I remember him from our good times," Crazy answered pensively.

"There was nothing good to remember, it was bad, and it was all bad" Vlad said.

They all retrieved to their corners, sorting things out. A little bit later, Crazy broke the silence with a happy scream:

“Birthdays! We have birthdays! All of us, not just the rich kids!” “Relax Crazy,” Vlad yelled, “everybody has a birth date!”

“Yes! But now, I know what mine is: October 6!” he laughed, “October 6,” he repeated in ecstasy.

Vlad and I went to our secret place so he could read our files in peace.

“So, I got stood up by a homeless boy!” a voice said calmly behind me. “What?” I asked while awakening from my thoughts and turning around.

“I mean, how much lower than that can a girl get?” Mariana said while looking happy too “Remember? We had a date?” she asked me, smiling. She looked all dressed up for a date

I was perplexed that I forgot, but then again I had had a rough morning with all the killings going on.

We went to a sweet shop to eat some cake, a lady and a homeless boy. Everybody in there was looking at us and talking about us. She didn’t care, she paid for the cake, I barely paid any attention to her.

I didn’t understand what was happening to me.

Chapter 8: Freedom for sale

I always got the feeling that something vital was about to happen just a few seconds before it happened. It's like seeing a time ghost.

"Daddy! That is my Daddy!" Jail said losing his voice at the end of the sentence and looking stunned while pointing to a man sitting by the window of a dirty white bus that just stopped at a red light of the intersection where we were begging. We all raised our heads up and looked at the guy getting a glimpse of a rough, well build man sitting by the window and reading a newspaper.

I remember thinking for a second: "Jail looks just like his father..."

I stood there, trapped in the moment as the light changed and the bus started to slowly drive away through the intersection, and I didn't come around until I saw Jail running frenetically after the bus: "Stop the bus! Look at me, Daddy!" He was yelling from all his lungs, crying as the bus was driving away "Look at me Daddy...".

We all knew it was pointless, but we started to run after the bus as well and yell: "Stop the bus! Stop the bus!" It was all in vain.

Nobody but an old wrinkled woman sitting in the back of the bus turned her covered head back to us, surprised for a second, and looked at us with contempt, disgusted to see us.

"Stop the bus!" I yelled at her again while running, but she didn't care, by now she already had turned her eyes away from us. Why should she care anyway?

And at that moment, as I was hearing Jail's shouts of pain and desperation as he was losing all hope to get reunited with his father, I heard a short and clear whoosh whisper and I felt something flying next to my right ear and hitting the bus in the rear window with a loud thump.

I looked back and I saw Vlad on the street corner, picking another rock from the street corner as he yelled at us "Get down!" and then he threw a stone in a car's side window coming from the other lane. The driver pushed the brakes and stopped the car, shocked at what happened.

And then, when all hope was lost for Jail, I truly saw Vlad for the first time in my life: a benevolent God squishing out all his strengths in one thrust for a sewer's child

happiness.

I watched as the third rock flew through the air, through the power lines and broke the bus back window.

The bus finally stopped and I could see pure heaven in Jail's eyes as his father turned his eyes and saw his son for the very first time in a very long time.

That man jumped out of the bus and fell on his knees with big tears in his eyes, as Jail run into his arms.

They hugged and cried for an eternity in that fatherly embrace, right there on the sidewalk. We all felt that the emptiness in our souls was getting a little smaller in that moment and maybe for the first time in our life, we all felt hope for ourselves.

“Let’s go get ice-cream...”his father said wiping his tears with the back of his big hand. “You used to love ice-cream...”

I wanted to go after them. I wanted to share their happiness. But Vlad grabbed my hand and stopped me.

“Leave them alone. He doesn’t need us anymore,” Vlad whispered pulling me back and holding me in place, “He is happy now...he doesn’t need us anymore. Good for him,” he told me again.

And that was it! Jail never looked back. We never saw him again.

As we turned to go back to the intersection, I got for the very first time a glimpse of the new Romanian cop: young, corrupt, full of greed and ready to tear anyone in pieces for any kind of financial gain. You see, in Ceausescu’s time nobody was allowed to have more than a house and a car, so even if you got money illegally, there was nothing you could do except get caught and go to prison.

But this new police guys were out there, hungry to get more and more, lacking any sense of right and wrong, watching for any opportunity to make themselves rich by sin, to get money.

This new cop was as young and tall as Vlad. He had been there the whole time looking at us from across the street and none of us even saw him when he stopped his police car and got out in the middle of that madness.

I was scared thinking that he was going to come over and arrest us or beat us for what

Vlad did. But this cop didn't move, he just stood there holding Vlad's look while they stared at each other; two kids from different worlds, enemies by birth, meeting for the first time.

He finally got up in his police car and left. We saw him later that week and found out that his name was Christian, he was extorting money from the young prostitutes who were now appearing on old Bucharest's streets corners. Clara was our friend, she was a young girl that became a prostitute to support her brothers and sisters when her father was institutionalized in an asylum. Nobody cared about her but Vlad, and she was keeping him up to date with what the cops do and where they were going to be.

"I'm poor!" Clara used to say, "I'm not free. You are free when you are rich. You can go everywhere and do anything you want..." she used to say this dreaming for a better life.

Everybody was looking at the TV for hope. Everything started there, the revolution and all that followed.

"I'm not free, I'm poor. I don't know why those people of the revolution wanted freedom for? They were already rich. Back then we had bread and a job. Now we are losing everything, but we are free!"

"Me?" Clara answered, as if one of us had asked her a question.

"I don't know where I'm going to sleep tonight. Maybe at the shelter or maybe in the park with the Bushmen..." she kept going as if she had a conversation with one of us.

With the Bucharest's rebirth overnight, people lost their communist grey uniforms and wore new colorful clothes, indulging in the freedom of western music and new food. But with all that a new evil spread into the country through the entrepreneurial impulses, breaking the old state monopoly barriers, flourished corruption and the political-financial mafia. Everything could be bought now, even justice. The new-old government kept the control quietly, while giving the complete illusion of freedom. The master puppeteers untangled the old strings from the timeworn generations and knotted the new fresh blood.

The crumbling Communist era was upon us. Deserted stores with broken windows appeared next to colorful quick marts. The sidewalks, filled with young emancipated beautiful girls who discovered the freedom of money were shared with packs of street dogs.

I liked Mariuca's little boy, he was a sweet boy with his big blue open eyes, always trying to hug everyone he met. I thought, that, maybe one day, if I had a boy, I hoped my boy would be like him.

I was not there when they sold Marica's little boy, but from what Crazy told me it went this way:

Vlad gave Mariuca's little boy to a middle-aged American, took the money and walked away to the end of the curb. Vlad didn't look back but Crazy did.

The American was under the secret police surveillance or maybe they just happened to drive by when they saw the whole transaction and threatened to arrest him. One of the cops had his hands in the air, looking angry and he didn't put them down until the American reached into his pocket got his wallet and gave the cops some money. One of those two cops was Christian, the new young cop.

"Ten thousand dollars!" Crazy exclaimed, amazed while looking in our eyes and he grinned.

"We can buy an apartment...we are not going to be homeless anymore! We don't have to live in the sewer anymore..." he raised his hands as if he wanted to praise the Lord.

He didn't show any signs of remorse even when Tuca slapped him really hard and hatefully.

Good thing Vlad was not there or Tuca might just have killed him on the spot.

"You fool! They didn't take him to adopt him! They took him to harvest his organs." I told him quietly and bitter with tears came in my eyes.

At that moment I knew I was not going to see that innocent child with blue eyes again in my life. It hurt so badly. That was the worst pain I had to suffer in my life, it was deep in my chest and in my head.

"Mariuca, trusted you... She trusted us..." Crow said crying, barely breathing and looking at all of us.

It got quiet. Crazy was feeling some kind of guilt but there was nothing that he could do about it now. We all knew except Crazy that we were not going to see Vlad again.

"They don't buy children anymore." Nicu broke the silence, "They have a phantom

ambulance that snatches healthy children right from the streets and somebody told me they also have a breeding village somewhere in the country side where they grow babies for organs.”

His thirst of showing his knowledge of the world got him an angry look from the rest of us.

“You always know when to say the right thing, don’t you?” said Tuca, fuming.

“Who would want the kidneys of a homeless kid anyway...” he said, looking at me, “I’m just saying...” he mumbled quietly for himself.

“How did you ever imagine that they took him to give him a better life? They took him for his young unspoiled organs...or he is a pedophile, Crazy!” Crow yelled at him a second time with thirst while Crazy was holding his head down.

Vlad was gone and I never expected to see him again.

Crazy started to brag and spread the rumors that we had enough money down there in the sewer to buy an apartment. It finally got to Fatty’s ears and now everybody was looking for the newly enriched Vlad.

Four days later I saw Vlad seating in a middle of a feast surrounded by a lot of young girls and boys in one of the old Bucharest’s Lipscani Street bodegas. I stopped there, looking straight to him trying to make my own eyes believe that it was really him in the middle of all that laughing and talking in a high-pitched voice.

“Come friends and eat, today I don’t care about the money. Come all to my table” he enticed his new friends to eat and drink more and more. Who were all those people? I never saw them in my life.

He looked drunk and depressed. An accordionist paid by him was playing an old sad romance.

“What? I drink like every other man!” he defended himself from what he thought I was going to reproach him.

I didn’t say anything, I just stood there close to him looking at his sad face, he was suffering. After a while he looked back to me.

“I didn’t sell the kid.... I sold myself, my soul for a bottle of liquor and the warm embrace of a diseased prostitute...” he said while looking at me from under his big eyebrows while holding his big long hand on three girls’ shoulders.

Nobody was listening to our conversation, not even the girls that he just had called prostitutes.

“It’s good to get help when you pray...” he smiled for himself. “Maybe people are right, maybe God deserted me...” he said opening his fist and looking at his missing fingers.

“All that is left for me now is to be other people's God... Should I be a benevolent God or an evil God?” he said looking at his newly made friends.

”They preach us about God everywhere. You see Daniel, nobody would need God, were it not be for this unkind world. Your God is within the others. Look at me, what women will ever love me now?”, and he cried out, shoving his missing fingers in my face. They smelled weird. an odor that I didn’t smell before.

He didn’t give me time to answer and yelled to his buddies:

“God damn you, life!” he said sounding miserable, “If life is for sale, let’s mock it!”

They stopped for a second and looked at him, surprised, and then they all started laughing copiously.

He then turned around to the fiddler and asked him: “Please sing to me and my old friend your saddest song. I will give you money and pay for your wine... tonight we end my bitter life...” and he took another sip from his wine glass.

I left, I never told anyone I saw him in the “Little Paris,” as we used to call that area. Two nights later he came back to us ashamed with what he had done, afraid and broke. Tuca and Crow didn’t say anything, there was nothing to be said anymore.

The fat cop was still running after us when we went around the corner, he looked furious now. I never imagined that he could run for so long.

“Run all the way to the roof, where we sit to see the town...” Vlad said, pushing me to run into the old apartment building, “and take the stairs,” he added, breathless.

My legs were becoming heavy, uncontrollable at the verge of collapsing to the ground. “What? Why?” I asked him. I didn’t have a plan of my own on how to lose Fatty, maybe just hide somewhere, but to run to the roof? Then he would surely get us there.

“Just do what I say.” He powerfully squeezed my arm while giving me a frowned look with his green crystal eyes.

We ran in the building, there was no way back now, I went up the stairs and Vlad jumped into the elevator and closed the door just in time, so Fatty wouldn't see him, but had plenty of time to hear me running up the stairs.

“Hold it! Stop! Give me the money!” he yelled again and he threw his baton in my direction trying to hit me. He missed. “Your mothers... You’ll see what I’ll do when I catch you two...” he mumbled, struggling to go up the stairs while picking up the big black baton that he has just thrown to me.

I could hear his blue dark pants stretching and feel his sinuous coughs at the back of my neck. Why was he still chasing me?

I was scared, Vlad managed to hide away in the elevator, but what could I do? I remember panicking and asking myself like crazy “What you are going to do Daniel? He is going to break your head just like Stammer's.” I started pushing the elevator buttons every time I got to a new floor but the elevator didn’t come and the cop was getting closer to me and I was getting closer to the last level of the building and the roof.

I became mad and yelled in my mind crying to Vlad: “Come on Vlad, let the elevator go, please!”

There was nowhere to go when I got to the last floor but run through the window on the roof. This was it!

I was looking for places to hide when I heard his horrible voice, out of breath:

“Oh, what I’m going to do to you!” he said while taking his militia hat off his bold sweaty head. "I’m going to break your legs first, and then your arms, and the last thing you are going to see is this baton breaking your face...” he whispered to me, getting closer.

I don’t think I ever felt as close to death before as I was at that moment. I remember thinking “This is it! Is going to happen...I’m going to die.”

He got me cornered and raised his baton straight above my head ready to club me and yelling one more time: “Tell me where the money is!”

I closed my eyes ready to take the hit. And then it happened.

“You see this is my good old pipe, I club militias with this pipe” Vlad took us both by surprise, appearing behind him, while swinging his metal pipe.

Vlad’s pipe was twice as heavy and long as Fatty’s baton, it looked more like a black

sword when he was swinging it in his hand.

Fatty saw something in Vlad eyes at that moment, something that scared him into backing into my corner, into me.

I could feel the militia's fear growing bigger and bigger as Vlad was getting closer and closer to him. I remember thinking: "Up here, there is no earthly law, no one to see us, we can do whatever we want to him, and we can escape!"

"Back then we were small and weak, but time and pain made us big and strong," Vlad said looking at Fatty the way one looks at a bug before stepping on it, "You thought we forgot, you thought you would never pay for what you did?"

He raised the pipe as a sword above Fatty's head, just the way had done with me seconds before.

"Today, I'm going to use my weapon, so you will get to see what we had to go through all these years growing up with you on our back."

Fatty suddenly and unexpectedly reached to take out his gun from the holster as quick as he could but Vlad saw that coming and by the time the militia let go of his baton to grab the gun handle, Vlad had raised his right foot into the air and put all his force to bring it down on Fatty's wrist.

I heard a terrifying genuine crack.

The militia face burst into a silent scream of pain and stood there still on that spot till he got the power to grasp for little air in his lungs. He raised his crippled contorted hand to look at it and then I saw a small white bone sticking out through his forearm skin surrounded by blood. The pipe blow to the right side of his head came with another cracking sound and paralyzed Fatty's body close to the building edge.

He tried to articulate something to us while his jaw was moving up and down in a spastically, uncontrollable way. Vlad stood there and watched him for a little while till he got bored and then he pushed him over the building's edge.

When we left the building I saw Fatty's body surrounded by a crowd of curious people.

He fell on a car, well, at least half of his body.

My yellow file contained just a name and an address with an underlined note: "Friend

of victim” signed and dated by an officer Stanescu.

“You want me to come with you?” Vlad asked, chewing gum and measuring the apartment building up and down with his eyes. I shook my head.

There was a warm peach sunlight that morning that covered everything in bright orange lights.

“No, I need to do this by myself” I told him while looking down at my yellow file.

“She knew my mother, it is like meeting her through her friend's eyes.”

I looked with affection at the aged cement apartment building, feeling that I knew I was somehow meant to live in one of these suits until something, somewhere in my life went terribly wrong.

I remember going up the stairs, touching the walls with the tips of my fingers and looking at the pen marks made on the old paint. There was a cupid's love heart doodle with two names that someone had tried to scrap out but I could still make out the names: “Daniel + Mariana”.

I found myself asking if I had seen that before, it looked familiar, when I stopped in front of an old cedar door. I barely got the courage to knock.

It took a while, but a middle age woman with gray hair opened the door looking down at my dirty clothes first and then raising her head to look into my eyes. She thought I was one of the kids that wander around on Christmas days, singing carols to get treats or money.

"I only have cookies, no money” she spoke with a soft voice ready to close the door. “No... I'm here to ask you about my mother: Doina!” I raised my voice as some children started singing at another door.

“Who?” said she turning quickly back toward me.

“My mother. Doina Elena!” I shouted and suddenly her face paled horribly, she looked down the corridor left and right.

The kids started singing very loud a Romanian Christmas carol:

“Open the door, Christian Man

We are coming again to you

The road was long and we are tired.

From faraway we came...”

She hesitated for a second as if her mind was not yet made up, then she reached for my shoulder and pulled me in the apartment. “Come in.”

Her apartment was dark and smelled of decomposing wood, the draperies were almost closed, leaving just a little bit of light to get through. A phonograph was spinning the disk of an old romance in the corner, chanting about a lost love and eternity, I still remember the words: “Maybe our roads will meet again one day, the roads and the love, the thought and the happiness. I will always hope for the love we never had.”

“Yes, Daniel, I don’t remember her choosing this name for you. I think it was the name of your father, the American. He was a Counselor of the American Embassy in Bucharest” she walked towards a wall that was entirely made out of bookshelves with hundreds of old books, where she picked a dusty leather album.

“The American? So my father is an American?”

This old skinny tall woman took a heavy breath and pressed the shriveled photo album against her chest and then she spoke: “Your mother, I knew her well, she was my best friend. We grew up together in the same block apartment.”

She began to tell the story as she knew it:

“Somehow she found out to which orphanage you had been taken. One day she left her job and she came to get you. She had a plan to run with you to America, where your father was. I told her she was crazy, but she never listened to me.”

“She didn’t know if she had a baby boy or a baby girl. But she thought that when she would get to the orphanage, she would just feel which baby was hers” she said, moving her hand strangely.

She stopped for a moment as if she didn’t want to remember: “When she died, the militia came, broke all my ABBA records and arrested me, They interrogated me for months. They accused me to want to flee with her to America.” She laughed nervously and then she looked out of the window at some children playing soccer in the street.

“Life had not been kind to me... I thought I was going to rot in jail for the rest of my life, all those years of solitary confinement, periodic beating and rapes, hunger...and then 12 years later the revolution came and they let me go...” She took a heavy deep breath and continued “but by then I had lost everything, my youth, my looks, and my life. Sometimes when I was in there at night, I used to get angry at her and yell: You did this

to me! You put me in here!” and her sad eyes looked straight at me for the first time as she told me: “But it wasn’t her fault, it was the communists who locked me in there...”

“Look here, at this photo of her and me in the Cismigiu Park” she said, suddenly giggling, while pointing to a gorgeous blond girl glowing with youth and hope. I looked at my mom’s picture, hypnotized, she had bright blue eyes tangled in a vibrant smile.

"We ordered parfait ice creams and left, forgetting to pay. Halfway through the park we realized what we had done and we started laughing.” And then she started laughing as if she was living that moment again.

She took the picture out and gave it to me. I took the photo and looked closely at my mother’s face for the first time in my life. I couldn’t imagine that someone like me could be related to her, even more that she was my mother.

I barely could stop my tears and I aimed for the door when she stopped me.

“Wait! I have her letters. She wanted me to throw them in the stove but I kept them...” she said reaching for a drawer and she added: “I never read them. I couldn’t. They are in English”

“Your father, the American Counselor never found out what happened to your mother. He probably just thought she had decided not to see him anymore when the Romanian secret police arrested her for country treason and having a secret affair with a foreign diplomat.” She handed me the letters while she stood there with her face close to the wall as if she was hugging someone.

She looked at me with her sad watery eyes, watching me till I was all the way through the door, feeling overwhelmed by the all those memories that I had brought flooding back to her and she said: “The hardest thing to do in this world is to keep your mental sanity...Trying to make sense of everything. Choose what you want to remember and what you want to forget!”

She took a flask from her pocket, unscrewed the cap and took a long drink.

I left and promised her I would come back to visit her sometime. I knew she had suffered much in jail, I knew because she had the look of someone much older than she was and long-time suffering makes you look old.

Nicu came back that night in the sewer and told us.

“I went to Ceausescu’s grave in Ghencea cemetery. So many flowers, so many

people” he said, “He was my only hope for a better life, now he is gone too...”

That night I fell asleep with my mom's picture in front of my eyes so I could dream of her.

It was one of our last nights together, down there in the bleak dark silence of our childhood sewer home when I finally got the courage to ask Vlad what he was writing about.

“It’s not a novel; it’s a window into our world, entitled: The kids that never had any chance,” he said, raising his hands in the air as if he was projecting the title somewhere on the ceiling.

“Any chance of what?” I asked.

“Any chance to become anything ...what else can we become, trying to survive, but mere criminals?” he said taking another gulp from his rachiu bottle while raising his shoulder and shaking his head.

“A gruesome story of an event that others don’t want to hear about, but it is our life... it did happen...” he continued with a changed commercial voice as if he was selling me my life story back to me.

“I never asked to be born... I never asked to suffer...” Vlad got carried away. I laughed, he made it seemed so important. We got quiet.

“You ever wonder what happened to Mariuca’s little boy?” I asked him, fearful. “No.” Vlad responded bluntly.

I was afraid that he would be mad at me because I dared ask him that, but he didn’t.

“Mariuca was the only girl that loved me, me, just plain old me, the way I am and the way I am not,” he said sadly and then he took another swallow from his bottle.

“I told her that we don’t belong with them, but she chose him. She thought he could give her a better life up there.” I could hear and see the disappointment in his voice and on his face. Vlad raised his hand up as if he was reaching for the lights coming through the manhole.

It was true, Mariuca always dreamed of a mysterious stranger who would appear and rescue her from the blackness of her life. She was a beautiful woman after all.

“She was my first and only love...the books say that you are going to forget and find

a new love... but it didn't happen to me. I waited and waited for years, but the pain didn't go away, it became a part of me...maybe I am not built that way, not built to forget.”

It is hard to forget something that haunts your dreams night after night, I wanted to say something, but I couldn't.

“Nobody gets out of the sewer, or even if you do for a moment, the sewer will pull you right back in,” he said pulling his hand back to his heart.

“She broke my heart. That day, my God died and I hated her. She killed him,” he kept going.

“You know, I dreamed about her on the last Sanziane night when Heaven opens and she came to me in my dreams.” He smiled for himself.

“Later, I have been having all these vivid dreams of Mariuca...”

Vlad hit something in me that night, something deep. The fear of an unknown romantic life, the fear of what the future would bring. Was I ever going to have that feeling of being in love?

I started thinking of Mariana, my heart got warm. She was a young humanitarian wannabe with a struggling spirit, suffocated by her merciless academic environment. You can be an immigrant even in your own country, you can be a foreigner in your own neighborhood or you can be abandoned in your own home.

I loved her.

Chapter 9: Prayer for a Father

Vlad was actually a good guy, but it took a while to get to see him that way. He would only do bad things to survive.

What I will tell you next may seem cruel and unnecessary, but only the one who went through the reality of the torture knows that, sometimes the only way the mind can survive the pain is by physically killing the demon. Not for the thirst of revenge, but for the redemption of knowing that the demon it's not going to hurt you again.

It wasn't very difficult to get to Vlad's father village. We found a countryside bus route that took us there straight from the Bucharest North train station to a small cluster of villages lost in the middle of dazzling sunflower fields under a torrid sun. Vlad had already started asking people on that bus if they knew his father on our way there.

Vlad's father was well known for his undeserved luck and wealth, he was rich in land and he had large flocks of sheep and cattle. He was now a middle-aged man with lecherous inclinations. It looked like he spent a lot of his weekends in the Bucharest's bordellos. When I saw him for the first time, I understood he was lacking that worldly humility that only a peasant can develop in the sanctity of his land and in his family moments.

The reunion with his father was sterile, lacking any kind of feelings, odd. I stood there embarrassed, invisible to everyone while Vlad forced his father to tell him why he brought him in this world. He looked at Vlad through his squeamish eyes as he began to tell the story of his very first woman:

"I loved your mother. She was a young girl in the village and I had a little crush on her when I first came of conjugal age. I'd seen her at the village round dance, there were about fifty of us boys and girls dancing out there." He closed his eyes, rocking on his porch chair while holding a glass of his palinca drink.

I felt he saw Vlad, somehow, not as his child but as a buried mistake from the past that had risen to haunt him.

He opened his eyes and looked at Vlad and me, obviously disliking that we were still there, and continued: "She was on the other side and that is when I saw her the first time that way, as a man, and I started shivering and panic," and he took another gulp.

"Nothing happened at that time but I became sad because I knew, I didn't have the

courage to go and talk to her. A couple of days later, while we were having the mid-day meal after harvesting hay all morning, my father asked me: What's with you, idiot? Why don't you eat?"

I barely got the strength to tell him: "Maricica!" "Maricica?" he asked me, confused.

"Yes father, Maricica," I answered, feeling my heart was the size of a flea. "But she is poor!" my father said, disappointed in me.

"I felt so bad and hated myself for falling in love with a poor girl. Stupid young heart," he said, angry at himself and hitting the chair's hand rest with his fist.

"Nothing happened, but then two days later we got all dressed up and went to her father's house, I never passed her gate that day I stood there with my head down looking at the ground and wringing my hat in my hands. My father did all the talking with her father, your grandfather, and then Maricica came out on the porch, and he asked her: "Do you like Vasile?"

She looked at me and I became petrified and I was about to faint when my father returned and he told me that the wedding was going to be in four weeks. I didn't believe it!"

Suddenly Vasile raised and put both hands on the table and stood with his legs apart and knees slightly bent while raising his voice as if he was in a quarrel between two drunks in a tavern, leaning close to Vlad and reproaching him:

"Your grandfather deceived my father promising that he was going to bless the marriage himself with twenty gold coins, two pigs, a horse and a cow, and would make sure that Maricica would bring her share to the house. After the wedding, he only came with five gold coins and a pig" he said laughing and raising his hand up in the air. His tirade stopped and Vasile went back to his normal voice.

"One night as Maricica was getting close to give birth to you, my father got drunk and he became angry with your lazy, poverty-stricken grandfather. He yelled at her, slapped her and hit her in her belly..." he acted out a hit below the waist with his big fist.

"Then she began to bleed between her legs and she ran away to your grandfather...but she never made it all the way to his house...She gave birth to you under an oak, alone in the November rain. When the villagers found her, she was already dead, they told me her skin was purple and her eyes were white staring down at you. She gave

all the heat and warmth from her body to you, so you could survive through the cold November night. Nobody wanted you, so when the authorities came, they took you to Bucharest and...”

As he was telling the story, an old peasant with a walking stick came slowly through the open gate. The dogs didn't bark at him, they knew him.

Vlad's father stood there, measuring Vlad with his eyes while he looked at the old man making his way towards us.

“Look! This is Maricica's son. Look how big is he now, the vagabond...” his father yelled laughing at the old man who by now was slowly getting very close to us.

The old man stopped and made a surprised expression, more like a rehearsed grimace than a real emotion.

“Ion's Maricica!” said his father.

“Aaaah...” the old one exclaimed. The old peasant realized who Vlad was.

I was wondering what made his father consider and say he is Maricica's son and not his son after he had confessed that he fathered him. He was not thinking at Vlad as his son because of what happened? Was he still waiting to get the rest of the promised gold and animals?

“Maricica's son's, Yes” he said putting his old wrinkled hand on Vlad's arm to feel his muscle strength. “What a young able man! God bless you! We could use his hands in the cowsheds” he said turning to Vlad's father.

“Sit, let's eat something,” his grandfather said looking at both of us, smiling. He called someone's name from inside the house and a very shy young woman who I believe was Vasile's third wife brought fried pig's skins from the kiln, still warm.

The old man jumped to be the first one to take the treat and looked to Vlad's hand as he was reaching to the plate. Somewhere in the valley, a big clock was chiming noon.

“Let's drink to your mother!” Vlad's father said, reaching fast for a rachiu bottle to take a drink.

He then put the bottle down generously in front of Vlad so that he could take a drink.

“So, what happened to your hand? Did you cut it in a door or something?” his grandfather asked carelessly while eating the skins.

I was shocked and scared. Gently, I took two steps back. He couldn't have picked a

worse question to ask him. Nobody ever dared to ask Vlad what happened to his fingers, ever, and anyone with common sense knew that you are not supposed to ask.

If I had been able to speak, I would have yelled at them to run the hell out of there, but it was too late.

It seemed that everything became silent for a moment in my head, and everything froze under that early afternoon's burning sun, even the clock's bells.

Vlad's kindly glow was long gone by the time I looked up to him: a hard-faced teenager rummaging through his awful past in the middle of that dank and fetid moment. I could see his hand muscle becoming tense and his eyes looking empty, soulless, deserted as if he was not inside himself anymore.

He broke the bottle on the table's corner with a powerful blow, leaving him with the shattered bottleneck in his hand. Broken pieces of glass flew all over the table and some fell close to my shoes.

His father and grandfather turned their eyes towards him, surprised by this disturbing twist of fate, but by then it was too late for them.

Then with a single strike Vlad stuck the sharp bottleneck deep within his grandfather's jugular and he kept pushing up and up as blood was dripping on his hand. His grandfather entire body became stiff and spastic as he was trying to stand up while gazing into Vlad's mad eyes.

He looked surprised, somehow, as if he didn't know why Vlad is doing this.

"You hit her in her belly..." Vlad growled with hate. "You hit her in her belly," he screamed, while the fight was taking place more between their eyes now than between their bodies. I saw the old man weak hand trying to push Vlad away in vain.

They stood like that for a moment like in a holy union till the young woman's scream, coming from the house, broke the sanctity of their fight. Vlad throb turned his head around just in time to see his father running away to the gate. He didn't get far.

Vlad ran after him and cudgeled him several times with his grandfather's cane. The second time he hit, I heard a crack sound. The fight was over, everything got quiet, a grave silence, and even the bells kept silent.

Vlad stood up looking to the panorama of the village seated in the valley. That was his dream, right there, that was all he ever wanted to belong to. He wiped the sweat and

blood that was splashed on his forehead with the back of his hand and told me without turning to me, still gazing in the distance: “Let’s go! There is nobody waiting for me here.”

He didn’t say anything to me till we got all the way back to the city. I was too scared to articulate anything and I was looking for militia cars. In my mind, they were coming after us. He sat down crouched in his seat and in his thoughts, careless of what was happening around him, covering his face with his bloody hands.

Before we got out of the bus he turned to me and said: “Not knowing the truth was the best thing that ever happened to me. Death will set me free!”

His eyes looked lost.

“What are you dying of?” I asked him confused.

“TB, AIDS, herpes, take your pick!” he answered lifting his shoulders. He left me there by myself. I didn’t see him again for days.

“Don’t be stupid, Daniel. That’s the funny thing about love, you cannot control it. What is meant to happen will happen...” Crazy cut me off out of nowhere, while I was telling him about my Mariana.

“She might marry someone that is wrong for her and she might not do anything about it. And then after a while, she will not see you for the rest of your life and she will start lying to you and pretend that she can live without you, but years later, after putting her grandchildren and her husband to sleep, it’s only going to be you and her within her broken heart, out there alone in the night, alone in her mind.” Crazy kept going.

He grabbed my hands and looked into my eyes:

“Nobody can tell you who is going to be the love of your life but only you can tell. So you go and tell her you love her and fight for your love, fight for her...” he said while we were still walking. It seemed to me that everyone else understood the way she looked at me, but me.

We stopped. This was it. Coltea Orthodox Church that was on Crazy’s file, sitting before our very eyes. He got in and I followed him captivated by the u over-the-top gold and silver decorations and vivid religious icons twinkling in the candles' light.

Crazy never told me the whole story of his parents and I've never seen his file or any

pictures in it. The only thing he asked me was to come with him to the church. We knew this church, we used to beg by the door for food on Easter and Christmas but we never got in, they never let us.

An old woman with a head scarf kneeling down gave us a loathing look on her way to kiss and kneel in front of every icon in that church. The worshippers didn't like us in there, they thought we are there to steal, and truth be told, Carrion used to steal. I sat next to the burning candles, I liked their smell.

Crazy went humbly to the doors of the iconostasis and waited till the old priest came out through the carved wooden doors in a cloud of sweet smoke.

The Father took a moment to remember the young couple:

“They lived in sin and she had a little boy, after he died. I hold their wedding and your father's funeral the same day, in this church, it was the Christian thing to do. She had you in her arms, and you we're crying, while he was stiff there in his coffin. They loved each other but they let the Devil put his tail into their happiness...” the priest said vaguely recollecting what happened a long time ago.

He took Crazy's hand and put it on the Old Testament and started preaching:

“There is a great evil out there in the world, beyond the limits of our earthly understanding” he looked up to the painted saints and apostles.

“The man is trying to understand the good and bad with his small mind, but if you don't stay on God's path, the right path, and you leave it for a meager pleasure, then your children will pay for your sins.” He said this showing Crazy a path in the air with his hand that made me look above our heads to the blazing chandelier encrusted with shiny crystal beads.

“Yes the path, Father! I dream about the path.” Crazy said, amazed, turning his head to me.

“The earthly union between a man and a woman has to be consumed only after God's blessing is given” the priest was citing perhaps an old religious book that he knew by heart.

“The purpose of the evil is not to kill you... The purpose of the evil is to entrails itself in you and to make of you one of his acolytes, and then you will serve him and become him... and then you will start torturing others, even your own kids...” the priest looked

suddenly deep in Crazy's eyes.

It got quiet as his last word reverberated with haunting sounds through the church's bell tower.

"This is how you know you are fighting evil: the pain, the torment the uncleanliness."

"And how do you defeat evil, then?" I interrupted him, confused.

"You never really defeat the evil...but you don't pass the torture to others, to your children, and that makes of you a good man, a God's man..." the priest said quietly looking at me, disoriented by my intrusion.

That made sense to me.

When we left the church, Crazy had already accepted that his life's sufferings and pains were only to pay for his parents' sins, for his father fleeing pleasure.

The moment we came out of the church, the old Gipsy, who the people called the Guesser, stepped right in front of me. She was a creepy, unnervingly truth-telling woman and she would stare deep into your soul and articulate your own thoughts, the ones you didn't want to know. The Guesser was not like the other Gypsies with braided hair and a colorful skirt, she was all covered in black, leaving out to see only her brown wrinkled face.

"Let me tell you your fortune" she asked, moving from one hand to another a bouquet of withered flowers.

I looked at Crazy and he looked at me, surprised. We were homeless kids with no money, living in the sewer. Fortune tellers didn't come to us because we didn't have money and fortunetellers didn't stay in the front of the church's gate waiting for customers anyway.

The old shivering Gipsy took my left hand and stared a while into it and finally said: "There is a young girl with a pure love waiting for you... you told her that you are going to come back for her with your eyes but you have forgotten her already... she is knocking at your closed heart, looking for your soul... for you she is a lost dream but she gave you her burning heart forever. Go back and tell her that you love her and give her her life back!"

The Gipsy let go of my hand and gazed into my eyes.

“She will always remember your pristine love...run to her now, before it is too late...Go! Seek her with your heart, not with your eyes,” she yelled at me while remaining motionless on the sidewalk.

I panicked. Crazy got scared too and he pushed me: “Go! Run to her!” he yelled.

I ran. I ran to all the places I knew I could find her but she was nowhere to be found. Finally the Martyr told me:

“Yes! She asked about you...yesterday. Where you were... I didn't know what to tell her. She left back home to America, with her friends yesterday...” he looked at me confused for a second and then he burst out laughing loud:

“I lived to see this too! Ha, ha! A homeless sewer kid in love with an American girl!” He couldn't stop laughing even if he wanted to. It hurt so bad to lose her, to lose Mariana.

That night, I walked aimlessly in the dark streets for hours with a broken heart, thinking about her, trying to remember every little thing I ever liked about her.

It was raining that night, but I didn't care. I wanted to die of cold. I didn't care anymore as long I could stop the pain in my heart. Everything was lost. She would never know what I felt for her and I never had the courage to tell her that I loved her.

I didn't care if she ever loved me, all I wanted to tell her was that I loved her, but it was too late now.

At that time, I remember thinking that I would give my entire life for just one more hour with her and I feared my memories of her would eventually fade away.

I was now just another solitary dreaming soul in the vast sad world of lost love, wounded by a passing beauty and left with nothing but a bitter smile and a derelict broken heart.

Close to dawn, after a night of wandering through dark and shadows, I stumbled back to our sewer.

And as I was lifting the lid of the manhole, I saw a shadow crawling to me... and there she was, the angel, the love of my life, waiting for me.

“Why are you crying, silly boy?” she said.

I burst into tears again, my eyes trying to squeeze out any tear drop that I had left in me. My nose was running a sticky mucus that mixed up awfully with sweat, tears and

rain drops.

“I thought that I would never see you again,” I told her while trying in vain to wipe my face clean.

“I was never afraid to lose you, because from the first moment I saw you, I knew you would be mine forever,” Mariana said, coming close to me and giving me the first kiss of my entire gruesome, miserable life.

And in that moment I felt the world breaking, a series of bad foredoomed events crushing to the ground and a rupture in the universe.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Daniel. Just dance with me,” she said putting her forehead down to rest against mine. From a balcony above, someone was playing an old Romanian romance on an old phonograph, I still remember the words: “Don’t be sad dear girl, it’s a pity, but without tears there is no true longing.”

Later that afternoon when we were in her hotel apartment, she told me:

“It is my perception of the world that a woman’s love belongs entirely to her man. In love you have to surrender your soul to the other, or you are not really in love.”

“Calculated love is not love” Mariana said, proud of what she believed in.

The only way to talk to detective Stanescu was at his home. Vlad and I were scared to be seen out there in the city since a rumor somehow started that two homeless kids had killed a cop.

“Someone always see what you do.” Vlad told me. His plan was to go to Constanta, the city by the Black Sea shore where the tourist season had just started. Lots of beggars we knew went there for the beach, sun and money that people give easily away when they have a good time.

“I’ll leave for a little while till everybody forgets about Fatty’s death, then I will come back.” Vlad planned the summer. I was supposed to go with Mariana to America, or at least that is what he had planed for me.

We waited and waited by the stairs of his apartment door and a couple hours later, Stanescu finally showed up caring two bags of groceries. He looked like a regular family man and we didn’t know if it was him till he got close to his door. He looked surprised when he saw us sitting there by the stairs and he became reluctant to open his apartment’s

door.

“Detective Stanescu!” I told him respectfully “I would like to ask you about a case you had twenty years ago... I wanted to ask you about my mother.”

He looked at Vlad and saw him in that dim light that you find on stairs between apartments floors. Vlad looked very frightening in that gleaming murkiness.

“I don’t remember all my cases...that was such a long time ago...twenty years...” he was trying to excuse himself so he could get away from the awkward situation as soon as possible. He pushed his key in, ready to run in the safety of his home when Vlad simply said: “Doina Elena”.

He suddenly stopped midair still holding his key and turned to me. “So, you are her son?” he looked carefully at my face and smile. “You have her eyes,” he noticed, more for himself.

He left his bags near the door and he came close to me.

“I remember her, your mother tried to jump on the orphanage roof from another building close by. When she jumped her shoe slipped and she didn’t make it. She fell down right there in the interior court of the orphanage next to the power surge panel. I was in charge of the investigation in the beginning, till the Romanian secret police took over next day... I remember her, because she was a very beautiful woman. When I saw her lying there on the cement I somehow fell in love with her. I knew it was her last moments on this world, but that’s how I felt. She was so beautiful,” he confessed.

He didn’t look like a sentimental guy, but I felt he had kept that inside for so much time that it burst out of him pulling him from his routine life.

“The ambulance took your mother to the emergency room and I held her hand, there was nothing that anyone could do to save her, but there was just a little bit of life left in her and she used her last strength to write on the wall: Daniel, I didn’t forget you...” with her own blood” he said looking up as if everything was happening before his eyes once again.

“It was for me? Daniel? Or for my father the Embassy Counselor?” I asked barely holding up not to burst in tears.

“The Counselor?” he asked me, surprised, coming out of his hypnotic trance. “Yes, the American Embassy Counselor, my father.” I replied quickly.

“What? No! He was not the Counselor...he was an American alright but...he was not the Counselor, he was a driver, a chauffeur for the embassy,” detective Stanescu tried to remember while shaking his head left and right and looking down to his hands.

“His name was Daniel something, a common name Smith, Jones, I don’t remember but come tomorrow to the police station and I will...” he was thinking about how to help me when he got brutally interrupted.

“No!” Vlad yelled, “We are not coming to the police station!” and he raised up from the steps.

A silence followed those uncalled last words and the two men raised their eyes looking to each other’s reaction. Did he know about the rumor of the tall homeless boy that killed Fatty last week, I asked myself.

Right there, in the middle of that boiling tension, I realized that maybe my father had lied about who he was to my mother. But did he ever know that my mother had me?

Detective Stanescu made a sudden clumsy hand move to pull his gun out of his belt and I watched, hypnotized, as the gun barrel made his way out of his holster. If he had pulled the trigger right at that moment, he would had shot me in the legs first, but he was aiming for Vlad who was at some distance behind me.

The two shots were short and they came from Vlad’s gun. I didn’t feel the bullets passing by me.

When I looked back I saw Vlad standing still with his right hand sticking out and the gun barrel fuming. Detective Stanescu groaned and felt on his back. It all happened so fast.

Somebody opened their apartment door, but by the time we looked to see who it was, the person closed it right back, fast.

I leaned over him knowing he was my only hope to find out who my father was. “Wait. Tell me my father’s name, please!” I begged him.

Detective Stanescu was holding his abdomen trying to stop the blood pouring through his shirt and barely tolerating the pain. He looked at me loathsomely and said:

“I talked to the American and told him about you and your mother, but he never wanted a bastard child, he never wanted you, he didn’t even wanted to know that you existed,” and then he spit on me with a mixture of saliva and blood coming from his lung

in my face. His breathing became more heavy and clogged with blood in just a couple of seconds.

“Come on, let’s go!” Vlad pulled me, full of the stamina of a killer, while looking around.

We left as the detective went into his final agony, wincing and mumbling incoherently. I think I heard his last breath.

We went down the stairs to the building door just in time to hear the police car sirens in the distance. The sky was cloudy and the night just falling over the old Bucharest, from time to time you could see the striking summer moon.

We ran till we couldn’t hear the sirens anymore and then we finally stopped.

“O.K.! We need to move fast! Let’s go get all our stuff. I’ll leave Bucharest and you will go with Mariana in America,” Vlad said stopping to take a break and breathe.

“Let’s take the bus,” I said. I was tired, hungry and exhausted.

“No, it is too dangerous. We will walk...and stay close to the walls,” he told me. We walked, staying mostly in the shadows away from the street lights.

After a while he stopped. He looked as if he had the time to think things through.

“Here, take this blade” he pulled his knife with that big flat handle from his belt and gave it to me.

“What do I do with this?” I said holding it in my hand while walking behind him in the early night.

“Did you ever kill anyone before?” he turned around and asked while looking into my eyes.

I didn’t want to look gutless, so I nodded my head. He stopped and turned to me again.

“No, you didn’t! You take this blade and put it in their neck like this and then you look into their eyes and suck every drop of life they have in them till is nothing more left of them than a lifeless rubber dummy. You are not killing people, you sacrifice animals.”

Now I knew why people were truly afraid of him and his crystal green eyes.

“Never feel bad for killing one of them. They have no soul, no compassion” he preached me.

“They are at war and they are killing children...” he kept going.

We kept moving slowly through the dull and soundless night, a couple of police cars drove by with their sirens and flashing lights on. It felt like it was going to take forever to get back to our sewer home but we finally made it.

“They are looking for us,” Vlad whispered to me, getting me more scared than I already was.

It was long after midnight when we got back to our underground place and nobody was around but Crazy and the Martyr. Tuca and Crow were sleeping now in a house that belonged to a religious sect and they washed clothes for them, and nobody knew where Nicu was. Vlad went to talk to them while I was gathering my stuff. I could hear more sirens driving by really fast this time.

They told me that One Eye had just come back from Constanta, his brother didn't want him around for some reason, and I felt bad for him.

“We will show them that at least one of us survived them...” Vlad stated out of nowhere. He sat down and picked up his notebook and started nervously leafing through it.

“Any of you has a cigar?” he asked but nobody replied.

“Why are you writing and then erase some words and write again?” I asked him curiously.

“Because, a story is like a knife: you sharpen it, and you sharpen it, and when you get to use it, it will go deeper in the readers brains...” I felt he wanted to continue when he got rudely interrupted.

“You think the world cares about your story? You think the world cares about a piece of garbage like you?” the Martyr said laughing.

“There are millions of discarded children in the world, nothing new...” he continued. “Yes, but this one said ”No more!” and he took a stand right in the middle of us.

The Martyr smiled at him, the way someone smiles at an innocent little kid that wants to change the world for the better. None of us could sleep through the night and we were all up trying to think things through. Trying to understand how we were going to escape from what had happened.

Then when the dawn came, Vlad told me: “My teeth are falling...its happening”

“What?” I asked confused with my mind flooded by my own thoughts.

He smiled to me: “Look! I’ll pushed them with my tongue,” he pressed against two of his front teeth and they moved “See!” he asked. He freaked me out.

He pulled out one of his loose tooth with his bare hand and threw it on the ground. We all felt very bad for him and become really quiet.

“The skies are red! It’s happening!” Vlad expelled a sad weep while looking outside through the manhole. “I knew it would...I knew,” he told me.”

The skies were red that morning.

Vlad sat next to me and looked into my eyes for a second.

“It’s your eyes! You see...None of us ever had our eyes, our eyes are full of misery and pain, but yours are full of stupid hope. They have parents in them, and brothers, and sisters, and friends and soft beds in homes by the beach,” he confessed to me.

He continued after a moment, changing his whispering voice into sporadic shouts. ”I always hated you because of that, but now I just want you to survive and show these retards that one of us could make it out of their filthy sewer!”

He showed me his dirty, smelly notebook and then put it in my hands.

“Here, take my novel. This is all I have to leave to this world. I’m all done now” and he shoved the manuscript in my arms.

“Tell the world my story! Tell the world we were here in the sewer! Tell them about our museum of broken children,” he said looking deep into my eyes.

“Me? But, I can’t read!” I told him, ashamed and surprised.

“Don’t worry, you will learn someday,” he whispered and gave me a hug.

“I don’t want to leave without you!” I started crying trying to cling to his arm, so he wouldn’t go away.

He pushed me back and slapped me.

“Now you listen to me now! That girl over there for some crazy unearthly reason loves you and is the best thing that ever happened to you, to us. She is your ticket to get the hell out of this place and you’re going to take it or I swear to God I’m going to kill you with my own hands.”

We shared a moment of silence till things calmed down.

“Forget about me, I have no one to live for! I don’t have much longer to live

anyway... maybe two weeks, but you still have a chance to forget all that happened here. You can start a family and be a normal man, a happy one,” said Vlad with tears dropping from his eyes. “You are my brother from hell, my blood brother, the one who made it out, go live out there for me too!”

“But, I don’t want you to die!” I cried louder in agony, while Crazy and the Martyr were looking at me helplessly.

He pulled my face with his big hands in front of his eyes and he finally admitted: “Daniel, I never told you...” he said looking deep into my eyes “but I have seen the Oracle too, last week...and I know what I’m supposed to do... and this is all I’m going to get...I am your Guardian Angel! Helping you is the only good thing that I can do with the rest of my life.” He added, very confident: “Imagine me! An Angel! A Guardian Angel in Heaven with Mariuca by my side!”

He leaned towards me and whispered:

“Now is the end. The end of pain. There will be no more pain for me. Everything is going to fade away.” His voice sounded like he already had made peace with himself.

“Don’t be sad for me! You never really die, if someone out there loves you, and if nobody loves you, then what is the point of living?” he reflected.

“You’re going home! You’re going to your girl! And I...I’m going to my girl...” he laughed happily.

“Here! Give Mariana this ring!” he pushed his hand into my chest, holding a diamond ring, a real genuine one, the kind that you see in the extremely expensive jewelry store down the main street.

“This is the ring that Horse found in the Garbage Mountains. I was with him that day and I saw it when it fell out through the hole in his pocket... I was walking behind him,” he confessed.

“I kept this ring for Mariuca, but she didn’t want me, she liked that rich guy better... and now she is dead and I don’t even know where her grave is, so I could go and put a flower on her resting place” he said collapsing to his knees and bursting into tears.

“Who closed her eyes?” Vlad asked himself as if he suddenly realized her terrible end, “Maybe they are still open down there in her grave...”

It’s easy to succumb to the pain, Vlad’s tears tore my heart apart and I hugged him .

“Thank you for all you did for me Vlad!” I yelled.

“No! Thank you for giving a meaning to my life!” he said, looking up at my face while still on his knees crying out to me: “I thought I was a nobody, I thought my life was worthless, till you came and gave it a meaning. Thank you!”

His display of gratitude was interrupted by Crazy, scared as if he had seen a ghost.

“Horse was there in the Garbage Mountains, looking for this ring, all this time... but, I guess he could have left any time he wanted, there was nothing keeping him there but his own mind.” Crazy said confused by what he just saw in Vlad’s hand.

“Then give it back to Horse!” I handed the ring to Crazy but he didn’t wanted to take it. “This ring is cursed! It destroyed someone’s marriage, which is why it was found in the garbage in the first place... it will destroy you, it destroyed Vlad’s and Mariuca’s life and Horse’s life.” Crazy said slowly backing up from it.

“Here, take it! Give it to Horse!” I said again and pushed my hand forward to him so he would take it.

“No!” He jumped back, afraid to touch it, “Horse is dead! He died over a year ago but I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t think anyone would care...the other Searchers found his badly decomposed body, almost an unidentifiable corpse.” Crazy said lifting his eyes from the ring for the first time and looking at us.

Horse vivid image sprang into my mind one time as I put the diamond ring back in my pocket.

I believed in everything Crazy said about the ring but I didn’t have the power to throw it away.

It got quiet again and I could feel the boiling tension rising up until the silence was broken again.

“Look at Tuca’s drawings. They are so beautiful. Do you still remember them?” Crazy asked touching their faces so gently with his fingers tips as if they were really there. “Horse, Blackie, Scabby, Burned, Spot, Mariuca, Carrion, Nelu, Jail, Stammered, Sleeper ...I miss them. God rest them in peace.”

“Don’t worry, when the time comes, I will take care of Christian, for good...” Vlad said.

“You mean you can beat that big young militia that went to the high school for cops

and then to the police academy, and was trained to beat people for countless years?” I said ironically. “Yes, but I have the ferocity of a hopeless killer, the thirst to spill blood. Any blood, even my own. What can you tell me about that cop? He has no idea what people like us have been through.”

“They are out there looking for us” Vlad said “but they are not coming down, they don’t have the guts. This is our world, the underground, the city of the dead” and he reflected from himself: “He already defeated me, which is in my advantage.”

“Nobody really wins anything, times always win everything” Crazy added.

“This fight between me and the cop is nothing bigger than between Evil and Good, it happens all the time, everywhere on this Earth!” Vlad said starting to sound like Carrion suddenly.

We looked up at the first rays of the morning sun coming through the manhole with fear for the first time in our lives. We knew that nothing good was waiting for us up there. When did we get thrown in the middle of all these things?

“O.K. here’s the plan!” Vlad exclaimed to get our attention, “We need to get this guy to his girl, the American girl.”

“In about half an hour you will have all the militia in Bucharest looking for you two guys...” the Martyr said grasping on his beard, “...where are you going?”

“We need to get him to the Intercontinental hotel, downtown in the middle of all those official buildings, full of cops.”

“The best way to get there is the subway. There is an exit fifty meters away from the hotel’s main entrance, take that one...” the Martyr suggested.

“O.K. will do that. Let’s go!” Vlad said.

“I’ll stay here” the Martyr said, “If someone asks I’ll send them in the wrong direction.” We left. I started to think about how this could unravel.

I hoped that Mariana would love me enough and do what any other rational being would not do: help me, and also understand that she would not be able to come back to Romania ever again.

“Crazy, do you have any more grenades left?” Vlad ask him. “Yes, just one...” he answered.

“Where is it?” Vlad asked him again looking at Crazy’s empty pockets. “It’s in my butt,” he answered looking sincere.

Vlad gave him a revolted look but by the time anyone had the chance to react the subway mechanic hit the brakes suddenly and we all got hold on something to prevent falling.

“You guys go get Mariana, I will find out which bus goes to the Bucharest airport and... hurry up!” Vlad yelled at us while he ran to another exit.

We ran up the stairs in a hurry and I was thinking about how I was going to tell Mariana everything that happened without frightening her.

Suddenly when we got close to exit on the street I felt that we were followed. I didn’t look back, my plan was to go up the stairs and run but somebody was already waiting at the top for us.

“Keep your hands up...if you don’t want to be a puddle of bloody mess right here on the sidewalk” a tall middle age man with a mustache said. He looked like he was working for the former militia or secret service, dressed in civilian clothes.

He lifted his overcoat to show us a gun hanging on his belt. He was all dressed up as if he was about to go to a business meeting or to a date. These were the “blue eyes boys”, the secret police forces behind Ceausescu’s regime, in charge of the arrests, torture and killings, now turned loose and on their own.

“Well, we’ve been waiting for you...” he said glad to see me.

We looked back, a small bony militia was also walking behind us, holding in his hand a gun.

“Who told you we are coming?” Crazy asked pierced by fear. “Your friend. The old one...” he replied.

“The Martyr?” Crazy asked full with anger, outrage burning alive inside him. “The Martyr?” they laugh together loudly, “He is no martyr. He is a traitor, an informer that the Romanian secret service uses to find out who is undermining the communist system. The martyrs are in the cemetery and that is where you are going to be soon.”

I remembered that Vlad told me these guys were the ones who arranged for the Ceausescus to be executed, they were everywhere, and they had even been in charge of Ceaucescu's personal security.

“You killed a cop!” the small bony militia yelled at us.

“We know you killed Christian’s dad...” another cop that just showed up said, looking at us with hate.

“I thought he really was a martyr,” Crazy told me, disappointed in the man he was looking up to. Of course he was an informant: he was old, vulnerable.

They took us in a dark back alley covered by big trees where their police cars and two more militias were waiting.

“We will make sure he is not going to see the light of day again,” the small militia said laughing loud and looking at Crazy. They put the handcuffs on his hands and pushed him violently in the car. We were ten minutes away from a merciless beating, followed by sure death. “I will take care of this one!” he grabbed me by the neck with a powerful grasp, “You guys go away” he ordered the other militia.

That was the last time I saw Crazy, he looked at me and yelled: “Life is sacred!”. They drove away, I was there in that back alley all by myself with three other cops.

“O.K. Where is it?” the dressed up cop asked me pulling up his gun from his belt and pointing the barrel to my head.

“Who? Vlad?” I asked confused.

He whipped me really hard in the back of the head with his gun handle. The pain was horrible.

“Don’t play dumb! Where is the diamond ring?” he screamed at me dreadfully nervous. “The ring?” I asked surprised, “I... here in my pocket...” and I took it out for him.

He rushed to grasp the ring out from my hand and gazed at it for a couple of moments. While still holding the ring up in the air he nudged his head signaling the cop behind me.

I turned around and looked at him, scared. I knew this was going to be the end of me. I thought that nothing mattered anymore and I started to cry. The small bony cop looked at me ready to pull out his gun and shoot me, but he hesitated and gave me a malefic look.

“Not here...let’s take him up in the apartment...” he said reaching to get a very small knife instead and took his police hat off his head.

With a quick move he cut my leg fast with the knife and yelled as if he was doing a martial move scream.

The cut was deep and burned before I could realized what just happened. The pain and fear came later and pulverized my brains like a bullet.

I was shocked to see the clear cut in my leg, and I watched as the blood was starting to come out through the cut and drip. I could feel they were all looking into my eyes to feast on my fear and resignation.

And then as the dressed up cop looked at me again and as he was about to start laughing or say something, suddenly the blunt sound of a heavy metal pipe bouncing of his scalp stopped him mid-way and his blue eyes froze as he fell on me chest sliding down my arm trying to articulate something while still looking at the rings diamond. A drop of blood splashed into the air and landed in my right eye.

One other cop behind me suddenly became scared and he was trying to pull his gun from the holster when he quickly went down with a strike from the same metal pipe that got him in the neck and the left jaw.

A woman grotesque scream came from somewhere up in a balcony: "He is killing them...Help!"

I turned my head fast and that was when I saw Him... my Father...my God...my Protector... instrument of death, fighting for my life, a sewers' child life. Vlad was fighting for my freedom with the small bony cop that jumped on his back. He got him by one of his arms and managed to raise him well above his head and brought him down and crushed him to the ground with great strength and thirst, splashing blood out of him in all directions.

Vlad was cops worst nightmare, a smart young man turned mad and unrestrained by any social chains.

And then and there, as he was taking the last bit of life from him with his fists, I saw mercy in his soul for the first time. Vlad stared in his eyes and he felt that he was gazing in the very eyes of God.

And as much as his heart was burning with vengeance and hatred, he could not do it. He saw a mere young man, a beggar, begging for his life and that reminded him of himself. We are all beggars in front of God, begging for a little more life from Him.

He stood up and looked at him, a young militia lying down there in his piss, shivering, spitting his own blood and teeth, and Vlad let him live. He threw his pipe away.

Everything held still for a couple seconds until Vlad finally raised his head and looked at me.

One more militia appeared out of nowhere holding his gun up trying to aim for Vlad's head. It was kind of a long shoot and he was only looking down to his gun's barrel trying to get him in sight.

"Daniel!" Vlad yelled while trying to dodge being shot in the head while my mind was reacting agonizingly slow, trying to understand the situation.

In a split second I remembered I still had Vlad's knife in my sock somewhere and with all my speed I raised my foot, grabbed the knife and threw it right at the cop's head.

He fell down, he didn't have time to take the shoot. Vlad was fine and in a blink of an eye it was all over.

"I just killed a man!" I whispered scared and panicked when Vlad got closer. He looked at me and saw me terrified and shaking, then he looked down to the militia and he start laughing really hard.

I didn't look. I was too afraid to see blood and a dead man.

"He's OK. You hit him with the handle. Look, no blood!" he retorted laughing some more while feeling the militias pulse with his fingers.

He picked his knife and kissed it. I got the feeling that this was not the first time that this knife had saved his life.

"He is going to be fine...you know for a guy who wants to run with the circus you throw a pretty bad knife" Vlad said.

He couldn't stop giggling for a while. He was annoying me while I was trying to patch my wound with a dirty rag.

Chapter 10: Youth without old age, and life without death

The rusty table in the interrogation unit had blood spots and markings, some of them looked fresh, some old. The room was a windowless subbasement with dirty thick walls belonging to what was now the old communist Romanian secret service building. They gave a new name to the institution that would make the newly liberated citizen believe that they were now actually protected and loved, but nothing really changed, the furniture, the system, the people were all the same. Down there you were two levels beneath the streets and you could scream as much as you wanted because nobody would hear you.

The militants brutally pushed Crazy inside and forced him to sit on one of the chairs that had a pair of handcuffs already hanging on them. The light was dim and Crazy couldn't see anything in the beginning till his eyes adjusted to the light.

"I'm trying to deal with this minor's situation!" somebody was yelling in a nearby office.

It felt like a lot of people suffered in there or spent the final moments of their life in that chamber.

"Your friend is here!" the cops yelled mocking something that looked like a pile of dirty clothes and rags.

Crazy didn't pay any attention in the beginning and was trying to adapt to the mold damp smell when he realized that lying in the corner was One Eye, severely beaten with blood coming from his both eyes.

"One Eye?" he asked as if he refused to believe the disturbing, uncomfortable sight and amazed that anyone could be so heartless to take the little bit of sight he had left out of him.

"Is that you, Crazy?" One Eye asked and he continued without waiting for an answer: "Looked what they've done to me, they broke my good eye....I can't see any more..." he cried while trying to reach Crazy with his bloody shaking hand.

He had taken a really bad beating, he could barely move.

"Why did they have to do that to you?" Crazy asked whispering from himself while fear shot through him listening to the hazy moans and cries of help coming from another

part of building.

After a moment the room's big metal door swung open suddenly and hit the wall with a big bang while Christian and a really sweaty obese cop came in fast.

"I don't understand why you guys don't like cops. We are here for your protection! Ha, ha, ha..." the obese militia started laughing with fresh blood dripping from his hands. He wiped his forehead with a rag. There was a small trace of One Eye's blood or maybe someone else's left on his forehead.

"You know what I read in one of those library books?" Crazy asked them laughing too.

The militia stopped laughing and looked at Crazy surprised, they were sure that by now he would be extremely frightened, but the only move Crazy made was to sit better in his chair, relaxed.

"I read somewhere that all life on this planet is just like a spark in time. Puff..." he said spreading his hand with a fingers snap, "Short-lived, and in a couple of millions years everything will go back to the vast unanimated silence that all has started from anyway."

Christian and the obese cops looked at each other. They knew he would have the same fate as One Eye. But Crazy remained calm and smiled while he kept talking to them:

"Imagine: no more pain, no more suffering on this planet..." he closed his eyes with nostalgia.

"The mist is finally all gone and now I can see where I buried my parents. I think that our paths will meet again, sometime, maybe not now, maybe not in this life," Crazy continued.

"Do you have any idea what he's talking about?" the obese cop turned and asked Christian who shook his head.

"Just tell me where the tall one is," Christian got ready to strike him with the black baton when Crazy reached with his hands in his pants through his fly opening and pulled out a small ring with a pin hanging on it.

"Vlad is flying and ...death is a blessing...think of something beautiful One Eye..." Such were Crazy's muttered last words while he embraced himself with his cuffed hands

reveling what he was holding between his legs for all that all that time.

“Oh God! He has a grenade!” the corpulent cop yelled panicked.

There was no way anyone could stop the grenade from exploding anymore.

Christian grabbed the obese cop and forcefully pushed him down in Crazy’s lap, screaming louder than everyone else.

“How am I going to tell her, Vlad? How am I going to tell her the whole story and then ask her to take me out of Romania? What normal girl will ever get involved with someone like me?” I asked him.

He stopped in the middle of the hallway and said:

“I don’t know...but she is not a normal girl anyway, just break the news slowly to her and give her some time,” he said, unsure.

I wasn’t prepared, but I knew that I would never be anyway.

I knocked on her door and she opened the door, happy to see me but soon she realized that something happened just by looking into my eyes. I couldn’t keep in me anymore so I started to tell her the story really fast.

“Mariana! Listen to me, all the militia is out there trying to find me and Vlad, and kill us. We need your help to get out of Romania...” I just stood there looking at her beautiful face for a moment.

I thought that I was going to lose her forever so at least I wanted to keep that image in my mind forever, but Mariana looked straight into my eyes and smiled.

I wondered what was wrong with her. Didn’t she just hear what I said? The weird moment of silence was interrupted by her thrilled scream.

“That is soGreat!” she yelled ecstatically while grabbing my hands and jumping up and down.

Vlad got a bit scared and amazed by her reaction and shook his hands and legs in a spasm, almost pulling his gun out of his pocket. We were both unsure of what was happening.

“Look, your friend even has a gun!” she said excitedly, pointing at Vlad while pulling me inside the room.

“This is exactly what happened to my grandpa forty years ago when the communists

haunted him but he escaped from Romania!” Mariana continued.

Vlad tried to adapt to the situation and sketched a smile, bewildered by her reaction while looking at me and then down the corridor.

“Come in! Hurry!” she said to Vlad.

I was very surprised by her reaction and I kind of liked the way she took over the control. “Here! I got you a present. A suit! Put it on, I will go get dressed and hurry up!” Mariana got some of her stuff to change and went in the bathroom leaving me and Vlad alone.

Vlad looked at me with a very surprised look on his face and whistled while putting his big hands on his waist. Mariana was not the kind of girl that we usually see in Romania: strong and decisive.

He said, very impressed:” Oh boy! American girls!” He smiled very invigorated for some reason and cheerful.

It was a really big explosion with a deafening boom and a blinding flash that did rocket the room. Crazy and the obese cop were shredded and disemboweled to almost nothing and bits of them were spread all over the chamber. In the hallway, militias were already making their way towards the sound of the explosion just in time to catch the last swirls of black smoke disappearing in the middle of the room.

Pieces of shrapnel penetrated Cristian’s right leg but he wasn’t dead yet. One Eye’s body was still twitching in the corner.

“Call the paramedics!” someone yelled.

“I know where they are going...” Cristian shouted dumbfounded to them while picking himself up from the floor, amazing everyone. He wanted to show guts as if surviving the explosion wasn’t a big deal, as if he was immortal.

“Are you alright?” a young woman asked him concerned, affectionate. He didn’t answer. He looked around to see who was there.

“Call in a warrant to the airport to arrest them on the spot, now...” he mumbled to someone in the mob.

“Who?” said a voice in the crowd.

“Those guys, the homeless ones!” Cristian said walking through the human debris

blasted out the doorway. He pushed away some cops bunched up to see what happened who were standing in his way.

“Do it now! They killed my father...” he screamed and planted violently both his hands on a guy’s vest with a tag that read “Dispatch” and shook him really hard and angry.

The guy didn’t like it and was not interested in hearing anything anymore, he shrugged his shoulders, pushed him while stepping back and yelled: “Well... it’s kind of difficult to get your sewer kids arrested when you don’t have a picture of them and they don’t even have a name.” He looked back at the surreptitious glances of the crowd and listened to the whispers around him.

“Can you tell me exactly what I should put in the warrant?” he defended himself, annoyed more at the other militias than at Christian.

Christian pushed through the crowd again and made his way towards the end of the hallway. He grabbed a young, black haired, confused rookie cop by the arm and said: “Come with me! You’re driving!” and disappeared just before two paramedics arrived with a stretcher.

“There’s no way we can get to the airport with all the militia and the secret police looking for us,” I told Vlad assassinating his newborn hope.

He knew it and he didn’t say anything while reflecting about what we were now mixed up to our necks into. I knew it was the end of the road and he knew it too.

“Unless a miracle happens, we are going to be dead by the end of the day, maybe in a couple of hours.” I only said what both of us thought.

I was sure people saw us going into this luxury hotel, they knew we didn’t belong there.

There are no miracles in real life, no divine intervention, just dead innocents. I was there at the revolution, I saw dead mothers holding dead babies in their arms.

Vlad’s put his head next to the window looking as if he was about to faint. His sweat left dripping marks on the glass.

“Hey, you want to hear Stammers story?” he took a short breath and he continued with melancholy, ”He made me swear I would not tell anyone, but since we are not going

to see each other anymore anyway, why don't I just tell you the story?" he asked sounding as if he was about to go to sleep.

He looked at me with his almost shut down scary blue eyes and laughed for himself while slowly taking another drink from a small vodka bottle that he had found earlier in the mini-bar. He turned his head back to the window and started telling me Stammers' story:

"When he was little his parents were poor and they couldn't afford to pay his ticket for the school trip to the firehouse to see the fire trucks...so, get this Daniel, he found a way to bring the fire trucks to him..." Vlad laughed and looked out the window, "...long story short: He got to see the fire trucks in action when they arrived to the burning school and the rest of the class didn't!" he kept on laughing for a while.

I don't know if that was funny or because of the tension we both were at that point but I started laughing too.

"After that his parents took him to our "concentration camp" and they never came back for him," he said and we both burst into laughing again till we came in touch with our sad reality again.

Vlad stared out the window looking nowhere and vocalizing his intimate thoughts unaware that Mariana had entered the room:

"You breed these people, you kill their families and take away their dignity, their food and their God. You take everything from them, you have everything and they have nothing, not even the desire to live another day! Sometimes I see them as dirty shadows walking down the boulevard," he said, "and then when they are starting to fight back, glad to lose their miserable life. You make them into a symbol of evil, a Satan, a monster, a terrorist ! I always saw their ghosts walking among us."

"What are you going to do if we make it out?" I asked him, hopeless.

"I will stay away from Bucharest. I killed too many cops. Maybe I will go see Bulgaria, I have a friend there, somewhere, Ivan..."

He started gazing down the window more carefully and then he jumped up on his feet suddenly.

"They're real!" he said for himself as if he was trying to convince his mind.

"Hey! Did you asked for a miracle, Daniel?" his voice sounded scared and amazed.

“Yes...?” I said sadly.

“Did you ask for thousands of derelicts with clubs in their hands?” he raised his voice while pulling himself up together again, ready for action. He looked at me as if I was some kind of divinity.

“What?” I asked.

“You better dress up now,” said Vlad.

I didn't tell Mariana anything about my wound.

Chapter 11: Green card to Heaven

Bucharest, June 1990 Meanwhile, in reality

The square below us was full of miners chanting "Death to the intellectuals!" and "We work, we don't think!" There were thousands of them carrying big wooden clubs with nails hammered in them, uneducated and aggressive, coming out of nowhere and everywhere.

Their faces and clothes were dirty like ours and they lived in the dark like us but now for some reason they were out there in the middle of the day in everyone's line of sight in University Square, ready to start a massacre.

And that was the twisted reality bursting through my life again.

"Our brothers are here to protect us! You're not going to see any militia around here for sure!" Vlad yelled enthusiastic.

That was true, they didn't have time for us now.

Mariana turned on the TV just in time to hear a newscaster saying that the miner's mission was to occupy and clean the University Square of students and academia.

"This is not a conflict between classes, it is cruelty," Mariana said, "I am appalled me to look at it." There had been nothing fake in her all this time, just old divine goodness. When did I get so lucky?

By the time we got to the hotel's ground floor I could see a bus burning in the distance and people throwing exploding flaming bottles full of gas they called Molotov's cocktails into buildings. Cobblestone rocks were flying in all directions.

"There is no bus or cab to take you to the airport, miss" the doorman said frightened by what was going on outside the hotel.

"And we need to get to the airport fast...next airplane leaves in less than an hour," Mariana shouted to make herself heard in all that rioting.

But Vlad was not listening to her. He was looking to a group of miners kicking a guy with their feet while he was lying on the ground, unconscious. The young man looked like a regular student dressed in a nice suit that was now covered in blood and all I could make out of his face was his sun-kissed blond hair and his glasses. The atrocity!

"Just your luck! The only day you get dressed in a suit, and these guys are out looking

to kill scholars..." Vlad looked at me, disappointed and making me feel guilty.

Now, Mariana and Vlad were afraid for my life. "We need to find a car," Mariana said.

"No! It's going to take too much time, the streets are blocked. Maybe the subway is still working," he said grabbing us by the arm and pulling us to run with him towards the subway entrance.

We ran among flying incendiary bottles, rocks, screams and I turned my head for a second just in time to see how a group of miners pulled out a woman from a crowd of commuters and started hitting her violently with their wooden clubs full of nails, looking proud of themselves.

"They got into the university building..." someone yelled but by now we were running down the stairs of the subway station.

We made it in the safety of the subway. There were miners in here too, but at least we didn't have to watch out for flying bottles.

And then we waited, and we waited for the sound of the subway coming from the darkness of the tunnel. We didn't know if the trains were still coming, and we didn't know if the conductor was going to stop in the station, but everything we knew at that time is that that we were late and we might just lose our last hope.

Every second felt like an eternity.

My hands were sweating and I could feel my heart getting smaller and smaller.

And then we heard it, the liberating sound of freedom accompanied by a fragile breeze.

We all looked at each other and laughed, happy. The tension was gone.

We jumped ecstatically in the train as soon as the doors opened. Sometimes small things can make you incredibly happy.

Vlad stopped laughing suddenly and walked to someone lying under the subway seats in front of us in the fetal position.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. He didn't wait for an answer.

"It is dangerous! Go home!" Vlad yelled.

I could see it was Crow, and I got scared before I started to wonder what she was doing under there.

“There is no home anymore,” Crow said crying “ They covered the sewer entries with cement and they buried everybody alive. It all happened this morning, by the time I got there they were all dead,“ she said while moving back and forth with her face red and dripping with tears.

“But there were children, boys and girls in there,” I said shocked. We were not the only ones living in there.

“They didn’t care, they just did it!” Crow continued crying.

“All I found was Tuca’s hand sticking out of the cement...” Crow showed us with her fingers in a silent scream” and she started to sob and put her hand out as if she was tracing Tuca’s fingers somewhere out in the air.

“She must’ve been scared and tried to push her way up through the wet cement and she got stuck in there. She should have waited, I would have come to save her,” Vlad said looking down.

“It’s too late now...” Crow cried out going back in the fetal position. We all got quiet and started mourning Tuca in our minds.

“So if Daniel survives, all our deaths will not have been in vain. You can still find your father and have a good life,” Vlad said trying to pull himself out of the terrible moment.

Everything got quiet in the empty subway,

“My father knew I was born. My mother wrote him a lot of letters. My father knew I was here, but he never came for me, he never came to take me away from this nightmare.” I said, revolted and angry, holding my hand to the wound without anyone seeing it.

Mariana turned to me and she said: “That is not true! Your father never got the letters; the Romanian Security Service stopped them all. He had no idea that you were born. This is why we never got any mail from our relatives, either.” she said, surprised that I didn’t know that.

Hope grew again in my soul. A father! Waiting for me!

We reached the last subway station and I felt that the only thing I really wanted was for this nightmarish day to end. Crow remained in the subway, she kept crying under the

seat.

“I will be back for you all one day!” I told her. That was of course if I could make it out of there in the first place.

Suddenly, with a violent jump Vlad burst running towards someone several steps away from us and grabbed him by his hair and whispered gently to him before he had any time to react: “And this is how you die!” and he took out his big shiny knife and with a single move he plunged the knife deep in his stomach. He was fast and I don’t think that anyone beside us noticed what happened in that moment in that subway, or maybe nobody else cared.

By the time we all understood and got horrified, we realized that Vlad was stabbing the Martyr.

“You came to get your treason money from the securists?” Vlad yelled full with madness.

The Martyr was holding his hands over the wound, surprised. There was a little blood that you could see, at least in the beginning,

“So this is it? Is all going to end?” the Martyr said looking at us as if he just awoke from the hallucination of being an all-powerful manipulator.

“I’m not ready...I’m not ready...” I could hear him cry more and more slowly.

“A tooth for a tooth, and an eye for an eye. Talion Law!” Vlad screamed while holding his knife deep in the Martyr's abdomen, stopping the blood of bursting out.

Vlad stood there for a while watching him become inert, when he suddenly turned to me and said: “Why do all people who die, look in my eyes?” The Martyr was dead.

“When is this horrible day going to end?” I screamed. Mariana took a moment and said, “It’s easy to believe in God when you have a home, family, friends...but sometimes you can see someone that is really tested, and you can catch a glimpse of God’s face.”

I showed Mariana my passport.

“Is this your plan?” she asked me, disappointed, “I’m going to spend tonight in jail...” she said resigned to the situation.

“It’s fine, I didn’t believe it was going to work either,” I told her.

She took a moment for herself and found somewhere to sit, then she stated, as if I

already had asked her a question.

“Yes, I knew him. We were next to each other in the airplane that brought us to Bucharest three months ago.” She closed her eyes to recollect his presence in her mind while holding the passport in her hands.

“He was so enthusiastic, he was hoping to get a Pulitzer Prize for this Romanian revolution's story. Poor guy...” I got the feeling she had liked him.

Vlad turned to Mariana and told her: “Now you have to help him! Help him, and this guy did not to die in vain,”

“You are younger than him, but with all the lost nights lately and those dark rings around your eyes you start looking a lot like him.” Mariana was trying to convince herself.

“The smudge on the picture helps a lot!” Vlad said. “Yes! That too,” agreed Mariana.

I walked in the Bucharest airport for the first time in my life. The sound of thousands of steps and voices going in all directions echoed in my ears, hypnotizing me. A small girl waiting at the gate for her mother suddenly screamed close to my ears “Mammy” and almost knocked me down, running towards her mother’s arms. I noticed an old woman watching by the window the planes taking off, as a group of young boys were laughing loud, happy and ready to fly.

They were all Romanians, they all hoped to travel to a better life. I stood there looking at them while Mariana was buying the tickets for us. I was afraid to leave Romania, but in the same time I knew it couldn’t be any worse wherever I went

People like Christian don’t want to leave their country, they are kings in their own dark kingdom. While we the innocents have done nothing wrong but to be born.

“Come one, let’s go, the flight is in 20 minutes” she said pulling me out of my trance to start walking fast with her. We walked through a maze of hallways while Vlad was running behind us just to keep up.

“I got the tickets, but we are late!” she said turning her head back for a second just to get a glimpse of me. We finally got close to the passport checking point and were sitting in line when Vlad said suddenly: “Good bye, my brother” and then he turned to her and gave her a hug while whispering her in her ear: “Good bye, my sister. Take care of my

brother. Take care of Daniel”

And the he turned his back to us just like that, walking slowly towards the exit, slowly dragging his legs. I needed it something more from him, from me, something out of the ordinary for our farewell.

For the first time in my life I felt vulnerable, naked without his protection.

I was still watching him going away when Mariana saw a couple of militia coming along the corridor looking left and right and she jumped closer to me and whispered into my ear: “Two militias are coming this way. Don’t panic! Don’t stop now, keep going towards the end of the line, I am going to keep talking to you in English, and you just nod your head.” She put her hand on my left shoulder and I felt her hips next to mine and she gave me one more advice: “Don’t look at them. Just keep looking down at your passport” and then Mariana started talking in her language while she was putting her sun glasses over my eyes.

It felt like an eternity for me and I could feel drops of sweat sliding down my forehead as I was thinking: “What do I do? Do I wipe my sweat or not? Are they going to see it?”

I was expecting fearfully to get spotted any second. I expected a powerful blow in the back of my head. I almost felt it. I knew the horrific moment passed when I heard Mariana’s voice again. ”O.K. they are gone now...they are walking somewhere else. We are safe.” she said relaxed.

She put one of the tickets she bought into what had to be my passport and handed it to me.

“Now! Just do exactly what I told you”. She looked at me with those beautiful brown eyes, too beautiful to look at by someone like me, and she told me: “One more jump through the loop, bunny and we are out to Wonderland...”

The two militia stopped running.

Christian anxiously cocked his Carpathian pistol with his left hand and with his right hand he pulled the knife from his belt and plunged it deep into Vlad’s back. Vlad felt on his knees with a quiet painful scream trying to reach with both hands for the wound.

“Aaaaa! Aaaaa! Come on... Time for payday! Time to dieeee!” Christian yelled in Vlad’s left ear and hit the back of his head hard with his gun’s handle.

People stopped in place looking at what was going on. Everybody around them froze and nobody knew how to react. This was the militia after all.

The other young militia stopped the revolving door so nobody could get in or out.

Vlad was in agony and he was trying to lift himself from the floor when Christian took a step back to get a good swing and kicked Vlad’s mouth like a soccer ball with his big right boot breaking some of his front teeth.

But Vlad was not the one to be taken down in agony by just pain alone. He fell down on his back this time screaming silently. It took Vlad a couple of seconds to get used to the pain and learn how to keep it under control.

“You killed my father!” Christian kept yelling at him while walking in circles with his gun pointed at Vlad’s head looking for where to strike him next.

“You!... Killed! ...” He was preparing to shout again really loud when he got interrupted. “Yes, your father....” Vlad shouted leaving Christian perplex, “I also killed mine, and my grandfather...!” he confessed closing his eyes as if about to lose consciousness.

Christian raised his gun and aimed for Vlad’s head. Wait! The money... you can have them...are in the...” Vlad mumbled.

They looked in each other’s eyes.

“What? Where?” Christian said leaning down a bit trying to listen to the dying man’s words while still holding the gun to Vlad’s head.

He couldn’t hear him and so he got even closer to Vlad.

And then Vlad squeezed out his last drop of strength and fast but shivering reached with his right hand in his pocket and pulled his old dirty syringe and stuck the needle deep within Christian’s left leg.

Then while lying down on the floor he started laughing.

“Why are you laughing for? I’m killing you! Where is the money?” the militia said more angered and confused, ready to pull the trigger.

In all that agitation and tension Christian didn’t feel the pain of the needle stuck in his leg through his militia pants and didn’t realize what just had happened to him.

Vlad pointed to the syringe.

“It’s HIV! AIDS! All the money in the world can’t help you now” Vlad said with a big grin on his face enjoying Christian’s realization.

I have that feeling again. The feeling of brutal intimacy that you only get when you see a violent war, as if someone's brain was just blown to pieces and some of it landed on your face.

“Die!” Christian screamed scared and furious, while pulling the syringe out with two fingers in disgust and angered that he got tricked by a homeless sewer' child.

“Come one! Do it! Do me a favor! Where I’m going, you’re coming! Soon!” he yelled and turned his eyes to ceiling as if looking for something.

And then at that moment, as he was looking at the very end of his life, knowing that this was it for him, I imagine that he had the power to smile for me, as if he was saying: ”Don’t worry about anything, don’t worry about what is going to happen. We had a good run... You are my best friend, Daniel. You are my brother.” Then I imagine that he raised his left hand and saluted me one last time, like he always did, my guardian angel.

I’m sure he kept that big smile on his face even when the bullet went through his head.

Time slowed down as we got closer to the metal detector door. I could feel in those moments the officer's hesitation to wave me in growing bigger and bigger, as he was looking more and more at me and then again to the passport picture. I felt a divine force pushing down my head from above as I was trying foolishly to raise my eyes and look at the officer.

And then it happened ... the sound of the bullet that ended Vlad’s life reverberated like thunder through the entire airport. It felt that it would last forever and I remember seeing myself holding still, while everyone else turned their head to look towards the direction of the shooting.

”Everybody down!” a security officer yelled somewhere in front of us covering all the screams and everybody jumped on the floor. I turned around for a second and I saw two young militaries disoriented, running toward the exit, getting directions from bystanders.

A second bullet pierced the silence and then the security officer handed me my passport and waved to me and Mariana, yelling “Go! Go!”

I stood there incapable to understand what was happening, trying to turn back and look.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Mariana screamed in my ear and she grabbed my arm, pulling me to follow her, “Don’t look back!”

We ran in the airplane.

The memory of that moment became instantly clouded, dark, as if my brain refused to deal with it at the time, it took me several months to remember what took place.

I had to see Bucharest one more time from the air as I was flying away from it. Bucharest looked like a maze of short-ended lives and broken dreams, a decomposition of the order in the universe. I’m sure it was Heaven for others, but not for me.

And this is how I flew out of Romania, my country of birth and pain, in a warm June afternoon. I flew to America in that brand new blood stained shirt covered by the suit jacket, feeling like a misplaced phony guy waiting to be unmasked, getting scared every time the flight attendant stopped to ask me: “Would you like some orange juice, sir?”

The airplane lights became dim after a while and Mariana felt immediately asleep. I didn’t blame her, she didn’t know that I was wounded, she was tired. I was tired too.

My wound was feeling more and more numb as my mind was slipping into a victorious lethargy. I can rest now, it’s over.

It was quiet, everybody was sleeping, I could think and cry, then think some more.

I tried to deceive time, to ignore it, not to feel it anymore till it burst out to me dimensionally. My whole life felt like a race against the clock now.

Then those eight quiet hours of flying over the Atlantic Ocean brought all in perspective.

I realized that although I didn’t pay any attention to time, time paid attention to me.

Why was I the only one that escaped that nightmare? I was no better than anybody else that was there...I wasn’t leaving behind just Vlad, Crazy, Nicu, Mariuca, Carrion, I was also leaving behind my destiny... and in a way I was escaping my own death.

I wasn’t the seven years old boy anymore, who just escapes the orphanage looking on

the streets for a better life. I was an older boy that Mariana had turned into a man.

I looked back and saw myself through others' eyes. Some of us died in the sewer, but bits of all of us made it out and sparked as dying stars in the night. I saw myself suddenly as mingled parts of them all. I was thinking how they protected me unknowingly, teaching me and building me, and finally creating me.

All their faces started to float out before my eyes.

Scary, evil forgotten details of my life became visibly thrown in front of my eyes as on a big curtain for everyone to see. There were whispered voices and cracking sounds coming from everywhere. I felt ashamed and sensed someone's hand trying to still gently my brain.

The airplane suddenly changed into a church and I woke up sitting on a bench with others, mourning someone for whom the priest was giving the last rites. I got up to see who was dying and as I made my way to the altar I could see Vlad, holding Mariuca's hand in the first bench. They both looked at me.

The boys that they all mourned was us, the young us, the ones who just came out from the basement, fresh. We were all lying naked on the altar, lifeless.

I stood there for hours in silence, motionless until I heard my name spoken from above. "Wake up, Daniel" an angel voice whispered, "we are here!"

Those eight endless hours disappeared in a flash.

"We are going to land in about 20 minutes?" Mariana told me.

I looked out the window and saw the ocean for the first time in my life. It was blue, happy blue, not sad blue.

"It smells like salt here..." I told her, "...maybe just to me, but it smells like salt."

She woke me up just in time to feel the landing bump. It was liberating and it felt like a big jump from one country to another.

We stood afterwards in long lines and I tried to keep my head up as I felt I was losing consciousness.

The bored and sweaty custom officer didn't even look at my face and he waved me in, he was more concerned in asking his colleagues when the AC was going to start working again.

The jump through the hoops was over.

Mariana was happy, excited. She was going to present me to her father.

I barely walked behind her, the pain was stabbing me every step and my head was screaming in agony. I did sweat and sweat, and my vision was getting darker and darker. My ears were ringing loudly and I could hardly hear her telling me: "There he is! Right there by the green car. My dad!"

She didn't notice what was happening to me. She didn't look at me, she looked at him now.

Mariana grabbed my cold dead arm and pulled me to run towards him, running...

I fell down. My senses were almost gone by now. I felt my scalp hitting the cement. It should have hurt, but it didn't anymore.

"Daniel!" I heard my angel's voice one more time as all the sounds were fading. The last thing that I felt was the warm sun and then the soft embrace of unconsciousness. I knew this was the end.

I remember Crazy once told me: "You don't die you just get thrown in the recycling bin of the universe and then molded in a new form of yourself..."

Everything was blackness.

Chapter 0: My America

The first thing I heard was the sharp screams of hungry seagulls and I smelt a sweet jasmine aroma in the air. I opened my eyes and saw the sea breeze blowing the fine curtains away through the open window. It was a pleasantly warm, sunny afternoon and I could hear the ocean waves gently lapping against the shore close by. A small gray cat was sleeping on my chest, purring.

I moved my head gently to the right and saw Mariana sitting in a chair next to my bed holding her hands over her mouth, her eyes flooded in tears but happy that I was alive.

She kept her eyes wide open and came gently next to me; suddenly she slapped me pretty hard. The gray cat ran away.

“Why didn’t you tell me? You got me so scared! I thought you were going to die!” she screamed at me angry for a second and then she jumped to kiss me.

I slept for days, partly because of the drugs they put in me, partly because I had been pretty tired for the last twenty years.

“I made it! This is America!” I remember thinking, as proud as if I was the first man on the moon.

I looked around and found myself in a room full of sea heirlooms and salvaged dock's finds. A big sea horse statue was watching over me from across the room surrounded by coral, sea shells and star fishes in a carefully colored assortment. The walls were covered in clumsy but graceful mural paintings of sea creatures.

“Is this your room?” I asked Mariana.

“Yap!” she said proudly, letting me go after a long hug.

“You got lucky. You have a rare blood type just like my father, he is a surgeon...”, she told me.

I rose slowly out of the bed with Mariana’s support accompanied by the squeaks of the old wicker bed and we stepped out on the wooden porch. I didn’t feel any pain in my right leg anymore.

I insisted for going for a walk on a beach.

From outside I could see that the house seemed to have fallen in oblivion, the old timber of the roof was addle and the metal door notch with burgees models was eaten by

rust. They didn't hire anyone to fix this house because they wanted only the men of the family to work on it.

Over the door, on the rock arch, one could see the fading face of a woman carrying a Latin inscription on her shoulders: "Bona Fortuna".

"That is my grandmother" said Mariana. "My grandfather was a sailor. He was the first one that came to America when he was a young man," she added with delight.

"He used to go fishing in the morning and work on building the house in the afternoon." We walked all the way to the seashore, and I sunk my legs in the salt water of the ocean looking at the melancholic landscape that I had dreamed of in my childish dreams.

Mariana stopped and looked deep in my eyes.

"I have something very important to tell you..." she said while I was melting in her arms. I felt small sand grains carried by the breeze gently hitting my cheeks.

"It so beautiful here" I said, disbelieving what I saw, "Am I dead? Is this Heaven?" She laughed, surprised "No silly! You're alive! And you're mine!"

This was indeed my personal heaven ordained by my personal God.

The old town looked like one of those idyllic village pictures I saw once in an American Magazine. Life was simple and quiet; everybody knew each other.

My first week in America? I just leaned back in the old rocking chair on the porch overlooking the seashore. The sun was strong here and it burned my skin right away.

I watched and listened to everything around me. A man with a child passed in front of me, dragging their feet in the sand. I couldn't see them very well but I could hear them.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" the man asked the child. "A guest!" the child answered fast.

The man laughed, I laughed. My new life began.

Her grandfather's eyes are still vibrant blue and filled with fire. I can tell he was once the proud handsome man who hiked his way out of Romania through the mountains of the north to run away from Ceausescu's regime.

He stops in the middle of his story. "I never knew that she left for Romania, I wouldn't let her go!" her grandfather told me out of nowhere, taking me by surprise.

I looked at him. He was a good man, a fisherman turned priest.

“I know you too have been tested!” he said looking at me, “but you are now forged in fire, you can survive anything...”

Why am I ashamed of what happened to me? Even if it is not my fault? Maybe it is somehow my fault? Why did I choose to be born there? Maybe it didn't mean anything to anyone, but that was my life.

My birth destroyed my mother's life. It killed her somehow...now I feel the guilt, tangled in the moral zymotic mildew of past analysis.

Life doesn't have to make sense, It's just life.

Mariana's grandfather was looking at me and for the first time in my life I wondered if I had a grandfather somewhere.

I looked away. I didn't know what to say.

He got closer to me and locked my head straight with his big old hands so I couldn't escape his eyes: “I know you have been tested!” he said again with a soft voice, “But you are a good boy! You hear me! You are a good boy!”

I burst into tears feeling weak... I cried.

I was mad and angered at myself, God... the world.

It hurt.

“You can cry now! Cry as much as you want!” he said patting me gently on the back while I was swallowing my tears.

I was crying for myself for the first time in my life.

“You are my grandson now. I just adopted you...I just adopted you” he whispered.

They all taught me about life. They all taught me English. I'm one of them now.

“An engagement ring should show character and love. Should reflect the time you spend thinking about her, not vanity or a piece of diamond that one day a drugged-head might kill for and take to the pawn shop” her grandfather told me in the old language.

I wondered what I had to offer her.

“Don't worry, the universe will manage to give you what is yours in the end” her grandfather kept telling me.

We went fishing together on Saturdays, we talked.

“She was never like the others girls, looking for a rich man to marry. She was never a predictable equation. She is loving, caring, she is human...” he told me about Mariana.

“You have to look carefully at life...Sometimes the life gives you clues, it smiles at you.” he preached to me while I helped him untangle the trammel.

“Look back. What did you miss?” he said unexpectedly.

I didn't understand everything he was telling me, maybe because I was too young.

As we were coming back to shore he pointed a big boulder sticking out of the sea to me. “She used to stay here on this rock for hours, with her legs dipped in seawater. Somehow, she felt connected to everybody else in the world that was touching the water, bringing her and them together.”

The money came. It was hidden in Vlad's notebooks. He hid bills between the pages. There was enough there to buy an engagement ring but Mariana wanted me to start an education. “You see...in the end...as cliché as this may sound...the beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” I remember her speaking these words to me that evening.

Three year later. Virginia Beach, VA

I fail. I fail a lot and I get used to it. I never win, I just do a little better each time. Failing is what makes me grow, is what makes me stronger, resilient. A new life, a new country, a new language.

I struggle and I feel out of place, but at the same time I am at peace with myself.

I still feel lost, I still cry and I still feel embarrassed by my shortcomings but I am now proud of myself. It's new to me, but I haven't felt loved and wanted ever before.

“Be positive,” the nurse said waking me up from my late afternoon daydreaming.

I didn't look up in time to see if she gave me a smile or not. She just worked there surrounded by her noisy machines.

“I always am. Thank you for your encouragement”, I replied quickly, trying to catch up while looking at my shadow.

Everything in here was white and flooded in sterile neon light.

She looked at me trying to make sense of what I just said, then she turned around to write something down.

“What? No! I mean your group type is B plus, positive! You asked me...” the nurse told me. We look at each other in confusion.

“You asked me what your blood type is...” she said again.

She was tired, I was tired too and I didn't remember asking her that. End of shift. I wondered if she was retired and still working or just close to retirement. I didn't remember asking her about my blood type. “Oh, yes! Thank you!” I found the strength to answer. Maybe another patient asked her about it.

That happened a lot to me, when I got tired I couldn't concentrate enough to speak my new learned language. It was like my brain was so drained that it went back to basics. I tried to keep my eyes open.

The nurse looked at me with compassion. I was the only one left in that waiting area, waiting for my results.

“Where are you from?” she asked quickly while her hands were working very fast. I looked at her white starched clean uniform and I answered:

“Romania...”

She stopped for a second as if she just got hit by lightning and looked at me. All I can hear now was the humming of the machines.

“Romania! My son is from Romania” she said changing her voice into a warmer tone. “Well my adopted son...Michael!” she added while she printed my results.

“Do you want to see him? My husband picks him up from school before he comes and gets me, so Michael is in the car” she told me excited.

I smiled.

“I want Michael to speak his native language and English but it is so hard to find Romanians around here...” she keeps blasting one sentence after another while leading me now to the parking lot.

It's dark and cold outside.

And then I felt it...it was something like a very short shiver in my head, mixed with fear, it's life breaking through again.

My heart started to beat really hard and my ears went deaf for a moment. The sleepiness that I felt before disappeared and I became angry because I couldn't tell if all was just a stupid dream or if it is really happening.

I could feel my eyes starting to pour tears of happiness without waiting for my brain's reaction.

That was him! I would recognize that child anywhere. That was Mariuca's child much older, but it was him. I got close enough to see the scar on his neck.

I leaned over him and hugged him.

"Do you know him?" the man sitting next to him asked me in surprise.

He doesn't recognize me. Its ok, it's better this way. He doesn't remember the bad times. "Yes, I know him...I know him..." I cry out and looked up in the sky trying to see somehow Mariuca and Vlad up there.

They looked at me with compassion, they understood. Later on, on one of my visits, they told Mariana and me

"When we saw those kids on TV we knew we had to adopt one of them. We had good intentions but we were afraid of the dubious arrangements all the way to the end...you know: bureaucracy, corruption, scams..."

Later that year when I went back to Romania I found out from the people in the neighborhood that Crow had died soon after I last saw her. Somebody threw a bottle when she was walking on the street from an apartment above and smashed her scalp right in. The police didn't care who killed a homeless girl and they didn't even investigate. The building was ten stories high and anyone could have thrown the bottle from the balcony or from a window or even someone from the roof, they said.

I felt bad that she didn't know before she died that the little boy she took care for so long had made it after all.

Mariana's grandfather died on a summer day. The sun was strong and the waves were high that morning. His boat drifted slowly close to the shore, full of fish ready to be sold at the market later in the afternoon.

"This is the way he wanted to go..." some of his fellow fishermen told us at the funeral, "out there in the loneliness of the ocean. It was where he felt most at home." The burial was short, everything happened so fast.

I remembered him joking and asking us all from time to time when he was getting drunk: "Please bury me with my fishing clothes on and next to my dear old wife. I don't

want to spend my eternity in a stiff suit that I never wore before in my life.”

I remembered him lying down in his small room, with legs across the bed’s footboard, keeping his hand on a Romanian rachiu bottle filled with beer and listening to old Romanian romance songs played on his very vintage phonograph that he carried out through the mountains in his back pack.

And then, when we were looking through his things, I saw it...

I opened a drawer and I saw this old gun staring back at me asking me “What are you waiting for, Daniel?”

I touched the revolver with my scar and it all came back to me more vivid than anything else in my past. There were bullets in it, ready to be fired.

I knew what I had to do it and I knew what my blood brothers would want me to do it.

I took the handgun and hid it in my pocket without anyone seeing that I had taken it. I’m not afraid to confess, that was exactly how I felt at that time.

That evening I walked into Mariana’s brother room and asked him if he could help me find my birth father.

“Yes, of course I can find him! I mean how many Americans were back in the 70’s in Romania working for the U.S. embassy whose first name was Daniel anyways?” he said jumping quickly to help me.

I stared scared in the blackness of the screen looking to find an answer, looking to find hope.

“I will help you find him” he reassured me friendly tapping my shoulder as if he just realized how important this was for me.

We sat in awkward silence for a moment, my heart was racing and a void of fear was building inside me slowly.

“Look at the ambassadors list...any of them named Daniel?” I asked full of confidence. I could feel the minutes turning into years.

“No! I can’t find him...” he said frustrated after a while.

I went and sat down on his bed and said what I was most afraid to say:

“Look at the staff then...” I whispered, “Was he a chauffeur?” I asked again “How did you know?” her brother turned around to me for a second.

“It says here he was a driver at the embassy and...” his voice faded as I was getting lost in my thoughts.

In a way I could say I had an interesting life and nothing makes the victory sweeter than a long struggle. It was one of the greatest feelings in the world to become an American myself that afternoon.

I didn't celebrate, I was on the road for two hours afterwards. The house looked old and barely standing.

It seemed that kids were here once, playing under what was now an old rusty basketball hoop with a tore up net. Near the door was an old dog's house badly painted but I didn't see any dog around, just a small pet grave near the dog's house with a tomb stone and the name “Spot”.

I gathered all my strength and fearfully rang the bell. It didn't ring or maybe I couldn't hear it from outside. I knocked several times.

It took some time but a fat middle-aged man opened the door in a sleeveless dirty shirt. He looked probably older than his age, unshaved and his hair was a big mess.

He barely looked at me for a second and asked: “Yes! Can I help you?” He didn't wait for my answer and quickly took another drink from his beer.

I remember pulling my hand out slowly of the coat looking firmly at his face and thinking: “This was my father. It could have been so beautiful...Why do I have to be here...Why do I need to do this?”

Images of him, me and my mother were flashing through my head.

I dreamed for a split second of a Sunday afternoon inundated by the summer sun ascending among puffy white clouds, with him, my father, pushing me on a swing, I was a happy little boy screaming “Higher! Higher!” while mom was close to us and laughing. I knew that was so common for kids around here but for me it was a dream. It was heaven for me.

We lived in a family neighborhood and...

“I said: Can I help you” he repeated raising his voice this time while giving me a

suspicious look waking me up from the mirages of a dreamed life.

By now he was afraid of what I was about to take out of my pocket, I could feel his fear and saw his eyes getting bigger and bigger.

“Yes! This is for you!”, and suddenly I pulled my mother’s letters from my pocket and handed them to him. He hurriedly took the letters from my hands, somewhat annoyed, then he froze when he saw the senders' name on the letters. He didn’t open any of them but it took him a couple of seconds to get the strength to raise his eyes up to me again.

“Are you my son?” he asked gently with a weak voice.

And as I stood there I could feel all that great sadness that had followed me all my life lifting up and disappearing in thin air.

“You knew?” I asked him trying very hard not to burst out crying.

His voice changed, I felt a shiver in his voice towards the end of the sentence “What’s your name?”

And then a thought lighted through my head and I simply told him: “You never gave me a name...”

He did not know what to say as I turned my back to him and left.

I never saw him again, but I felt that in a way I still kept my pact with Vlad: I killed him, in my mind, at least what was left of him.

I didn’t hate him. I knew he was a heartless man who wouldn’t care if his son is at his door or if he was rotting in a grimy sludge of the sewer.

And as I left walking to my car, I heard his voice calling for me “Hey! Wait!” but I didn’t stop because in front of me was my family waiting for me in our car, my wife Mariana, with our two kids sitting in their baby chairs Daniel Jr. and Michelle. And they were waiting for their dad...

.... and I am going to be there for them.

The End

If you enjoyed this book and you would like to make a donation to help children that are in orphanages now in Bucharest or to adopt a Romanian orphan...

Please visit our webpage at:

www.MyAmericanKids.com

Thank you!

Michelle, Mariana, Daniel & Daniel Jr.

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This book is the journal of a Romanian homeless orphan that escaped the streets. It is a healing book.

I'm not a writer, I didn't write this book, life wrote this book. All I can offer you is my reality, my simple truth. The book burst out of my journal as its own identity after 20 years of weekly confessions. I guess you couldn't really understand me and my friends without reading this book.

What happened under the streets of Bucharest will sink into your mind and take you back into those dark communist times.