

The Purple Blood

Strands of hair come out of my cute little bun and now stick to my face. Although I used a makeup foundation I look pale and my eyes are small and still.

The second hand skirt I bought is a size bigger than my size, and it dances on my hips every time I take a step, and my “borrowed” shoes strangle my toes so tight I can feel sweat droplets gathering on my forehead and above my upper lip. A snag in my tights runs all the way up under my skirt showing a thin line of skin on my leg.

Waiting nervously for the queue to advance, I vigorously massage my temples until sweat, and my makeup foundation are both smudged on my fingertips. I wanted to make a first good first impression, but now I look just like a voodoo doll. I open my handbag and start to feel around. After touching several things, I find the envelope with 200 pounds from my father, his last month’s salary. I close it and move it deeper into my handbag.

After that it is all a blur of memories and smells in the middle of a cold rain and thick fog. Oh, yes! You can’t see the sky. The fog is so thick that I ask myself if I will ever see the clear sky again in this life, if I will see again that unmistakeable blue or the warm light of the sun. I stand outside of Luton airport smelling the sweet bread, the cheap cream on my mom’s old hands, and the smell of bitumen on a 30 degrees summer day.

My stomach began to growl. I got so used to being hungry that I feel like I will never get rid of this feeling. In the middle of all these new faces, I remember what I left behind: poverty, a family and a cat.

I can hear chairs being pulled and plates and cutlery being handled. A divine smell of potato stew hypnotises my nostrils. I don’t even realise when my tears start flowing down my cheeks. I hug my backpack thinking at my stew and my cat, Issis. I remember the day I found her in the stairway of our block of flats. She definitely did not look like an Egyptian goddess. She was infested with fleas, and her fur had a strong smell of petrol. Her terrible meowing and her little eyes quickly convinced me to take her in, just for a few days. Those few days became five years now.

Between the tears and smiles I let my mind to travel back in time.

I walk down a long hallway. My blue uniform with embroiled collars is too big. My father smiles at me while he’s holding my hand. He’s all dressed up, and he also trimmed his dark moustache. He wears a big black hat. I like how it fits him. He lets go of my hand, and I leave him behind as I enter the classroom. It smells nice here; it smells like fresh paint. I sit at a desk in the last row. There are a lot of children in the classroom and they are quite noisy. Some of them give me weird looks.

The voice of my memory is taking me to nana. I have a pretty dress with folds and my dark hair is braided with colourful ribbons. She puts a necklace around my neck. It’s a coin with a dragon engraved on it, a dragon to protect me.

In the labyrinth of my memories, I remember about my dearest uncles. There was a time when I saw death with solemnity and relief, but that all stopped when nana Karina told me a story. After World War II death became a comedy for our family. The ones responsible for this were my uncles, Mirko and Valko. When the war ended none of them made it home. They were declared dead, and even though they were gipsies, the mayor came to acknowledge their deeds and presented each of their widows with a medal. They placed the medals next to the Virgin Mary's statuette. Before long they accepted their husbands' deaths and decided to have a symbolic funeral. Their children, thirteen altogether, nailed a few pine boards together and made two coffins, which they then placed in the best room of the house. With a decent amount of homemade brandy, they persuaded the village priest to toll the bells three times. They covered the mirrors and they locked the cats away so Mirko or Valko won't appear as ghosts. The old women started wailing and the young lads started playing cards. After three days, everyone took their farewell from the ones that were husbands, fathers, uncles and friends and everyone continued with their lives. Two years after these events, Mirko walked into the village. He was fatter, had better clothes on him, and instead of a flimsy knapsack, he was carrying a shiny wooden suitcase. The village was flooded with cries of despair; the women fainted and even those that were never religious were on their knees praying. By the time he made to his house, Mirko became a walking miracle on the dusty and dung covered paths of the village. After the wife calmed down and was convinced he's not a ghost, he thanked God that he is with his family again and then they started partying. One night, Mirko woke and removed the medal and the basil flowers laid around it, made crazy love with his wife and then he confessed: being alive is a miracle, but he is no war hero. He ran away from the front long before he was supposed to fire a bullet and stayed hidden in abandoned houses and in people's attics, stealing food and clothes to survive. He sometimes even found work, but he couldn't work too much because of the back aches he had. They made love once again and for Rada, Mirko was a hero still. Death became a joke one year later when Valko showed up in the village. He had a similar story, but he told it only to Mirko. Valko's wife, Zlatka, died, but two months before his arrival. Mirko and Valko drank until dawn when the boiled wine with cinnamon washed away any trace of guilt for their "heroic" deeds during the war. They put their medals back in their place and swore never to talk about it again. Death found them in the end and now they smile from the Merry Cemetery. The place is famous for its colourful tombstones with naïve paintings describing, in an original and poetic manner, the people who are buried there as well as scenes from their lives. Since nana told me this story, death became real, but it had a funny side to it too.

And how could I forget my old church? For over two months the church is being renovated. Even with the scaffolding and construction materials scattered around the church maintains its innate beauty.

On the southern wall above the entrance door, you can see "CULTORES SUI DEUS PROTEGIT" written with big letters chiselled deep in the stone wall. On the massive oak door, which was taken out of its hinges and now resting against the wall, there is a sculpted image depicting Jesus kneeling before The Chalice. A frame of laurels encompasses the image. Another sculpted image depicts Moses holding The Ten Commandments. He probably had twenty, but the poor man dropped two of the four tablets he initially had which only makes me happy. I do so many stupid or wrong things I am convinced the other tablets contained rules made especially for me to guide me through my pity life.

I love listening to the choir singing “Virgo Mater” every Sunday. I don’t really know how to pray so I spend lots of time in church to be sure God got my all my “messages”... yes... I am doing that a lot. My family is simple and religious. I guess poverty leads to hope and faith... faith that one day it will be better.

I don’t know how he got here. For a moment I think I am hallucinating, but when he opens his mouth I am certain he is not a figment of my imagination.

“Miss, can you spare a few coins?”

I stare at him. From his neck down to his hip he looks like an empty carcass. His pants that are rolled above the knee show a pair of very skinny knees. He is ferociously ugly and dirty. The little gypsy child makes an effort to smile revealing his teeth that are as black and dirty as he is. He puts his hands together and starts blessing me. I am feeling ashamed and I quickly look around. I have a strong desire to hide him in my suitcase before any of these sophisticated people will notice him. After I dropped a few coins in his tiny rachitic palms, I leave him and my country behind. The thick mist rises and curls around my feet. I look like a doll that’s missing the lower half of its body.

I head towards one of the coaches pulling a suitcase full with second-hand clothes from size eight to size ten and between them dozens and dozens of hope and dreams. With a strong accent, I whisper a humble

“Good morning” to my new home, but no replay is coming back. I am surrounded by fog and the drumming sounds of my own heart.

Spring

I learn how to recite the letters of my name mechanically “Alpha, Lima, Lima, Echo, Romeo, Alpha”, ask for “Fish and chips” instead of “Chips and Fish” and answer every morning with “ I’m fine, thank you!” because no one is ready for a different scenario, like: “ In fact... I am not fine!”

Because of such an unusual name, I am “the girl from Romania” and after a while, I become: “Romania”. I was not bothered at all. Thinking now back, I should be bothered because that was the moment when flakes of my own identity started to fall off. I picked up everything that the East European Country meant to be for the western culture.

The first two years passed peacefully and I enjoyed each minute in a nursing home, on the first floor: “White Wings-Dementia Unit”.

Every evening the residents were sharing their own stories having next to them digestive biscuits and beakers with hot tea or milk shake. We had something in common: the valuable memories and a family

and friends somewhere far away. For them, forgetfulness was sometimes the best medication for the loneliness. I had no medication for mine, but I had them and for a while they were my family.

“Once I got there I was enlisted in a British school.” I heard Mrs Farmer voice behind me. “I always was quite selective with what I was learning. What I thought that is worth my time is not thought in schools. It was just a normal school in no way different from we have here.”

While she speaks she pushes her chair closer to mine.

“No, Mr Wallaby! Please!” I say to my gentleman eager to steal the salt from the table.

“Maybe they were a bit stricter there come to think of it.”

“Who, Mrs Farmer?” I asked her without taking my eyes from Mr Wallaby.

“The teachers, dear! Stop it, Peter!”

Before I have the chance the salt disappears in Mrs Farmer’s purse.

“In any case, I just couldn’t adapt to their ways. After all, I was the daughter of a measly secretary. I quickly became interested in what happened on the other side of the resorts fences. The language was quite an obstacle, but it didn’t stop me from experiencing all sorts of sophisticated and forbidden pleasures.” she is telling me and she winks at me. “If you know what I mean! I made friends with some of the local girls in record time. They were quite simple, they were not interested in designer clothes, they didn’t care about social statutes and they were completely foreign to technological stuff. Still, we were having a great time when we were together. Opposite to how I live my life now, back then I was careless, I was avid for adventure and defied all rules. Did you ever visit the Orient?”

She starts talking about her years in Kuwait with such passion that I can almost smell the saffron cookies and the steam coming from the communal baths, I can see the sandstorms and adrenaline rushes through my veins as Mrs Farmer speaks of one night when she ran away with an American soldier.

I know she has never been in Kuwait from her care plan, but we had a day trip to the local cinema where the residents watched a movie with a very similar storyline like Mrs Farmer experience.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Who?” I ask while I am trying to take a jug of orange juice from Mrs Smith shaky hands.

“You!”

“Please, Mrs Smith! Are you thirsty?”

Instead of an answer, Mr Smith decides to bite my hand. I scream in pain, Mrs Smith starts to cry, and Mr King makes his appearance in the kitchen wearing only a red shirt with the “Patriots” emblem and a incontinence pad.

“Mr King!”

I jump from the chair, quickly grabbing a blanket.

“Am I your boyfriend?” he is asking me with a handsome smile.

“No, Mr King, you are not my boyfriend!” I say while I put the blanket around his prominent belly.” But you are my best friend for sure.”

“So?”

“No, Mrs Farmer. I have no boyfriend and please put the salt back on the table!” I shout back at her from the corridor as I am taking Mr King back to his room.

“If you give me a cup of tea, I will tell you Mary!”

“I will give you a cup of tea after we find a pair of trousers.”

“Is my wife coming today?”

“No, Mr King, she can’t come today.”

“What about tomorrow? Will she come tomorrow?”

“I am afraid, not!”

“I miss her, you know?”

“I know, but she is fine. You no need to worry about her!”

“Can I have supper?”

“You had it already.”

“When I had it?”

“Half an hour ago!”

“Are you sure?”

“I am sure, Mr King! Tell me about Mary!”

“Sure!”

I take a biscuit from the tin, I help him take a seat and then I make myself comfortable on a Turkish stool with models.

“What is it dear?”

“I am waiting to hear the story...”

“What story?”

“About your grandmother... Mary.”

“Oh Yes... Mary... well, she was a suffragette. She went to Romania with other women from Scotland. They had set up company hospitals in a country engulfed by the flames of the First World War. She was a nurse and she put all her knowledge and will into the service of Dr Elsie Inglis.

“Romanian officers had not met Scottish women until then.” He says proudly. “They possessed a sense of duty, a desire to help others and confidence in their personal abilities. They were unstoppable and refused to be stopped by any obstacle”.

“Mary had been the driver of one of the ambulances. When the wounded soldiers begged her to return the car from the road during a bombing, she refused and did not stop until she took them safely to the hospital. This was Mary!”

Mr King shows me a picture with her kneeling next to a soldier with his head half-bandaged laying on a stretcher. The sight of the image sets my imagination in motion. I feel the smell of gunpowder in my nostrils and I see the death, accounting indifferently its victims. I see Mary running from one soldier to another and I hear her giving precise instructions. I see her long, grey dresses soaked with blood. I almost hear her heavy breathing, the sound of bullets and then the stifling pursuit. I see the bodies of the soldiers that you can hardly recognize and their hands full of blood clinging to her feet; I hear their cry and agony. I imagine how Mary checks their pulse, closes the dead eyes or how she puts her ear on their chest trying to find a trace of life. I hear her prayer as a whisper for the people who now form the image of carnage. Suddenly I wonder if we still need another war to remember what solidarity is and what really matters.

“She was a very brave woman, Mr King!”

“Brave and crazy! Did I tell my wife brought me a new book?”

“When did she bring it?”

“Today, dear, I told you... today!”

“I need you in the meeting room. Now!” my manager raises his voice a bit seeing that I am staring at him and giving him no sign I am going to react anytime soon. His face is red. I wonder if he ran up here. He closes the door as quickly as he opened it. I throw the pen in my drawer without finishing my sketch of two robot unicorns. I put all the files back in the drawer as well and lock the desk.

In the corridor, a strong smell of disinfectant stings my nostrils. I tread carefully on the wet floor while I quickly go through any and all reasons why I am summoned to the meeting room.

I go down the a flight of stairs and enter a long hallway. It's well lit and there's no disinfectant smell here. On the contrary, I can smell Imperial Lilies. Big ferns and bloomed jasmine rest in pots along the wall. For a moment you might think this is a botanical garden, not a nursing home. My shoes make too much noise on the shiny green floor, and I catch a few annoyed nurses looking insistently towards me. I carelessly smile at them and stop in front of an upholstered door. I feel my heart shrinking and a vein hidden under my collar throbs uncontrollably. I straighten my burgundy tunic, and with a shaking hand, I ring the bell anxiously waiting to see what waits beyond the door. I inspect myself again, and I straighten my tiny leaf earrings and tighten my ponytail. I am about to ring the bell again when Paul opens the door a bit more relaxed, but his face is still red.

"Please, come in!"

As he invites me in, he pinches the suspenders holding his pants up over his big fat belly.

"Thank you!" I reply automatically while trying to squeeze past him.

"Be careful what you are saying!" he whispers in my ear through his big yellow teeth, and his breath has a strong smell of tobacco. "They are from CQC! They have some questions for you!"

I feel his huge palm on my back pushing me forward.

"Shall we sit, miss?" one of them asks while he gestured towards a small coffee table with a few armchairs around it. I follow him with my jelly legs and only when I manage to sit down I notice Paul has left the room.

The cascade of questions starts and completely paralysed, I realise I just forget how to speak English.

My fists are clenched under the table and I think that he talks about the psychological profile of a lunatic. Wait! I'm the lunatic and he is the saviour of my tormented psyche. My nostrils just increased their girth, I and feel the beads of sweat gathering on my forehead. I gather the last ounces of strength and manage to smile and nod at him encouraging him to continue pleading for the eradication of this virus known as me. Paul is explaining me the origin of my country: it is not a Latin country. In fact, we share a whole history with India, because my country is full of gipsies. He is upset because I was too open with the inspectors... well... way to open after I remember how to speak English.

"Don't you agree?"

"Not really, Sir..."

I look at a statuette of the Goddess Diana placed in the corner of her desk. Her bow is aimed right at me. I let my head fall into my chest waiting for Diana to release her arrow and end my misery.

"Do you like here?"

“Here... where Sir?”

“Here in England!” he raises his exasperated voice.

“It is a nice country.”

“Do you have any school... any qualification?”

“I graduated Medical School.”

His eyes become like two big plates.

“Why are you cleaning shit then?”

“I am waiting for some documents from my school, Sir!”

“This is your problem! You come here, take the money and run back to your country.”

“I don’t intend to go nowhere. I want to make a life here!”

“Ok, ok. You can go!” and he dismisses me with a boring gesture of his hand fluffy like dough. “What are you waiting for?”

“My annual leave... can you sign it, please?”

“Not now! You know we don’t have enough staff! You should know this because this is exactly what you told to the inspectors! We’ll discuss later on.”

“Later on?”

“Next week, now go! It’s nearly lunchtime and I allocated you on the ground floor.”

“Next week it is the Easter!”

“How can be next week, Allera?! What is wrong with you?”

“I am orthodox so for us the Easter is next week. I was hoping to...”

“Hopes are for fools.”

Summer

This summer has a different colour from the rest of the other summers. And this summer smells different. Various posh boats, costly ones with buying prices that make me dizzy just thinking about it, slowly glide between barges and river buses under the warm June sun in contradiction with the London

morning rush. I keep promising myself that the first time I will have a day off I will book a cruise on one of the boats and I will enjoy a muffin and a cup of coffee while cruising on the Thames. I don't know why, but the idea seems to be so old it feels like mould has grown all over it. I wish this summer not to paint my dreams amid it. I think of the Black Sea. I want to hear the seagulls and let the waves to hit my legs. I would love to sit on my chair eating pears or drinking a cup of white chocolate. I want to walk barefoot on the rough and hot ground. I want to feel the smell of summer rain mixed with soil. I want to do all these things this summer, but I'd like to share them with someone else. I want to show this "someone" my world. Happiness is an illusion in bright colours, but in the end, remains gloomy and dark. Something was missing in my life, but I did not know what.

The political decision from that day came like a bomb in my cosy, peaceful life.

The morning started with a phone call from my mom. After I ensure her everything will be fine and nothing will change, she hang up the phone, but other two more phone calls proceeds the first one with the same anxiety and tears. She thinks my deportation will be similar to the one from 1944 when the Jews were deported from Oradea. She also probably thinks the Big Ben will stop working exactly like one of the Orthodox Synagogue who marked the tragic events.

After I calm her down, I am buying a coffee with the last coins I had in my pockets and from the opposite sidewalk, I look at Big Ben. I had to say I was myself scared. Going back to my country was not an option. I created so impossible and unfavourable circumstances around my life that going back it was just impossible.

I was feeling trapped. I took my TV out from the cupboard and I started to pay attention to each piece of news. I was waiting day a night for a sign either from God or from the government.

My nights turned into days and even the dragon from my nana could not protect me against the nightmares I started to have.

"Who am I?" this is the question which is haunting my mind and my soul.

I woke up getting ready for work, but my legs are paralysed. I try to open the door, but my hand is not listening to my command. My brain freezes and I feel my heart beating in my throat. I can't move and being out of my little studio flat it is something I can't imagine at this point.

I decide to go back to bed. I pull the blanket over my head and I hide there.

Only after a few days, I go out for a walk.

I look up and down the street. It's completely deserted. I back off scared when a cat jumps out from a bush. A street light flashes intermittently until it finally goes out, and I become invisible as darkness surrounds me. From time to time I can see my shadow on the red brick walls, then scampers away into a graffiti tattooed tunnel. With my legs numb from the cold water I start walking again. When I reach a

rubbish bin I throw away my shoes full of water. I can hear laughter from an apartment on the ground floor, and someone plays the piano somewhere in the distance. By the time I reach the end of the street that 'someone' starts playing an aria from Bach. I turn my head when I hear the sound of keys. A man in his 40s with a black trench glistening from the pouring rain freezes in place with a key in the lock when he notices my presence. His gaze stops at my bare legs. I smile at him and his face relaxes. Amused, he salutes with two fingers next to his temple and then enters the house leaving me behind. I look at his door painted red with the number 33 in gold numbers. I retire to a shaded corner and listen to the last piano chords. With my mind's eye, I see a pair of hands with white long fingers skipping over the white piano keys. The sensitivity with which the aria is played... Every note flows with sadness... like happiness yet to be found. Is there a story behind those pale hands? I breathe the fresh air brought by the rain and I let myself absorbed in the evening silence. I love life made of things which can inspire you to dream.

I spent all my childhood with Karina and Isra, my aunty, running through the forests, gathering herbs for the tea, dancing in the meadows, or bathing at midnight with the moon watching us from above. But all of this was just a ruse for the uninitiated as we always had a small audience, whether it was the forester or a wandering tourist or just locals. It was just marketing. People had to believe in their more or less magical powers. Karina was convinced of her powers, even though no potion or spell had ever had any effect. For Isra, it was only for the money, and she made fun of my grandmother every time she got the chance. Isra was extraordinarily beautiful and that was her advantage in front of the mesmerised customers for whom it no longer mattered if they were going to die in the next two days or they were about to win the lottery. She fooled them with the charms and they fell for it every time. Karina had the gift of getting to know and measure a person after no more than two words and she was very good at talking. She really believed most of what she was saying and that made people follow her blindly, despite the fact that most of the time her predictions either turned into coincidences or never happened.

I have been raised in the midst of magic or at least the idea of it, enchanted by Karina's words and her stories. Isra, being a nonbeliever, showed me how to play the games of the mind. As soon as I grew up, magic was replaced by fraud and spells by tax evasion. The moon had nothing mystical anymore; it was just a means to see in the dark when the police were after us. We no longer danced, we were only running and hiding.

I am falling asleep dreaming about my other grandma, Marta.

She sits in the middle of a spacious living room, in the middle of a clean and deserted apartment, located on the tenth floor of a block from where you can see the city. Dressed in a blue dress, she tells me about fate, about how it can change at any second. That still amazes her. How you should live your life, knowing that in the next second you could die.

“It all started with a photo. I wondered what it would have been if that photo hadn't been taken on that sunny afternoon in the summer of 1941. That second ... I remember everything. What if the photographer had not pressed the button? From that moment on, for 50 years, my life has been just

torment and fear. The Russians occupied Bessarabia and the border was closed. My mother couldn't go back. The Soviets started from house to house, making savage searches, burning in the middle of the ruins any book wrote in the Romanian language. From the grandmother's house, they took several documents and among them, they also took a photo of the two German stepbrothers.

Two Russian policemen were waiting for me. My grandmother was holding my hand. I will never forget that day: 9th of May, 1945. The day the war ended. They started torturing me that day. I was 15 years old. Since then, my life has been over.

What could I say? They beat me with bestiality every day, for half a year, without even understanding why. They brought me a translator and they made me speak German, although I did not know the language. I knew only "Das Vaterunser", that little prayer learned from my stepbrothers. I didn't even know Russian. What did they want from me? I understood only after one week: the picture!

The Russians never forgot the Romanians, because they violated their territory along with Hitler's armies. Never!

They wake up all the prisoners in the middle of the night. We were gathered at the central penitentiary in Chisinau. Suddenly, a guard gave the order, shouting: "Move! Come on! Fast, fast!"

They pushed us towards the prison gate: "Quick, come on, faster!"

There were hundreds... maybe thousands of people. The big doors opened and we were taken to the train station in Chisinau. I saw 14 cattle wagons. We were around 100 people in each wagon. We were ordered that no whisper is to be heard until we arrive at the destination. "Understood?" the sentry shouted once in Russian. Everyone was quiet. Nobody, but absolutely nobody, didn't know where they were going to take us.

The journey lasted for almost three weeks. The first stop was in a city, Yaroslav, where we stayed one day and one night. We thought they would release us. Then it started to get colder and the train didn't stop. The whole wagon had a single window, without glass, only bars. It was snowing and the snow covered the people sleeping under the window. They were dying. I was looking through the bars at the stars of the frozen sky. I had lost count of the days. What was I doing there? I was just a child. I was alone; among all these hungry and dirty and dying people. What should I do now? I hope maybe tomorrow they'll release me. Tomorrow, always tomorrow. That's how I thought...

Then the train stopped. The doors of the wagons opened, one at a time.

We were at the end of Siberia, in the most north-western region of the Urals. We were at the end of the world. It was a place where no one could survive.

Our camp was home for 10,000 people crowded in long wooden huts surrounded by high barbed-wire fences. There was no need for fences because you had nowhere to run. Thousands of miles were just a

frozen wasteland. We went to work every day, at 6 a.m. We were flanked by Russians having dogs with them. It was -40° outside. You could suffocate with the frozen air. The women built a wooden railway. On these tracks, we pulled some huge wagons, full of trees cut from the Siberian forests. Two women were crushed under two of the trees. When they fall, it felt like a bomb. We were carrying 6 meters long logs on our shoulders- two women on one end, two on the other - and we were carrying them through the snow for several kilometres, to the wagons. We had to make the norm, otherwise, we didn't get food all day and that meant we would starve. Our meal was a frozen porridge and black crusty bread. I found out a secret: if you want to survive, you have to work continuously. If you rest for only five minutes and you sit down, you are dead. You had to be always on the go, not to let your thoughts relax. Otherwise, you may freeze immediately, as in a pleasant sleep. I saw people who stripped off their clothes and gave us as a gift. Then they sat naked in the snow like eggplant statues. "I'm going to rest," they said. We had to take the dead bodies inside. I carried hundreds of dead women back to the camp. I had even become a friend with some. I tell you Allera: everyone I met there, everyone died. All of them! I didn't even get to know them well. I don't even have anyone to remember. Yes! They were dead... I also feel dead inside."

Autumn

I feel like a ghost wandering through life. My mind and body are scarred by the memories from the past year. I feel like I lost *me* and if I lost *me*, then how can I live without *me*?

Who is this 'me' now? I lost my faith, I lost my beliefs, I lost my dreams. What makes me "*me*"?

The memory of the last year continues to change my thoughts every passing second. I try to anchor myself in reality, but in vain. I tried to drink more tea, and I celebrated Halloween, and I answered every morning with "I am fine! Thank you!" I smile and I embrace every new word, every taste of food and I loved every drop of rain and wind. I paid my bills at the time, I did not answer back... but somewhere on the way, I lost me.

I am far away in a parallel world trying to find all the answers, trying to cast away my sadness, to soothe my pain of being rejected.

I risk being suffocated by my own thoughts. My whole life is an amalgam of chapters, some open and closed, others half-read, some completely forgotten and others are just open and waiting for to get on with them. I can't go back! Go where?! Where is my home now? This is the question I want to ask the people who eagerly advise me to go back to my country.

People fascinated me since I can remember. This species... I see in them a harmonious mix of both simple and complex. Most often they are like an equation with many unknowns and variables, possibilities and solutions. Yet some of them seem so imprisoned, frightened... frightened to be free. We all stick to the same story. We are all running for happiness, the constant in our life. What is happiness

in the end: a house, a car, a family or maybe children or a well-paid job, what about love? How far are we willing to go to get it? We all want it, we all seek it, but one way or another all of us run from it or condition it. NO! We do not impose conditions on it, but on ourselves.

All my happiness, my whole world is reduced to one word: acceptance. I am going back to that primordial desire: to be accepted, to be part of something.

Then I asked myself if my hair is too dark, if my skin is too olive or my heart is still strange of this culture?

The morning finds me in a train squeezed between two ladies with their faces stuck on the phone.

When I can finally breathe fresh air and feel my blood running through my legs I am in front of a door.

“Good morning, Allera! Please, come in!”

I just stand there like a statue while she looks at me smiling.

“Err... good morning, Mrs Taylor!” I reply after a desperate attempt to clear my throat.

“Please, tell me, Abigail!”

I step in, doing my best to keep my back straight and my head high. I am prepared to face any challenge this meeting may throw at me, but, as I step in, I am completely deflated. I imagined dark rooms, psychological games and trick questions, but I was not expecting this. The hallway is bright and very spacious, with flower pots everywhere. Some flowers are suspended on the wall, others are placed on small supports near the walls. In one corner, on a small, round low table, there is a beautiful vintage French phone, but I cannot see a phone book anywhere near it. Maybe it doesn't even work. Just above the phone, it is a birdcage and the owner of it is a parrot with red feathers under his tail.

“I am a good boy! I am a good boy! Squawk!” the bird starts saying as I get closer to it.

“Shush, Chippy! Shall we make ourselves comfortable in the lounge?”

“Shut up Chippy! Shut up Chippy!” the bird starts repeating seemingly displeased with the command he received.

“Do you have a pet, Allera?” Abigail asks.

“Not anymore! I had a cat!”

“Escape! Escape! Squawk!”

I start laughing, but Abigail doesn't seem to be impressed by the bird's recital.

“This way, please!”

I follow her, but not before taking another look at the bird. It seems to have settled down now. The hallway ends with an arch leading into a corridor. I stop to admire a nice collection of Faberge Eggs in a display on the wall.

“You have a beautiful collection here!” I tell her with sincere admiration.

Nana Karina had one from Russia, but Igor, my cousin, managed to lose it gambling. With the egg, he also lost a few teeth, but my grandmother never managed to recover the egg.

“Beautiful, yes, but quite costly. Do you collect anything?”

“Teapots. Sometimes they are chipped or cracked, other times not so much.”

I clumsily take the coat off in the living room and I hand it to her.

“Would you like a cup of tea or maybe a coffee?”

“Coffee sounds great, thank you!”

“Make yourself comfortable!”

Left alone, I take a seat on a Louis chair with worn green velvet placed in a front of a massive wooden desk. I look around and quickly decide I like this room. It’s warm and welcoming and it feels aristocratic, but not at all opulent. The worn furniture and carpet give the room an even more pleasant feel. I can’t help myself not to take my rusty shoes off and touch the thick carpet with my foot. The furniture is massive but it doesn’t make the room feel cramped. The design is a perfect mix between office and lounge. Warm wood radiates a feeling of belonging, light is filtered through the window frames, fresh air can be enjoyed beyond the large glazed doors and the few decorations make the transition from home-life to job-life seamless. I imagine it’s enough for Abigail to just turn her chair and shuttle from one world to the other via the books in the case behind her.

Several oil paintings of flowers adorn two walls in the room and behind the desk, there’s a simple bookcase with a few spotlights hidden underneath the shelves. On one of these shelves, a framed diploma stands out: “Mrs Abigai Taylor-Therapist”.

I turn a picture frame sitting on the corner of the desk nearest to me. I see a young woman wearing a dress as blue as the water stretching behind her. She smiles joyfully from under an oversized straw hat. On both sides of the frame, there are a few figurines depicting various Asian gods and next to them a small wooden box filled with fresh white lilac flowers. I can hear Abigail's heels behind me and I turn the frame back to its original position.

“Feeling ready for the session?”

“No!” I whisper ready to jump off the chair.

“Great answer!”

When I enter my flat I look at the spotless carpet and I realise how much I miss Issis. I miss even the mess she makes and all her habits. I turn on the radio and then the laptop. The news are on the radio, and there is a film playing on the laptop. I need the noise. I need to animate this show-box flat. I put some of my things in the washing machine. After a while, I decide to put them all in. I busy myself with things I barely noticed before. For more than half an hour I mop the same corner of the floor, I clean the fridge, I wash all the cups and saucers that I have, I wipe the dust and sort through some magazines that normally would end up in the trash. I occupy my time with all sorts of trifles, and yet when I enter the shower, I can hear my thoughts echoing on and on about the same thing. I cannot stop myself from crying and I kneel under the running shower.

The same question cuts through my flesh: "Who am I? Where do I belong?"

I turn from the window and look around me. They are strangers.... I am stuck in a world that I never belonged to. I am a woman out of time. I am a random mistake of time itself. Bang! I wander blindly among the people of this time without finding my place. They smile at me, we are crowding in this train, we are crowding the streets or in Victoria Station. Some ask me how am I, others greet me in the morning just because we are on the same train every day, but I do not feel them... at all. I'm stuck in the middle of these people and their lives, in the middle of their day, their morning or evening without truly feeling them around me. They come and go. I bump into them, I can smell their coffees, I can read the headlines in their newspapers, and we sometimes walk under the same umbrellas. In all this madness I am unable to feel or care anymore.

Abigail and I had lots of sessions. My thoughts were like a Daedalus' labyrinth.

More I was giving up on me, more she tried to save me.

She gave me a task one day: to go and buy something for myself.

I did not understand why it was so important to buy something for my own pleasure. I never bought anything for my own pleasure and I was fine. I mean... I was buying the basic things for the day by day living, but... for pleasure?

I was educated to not live in lavish meals, or expensive clothes, or pretty much anything too "exaggerated".

I remember I read once that in Tudor times it depended greatly on who they were: the rich nobility enjoyed lavish feasts, seafood and sugary treats, while yeomen and labourers were restricted to a diet of bread, pottages and vegetables. Everything from the number of dishes eaten to the ways in which food was served was dictated by status: in 16th-century in England, you truly were what you ate.

This was back then, but now... I am more than the meal I eat. Somehow my journey to understand who I am once again it started with this task.

I am not just a potato!

I bought three items in the following five months: a kaleidoscope, a dress, and a plane ticket.

The kaleidoscope taught to dream again, but dreaming can turn into a dangerous game. The dress helps me to recover, and the plane ticket it was my recovery.

I named the dress Miss T because she was the True me. It was this dress that made me shine and forced me to discover myself. Until I met Miss T, I did not know how to live life. I never knew what is truly important in life! I was running after dreams that over time became obsession, dreams and plans that I didn't recognise anymore, that I didn't even know if they were mine or someone else's. These dreams became toxic until I finally realised what is truly important in life: my freedom. That freedom where you are no longer limited by anyone or anything, that freedom that allows you to explore, to think, to expose myself exactly as I felt like without ever caring of what people thought. I met Miss T shortly after my first and only pathetic suicide attempt, back when I was standing out from a million other people and not in a way anyone would want. I was resonating neither with myself nor with anyone else.

I was broken. That all ended when I met the lovely Miss T that instantly resonated with my entire being. One day as I was rushing to one my many sessions with Abigail I practically bumped into her and nearly fell over when I saw her. Her eyes looked down on me from behind a show window on Oxford Street and seemed bored and amused at all those passing under her. She looked like she gave a sarcastic look to all those poor fools running around with their coffees and their newspapers, for all those that were fighting desperately for a taxi or those that were looking confused at the street maps trying to find their way. Even the 'You are here' sign on the map in front of the shop seemed to be Miss T's accomplice. It looked like a soothsayer. It showed you exactly where you were, but as soon as you took your eyes away from the map, you became lost again in an instant. It was only her that seemed to know exactly where she is and why she is there. She was overflowing with self-confidence. She wore a mask too, just like me, but mine was a social mask while hers was a signature, a statement. I just stood there in front of the window looking at her for a while. I took a step towards the shop just as a car swerved too close to where I was standing. I could almost say she saved my life right there and then. I bumped into the glass doors at the entrance of the shop. When I finally made it to the 2nd floor of the shop and set foot on the thick carpet I nimbly made my way through mannequins, potted flowers, standing mirrors and chairs with velvet lining until I saw her. I kept myself at a small distance and just stood there and admired her. Before long I mustered my courage and got even closer until I could touch her skirt. It was made out of the most delicate lace I saw in my life. I carefully caressed it like I was hypnotised, then my hand moved up her waist and stopped to feel the embroiled lace on her chest and finally her standing collar.

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest as I was pulled out of my trance by the shopkeeper's words.

"Can I help you?"

She looked at me with compassion. Standing there, next to Miss T, I must've looked like a beggar. I don't know why, but she started talking about the dress and while she kept losing herself in so many details, I realised what made Miss T so special: she was unique, the brainchild of a renowned designer. She walked on well-known podiums and she was used to be admired and to attract the attention of everyone around her. She travelled a lot and lived plenty of unprecedented experiences, and she was the expression of true feminine freedom.

"I'll take it!" I said without even thinking about it.

With all her professionalism, the shopkeeper couldn't keep herself from smiling cynically.

"Give me a few minutes. I will come back!" I continued menacingly.

Without any more words, I rushed out of the shop and it was for the first time ever when I actually felt I wanted to live. I stopped in the front of first cash machine that I found and I cashed the money I saved for the last few months.

Buying a plane ticket was the most difficult task.

"Tell me a story, Allera!"

"A story?! A story about what?"

"Any story which is coming into your mind."

You will find very rarely parents in East Europe in 1990 telling a bedtime story to their kids. Indeed the communist regime was eliminated, but you can't change yourself into an occidental individual only because the dictator is dead. Thinking of this I remember a story my father told me once.

"Ok!" I told Abigail reluctantly because I wasn't sure how much she will understand from this story.

"So the story is about an ass... The poor animal was emaciated and sick. The ass was famished because he didn't eat or drink anything for days. One day, a man passed by, saw the ass and he continued on his way. In the evening when he got in his bed the image of the poor ass was haunting the poor man. The next day, early in the morning the man went straight to the ass with a bucket full of fresh water and a bale of hay, placed them in front of the animal and then went about his business. The following day the man came to see how the ass is doing and realised the hay and the water were untouched. He changed the water and the hay and left again. A day later the man came again, only to find the ass was lying dead between the water and the hay. It died because it couldn't decide what to do first: drink to quench its thirst or eat to appease its hunger."

"So, if this story is connected to your father, what do you understand?"

"My father was... I mean he is a simple man. The communist regime was everything he knew since he was born. It was difficult for him to choose between what he knew already, despite the fact it was so damaging, and the new freedom. He was scared of what he will do with all this freedom now..."

"I think it's time for you to choose, Allera. The session finished!"

I stand in the middle of the lounge with a tornado of illogical thoughts flying through my head. My life is an incomplete puzzle like some pieces are missing. I try to control the rage caused by my inability to find answers.

I walk into the kitchen and put my mug in the sink as pass by it. After a few steps I turn around, I wash it, dry it and then put back in the cupboard. Am I happy? If I was happy I shouldn't constantly feel like an uninvited guest in my own house. I shouldn't constantly feel that everything I do is wrong. Furthermore, I really don't like this apartment. It's like I am visiting my most annoying aunt who's always on the lookout just waiting for me to do something wrong so she could punish me. Everything about this place is so impersonal.

It is my birthday today. I received a few messages on social media, but I heard no one's voice, except my parents, but they don't have any social media accounts. I received lots of cakes, flowers and balloons... of course on virtual media. I think I will be very happy only with a cup of tea as long as someone speaks with me. This year my birthday is impersonal like my studio flat.

Winter

Glasgow is like a young woman in her early twenties, full of life that combines the old with the new, that has the courage to wear a garter belt and stockings, bright red lipstick and then go chair a conference in Geneva. This is how I see Glasgow... This is how I would like to see me! Confident!

I love this city!

After few weeks...

I bought a coffee, an oily croissant and I sat on a bench.

I was but a droplet in the endless ocean of life, drifting aimlessly towards the end of my time. I spent a lot of time trying to find purpose or a reason to be, trying to find happiness or at least to be contempt. I failed. In my failure, I gave up and gave myself completely to the ocean currents. I have seen a lot during this time. I have seen other droplets like me, but they were not like me. They found their purpose, a reason to be and they... they were happy. Or at least I thought they were. This feeling was so foreign to me that I could barely recognise it in others. As time passed, I stopped counting the days, the weeks, the years as it felt like it was the same thing, happening over and over all around me. One day, the tides of fate pushed the currents in a slightly different direction. I couldn't care less as I was certain there was nothing I haven't seen before. Before I could realise it, I found myself once again on new land. It actually was something I couldn't predict and, at that moment, something happened inside me. I felt! I felt

curious, excited, I felt fascinated by this land and I felt happy. I was happy because I could still feel excited and curious and fascinated. The ocean currents were trying to pull me away, but I knew there was nothing for me there. I had to make a choice: let the currents drag me down into the empty life I have known for so long or take a chance and start a new one. It didn't take long to make the decision. I cut all ties to the currents in a heartbeat. The currents were gone and the ocean calmed down, calmer than I have ever seen it before.

"Are you ready for your new adventure?" Abigail asks me. She bites from my croissant and takes a seat next to me.

"I am! Abigail..."

"You have purple blood, Allera! Not blue, and not red. Just purple, the right combination! This is who you are!"

We did not say goodbye.

For the second time in my life I was pulling a suitcase, but this time it was empty... no clothes and no hopes or dreams. It was empty, but ready to be filled up with everything that life would trough at me.

The impact of words can change our lives. The ideas we take from others can be parasites that have the greatest power to resist and return when we expect less. It takes self-discipline to speak with respect, gentleness and humility. Every word has a personal vibration. Words can be inspiring, encouraging, empowerment or can destroy lives, characters, and people.

Without words, we are a shadow.

Words can seed either joy or hatred.

Our life is made of other people's lives. Every person we meet feeds us. We laugh, we cry, we become smarter or weaker. All the people I met in my life made me who I am today and this is exactly the same for you and for everyone else. Sometimes some people barge into our lives at inopportune times while others come at the right moment.

They see poverty, where I see modesty, they say rude when I say honest, they name primeval what I name customs. It is not racism; it is just a gap exactly like the gap announced in microphone in each train and underground. The only problem we have instead to mind the gap we just wider it. It is not racism, it is just ignorance. We will never have enough details to define someone, but we have the power of words. I am still sometimes hunted by "Go back to your country!"

We are more than a name, a colour or a document... so much more!

We are living in a century where it is easy to express ourselves through emoticons and when it is coming to communication we are speechless. We are unable to express our feelings and the limited of words we have, we are using without understanding their full meaning.

The fact that two people come from different cultures does not mean that they cannot communicate. It is very important for people to consider the many ways in which cultural background can influence who we are.

The fact we are different is doesn't mean we cannot be equal.

We cannot judge people for things they did not choose for them. In some cultures, we are born having already a religion, the genes also plays a role in how we are looking, and we don't have to say too much about our nationality. It is important, what we choose later on and in what circumstances. We should change us only because we are feeling ready or happy to bring these changes in our life, and not because we are in need to hide or to repress who we are. I think it is important to make peace with us first of all.

This story is not about a political decision. It is about how other people perceived this political decision.

We have so much technology, we progress so much, but we regressed in our emotions.

If we see someone crying, or being in pain, or being abused we don't interfere.

It is not our business. We got so used with: "it's nothing I can do!"

You can do everything... if you want!

I like the simple people because they are the true gemstones in our society.

I like the waitress, who served me with a smile on her lips, the amiable man on the bus,

I like all people without too many qualities, but with one that covers them all: they are here. They look at me, they see me. Beyond this simplicity they are a Citadel of emotions and feelings. People need people. We don't need likes or pictures or emoticons. We don't need others to tell us who are the people around us. It is enough just to rise your eyes and look at them.

We need us.

Beautiful people love *the word*, the sound, the sunrise, the smile, the hugs.

They love simplicity. When we will truly learn to look around us than we will not discuss anymore about ignorance or what we call racism. We cannot love or accept everyone because we are not living in a utopian world, but we can give chances to people.