

Summer to Spring
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Still as cold as before, and a hazy light. The city has filled overnight with jeans, preventively turned-up in case they would shrink in the wash. Levi Strauss jeans, Lee Cooper jeans and teen girls with Sasson haircuts. The first tables loaded with dry wafers and rolls have also come out, and by their side the grills with mititei¹, smoke starting to rise above them. The droning of superchargers fills up the city centre, as well as the far-away neighbourhoods: they are building in a hurry, on the ground left vacant after the earthquake – unexpected crooked wastelands, where bulldozers heave in a cloud of dust. Passers-by still stop and look at the remnants of blackened walls with the same eyes – horrified, obtuse and greedy. And again teen girls with Sasson haircuts, wearing Levi jeans Andrei doesn't look at: he is the grimmest of all the men his sister in law, Romanița, has met in her life so far.

“Tanti² Milica called yesterday too. You know Lia always answers our phone. Never mind, stay at home, relax, she told her, I haven't seen mother in a long time either. I can't go to the hospital such a long way! After all the trouble I've had with the pregnancy for months, she told her, I won't ruin everything now, in the end. You ought to call Romanița... Has she reached you?...”

They are both whispering, although for ten days doctors have been saying that the patient is unconscious. Now and then one of them casts a suspicious glance towards the bed displaying her worn-out countenance, with white hair, tow-like from all that lying in bed. The small tray on the bedside table is full of greenish vomit. When Romanița reaches for it, the sick woman's eyes open, restless.

“Leave it, you know she gets annoyed when you take it from her,” the young man mutters.

¹ Romanian dish, a kind of grilled minced-meat rolls made from beef (usually mixed with mutton and pork meat), which contain garlic, black pepper, savory and sometimes a touch of paprika.

² Romanian for “autie”.

He also gets annoyed by Romanița's anxiety: affected and exaggerate. He usually defends her in front of Lia, leave her alone, dear, you know how Romanița is, what point is there in getting angry? After all, she's your sister! Now, however, when he doesn't have to defend her in front of anyone, he can't help noticing how out-of-place she is: the way she moves around the ward in her white canvas trousers, occasionally glancing at herself in the mirror in front of the sink. Now and then she takes away the bedpan, glances at herself again, and her eyes are daubed, as always. She most annoyed Lia with her haphazard life, and the fact that mother would run around taking her kid to kindergarten, to school. "Well, let's see Romanița manage from now on," Lia said when mother let her know she would go to hospital. Stop being mean! Flaws and all, she's still your sister, he told her. I'm not, you know I'm never being mean, Lia replied. I'm just right. And look, she actually is.

"Oh, she's reached me all right... In the end, she managed to get through to me! She wouldn't give up until she did..."

Romanița listens to her pacifying, humble voice. After all, they have to work together, even though recently the relations between them seem to have grown colder. And how well she used to get on with Andrei in the beginning! As if he were her brother, and Lia her sister-in-law! It was Lia that had managed to change him! Every time she lays eyes on him at the hospital it strikes her how hefty he's gotten: he's even grown a potbelly!

"She keeps calling either our place or yours because you've set yourself against telling her the truth about mother. She can feel it! But we won't be able to keep it on much longer, Lia's right! When she sees mother still won't show up, even tanti Milica will understand what happened."

The young man whispered the last words more distinctly, and is looking again, uneasily, towards the bed: no, thank God, the sick woman gives no sign that she might still be able to hear!

"Where are we?" she just asks from time to time.

She hasn't even given a moan all the while she's been lying in this bed, the wound on her abdomen open, like a crack on a ripe melon, the dry skin on her wrists black from perfusions. Now, that she's not carrying heavy bags any more, nor running to work with

ladders in her stockings, nor yelling exasperated at the kids, her eyes, with long black lashes, widened on her thin face, gained a vague, distant and mysterious look.

“She’s better off making phone calls than knowing the truth. This way she can still hope,” Romanița says, sweetly.

She listens to the sweetness and charity in her own voice and sneaks an inquiring look at Andrei: has she persuaded him? The dense and ambiguous colour of his eyes on his olive-skinned face, his oily complexion, pores visible – a grown man’s complexion. Just like his tall body, which clothes fit well, just like his poised gestures. But the look on his face stayed distrustful. Even a little bored. No, this was not the argument she could persuade him with.

“What if tanti Milica gets a shock when we told her the truth?” she slips in.

Her back is turned and she’s making herself busy around the sick woman: she fluffs her pillow, straightens the folds in her bed sheet, takes the ointment from the bedside table to salve bedsores.

“Why should she get a shock? Haven’t you seen how well she is, how good she looks? Lia’s right claiming that she’s healthier than her!”

“Is that so? And what if she’s left paralysed? What are you going to do with her if she’s left paralysed? What are you going to do? Take her in?”

“Where should I keep her? Who should take care of her? Should I sacrifice my baby, after Lia’s had so much trouble for him such a long time?”

Andrei’s swarthy face has darkened still. It’s hot, and despite all that morning’s deodorant wet circles stain the armpits of his freshly-ironed, freshly-starched shirt. Even more than the sister-in-law’s stupid questions, it annoys him that she asks them from the side of the bed. What carelessness about everything around her! What a way to fail to foresee consequences – just like long ago Lia noticed about her. There was no point in defending her all these years; Lia, who is her sister, knows her better after all!

“Well, then you will just have to take her in yourself!” he breaks out.

His eyelids are swollen and the whites of his eyes bloodshot, when have years passed without him doing all the things he waited for? He works desperately night after night, his nature is slow and conscientious, he has bile/gall problems and people who come to work and waste their time on chats and coffee make him mad. His bourgeois,

puritan family that sent him into life shy and helpless also makes him mad: with his biography, no matter how hard he may work nights, he just knows it, he will never be promoted.

“Why should I take her in? I’m for leaving her alone. As long as she doesn’t know anything about mother she has nothing to worry about,” that scatterbrain Romanița insists.

She is always behaving in an unconsciously casual manner and messing up everything around her. Then the others have to step in, disentangle and straighten out things behind her. What others? The family, of course.

Yes, she’s right, Lia won’t take it.

Andrei turns his back too and starts opening the packages and parcels he’s brought, unscrews the flask, then:

“The meatballs are steam cooked, Lia made them,” he explains.

He’s changed the subject and is trying to change his voice too: it sounds almost friendly to him. That’s it, there are people in this world you just can’t get on with, no matter how hard you may try.

Look at him, Romanița clenches her jaw. Look where he’s gotten to! Even in these circumstances his only care is emphasizing the wife’s domestic abilities! Even in these circumstances!

She glances one more time towards the bed: in the sour-smelling air of the ward, her face is as beautiful as that of a woman her age can be. She’s thin and pale, her hands have become frail, her gaze dark and dreamy – where’s the authoritative, resilient, energetic woman she used to face?

“So you still don’t want us to tell aunt Milica the truth,” Andrei whispers.

He screws the lid onto the flask, folds the paper wrappings of the parcels meticulously. Ever since he was a child he’s been very clever with his hands, he could do anything if you only gave him time: take apart the device slowly, smoke a cigarette, then assemble it. He could fix everything if he had the time: but, the way things are, he’s ended up sleeping four or five hours a night. And when you look around, you can rarely find anyone to put his soul into what he’s doing. When you look around, you get to wonder how come everything hasn’t gone down the drain yet.

“Are you coming tomorrow?”

Romanița has walked him out. The smell of intensive care – soap, alcohol, urine, dilute/ watery faeces – is slowly fading away. Nobody around at this hour, only empty corridors. In the nurses’ room they spot the varicose-legged cleaning lady: she’s carefully ironing the laundry she’s brought from home – kids’ vests, doilies. Tall and clumsy, Andrei tiptoes to her and puts a 10 lei note in the gaping pocket of her apron. You can hear the “Rich Man, Poor Man” theme song and the last nurses go downstairs to the TV.

“...No, neither tomorrow nor the day after. I must take Lia to have a checkup. And I must see to things back home... Get things ready... Anyway, we’ll talk on the phone,” he adds, in a hesitating voice.

How egoistic of Lia to drag him around to the doctors, in these circumstances! And the hard part, of course, she passes over to me, as always!

Romanița’s had it in for her sister, ever since they were small and Lia would yell every night in the bathroom, scared that soap might get into her eyes.

“What’s new with the old folks’ home papers?” Andrei asks. “Have you thought that by autumn we have to get tanti Milica admitted?”

His voice is now bored and harsh. For years he’s been waiting to see his house set up and Lia having carried out a pregnancy safely. This is the least he deserves, so he can work nights with his mind at ease. And there it goes, just when things seemed to be settling, these horrible events came out of the blue.

“Who has time to run after papers? Haven’t you thought I have no one to help me once in a while?” Romanița whines.

Drop it, you’ve had enough help so far! he’s about to reply. But he gives it up and just waves his hand, bored. It’s not really the best time to throw such truths in each other’s face.

“Mother thought Milica right not to want to go to the old folks’ home. She would be the only one in the street, she’s ashamed. Why, they used to be somebody, they once had a position...”

“Oh, some position they had! Don’t tell me you listen to tanti Milica’s drivel!”

“But you don’t know how those places are! She’s right not to want to hear of them...”

“Listen,” Andrei interrupts her hoarsely.

He searches his pocket anxiously, for cigarettes. Only his small, yellow, worn-out teeth show his age mercilessly.

“Listen, can you take her in?”

“You know I don’t have any room... You know that so far...”

“Then why all the useless blabber? Can’t you realise the responsibility you’re taking upon yourself?”

“What responsibility?”

“If anything happens, if she’s left paralysed, or, well, you take her in and look after her... That’s the truth, stop shrugging your shoulders! What would have happened if uncle Pavel hadn’t died in a week? Otherwise, I should think it’s easy playing charitable! It’s easy to say you won’t send her to the old folks’ home! But without taking any responsibility!”

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My main goal was preserving the text's colloquial language, so it could give a realistic account of everyday life in the Communist era (more exactly, the period just after the 1977 earthquake), and also conveying the same stifling atmosphere. I tried not to alter the text too much, besides adapting it to the specific conditions of the English language.

Obviously, I maintained the narrative tense in the original, which is Present. I used Present Continuous only in a few instances where the action was undoubtedly durative, or to express an annoying habit (*they are whispering; she's making herself busy around the sick woman; she is always [...] messing up everything around her*). I preferred Present Simple because it conveyed the same feeling in the original, that of events unfolding one after another, as if they passed by in front of you (*she fluffs her pillow, straightens the folds in her bed sheet, takes the ointment from the bedside table to salve bedsores*). In most cases I preferred Present Perfect over Past Simple, for the same reason (*Romanița has walked him out*).

In order for the text to sound natural I used some typical English structures, some of them mainly literary, such as 'absolute constructions', that are built on ellipsis: (*she's been lying in this bed, the wound on her abdomen open, [...] the dry skin on her wrists black from perfusions; his oily complexion, pores visible*),

On occasion I replaced the Romanian collocation by means of a less analytic equivalent in English: a verb and a preposition (*tiptoed to her; moved around the ward*), adjectival compounds (*sour-smelling; varicose-legged; olive-skinned; tow-like*), phrasal verbs (*reaches for it; she managed to get through to me; she is always [...] messing up everything around her; the others have to [...] straighten out things behind her; I must see to things back home; Romanița has it in for her sister*), modals (*you ought to call Romanița; she wouldn't give up until she did; she can feel it; no matter how hard he might work nights; why should I take her in?; can you take her in?; I should think it's easy playing charitable*), impersonal verbal structures (*you can hear the "Rich Man, Poor Man" theme song*), cleft sentences (*It was Lia that had managed to change him!*). As far as the meaning is concerned, these are equivalent to the structures used in Romanian, but better fall in with the tones and rhythm of the target language.

Phrases and informal terms and structures played a very important part. They were a means of preserving the familiar style of the text, and, most importantly, the way the characters spoke or thought; this made the text sound natural and the characters seem believable (*he can't help noticing how out-of-place she is; he's even grown a potbelly!; she's better off making phone calls than knowing the truth; I'm for leaving her alone; you get to wonder how come everything hasn't gone down the drain yet; and there it goes, just when things seemed to be settling, these horrible events came out of the blue; drop it, you've had enough help so far!; oh, some position they had! Don't tell me you listen to tanti Milica's drivel!*).

Generally I preferred typical British terms, structures or spellings over American ones, in contexts where a choice had to be made (like *turn-ups / cuffs, bedside table / night stand, ladder / run, vest / tank top, note / bill, in the street / on the street, neighbourhood / neighborhood, colour / color, paralysed / paralyzed* and so on). It seemed a better choice from a geographical and social point of view (Romania in the 70's, European and communist, had fairly little to do with the United States).

For similar reasons I preserved Romanian terms when possible, as in *tanti Milica* instead of *auntie Milica*. Although it had an English equivalent, I used in order to add authenticity to the text. To readers which are not speakers of Romanian its meaning is quite transparent, as it comes from French, and it's used alternatively with that of *aunt*.

Many words in the text had a Romanian counterpart as far as origin was concerned. Since I wanted to stay close to the original, in most cases I chose to use those words, as long as the meaning was also the same with that in the text (like *obtuse, authoritative, energetic, dense, ambiguous* and so on).

Stylistically, the text didn't raise many problems (except for the free indirect style that is consistently used throughout the short story). At this level, the most complex part of the text was the description at the beginning of the section, which contained epithets and some metaphors. I preferred conveying the same meaning and impact over using the perfect English equivalent of the word in Romanian, this is why I translated "maidane ştirbe" as "crooked wastelands", for example.