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THE INHERITANCE OF DREAMS

Romania, 1982

On the eve of Saint Dumitru's Day, my mother, Lucia, and her sister, Anda, remembered our departed relatives. I remembered Tante Clara.

"Don't forget to add her name to the *pomelnic*, Marga," my mother said, motioning to the hallway.

There, in the middle of the round table, pinned down by a water pitcher, was a strip of paper with two columns of names in bold letters. That list, the *pomelnic*, was written for our old priest who would chant the names at the remembrance prayers in church. I printed *CLARA* in the column with a cross on top.

As I returned to the kitchen, thinking of Tante Clara's life, a tide of hope washed over me. Perhaps all I needed was to pitch the right question, and her story would unwind like a ball of yarn in the paws of playful kittens.

"I wonder if Tante Clara had the dream," I said.

"Even if she had it, the dream would have been lost," my mother said, chopping onions. "She had no daughters to inherit it."

"Couldn't one of her daughters-in-law have been there at her death bed to hear it?" I offered. "Maybe the words entered her mind like a virus."

"No, it doesn't happen that way," Mother dismissed me. "It's more like a blood disease -- dreams pass from mother to daughter only," she said, wiping the blade of the knife with a finger.

The dream, our inherited oracle -- either a curse or a blessing, as my Grandmother Sofia once called it -- had been in our family for generations and generations. Once a year, at All Saints' Day Alms, the women would gather around the kitchen table and consult the last dreams, looking for hidden meanings or signs of fortune.

"What was Grandmother Sofia's last dream?" I asked.

With a brief lift of her chin Mother pointed to her sister.

"Anda was by our mother's side that morning."

At the table, Tante Anda was cleaning a black skillet with vinegar, her hands

drawing circular motions inside the pan.

“You know the dream, Marga,” she said, her voice hoarsened by years of smoking. “A Gypsy woman asked Mother for a loaf of bread for her barefoot urchins. In exchange, the old Gypsy took a cowry shell from her pocket, listened to its murmur, and foretold family events mother would never live to see.”

“Did everything turn out as the fortune-teller in the dream had predicted?” I asked.

“Most all of it came to be true,” Tante Anda said. “What the Gypsy said about my husband being struck by a bolt of lightning in the fields before a thunderstorm didn’t really happen. But in a way she was very close to the truth. An electrical wire sparked under his feet, and Pavel burned like a torch in front of his crew.” She sighed, and her hands came to a halt at the bottom of the greasy pan. She looked straight at me. “Other things are still to come.”

I lowered my eyes from Tante Anda’s gaze, busying myself with stacking plates and bowls inside the cupboard. Was my future foreseen in that dream too, wrapped into other women’s lives like the core of an onion wrapped by papery layers? I wondered.

Tante Anda turned to my mother. “Do you think that Old Petronia told her daughter her last dream?”

Mother snorted. “Old Petronia wouldn’t tell anything to anybody. She was too bitter and unhappy to get close to any of us, least of all her daughter,” she said, pointing with the knife across the hall. There on the wall, a sepia portrait of a middle-aged woman with a sharp chin and dark, ominous eyes looked down on us.

“She made herself unhappy. If you are unhappy with your man, run away from him, like Tante Clara did -- although she didn’t run away *from* a man, but *with* a man,” my aunt said as she brought a chair to the table.

“That’s what you think!” my mother laughed.

“But there was a man somewhere,” I insisted. “The one she was betrothed to. Wasn’t she engaged?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t a proper engagement, with the rings blessed by a priest and the dowry list signed by two witnesses,” Tante Anda said to me. “When our Grandfather Stefan bought five acres of walnut orchards from Cula, a farmer from a nearby village, Tante Clara’s future was wrapped up in the deal. The price was so low that everybody thought old man Cula was out of his mind. When they were drawing up the property deed, Cula demanded an additional fee -- Clara’s hand in marriage to his oldest son. Tante Clara had laughed, as if Cula’s request was a joke. At that time, our mother, your Grandmother Sofia, was only thirteen years old, but she remembered her sister’s refusal, *‘I will never marry an illiterate man, let alone an ugly one.’*”

“I bet that Old Petronia hit Tante Clara; she was well known for her heavy hand

and short temper,” Mother said.

“Our mother didn’t say anything about that. She remembered that the day after Tante Clara’s refusal, the girls’ books went up in flames,” Tante Anda said.

In my mind, I pictured page after page of books twisted and curling in the fire, burning in an old cauldron used only once a year for soap making. Upstairs, through the window, my Grandmother Sofia and her sister, Tante Clara, watched with faces pressed against the glass pane, pleas and protests making silent shapes on their mouths. What could they say to their mother? Was there anything to be said when words turned to ashes and drifted upward like a swarm of batty moths?

“I remember Mother telling us that Tante Clara bit her lip so hard that blood came out. With her fist she pounded the windowsill and said, ‘*Sofia, see how our mother started that fire? Now she will have a real fire, in her heart.*’” Tante Anda completed the scene as if she’d read my mind.

“But why would my great-grandmother bend to her husband’s will? Didn’t she care about her daughter’s happiness?” I asked.

“Happiness?” My mother laughed. “It was about money, Marga. Money.” My mother rubbed her thumb against her index finger and winked at us. “Old Petronia didn’t believe that love would bring happiness into a marriage.”

“Wait a minute. I still don’t understand something,” I said. “If Tante Clara was so disobedient, how come her father took her to the open market in Braila?”

“Because our aunt had a good head for business,” Tante Anda said, stretching her arms out and returning the skillet to the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet. “Besides, she was her father’s personal money keeper while the old man had a good time with his brothers in the market pub.”

“She left the country from Braila Port, right?” I asked, remembering old bits of stories that had slipped through the kitchen door. As a child I sat on the hallway bench, one side of my body pressed against the armrest polished to a lacquer by generations and generations of elbows and hands. Strings of words would drift through the kitchen door, float on the fruity aroma of marmalade or the pungent smell of pickled green tomatoes to reach me in that cold, poorly lit corner. The women’s words, in my mind like patches of oil trembling on water, would fuse their archipelago into one big story yet untold. Isolated scenes from the event of Tante Clara’s disappearance spoke to me in a confident language of endless possibilities.

“That’s right,” my mother said. “She bought a boarding ticket on a passenger ship and left Romania for good.” With a light swipe, she lifted the onion peels from the cutting board and dumped them into the garbage pail.

“Ah, Lucia! It couldn’t have been just like that!” Tante Anda insisted, denying my mother’s matter-of-fact rendition. “I think that a Greek sailor met our aunt in the market

where she was selling fruit. The young man bought a kilo of grapes, looked into her green eyes, and lost his bearings." A gentle smile lit her face.

It was love. Love at first sight, I thought, and closed my eyes. Under my eyelids, the image of a young woman with eyes like water under a willow tree took shape, moving toward the image of a young man with a black mustache. When she handed him a bunch of sweet grapes, their hands touched. That touch ignited a spark of love that traveled through their bodies at the speed of grassfire.

"Pff! Love! Come on, Anda, stop this romantic nonsense," my mother said. She placed her knife on the table as a ripple of laughter passed through her plump body.

"Maybe Tante Clara took the wrong boat," I suggested, "traveling down the river instead of going up river. She was distressed, tired, not herself... Perhaps she fell asleep on the bench. When she woke up and realized her mistake, it was too late -- the boat was already far across the seaway," I said, not believing my words but only trying to move the story ahead.

"Oh no, she knew what she was doing, trust me," my mother said. With the back of her hand, she swept the chopped onions into a bowl of ground meat. She broke two eggs over the mixture, kneading with one hand while holding the rim of the bowl with the other. "Yes," she continued, "our aunt knew exactly what she was doing. She had her father's money, plus the Turkish golden coin necklace promised to her as a dowry. She had planned to run away all along, with or without a man."

"Do you blame her, Lucia?" Tante Anda asked. "She knew what was in store for herself: a boor for a husband and a life of slavery in the house of her in-laws. She was young, beautiful, and eager to take life into her own hands. She was given no choice."

I thought of my own choices. I thought of my workplace at the National Museum of Art in Bucharest, that narrow nook occupied entirely by a long table cluttered by spools of silver threads, photographs, swatches of embroidered fabrics, magnifying glasses, and piles and piles of paper. Since it was less expensive to restore textile in Eastern European countries, the West German museums shipped us their work. Small tapestries, threadbare pennants, and other medieval emblems ended up in my hands under the fluorescent light of two desk lamps. In winter, icy drafts of air crossed the threshold of the tall wooden doors to coil around my body like a boa constrictor. Our museum was poorly heated because of the national energy-saving plan. Stone walls and marble floors were not quite the right construction material in a country where the cold season lasted more than four months. *You made your own choice: now try to live with it*, my father had said to me once when I complained about my refrigerated working conditions. Father was firmly convinced that art and beauty would not put food on the table.

My father's disapproval of my profession had never lessened, not even on the day

when my research paper on thirteenth-century natural pigments and colorants used in textiles made its way to print in a prestigious Italian art journal. My published article brought me luck and a work invitation from the Köln Museum of Art.

“Marga, let’s prepare the *coliva*,” Tante Anda said touching my hand lightly. She placed a small sack of wheat grains on the table. She spread a handful of golden seeds between us, and then her fingers began a swift dance of picking and setting aside, while separating them from the black seeds of corn cockle. Working side by side, I noticed flecks of age spots splashed across the back of her hand and wrinkles around the knuckles. “A woman’s hand is the most intimate mirror of her habits,” she had said to me in my first year of college, when, after a tiresome final exam, she had patiently cut and trimmed my fingernails.

I looked at her hands as if to memorize her almond-shaped fingernails, slightly stained by nicotine.

“What happened after she ran away?” I asked, using Tante Clara’s story to harden myself.

“Nothing much. Life went on without Clara,” said my mother.

It couldn’t have been just *nothing much*, I thought. I imagined my great-grandfather Stefan waking up from a stupor of bad sleep and cheap wine, a red mark from the wooden table still imprinted on his face. Back at the inn he searched for his daughter, but only his horses, unfed and thirsty, turned their heads to greet him with a neigh. He rushed to the market where his youngest brother was weighing the last kilos of sweet plums.

“Clara? I thought she went back with you yesterday, at noon,” his brother said.

“At noon?” my great-grandfather wondered. At once an empty cave opened in the pit of his stomach for he came to understand that a day had passed since he had seen his daughter. He cursed. He yelled. He even smashed an empty crate.

A vendor remembered seeing Clara the day before. “A slender young woman wearing a red kerchief? Heading toward the port?”

Running amok, my great-grandfather approached the harbor. There, somebody else had seen his daughter. “She was on the upper deck of a Greek steamboat that departed yesterday afternoon.”

“Please, please, stop the boat! My daughter has run away on it. Please do something!” My great-grandfather cried as he stormed into the harbormaster’s office. He threw his last wad of money on the man’s desk, begging, “Please, in the name of God, help me!”

The harbormaster felt sorry for the crazed man in front of him. He offered coffee and even a Macedonian cigar. “What’s her destination? Do you know the name of the boat she has taken? When did it happen?” he asked.

At a loss for words, my poor great-grandfather trembled while his hand rattled the cup on the saucer, spilling coffee on his wrinkled clothes. Through the open window he could see the port buzzing with boats and people like a hive at the time of the linden tree blossoming. It was September 1911, and commercial traffic on the Danube was booming.

“It must be a mistake. She wouldn’t do this to me, she wouldn’t...” For two days he murmured, pacing back and forth over the wooden boards of the passengers deck, waiting, hoping she’d come back. But he had to return home, alone, to face Old Petronia, who was already in possession of the devastating news.

Then it happened. The unthinkable. My great-grandmother Petronia looked straight into her husband’s red, teary eyes and slapped him twice. The sound of her heavy palm on her husband’s cheek reverberated through almost three generations of women, becoming a landmark, a historic date. For a long time our family would locate personal events on an invisible time line: before and after Petronia humiliated her husband Stefan.

No, life didn’t go on without Tante Clara. She would always be there in her parents’ minds, although her name was forbidden in the house, locked forever with her birth certificate and a ringlet of her baby hair at the bottom of an old trunk.

Three years after her disappearance, just before the First World War, a letter bearing foreign stamps was delivered into the hands of her mother. Inside the letter was a photograph of Tante Clara sitting beside a tall man with a black mustache. They cradled between them their firstborn child. No words of remorse or pleas for forgiveness were expressed. After reading it, my great-grandmother Petronia returned the letter with the picture to the envelope and tore it into four pieces. Like four orphaned sparrow chicks flying from their nest before the right time, the pieces plummeted from the porch. No words had to be spoken. Her gesture was complete: Her daughter was dead, drowned in the Black Sea or the Aegean.

At night, when everybody else was fast asleep, my Grandmother Sofia, on hands and knees, collected the pieces from under the lilac bushes and glued them together as if it were a puzzle. She hid the address and the picture, scarred by a thin cross of smudged glue, in the lining of her sewing basket.

Two years after her wedding to Dumitru, Grandmother Sofia sent a letter to her sister Clara. She also included a picture of her sitting by her husband and holding her daughter Anda in her arms. The baby’s face couldn’t be seen, cocooned into a bundle of ribbons and lace. She waited three long years for an answer. When she received it, she couldn’t help noticing the disappearance of the accents on several Romanian letters and the replacement of the letter ‘a’ with the Greek alpha. A black-and-white photograph accompanied the letter. There, in the smiling face slightly shaded by the man’s hat, in the woman’s hand leisurely resting on the husband’s arm, my Grandmother Sofia recognized the perfect grammar of a happy marriage. She never wrote to her sister Clara again. She

blamed her silence on her busy life raising four children, and, later, on the Communist government that forbade contact with people living abroad.

For a while only the sound of balls of meat being rolled into grape leaves, with a background of boiling water, dwelled in the kitchen air. I stopped sorting the wheat grains and closed my eyes, as if to imprint this moment in my memory.

Tante Anda broke the silence. "Lucia," she said, "don't you think we are preparing too much food? In these hard times we should limit ourselves to basic things only. A *coliva* for the church, some fruit and sweet bread for the beggars in the cemetery, and two or three plates of food to give to the neighbors, would be more than enough. Look at what we have here: stuffed grape leaves, pork chops, pilaf, raisin bread, three kinds of cheese, apples, and cake. I bet all of your monthly salary and half of your husband's went into this feast. The dead know how we suffer, and communism is not heaven on earth. Our parents will understand modest alms."

"It has always been like that in our home. Don't you remember? We must honor our father's Saint's Day. Poor man, he had to sell the last acres of his orchard to pay our school tuition in 1946." My mother brandished a wooden spoon over the stove to punctuate her words.

"Thank God he sold everything after the war," Tante Anda added, "so when the State claimed all the properties, we were already, poor." She laughed.

"Was this the orchard great-grandfather bought from Cula?" I asked eager to return to Tante Clara's story.

"No," they both answered.

"The walnut tree orchard was sold by Old Petronia in 1922, after our Grandfather Stefan had died. He left her in debt up to her eyeballs." With a moan my mother plumped her heavy body into a chair.

"Does anybody know when Tante Clara died?" I mused.

"On July 6, 1968," Tante Anda replied, "at her summer house on the island of Spetses. She died from a fractured hip."

The sounds in the kitchen ceased as if an invisible stop sign had been lifted in the air. Our eyes turned to Tante Anda.

"How do you know?" My mother asked.

"I kept in touch with her family -- why are you staring at me like that? I didn't have anything to lose. I didn't have children or their future to protect. My position as a secretary was not a top-secret job. I could afford the luxury of writing letters to a relative living abroad."

"Why didn't you tell me, Anda?" my mother said, looking across the table to my aunt. "After all, I'm your sister."

"Why should I worry you, Lucia? You had children in college, a husband with a

decent job. Me? I am just a bird in the wind, too small a catch for the *Securitate*.”

She laughed as if all those years, while she was writing to her aunt in Greece, she had played a game of cat and mouse with the black forces of the secret police. Now she had won. Her eyes moved from her sister to me, their velvety brown water shimmering with a gleeful smile.

“What else do you know?” My mother held her forehead in one hand as if a strong migraine was thrusting claws into her temples.

“You know from her last letter to our mother that she had three boys. She also had her own business, a small sewing workshop for wedding gowns. Her husband worked as a mechanic on a steamboat. After the Second World War, he opened his own repair shop in Piraeus. It is true that they had a very happy marriage. But you see, Tante Clara was happy by herself, with a man or without one.”

“You were happy too, Anda--I mean before Pavel’s accident,” my mother said. With a sigh she got up from her chair to return to stuffing grape leaves, her fingers red from the brine, and her glistening face bearing signs of fatigue.

“I am happy in my own way, but I miss my husband. Sometimes I wish I could talk to him. Mostly in the evening. I blame the darkness for making me lonely and hungry for words to fill that empty place,” Tante Anda said.

I knew what she meant by that. During my last years in college, in Bucharest, I grew close to my aunt and even closer after her retirement. Almost every evening she would call to announce her small daily victories on the “socialist battlefield,” as she named them. “Imagine,” she would whisper, “this morning I found real coffee and there were only ten people waiting in line.” Or she would say in a triumphant voice, “Come over for dinner. I bought some bones with plenty of meat on them. I will make a *borsch* the way you like it!”

“I don’t think that the *Securitate* bothered to check every side of our family,” I said. “Look, they are allowing me to travel to West Germany.”

“That’s different,” replied my mother. “In a way it’s not you, Marga Pamfil, a twenty-five-year-old woman, who will travel abroad. Don’t delude yourself. The Romanian government is exporting your hands and eyes. Besides, the *Securitate* is not afraid that you’ll defect -- for what in the world would you do there? You are an art curator, not a medical doctor.”

Her cynical expression stretched the corners of her mouth into a scornful grin.

I wanted to cry out, “What about my *mind*, Mother?” The words froze to a lump in my throat, obliterating the voice, pushing the anger back inside into a swarm of questions. Had she been like that in the past? How could I not have seen it? What would she do if she knew about my plans? Turn me in to the police?

I steadied my shaky hands on the edge of the table, letting the hard wood press

into the flesh of my fingertips.

Tante Anda didn't utter a word as she untied her apron, grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the windowsill, and headed out of the kitchen. I followed her.

Outside, the unusually hot October day was fading away, brushed by a gust of wind. The mulberry leaves fluttered over the dry flowerbeds like yellow butterfly wings. A bittersweet fragrance from the chrysanthemum bushes wafted in the air. Tante Anda took two cigarettes from her pack, one for me and one for herself. She lit hers, then, holding the trembling flame under her palm, she lit mine. We sat down on the top step and smoked in silence for a while.

"You have your whole life in front of you, Marga," she said, as she placed her hand on my elbow. "Don't look back." Then she added. "Before you leave for Köln, come see me. I'll give you the address of my cousin, Yourgu Menegatos, Tante Clara's youngest son. He's a lawyer in Athens. Who knows? You may need it." She looked at me with her velvety gaze -- part blessing, part silent embrace.

Between us, the bluish smoke of her cigarette rose in a thin ripple and stretched into a funnel like an estuary on a map.

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As it turned out, I didn't have to use my Greek relative's address. While in Munich, I called the Tolstoy Foundation, and in the summer of 1983 they sponsored my emigration visa to the United States.

Upon arriving in New York, I wrote a letter to my parents--not an apologetic one, but a simple letter telling them that I was fine. On the back of a postcard, my mother, in her neat schoolteacher handwriting, replied with two sentences: *What you have done cannot be undone. May your path in life be enlightened by the wisdom of God.*

Father never wrote to me. His old resentment concerning my profession turned into complete silence, a death without a name chanted in church at the remembrance prayers.

Tante Anda wrote to me as often as she could. Her letters became my only umbilical cord to the motherland, still nourishing me with stories of a bitter family divided over my exile.

From my aunt I learned that, because of my defection, my father had been forced into early retirement while my oldest brother was publicly expelled from the Communist Party Bureau of the power plant where he worked.

Somehow my mother was not affected by my betrayal. She continued to form elongated uppercase letters and curly lower ones under the obedient eyes of thirty future builders of "the best order on earth".

Tante Anda's voice on the phone sounded far away, sometimes almost disappearing into the fog of long-distance static. She said that she missed our Sunday afternoon chats over a cup of coffee and our lunches together in the garden of the museum. She tried to be cheerful. "As long as I am on my feet and I am moving, everything is all right... It could be worse... But, as long as I am healthy..."

But she wasn't healthy, and nobody knew it; she was, after all, the keeper of secrets in our family.

One night in the spring of 1987, I dreamed of her. In my dream we were both somewhere on the shore of a Greek island. We were sitting on a rock with our feet immersed in greenish seawater. The water was so clear I could see our red-painted toenails over the rocks on the bottom, like a rug woven in earthy, brownish colors. Tante Anda was dressed like a Gypsy with a colorful patchwork skirt and copper bracelets at her wrist. Close by, behind our backs, stood a whitewashed house with purple bougainvillea cascading over a wooden fence. I knew there, in my dream, that the house belonged to Tante Clara and that she had invited us to spend our vacation with her. Mostly she wanted to meet me, her great-niece, and catch up with my stories. I knew she was in the kitchen of her house preparing stuffed grape leaves, and not for the church alms, but for us, her family. Tante Anda was close to my bare arm, so close I could feel the heat of her body. She looked young: arms tanned, hair pinned high on top of her head, skin smooth, and hands unblemished. She was staring straight ahead at that line where the sky meets the sea in a thin ribbon of shimmering silver.

"Last night," she said to me, "I had the dream..."