



Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

(from the work in progress *Bucharesters*)

The bitter-sweet colors of the late roses came out as light absorbing, hesitant greys, anxiously framing the contour of the bench: an empty bench, in a park, in autumn, pervaded by that sense of abandonment that only objects destined to accompany human stories can communicate.

The second picture shows ash-trees on each side of a large alley in the early afternoon light: their dark trunks, equal and robust, lined calmly, their branches graciously meshed without affront. Trees don't fear solitude, do they? Nor do they challenge each other, rooted as they are in their self-sufficiency.

It was my idea to meet in the park, a neutral place, I thought, after he insisted so much on that encounter. He was showing serious intent, I should have been reassured and serene. And yet, the closer I got to that day, the more I doubted myself. What I used to see as the solid texture of my life

was fraying apart and I felt cornered by his confidence that we were a couple meant to last and my relatives' anxiety that single women have a hard time in old age. My short, unsuccessful marriage when I was a student taught me a bitter lesson, so I became single by choice, passing every now and then through a brief adventure, as if taking a short bath in a river and coming back safely on the bank to continue my life: going to the office, decorating my little apartment, making car journeys, taking photographs and developing them in the darkness of my pantry. That week my colleagues noticed my nervousness and this only intensified it: thoughts lost order and clarity, gestures turned exaggerate, anxiety put me out of tune. Most than anything else, it undermined my sense of time and made me check my wristwatch every few minutes. The day of the encounter, a Sunday, when I usually idle away till late, I woke up very early, and spent the morning preparing. I tried on various hair styles and ended up with a bun twisted on the nape, but the most difficult was deciding what to wear. I was alarmed to see that everything I tried on seemed to make me look ridiculous. In the end, I abandoned the search and put on the simplest things I had, a blouse, a pair of trousers, the leather jacket and a silk scarf. Then I decided to drive to the park, even if I could have simply walked, as he admired me for being one of the rare women drivers in Bucharest at that time, and I took my black and white camera, the only one I had at the time, because he liked my hobby and was intrigued by my idea that black and white pictures show things as they are without the disguise of color.

After I parked the car not far from the Triumph Arch entry I realized I was an hour early. The meeting point was on the main alley, more or less in front of the playground. Instead of calming down or taking it with a sense of humor, I felt lost. I got off the car and started walking along the alleys flanked by late autumn roses trying to give myself a purpose: taking pictures, as if I had come there to capture landscapes and would meet them by pure chance. I started devising scenarios in my mind, even imagined them finding me graciously pacing the alley in search of a good angle or the right light. A stupid useless game, as time passed and they still did not show up. Then I devised another lie: I walked all the way back to the car, got inside, grasped the steering wheel and studied a posture that would show I had arrived a second before. I looked at myself in the rear-mirror: pale, deep eye-rings, wild gaze: a woman in her early forties on the brink of panic. Nothing of what I liked to see as my settled expression in public, self-contained, benevolent and slightly ironic, suggesting who I thought I was: independent, open-minded, balanced. It was stifling inside and I felt estranged from everything, as if my own car was rejecting me. The folded umbrella on the passenger seat, the camera, the sunglasses I had taken off, had lost their meaning and seemed to lie there as if they had ceased to belong to me. Even the doll I had so carefully laid on the rear seat looked as if placed there by somebody else. For a second, I even felt the strong impulse to press the gas pedal: drive away,

anywhere only to avoid that encounter, disappear, getting out of time [perhaps further clarification needed here], had it only been possible. Then with an effort of will I decided to contain my anxiety. I got out of the car, arranged my water-green silk scarf with a slow, calculated gesture, meant to give me composure and dignity, put on my sun-glasses and turned back to the park convinced I was looking like a person in full control of herself. As soon as I looked at my watch and saw they should have come a quarter of an hour back, questions started crossing my mind like hurting arrow points [perhaps further clarification is needed here: Like sharp arrows? Like piercing arrows?]: what if his plan had met resistance on the other side, and everything were to finish absurdly with my solitary walk in the park? I closed my eyes to avoid seeing myself caught there in the null [void?].

When I opened them again, they were heading towards me, lightly, as in a dance. He looked taller and stouter than usual, and the girl, dressed in a blue wool jacket over a fuchsia velvet dress was hanging on his arm like a blossom flower on the trunk of a tree. The mild October light filtered through the leaves and rested on their heads, a beautiful image, but for me unbearable. In defense, I took the camera to my eyes and shot. I didn't have time to fix it properly, so the photo is strange: their contours appear subtler, like uncertain shades, interrupted by irregular light spots.

When I lowered the camera, they were right in front of me: he with a large smile, the girl sticking to his legs, trying to fix her fringe.

I put my sun-glasses on again to mask my emotion. He stooped towards her and uttered in a delicate voice:

“So then, she is...”

He must have added something to my name, but I couldn't get it, I was hearing only my heartbeat, fixing her blond hair, carefully combed down to her shoulders and the thin blue velvet headband pressed on her fringe. The girl lifted her eyes and studied me in silence. I felt my cheeks burning and took my right hand instinctively to my neck, as if I had a secret wound to cover. I was feeling the reassuring touch of the silk scarf with my fingers, when his confident, calm voice brought me back to reality:

“Aren't the two of you going to greet each other?”

The girl hesitated, then she put out a small soft hand, but as soon as I touched it, she drew it back. Her father smiled and addressed me:

“She’s shy, be patient.”

I was quite surprised by the tender way he was patting her blonde hair, as he talked. Then he added with a warm, deep tone:

“All I’ve got is the two of you.”

I should have exulted for joy, and yet I felt emptied of any feeling, as if my energy had unexpectedly drained into the alley below my feet. My reply sounded fake:

“Let’s have a walk, it’s such a nice day!”

We started moving quietly along, in silence. I felt withdrawn in myself, my eyes were gazing downwards to the leaves we occasionally treaded on, my ears capturing their dry lamenting rustle. I think he was the first to speak that time:

“I’m sorry we’ve been late! It took so long to have her readily dressed... you know how mothers are...”

Their late arrival betrayed the same uneasiness and apprehension that had made me come too early. We were even, I should have been glad, instead I lied in a colorless voice:

“Don’t worry. I was late myself. I arrived just a few minutes before you!”

No answer. He was bending toward his daughter, anxious to ask her:

“Dana, would you take both of us by the hand?”

I paused, pressing the camera strap with nervous fingers. The girl seemed to weigh the possibility

carefully, then finally let me take her hand without resistance. I sighed relieved, I had passed a test.

This photo is taken later, close to the flower pavilion. The girl is smiling, a bunch of maple leaves in her hand. In the next image, she is running towards her father, barely touching the ground, as if she were flying. Her blond hair is a nucleus of light; the background elements arrange themselves around it in mute obedience.

His idea of taking a picture of me and the girl in front of Brancusi's statue irritated me. Not so much because of its lack of originality, but because I felt under scrutiny. He wanted to compare us, see if we could stand next to each other. No wonder I look so tense! I lowered towards Dana in search of the best pose, but meanwhile I was examining her features, forcing myself to understand if my feelings for her father could include her. With a light tremor I discovered him in that creature, hidden in the deep arches of those fine nostrils, in the eyebrows, in the shape of those small fingers. The cypher of his body appeared in the daughter fastened to the traces of another being, I instinctively perceived as alien. I got close to him, eager to meet his eyes, in need of a support at this upsetting discovery. And yet, what is more common and reasonable than a child taking after her parents? Unaware of my malaise he was caught by the girl's play around the statue, and stopped only to ask me proudly:

"Well, how do you find her? Isn't she pretty?"

"Oh, she's very pretty... She's taken after you... But not only you..."

"You're right! The eyes and the chin are her mother's. The hair too, if it stays blond."

His words oddly hurt me. Strange, isn't it? And yet as mature persons we had often spoken freely and relaxed about his ex-wife. I knew the whole story of their relationship and their separation. With a daughter in common it was natural for them to be in contact. I knew this and accepted it from the beginning, and yet in that instant I feared that woman and doubted his actual separation from her.

This image is over-exposed but is still graphic: held by the two adults, the girl raises her feet in the air. The man looks contented, the woman slightly bewildered.

We had asked a young man passing by to take us some pictures. One can see he was not familiar

with cameras. The others are better. In those moments I was experiencing a new sensation. The girl's body, stretched between us like a bow, bound us with its warmth. For a second, I wished intensely the girl were mine. Mine and his. And immediately the thought of the other woman returned hurting. I could see limpidly that his and that woman's beings were joined in their daughter forever, even if they had ceased to love each other. Their union was there, alive, and I couldn't do anything against it [about it?]. I wished to ask him what he felt for that woman when the three of them were together. I was ready for an answer that would make me suffer, while mutely facing that woman in my mind, I featured occulted in the girl [I appeared hidden behind the girl?] as a powerful, tough, obstinate rival. Thus, when we reached the seesaw and the swing I didn't feel like playing with them. Instead I sat down on the bench and started taking pictures.

Here the girl and his father are on the seesaw: he keeps his feet firmly in the sand, she is up, slightly bent forwards. Their symmetrical faces, in profile and against the light, give the impression that each of them is the other's projection through a lens.

All the way to the pier, crossing the Island of the Roses, I had a sharp frustrating feeling of being out of place. They were so happy to chat ignoring me. I was trying to convince myself of the normality of the fact [of the situation?]: a father and a daughter have their own communication modes [their own codes of communication?]. It was the same for me and my father and mother felt jealous [It was the same between me and my father, making my mother jealous?]. And yet what mattered in those moments was my perception that he did not belong to me, which was hard to bear. I was trying to suppress that bad feeling [that awful feeling?], my touchiness, [and] withdraw within a safe inner corner. This state of surrender was alternating with a rising anger that a six-years old was able to shatter my life so deeply [with a rising anger over the fact that a six-year old was able to shatter my life so deeply?].

Another photo with the father and the daughter, this time at the pier on the lake shore. The girl rests her feet on the bar of the railing, one arm around her father's neck. She points to the center of the lake. Her fine hair is spreading in the air and covering her father's face like a veil.

The cruising ship that toured the lake had just sailed off, and its propeller was twirling the water and moving the air into a gust. I had proposed taking the ship, to circle the lake, but my idea was not taken [but my suggestion was ignored?]. Dana preferred to see the little island in the middle that

could [only] be reached only by boat as it had no proper pier, just a few wooden planks spread over four cement pillars. He was busy renting the boat, while I stayed back with the girl, in silence, telling myself: "Let's take it this way - I am here to pass a pleasant afternoon, living everything on my own [not clear what this might mean: to experience everything on my own?]. In truth nothing serious or irreversible [fatal?] had taken place. And it is a splendid October day." It took some effort to consider him and his daughter as just two nice leisure time companions, but I did well, so when he seized my hand to help me get on the boat, I responded with the affable but distant smile of somebody ready to enter a game without consequences.

The ride started well: a mild sun was lighting up the water. The little girl, seated next to me, was clapping her hands and shouted for joy when her father rowed past another boat; with every oscillation, her body was touching mine. He was rowing tense with effort, the shirt sleeves reversed up to his elbows, the sweater on his back, its sleeves bound around his neck. In his eyes there was a winning light, as if he were saying: "See how happy she is with us? You have conquered her! [You have won her over?]" Yes, of course, how could I have forgotten? The two of us were a couple supposed to allow that little girl in our world every now and then. Suddenly I relaxed, ceased to feel [like] an intruder, and regained my composure. I bent towards Dana and tried to hug her. To my surprise, she briskly pushed me back:

"Ahi! Don't hold me so tight! It hurts!"

I was desolate. I had attempted to bring her closer to me, literally, but I did not know how to take her. Half turned, he was busy steering the boat towards the improvised small pier of the island: he looked magnificent, with his strong arms tight on the oars and the neck arched with the effort. I took that image avidly in and realized in a flash how much I needed him: the self-assurance I had built through the years dissipated in a second, leaving me in need of protection, just like the little girl next to me. Suddenly there was meaning in my mother's warning that my nice independence could wither away into arid solitude. That moment I knew one thing for sure: I did not want to lose him, the rest didn't matter. That clarity gave me a sort of enthusiasm. I had to keep the image of that good-looking man, expertly handling the oars in the October sunset light. I prepared the camera and focused, but a harsh thud of an oar blade on the wood of the boat stopped me from shooting. It still resounds in my ears. It really does. Just as I can still hear his voice, suddenly turned wild, tremendous [angry? menacing?]:

"What the hell are you doing?"

In that very second, he jumped from his seat, grabbed the girl in his arms and sat down again, keeping her tightly. She started crying. I was startled. The boat was violently swaying, almost ready to overturn. Was that man who was piercing me unflinchingly, the same [the same one? the same man?] I loved? Was that rasping voice his?

“What is on your mind? Why don’t you take care of the child?”

It took me some time to understand from his angry words what had happened: while I was fixing my camera, his daughter had bent over to touch the water, just as he was pushing the boat close to the pier...if he hadn’t seen it in time, so he said, she would have hit against the cement pillar [she would have hit the cement pillar? she would have hit her head against the cement pillar?]. I had a confusing feeling of guilt and an impressive [overwhelming?] mental void. The dark water around us made me dizzy and my mind was fixed on a stupid question: what am I doing here, with this man and his daughter?

I did not dare to look up, but when I met his gaze, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks, and on the sunglasses hanging on the chain around my neck. My lacerated voice, in wild confusion, was imploring:

“Forgive me! Please, forgive me!”

I have no idea whether he responded. There’s a blank in my memory. All I can remember is the determination with which he started rowing back towards the main pier, speechless, closed in himself, keeping his daughter tightly between his legs, and explaining excitedly to her it was not worth while visiting that small island. Seated in front of them, alone and lost, I was trying to find support in evasive images: the last sunrays, the island we did not land on, swallowed by the late afternoon shadows, the trail of the boat in the water like a snake on our traces.

After he returned the boat, we sat down on a bench. Dana was palpitating in her father’s arms, not yet freed from the fear he had wrapped her in. Embarrassed, he was fixing a distant point on the lake and said:

“I hope she won’t tell anything to her mother. I can’t even imagine her reaction!”

His profile had turned more severe and the voice had changed again: bland, alien, as if he were not talking to me, but recounting an upsetting event to a person that happened to be seated on the same bench. My first impulse was to stand up and leave them there, turn back home, take a hot shower, listen to music, drink a glass of wine and enjoy my peace. But I was unable to move or speak. Then the little girl, unexpectedly, reached out and touched my arm:

“Will you buy me candy cotton?” A candy cotton machine I had not given attention to was right in front of us. This sudden purpose shook me from my torpor. I took her by the hand and we headed towards the place, where a stout woman dressed in white was twisting the white sugar threads, as lives [as two lives?] that a spinning energy was grappling together in an intricate, hardly comprehensible design. I couldn’t help thinking that those tangled threads would soon melt in the mouth like nothing. As the child was enjoying her candy floss [cotton candy?], she took me by the hand again and led me back to the bench where her father was seated. I was overtaken by a calm emotion that was putting order into things, and found myself suddenly wiser, and sad with the acceptance [with resignation?].

When we started to walk towards the exit, the darkness had already permeated most shapes around us. I felt his strong arm around my shoulders and his lips touching my temple in a strange kiss, half-hearted, hesitant and dry. Then he said:

“Forgive me! I know you didn’t want something like that to happen, but I was terrified! Do you understand? She’s all I have ...”

Something in him had changed too. I was no longer as precious to him as his daughter. I should have felt hurt, but unexpectedly I took those words in calmly and gravely, protecting the girl’s image in my mind, with a strange mixture of detachment and bond [and closeness? and intimacy?]. We were heading towards the exit, in silence, unassertive and docile, solitary and yet together, as trees that grow next to each other.

And yet, when we stopped in front of my car and I discovered the doll left on the rear seat, I did not hand it to the little girl with the generosity that should accompany offering a gift, but with a rigid and forced gesture, as if I was unwillingly giving away something that belonged to myself.

Another photo from the series shot by the young man. The three of them are seated on the bench: the man in the middle, with crossed legs is looking straight at the camera with a gratified expression. His arms, stretched sideways like an accolade encompass the woman on the right, and the girl on the left. Inexplicably, the two resemble each other: maybe because they have the same, slightly questioning smile.

This image causes me a sort of perplexity. I wonder if we could ever invent an X-ray-like system that reveals feelings, enabling us to distinguish in someone the zones of love, of indifference, of doubt. Maybe only then would I finally be able to discover which part of him encloses only me. But it may very well be that borders are continuously blurred and areas change color and outline, overlapping and separating again, in an endless dance.

Another photo: seated on a bench, the man is holding his daughter on his knees, his arms keeping her tight to his body. If one tries to look at this image from a certain distance with half closed eyes, until the details melt and only the contours of the human figures stand out against the vegetal background, the daughter's body appears ingrained in the father's shape like a core in the flesh of a fruit.

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Gabriela Dragnea Horvath, PhD, published essays, book reviews, translations of poetry and short stories in magazines and anthologies in Italy, Romania, USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland. She also authored a monograph in Italian, *Shakespeare ermetismo, mistica*,

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