



Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

The Smile

For M.D. and her son H.

The night before he had read the reviews of his exhibition, on top of the bed, one arm around Sanda's waist, a glass of vodka in her left hand, from which both sipped in turns. He had made it! His art was finally acclaimed as the event of the year. "Andrei Bratu is taking our national art into a new direction" was one of the titles. Only he knew how much hard work was behind that success; how many efforts to free himself from the socialist realism he was taught in the art institute. His master was a celebrated sculptor of monuments dedicated to soldiers, peasants and workers, all with a petrified expression on their faces, a sort of abstract look into an indefinite future. It was because of their lack of life that he rejected them and tried to do something else. Following Brancusi's example, he wanted to capture in stone, the most compact and heaviest matter, the rhythm and fluidity of things, the dance of fire, the inner tremor of things. His works turned abstract, and he had a sense of

accomplishment, of having succeeded to grasp the vibrations of the world engine. As he read the conventional formulas of praise, he was thinking how much he owed to his friend Florin, the poet, who convinced him to change the titles of his works. When he saw the draft of the catalogue, Florin exclaimed: "Where do you think you are exhibiting? In Plato's Academy? Hear, hear: Form 1, Form 2, Form 3... This will be classified as bourgeois reactionary art, and you'll get into trouble." The poet looked at the shapes and renamed them in socialist style: Gate into the Future, Accolade of Hope, Summer Crop, Flame, Victory.

The satisfaction of his success remained inside during the sleep, running through his veins like a benefic sap, and when he woke up, he let it out in a self-complacent yawn. The newspapers and the art magazine were scattered on the floor next to the empty bottle and the rests of the improvised dinner. He remembered Sanda had to leave early, but couldn't help bursting out: "Damn, woman, you could have tidied up a bit! That's me: always coupling with sloppy women indifferent to my art!" Next to the bed leg he caught a glimpse of her metal bracelets.

He frowned in front of the stylized torso inspired by her in which he had tried to capture the restlessness of her flesh, concealed as a latent threat in the compact matter of her lazy curves. "Really, Sanda there's lots of substance in your prosperous rump!" he addressed the torso and, changing his mood, he smiled at the recollection of her lush black hair, that left in his palm the same rough sensation of rugged stones. He bent to gather the newspapers from the floor and while he was trying to order them on a shelf the bell rang. "There she is," he thought, "she can't live without her bracelets!"

He prepared for a sharp rebuke and opened the door with a sudden gesture. In front of him was an unknown woman dressed in black. He was shirtless, with his hair in disorder and the sleep still hanging from his lids. When he finally understood that the unknown woman wanted to commission him a work, he put on a welcoming smile inviting her inside. She did not respond to his smile. Her face was frozen in a vacant expression. The artist disappeared in the bathroom to wash his face, give a brush to his hair, put his dressing gown on and wrap a scarf around his neck to cover Sanda's love bites. Then he spied the woman through the half open door: she was standing, motionless, backlit. Quiet and patient she was looking around, moving slowly her head. She had a peculiar style of dressing: a black velvet cloak, a hat made from the same fabric, black stockings, black shoes. He came out and grabbed the clothes heaped on a chair to make space and offered her the seat: "I'm sorry, my study is not apt to receive guests and I'm a bit wild."

The woman replied in a bland voice: "I prefer to stand, thank you, I won't keep you long."

The sculptor let the heap of clothes fall back on the chair and stood in front of it, trying to hide the sight. But the woman was not looking at anything in particular. Her pale face looked indefinite, and her blue eyes did not seem to reflect the world around. Her straight gray hair emphasized the severe expression of her classical lineaments. She spoke:

"Maestro, two years have passed now since our son left us."

The artist said in a low voice: "I'm sorry."

"I would like to order you a life size statue of him!"

The sculptor was stupefied: "Madam, I am an artist, and they say a pretty good one too, but I do not make funerary monuments."

"I know very well you are an artist. That's why I've come to you, I think you are able to return my son to life. I miss him enormously. Life is just an illusion anyway. Why not try to recreate it?"

Andrei examined her concentrated: was she insane?

"My son is the young pianist who died prematurely, you may have heard about him..."

The artist felt a shudder crossing his body and lowered his gaze. He had never attended a live concert of the young man, but he heard something on the radio, in a commemorative program, and knew everybody considered him an unusually great talent. What a terrible fate! And now his mother was standing firmly in front of him expecting an answer.

"Madam, you know, I make modern things, mostly abstract, or half-abstract if you like. I am not a figurative artist. But if you find something you like among the works on display now in the central gallery, I'll be happy to give it to you as an homage for your son. Actually, honored."

The woman made a vague gesture that betrayed her disappointment: "I know your works. I was at the inauguration last night. I'm here because my son saw two of your pieces once, when we visited a group exhibition, and he said that he liked them, because they were musical... I do not know what he meant by that, but I think you do not catch shapes of nature, but their soul... what is more dead than a stone, and yet you make it move, flow, fly."

The artist was caught by confusing emotions. He was flattered that the young musician and his mother liked his art. He replied: "I thank you, you are kind, but I do not feel like changing style right now. Can you understand? For years I have strived to create my own style and have it accepted in my environment. I think you know what I mean. Because I wanted to be free, as free as one can be here. Now I accept commissions, but in my style!"

Ignoring his words, the woman turned in a profile and motioned to an imaginary interlocutor: "Women and artists are the only ones who give shape to life in our mortal world. I am asking you to give my son a body, that's what I miss, for the rest he's alive!"

The sculptor was examining her with great interest. Her direct, yet very polite way of saying such things made him timorous.

The woman came closer with that strange, illegible look on her face:

"You think I'm mad, don't you? It happens quite often now. I've got used to it. After I lost my son, my life is very different, I've lost any interest in the usual ordinary things. I live for the dreams where my son appears and tells me things. My husband would have talked to you differently. He's pragmatic, so he would have told you immediately how much we can spend for this work. We have prepared a good sum, so if you prefer..."

The artist leaned against an empty pedestal and interrupted her: "Listen, I can't say money hurts me, but I... you are asking me a very peculiar thing. I am grateful for your appreciation, but I'm not able to accept this type of commission."

The guest kept silent, her eyes wandering distractedly versus a corner of the study. Then suddenly she turned her back on him and moved toward the door with little steps. On the threshold she turned

back and said hastily: "Truth is, such a thing is accepted on the spot, or not at all."

The artist remained staring at the empty doorway. But in an instant, he ran down the stairs. The woman was already crossing the inner yard with decided steps, when he caught up with her and asked:

"Please, come back, with some photographs, perhaps."

In the following days, the sculptor was very busy. Every evening he stayed in the gallery after the closing time, to talk to journalists or people who just admired his works. A commune on the Black Sea Coast commissioned him a monument for peace, inspired by one sculpture entitled *Waves*. All this made him feel exhilarated. It was as drinking champagne: turned him aloof and excited at the same time. A reward after so many years of solitary, obstinate work. In this euphoric state he went out to celebrate with Sanda and his friends. Often, he and Sanda turned tipsy to his studio, with some bottle under their arms, "to sip the dawn," as Florin, the poet, would have decreed.

One evening he had a dinner with characters from the artistic milieu. He did not feel at ease among all those people who had power in the artists' union. They were complimenting him. An art critic, with smoke-blackened teeth, congratulated him and added: "I was the first to recognize your talent, do you remember?"

Oh, yes, he did remember. Years back, when he was a beginner, he had exhibited together with a group of debutants, and the critic, a man of power then, a man of power now, patted him on the shoulder encouragingly and whispered in his ear. "You're promising you know! If you come to me, I'll teach you some tricks to get better!" He never did go to him, and he instantly felt a sense of disgust for that man who wasn't able to make a toy with modeling dough! And now he was sticking to him! After the toast he even held a speech repeating several times that he was the only one who believed in his talent, from the very beginning. The artist's gaze was captured by Sanda who let the hands of an old architect with a showy dark red bowtie under his grey face, run his fingers along her back.

This made the sculptor nervous, and he drank too much. It was almost 4 o'clock in the morning, when they got off a taxi in front of the studio. As they were climbing the stairs, Sanda, very excited, was leaning against him with her heavy body and tried jokingly to make him a Salvador Dali moustache

with her black hair. He was pushing her apart, slowly, tired and disgusted by the whole evening. When they were inside, the woman started liberating her feet from the narrow shoes, while speaking in a decided voice: "Now that you have started to be successful, you could buy a house. I hope you're not going to pass all your life in this studio!"

There, she too wanted to take possession of his success, to take care of him, organize his life. He grabbed the first empty bottle within reach and thrust on the ground howling: "And for who am I supposed to buy this house? For one like you who lets herself touch by the first old billy goat she comes upon?"

They quarreled as never before. Mad with fury, Sanda slipped her feet into her shoes and stormed out shouting back as she was going down the stairs:

"You're a beast! That's what you are!"

He heard the heavy entrance door slammed and the sharp sound of her heels on the desert street. Maybe she was right. All those years of solitude may have turned him wild. But, now that he was out in the light, everybody wanted to put him in a cage and show him as a prize. What a bitter thought! His talent finally recognized in exchange for his freedom. No! Never! He'll pull their legs, have fun in being an important figure, but he'll go on working as he had always done, for that was his strength. He wanted to start immediately. And while the dawn was consuming the diluting darkness, he made himself a strong tea and started to order the studio. He gathered the empty bottles in a corner, opened the large window and even watered the two plants abandoned on a granite cube. He was moving determined in the space where he had passed so many years, turning happy around a work he thought good or destroying disappointed many other unfinished ones, often disgruntled and depressed, sometimes without enough coins in his pocket to buy a newspaper or a packet of cigarettes. The first sun rays brought him an unexpected joy: "I'll go out for breakfast! World, I'm challenging you: today I, an artist playing with abstractions he entitles as the communists wish, I'll play the bourgeois!"

He went to a cafeteria and walked back with several journals rolled under his arm, smiling at the hasty pedestrians, full of an infantile, irresponsible joy. In the yard, a few steps from the entrance door, the woman in black was waiting for him. He had forgotten her in the confusion of that week. He

invited her inside and looked around to find a chair. He took the most decent chair he had, an imitation of a Florentine original, a gift from a fascinating actress, 15 years older than himself, he had loved in his youth.

His guest sat down with a natural grace that embarrassed him. Many women had come here, to his reign, beautiful or just attractive, stupid, interesting, intelligent or just shrewd, almost all of them hunting for his virility or attracted by his unusual lifestyle; yet none had succeeded to breach his confidence and made him hesitant.

The woman took off her thin gloves and posed them on her knees. She smiled, a faded smile, that was not destined to him, but to something indefinite inside her. The artist found it disquieting that, apart from her icy face, he could not find in her the apparent signs of pain. He was used to faces corroded by suffering, broken gestures, altered voices. This woman who had been traversed by death had a smooth face and a clear voice.

With a graceful gesture she handed him a big envelope with photographs: "There are photos from every age. He was never the same in pictures. It may be difficult for you to capture an expression that is typically his. I do not think I had one son, but various ones: one for every age. He used to say when he grew up, that we are musical phenomena, in continuous transformation. In music every moment is unique, even when the sounds repeat themselves."

The artist raised his gaze and said: "What a pity I could not hear him playing live!"

"He did not have time to perform much. But we have some recordings," she added pulling other pictures out of her bag. "These are the last ones: the New Year's Eve. He was already sick, but we had no idea yet, how serious it was. Just a year before this, everything was perfect: he made progress with his art, had a beautiful girlfriend and many future projects."

The sculptor took in attentively the young man's tired face, and he saw that the picture had caught how life was already leaving him.

"Who is the girl resting on his shoulder?"

“An old childhood friend. They talked, debated and quarreled over many things. She is a very intelligent girl and curious like my son. He had many friends, he was affectionate and extrovert,” she continued with a touch of pride her soft voice could barely disguise. “His friends continue to visit me, as if nothing had changed, we talk about him, as if he were in next room. It does me good... I find bits of him in any of them.”

The artist was listening in a respectful silence. Through the wide glass of his studio the spring sun touched the bloodless hand of the woman caressing discretely the photographs. She went on, as if talking to herself: “Sometimes I think that my son was not born for this world... and that he knew it; he knew he was just passing by...”

Distraught, the artist attempted to comfort her:

“Oh, madam, but one understands that he loved life...”

The woman stood up and took a few steps toward the window. The black of her dress was absorbing the light, avid and implacable. She stopped in front of him and asked motioning to the photos:

“What do you think? Could you capture his essence?”

“It’s hard... I need to examine them longer ...”

“Oh, yes, I see”, she added, and without any ceremony, greeted him with a light wave, moved towards the door and left.

After her departure, the studio looked strange, as if the woman’s words and evasive gestures had pervaded the air. That atmosphere distressed him, he would have liked to dissipate it with something alive, a group of noisy friends or Sanda’s silly but reassuring chatter. After their fight, she had disappeared. He was ready to go and look for her, but he gave up and went to his exhibition, where he stayed till the closing time.

The next day Sanda came to the gallery. She was the same as usual. In her lazy style she let herself

fall in an armchair, lit a cigarette and between one smoke ring and another, asked him if he was still angry with her. At the beginning he treated her with a certain indifference, but then an irresistible desire of warm, normal life pushed him again towards her. Late in the night they made love in his studio. Sanda recovered her self-confidence and started to think he could not live without her, while he was simply clutching to her shapely, statuesque body, as he thought its concreteness was banishing his anxiety, his fear of the unknown.

Dawdling naked in the studio, Sanda noticed the pictures of the young pianist on the drawing table. He told her about the encounter with the woman in black.

“Are you going to do this statue?”

He looked at her thoughtful.

“I don’t know if I am able. Just the idea blocks me. This woman wants a life size reproduction of her son, maybe seated at his piano. It is a crazy thing! And then my milieu... making fun of me: the funerary monuments sculptor...”

“But since you are known and the young pianist is known, maybe they’ll put your work in a public garden or a piazza?”

“This is a private commission,” he thought, but did not bother to answer. He was doubting he would ever be able to give the young musician his body, as the mother wished, but he did not have the courage to deny it to her.

For a while the pianist’s mother did not show up. Meantime he was absorbed by many commitments. His exhibition was transferred in July to Constanta, on the Black Sea coast, so he was busy with packing and supervising the shipping. Then he prepared with a photographer the images for a monograph on his works, edited by Virginia Ioan, a young journalist he liked. Every now and then, seeing a woman dressed in black reminded him of the pianist’s mother and he felt guilty. The idea that he could come across her turned him anxious. He had moments when he would have liked to withdraw his promise and send her to his old master, who did figurative sculpture and was more apt than himself for this work. But he also feared to delude her and this fear, thin and insidious, stayed

with him.

One morning she rang his bell. She greeted him first, fixing him with her blue eyes, and as soon as she got in, she said:

“I don’t want to disturb you. I just wanted to greet you. With you I can talk. And then I found this old photograph I think very important. I had mislaid it. It’s from the time when I was telling him fairytales.”

The photo showed a frail young child, his face tenderly attached to his mother’s cheek. The woman was beautiful, with long hair, in wavy curls, according to the fashion of the fifties, and bright, joyful eyes. The artist looked up from the picture. His guest looked absent. The delicate features of her face could barely be read behind that pale masque. Only her voice got some color as she spoke:

“At that age he was asking a lot of questions. I was taking him to the Herastrau Park on the island of the roses, and there, seated on his favorite bench in front of Mozart’s bust, I was telling him fairytales. Once I told him the story of the prince turned into stone by a witch, and he asked me, pointing to the bust: “Was he turned into stone too? Do you know the magic words to bring him back to life?”

The woman stood quiet for a moment, put on a feeble smile at that memory, then went on: “I often wonder why he has been taken away from me? Maybe his only guilt was his perfection... A creature like this ruins the balance of the world...”

The sculptor was listening quietly. A tear was slowly gliding on the woman’s smooth cheek like a raindrop fallen there by accident. And if now her suffering would melt into weeping? Nothing happened though. The woman passed her handkerchief on her cheek and unexpectedly got animated, as if a secret source had given her energy. She said: “I am convinced that you with your sensitivity will be able to catch my son’s music, I mean the music he had inside, able to express the matter’s secret life. There’s an echo of this music in me... I’m going to help you... we’ll make it, won’t we?” she asked looking up towards the artist.

The sculptor was watching her, moved, and thought: “What a bet with death. God, can you hear her?” How could he say he wouldn’t be able to represent her son? He got closer and said:

"I'd like to hear some of his recordings. My reel-to-reel tape deck is not so good, but maybe it can help me have an idea. Will you bring them to me?"

She did not need coaxing. Two days later she was back in the studio. She handed him the tapes, wandered for a while among the objects scattered around, stopped in front of a work called *Fountain*, that figured a stylized female body, with liquid contours and liquid hair and said: "I've had this thought: Adam was modeled from clay. God is a sculptor. They say in these stories it's the symbol that matters. I think we are literally made of this substance..."

She took off a necklace of small blue stones, she was wearing around her neck, and handed it to him: "My son made this present to me, when he was probably ten years old, together with a note in which he wrote: I want you to stay always beautiful and never die!" I've worn it ever since. Last night I took it off after so many years and I discovered the dust gathered between the stones. Look at it: this dust is my perspiration, the salts of my body, it's part of me..."

With her fingertips she separated two stones to show him what she meant, and the artist found it so strange, that this woman, so frail and reserved, made of air, so to say, even if the air she was made of was dense and tenacious, had left those dark, dirty traces between the little stones. She went on: "You see, we consume ourselves, I mean we always lose little by little this matter that forms us... we turn into dust everyday... like a statue eroded by the wind."

The artist was afraid to follow her in these digressions, he wanted to rest with his feet on the ground. Discretely he took two glasses, opened a bottle of wine and offered his guest. She took the glass with great simplicity, took a sip and went on: "I don't know if whatever I'm telling you can be of any help. But maybe as an artist, you can comprehend my son better than me. We used to have coffee, the two of us, in our small kitchen, and he was telling me incomprehensible things, for instance once he talked to me about the musical time as a form of getting out of the present, things like that. When he finished playing a piece, he stayed for a second immobile, with a bright light on his face... How he experienced that musical time, I cannot even imagine: maybe he just got into another dimension..."

Here she stopped fixing a point in the air, and clutching her small white fists: "I was so ingenuous, I felt happy if he was going out of our heavy present, I imagined he was gaining life, time; the other time sucked him out, instead, do you understand?"

The artist was playing distractedly with a chisel. He did not understand her, but he was moved by the effort of this little woman to try and find an explanation for her son's death, be it even in that bizarre arrangement of ideas. This made her appear to him more tragic than a mother who expressed her pain moaning and screaming. Lucky Sanda, interested only to find out if the men she passed by were excited by the dance of her hips.

He put a jacket on and offered to accompany her back home. She thanked, but immediately turned rigid and left in a hurry, leaving him disappointed.

The figure of this woman started to present itself to his mind more and more often. The mute features of her face and the pitiless black of her dress, made him anxious, but her soul was limpid, a crystal through which her son's persona appeared. Her brief visits awakened in him intense states of mind and lots of thoughts. He would have liked to talk to a musician and try to comprehend this fluidity of music, the way musicians tried to catch forms and dissolve them in the flow. It appeared to him that he was so different, as he tried to give material, solid and enduring shape to his states of mind. He tried to fix time, to block its passage: how could they feel attached to life, when everything in their soul and their art was fleeting?

Sanda took immediate notice of his distracted air. She was used to the artists' whims, but this time she felt in Andrei a rising resistance to herself that irritated her.

"What's wrong? Why are you always pissed off? Right now, when everything is going well for you?"

Sanda's bickering only added to his nervousness. He no longer found her interesting, actually she appeared suddenly flat and boring. He started to find excuses in order not to go out with her or take her with him when he met his friends. She would not surrender, but kept coming to his studio, sometimes she popped in late at night. He had become sullen, they often quarreled. Every so often the desire to own that lascivious stout body assailed him, but afterwards he ceased to experience that feeling of fullness, his union with her used to give him. He was changing and he realized this with a sort of restlessness, of subtle inner apprehension that was so distant from Sanda's carnal aplomb. Because of that he ruined their encounters and experienced a sort of cruel satisfaction when everything degenerated into the grotesque.

One morning, after a tense episode with Sanda, he felt angry with himself, degraded, wasted. He took a train and went to the mountains where he spent a week in an isolated cabin for climbers. It did him good to leave Bucharest for a while. When the weather was fine, he walked through the woods, stopping in front of some rock that seemed to have captured who knows what ancient motion, gesture or grimace of the earth. He passed hours watching the clouds and the rough mountain sides, fascinated by the contrast between the rocky abysses and the imponderable air. As a worker with matter, he had not much considered air, for him just emptiness, the lack of form. Now he realized that it acquired an undeniable concreteness. The entire alchemy of rain, fog, wind, was hidden in that air. The key to movement and life was encapsulated in it.

For two days there was bad weather, so he spent his time in the cabin with the manager, a rough mountain man, closed in himself, of scarce words, indifferent to anything that happened beyond the forest. He tried to feel what the man felt, now that he was far away from his exhibition, his friends, the women who stepped into his studio. Suddenly he felt more accomplished here in the full quietness than in the city.

Then one day the pianist's mother turned back to his mind. That woman lived on the edge of the unknown and felt so natural about it. She had also opened some secret improbable gates for him. The intuition of that realm made him lose his balance, but it also attracted him irresistibly. He had passed his life to study the fullness of shapes, and his work was the result of his stubborn observing, researching, and combining what he could absorb from the visible world with his senses avid of concreteness. Would he be able to recreate the young man from the vagueness of his mother's feelings? But that vagueness was so intense, like the strong air of the mountain, that he felt compelled to give it a try.

He returned to Bucharest one Saturday evening, serene, loaded with energy and with a new thought that had never bothered him before: maybe the human beings exist only if loved, as the colors exist because of the light. He had left his studio only a week ago, but he found it hard to readjust to its shades and objects. He found the tapes with the young pianist's recital. He put it on his reel-to-reel tape deck, opened a bottle of wine, snuggled up on bed, his back leaning against the wall, and in the dark slowly drank the entire bottle listening again and again to those musical notes. He was not sensitive to classical music and had no musical education, but he perceived a force in that recording, similar to that of the clouds changing shape over the mountains he had recently seen. He turned restless. The figure of the young man started to take shape in his imagination, only to vanish

immediately. He turned on the light and tried to sketch on a paper what passed through his mind. The sign on the paper was rigid and lifeless. After a few more attempts his hand started involuntarily to trace with quick nervous touches the face of the pianist's mother. What came out was her face as a young woman, a reproduction of her happy time when she used to tell her young son fairy tales. He filled various sheets with her portrait, scattering them around the studio. With every new drawing the portrait became livelier, her expression focused in her smile, a meek and ardent smile at the same time, a tight knot of emotional intensity and peaceful acceptance to life. He smoked his last cigarette illuminated by that smile, then he threw himself on the bed and fell asleep.

He woke up late that morning and went out to make some phone calls. He did not have a landline in his studio, as he did not want to be interrupted when he worked. He fixed an appointment and turned back to the studio to change. The door was half open. "What the devil!" He stepped in angry with himself slamming the door. The drawings made during the night were no longer around. An unknown dog came to greet him and started sniffing his shoes. After a second of stupefaction, he heard the voice of the pianist's mother coming from the large window.

"I apologize, I took out the dog and as we passed by your building he escaped from the leash and entered the yard, I followed, and he ran up the first flight of stairs and pushed the slightly open door with his snout. I am sorry... But I think he sensed that his young master's traces led to this place."

"No problem, my studio is always open," replied the artist a bit tense, when he realized she was holding the drawings done during the night in her hand. The dog walked around the studio, sniffing in the surroundings, then came close to the woman's feet and lay down, his head on his front paws with a downcast air. The woman looked down at the dog and said, "I believe in the myth of Orpheus who tamed animals and moved trees with his music. When my son was studying, the dog lay down enchanted under the piano, and never moved from there, not even if a stranger entered the house he usually reacted to. Now when I listen to one of our son's recorded concerts, he goes under the piano and does not move till the end of the music. He turns around the piano, he's waiting for him, ... the music binds souls, if they be human, or animal, and I think plants too."

The sculptor was slightly embarrassed, besides he had to leave soon.

"Madam, if you don't mind..."

The woman stood up keeping the drawings tightly in her arms. Her eyes had a vague trace of light and there was a touch of blush on her faded cheeks.

“Excuse me for daring to gather them... I have understood that you are searching for my son through me, you are a very subtle artist. However, since he’s no longer here, I cannot bear to see my face in a mirror... it’s not just that I should be still here...”

She placed the drawings on a small table turning her back on him. The artist was surprised by his guest’s change. She was embarrassed, hesitant, did not know what to do. Then, she abruptly walked towards the large window and stopped in front of the two flowerpots, with the plants almost withered, abandoned on the granite block. She took a gaze at them, then opened the curtains completely and commented with a trace of disappointment in her voice:

“There is so much dust in here, the plants do not breathe...and something else: I am sure you do not care about them.”

The sculptor nodded, trying to align his ruffled hair with his palm. It was true, he did not care about those plants. One of his flirts had brought them some time ago.

He asked her:

“Madam, why do you think plants perceive our feeling, or lack of?”

“I am convinced they sense everything; some research has proved it. Everything that surrounds us has a soul, including these stones, you know better than me that stones have a soul.”

Then the woman walked towards the darkest corner of the studio, where a few empty bottles had been crammed. She bowed, took one and handed it to the sculptor:

“Will you please rinse it and fill it with fresh water?”

When he came back with the bottle, she started to water the plants accurately.

That evening Sanda, he hadn't seen for a while, dropped in with one of her friends, a lean young woman with short hair and an expression of wonder on her face. At one point, when the conversation was stagnant, Sanda stood up taken by melancholy and walked towards the window. Distracted as usual, she hit one of the flower vases, making it almost fall. Andrei flinched at the sight:

"Beware! That plant has a soul..."

She replied sarcastically:

"Since when have you grown an interest in the soul of plants? Soul, heh?... Dear, they are made of flesh, like us."

"Yes, dear," he replied, "you're right. Like us they are made of flesh. Of corruptible flesh..."

Sanda beckoned to her friend who was inspecting the objects in the studio, grabbed her purse, and lashed back through tight teeth:

"I can't stand jerks!"

He heard her outside the door telling her friend:

"He must have found himself a botanical slut who talks him into souls."

With Sanda's departure he felt relieved. Two weeks later he saw her in a restaurant with the decrepit architect who was kissing the tips of her fingers one by one. That was good theatre, he started laughing and understood that one part of him had departed.

Andrei Bratu passed July and August at the Black Sea coast, as he had opened an exhibition with a selection of his most recent works in Constanta. In a few months without realizing it, he had become a fashionable character. He had longed to be accepted and admired for so many years, yet now he felt somehow detached from the public and would rather stay on his own. He went to a lonely deserted beach with the young journalist Virginia Ioan, who had decided to publish an album with his life and

works.

When he returned to Bucharest, he was ready to shatter “the excesses of the swirling summer” as his friend the poet put it. He had a new habit: going to various markets talking to the peasants who were selling their produce, then came home with mushrooms, watermelons, peppers, honey, he ordered nicely around the studio, as if he wanted to paint them. Just looking at that fruit of the earth he felt empowered and loaded with energy.

One late afternoon he was walking absent-mindedly, enjoying the sweet light of the summer end, when his attention was drawn by two figures walking on the other side of the street: a man and a woman. She was the pianist’s mother, he recognized her immediately. The man must have been the father. In full light the woman appeared smaller and thinner, lost in her black dress. Her husband, much taller than her, with a curved back, was struggling to go on, as if he had walked against the wind. They did not talk and look to each other, but simply marched side by side, as two strangers overwhelmed by a burden that had turned the spontaneous flow of life into repeated mechanics.

They were not aware he had stopped on the other pavement and was turning to watch them walk by. What struck him was the figure of the father, clinging to his wife to help him go on. He was obviously a finished man; the principle of his life was broken. The artist was more impressed by the man than by his little wife. He seemed to feel his tragedy deep inside, and he decided on the spot he would try and sculpt the young musician, life size, to give him the likeness of his lost son, as something to lean on.

He turned back to his studio with a mixture of incertitude and anger inside. All those years trying to make stones dance, fly and flow, appeared as an estrangement from what was near him: the life of humans, and their struggle to keep their lives meaningful. “God! If art is not love, if it is not a bet with death, it is a waste!” He took out the photos of the young pianist and placed them feverishly around the studio: against some statue, on the shelf, leaning against empty bottles on the low chest-of-drawers, or fixed to the huge curtains with clothes pegs. He played the tapes at high volume and started doing sketches with the charcoal that was running madly on the cardboard. A splendid sunset invaded the studio, but he paid no attention to it. The artist then started modelling with the clay. He was totally focused on his work, he interrupted only to smoke a cigarette. He barely noticed when the night fell. But he continued to work, exulting at the sight of a city that was going to bed: “Go to bed,

ignorant mass, lull yourselves into sleep. What do you know about life and death?"

At about 3 in the morning, the clay bust of the young musician had already taken shape. The artist found it a good beginning. When he went to bed, he had a quick thought for the mother of the musician. Would she return to visit him? He had no way of finding her. She hadn't given him any phone number or address. But maybe her sharp sense of things would tell her that he had started to work.

It was not long before the pianist's mother came. She was different. The summer seemed to have consumed her. She had black eye-rings and her face was deeply marked by wrinkles. He wondered whether it had been him who did not notice them before. Their conversation was slow to start. The woman was looking around lost, and she saw everywhere pictures of her son.

The artist realized the tape player was gyring in vain and he stopped it. Then he led his guest to the corner of the studio where he was working on the clay bust. He pulled the curtains to allow more light to come in, and waited for her judgment nervous, as when he was a student and waited for the master to judge his work.

The woman fixed the bust in silence, turned around it and said with her weak voice: "Thank you for having started the work. But he still resists, he doesn't reveal himself yet. He had soft hair that would slide on his forehead while he was playing..."

Her comment made the artist feel bad. He knew well that this was a clay model, and the sculpture would have been different, and he found this visit intrusive. "Madam," his voice sounded irritated, "I cannot re-make him as God made him with your collaboration. I am simply trying to give shape to something very vague you are describing, so I will go on by trials. In the end, whatever comes out is not going to be your son, but mine."

She closed her eyes, embarrassed: "I do not understand the work of an artist. Please forgive me."

The artist turned his back on her looking for a cigarette on a shelf. He thought he had been too harsh on the poor woman. He turned towards her to apologize, but she was no longer in the studio. He ran to the window but saw only the black dress vanishing behind the gate. He was annoyed by the whole

scene, so he took a jacket and threw it over the bust.

A few days later, he woke up with the sound of an engine. He looked out of the window and saw a lorry that had parked backwards in the yard. Four men were studying how to carry the marble block in the lorry inside the studio. The pianist's mother was pointing to the large windows. The sculptor felt vexed. How did this mad woman bring him a marble block without warning him or asking him an opinion? And then she was giving instructions to the workmen as if that were her place. He did not know what to do. It was crazy, unbelievable. But then he burst into laughter: after all he liked this madness. He put on some decent clothes and went down to the yard. He greeted the woman bewildered and pointed to the block as if saying, "It's enormous!"

The woman explained: "We thought that it would make no sense to represent my son without his piano."

The artist was in better spirits now. Of course, how could one sculpt a musician without his instrument? Suddenly he was seized by the fever of sculpting. He went back to his studio, climbing two steps at a time, and opened widely the huge windows. He and the four men had to move some heavy objects to make space. It was not easy to move the marble block. They used an inclined plane and thick twisted ropes. In the last strain to push it inside the two plants were swept away.

When the lorry drove away, the woman left too. The artist was by himself. The silent block was taking much of the space. He had never worked such a massive piece of marble before. Actually, only once did he work marble. He was turning around the block intimidated, but also with the excitement of a child who had always desired the toy that was now right in front of him. When the marble became more familiar, he patted it: "Stony friend, how do you feel here?"

For several days he kept on studying the marble from all sides. It was white with some pink strikes. He was measuring it, marking some points with a pencil. Every so often he sipped a little beer directly from the bottle, without losing his focus on the block and enjoying its whitish stillness. His mind was pervaded by that dense and formless matter. Gradually, the marble started warming under his gaze, ready to let itself mold, until one afternoon when he touched it, he seemed to feel under his palm the round shape of a shoulder. He took chisel and hammer and uttered: "Young friend I know you are here: come out please!"

He marked the point with a cross and started to chisel. This was the beginning of one of the most thrilling periods in his life. He was working with an intensity and a concentration he rarely had before. The figure of the young man started to emerge. He was touching the bust's back, and thought, "Michelangelo was right. Everything is inside the stone. It is enough to pull it out."

He had cancelled any appointment and refused to see anyone. He went out only to buy something to eat and some drinks. Sometimes a friend would drop in, but he sent them all away. Even his closest friend, the poet Florin who protested: "Come, Andrei, let us have a drink. If you don't give some liquid to this stone, it will stay thirsty."

One day the young journalist Virginia Ioan came to the studio to discuss about the album of his works and his biography. He had forgotten about this appointment he had fixed with her in August. The young woman, well-dressed, sun-tanned and fresh, stepped in relaxed, determined to cast a good impression on him. She looked around the studio, and then with a calculated gesture she took out her notebook and started to ask him questions. The artist was seated in front of her with a distracted air and an indifferent look. In the end, he gave up answering her questions and told her: "Miss Virginia, I give you free hand. Write whatever you like, as you would do about a dead artist. I cannot concentrate, I have to finish a piece of work."

The only person he accepted around was the pianist's mother. She used to come quite often, slipping inside like a shadow, she spent some time watching him at work, without asking anything or getting closer to him. Before going away she usually left him something to eat. One day she even brought him two plants in two small pots.

They barely spoke, they understood each other with half gestures. Her calm presence was mitigating the harassing hammer strokes and the black of her dress was a counterpoint to the pinkish white of the marble he was working daily.

So passed the autumn and the winter. At the beginning of spring, he was ready to finish his work. He put down his chisel and hammer and started to polish the marble with tender and slow touches. He was almost displeased he had to separate from his work. The last day he was so absorbed by his work, that he did not even go out to buy something to eat. He fed on some pears and walnuts, covered in dust, forgotten on a shelf. His eyes were burning, he felt the salted sweat on his back, and

his feet were so swollen that he had to take off his shoes. Yet he continued to work during the night, tenaciously, obsessed to finish, in a tremendous effort. In the morning he finished. It was the first time one of his works emerged like that, almost of its own.

He smiled and sighed exhausted, shaking his head, as if doubting that what he had experienced was true. He needed a cigarette and found a butt left on a drafting table. He lit it with shaking hands then he went to the corner where he gathered the empty bottles, in search of some drop left on the bottom. He sipped a sour rest of altered wine, but it tasted so good to him. Then he plopped on the bed. He was exhausted, he felt pains in his bones, muscles, even the root of his hair, but he was happy.

At the center of his studio was his completed work, the piano partly embedded in the rough marble, while the musician was seated in front of the piano, as at the end of a concert, the right hand lifted in the air, the left still resting on the keys, that were white with some strikes of pink. Pure, smooth, a certain lightness in the body, the eyes shut and an ecstatic smile on his face, an expression of accomplishment. He wondered if he had succeeded to render the entrance of that musician into the musical time the mother talked about.

Peace returned in the studio, but this time it was not the dumbness of the rough marble block, it was the silence fallen at the end of a concert, when the sound storm melts into calmness and the air is loaded with emotions, vibrations, dreams, life. He slept for two days, as after a great fight. When he woke up, he took a shower to wash off the marble dust, then he started to clean the studio. He was waiting for the pianist's mother. He wanted her to be the first to see his finished work. Only then did he realize she had not come for some time. He was seized by anxiety: what if something had happened to her? He was trying to find her address consulting a telephone book. Next morning, she rang the bell. She was pale and had lost more weight. She said in a worried voice: "My husband is not well. He is in hospital."

The artist sketched a greeting. Then impatient, he took her by an arm and led her to the sculpture. She obeyed, and the artist was shocked to realize how light she was, a leaf in the wind, without lymph and will. The artist pulled the curtains with an energetic, almost angry, motion. The woman stood motionless in the full midday light, then she got closer to the sculpture and touched her son's marble elbow with a finger. She was quiet. She stretched a hesitant arm and passed her palm on the young

man's arm. With the other hand she caressed the hair, the face and the shoulders of the statue. She was behaving like the blind men who force themselves to make sense of shapes they feel with their hands. Then her hands became more secure, they turned alive, and started touching avidly the marble. Her body was acquiring substance, and, loaded with an unexpected energy, she got closer to her son to communicate her warmth.

When the woman realized she was not alone, she made a step back, and turned towards the artist. Her face had changed, her cheeks were red, the eyes were wet with shining tears, and on her white lips a smile appeared, a pale glimmer, a thin troubled hope, as a snowdrop springing up with fatigue from under the icy snow. The smile lasted an instant, then the woman turned towards the marble again. She was eager to stay with her son on her own.

The artist lit a cigarette and went discretely out of the studio. It was a beautiful day. The fresh spring air struck him. He breathed it deeply in, straightened his shoulders and hurried up. Only now did he realize how much he wanted to go out and have a drink with his friends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gabriela Dragnea Horvath

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, magia* (Rome, 2003); has co-authored a book of fiction in Romanian (*Preludi epici Epic Preludes*, Bucharest, 1990), has co-translated with

Stuart Friebert and Adriana Varga the volume *Hands Behind My Back*, by Marin Sorescu (Oberlin Translation Series, 1991) prefaced by Seamus Heaney. In 2017 her study *Theatre, Magic and Philosophy: William Shakespeare, John Dee and the Italian legacy* was published by Routledge. She taught for the Liberal Studies Program at NYU Florence.