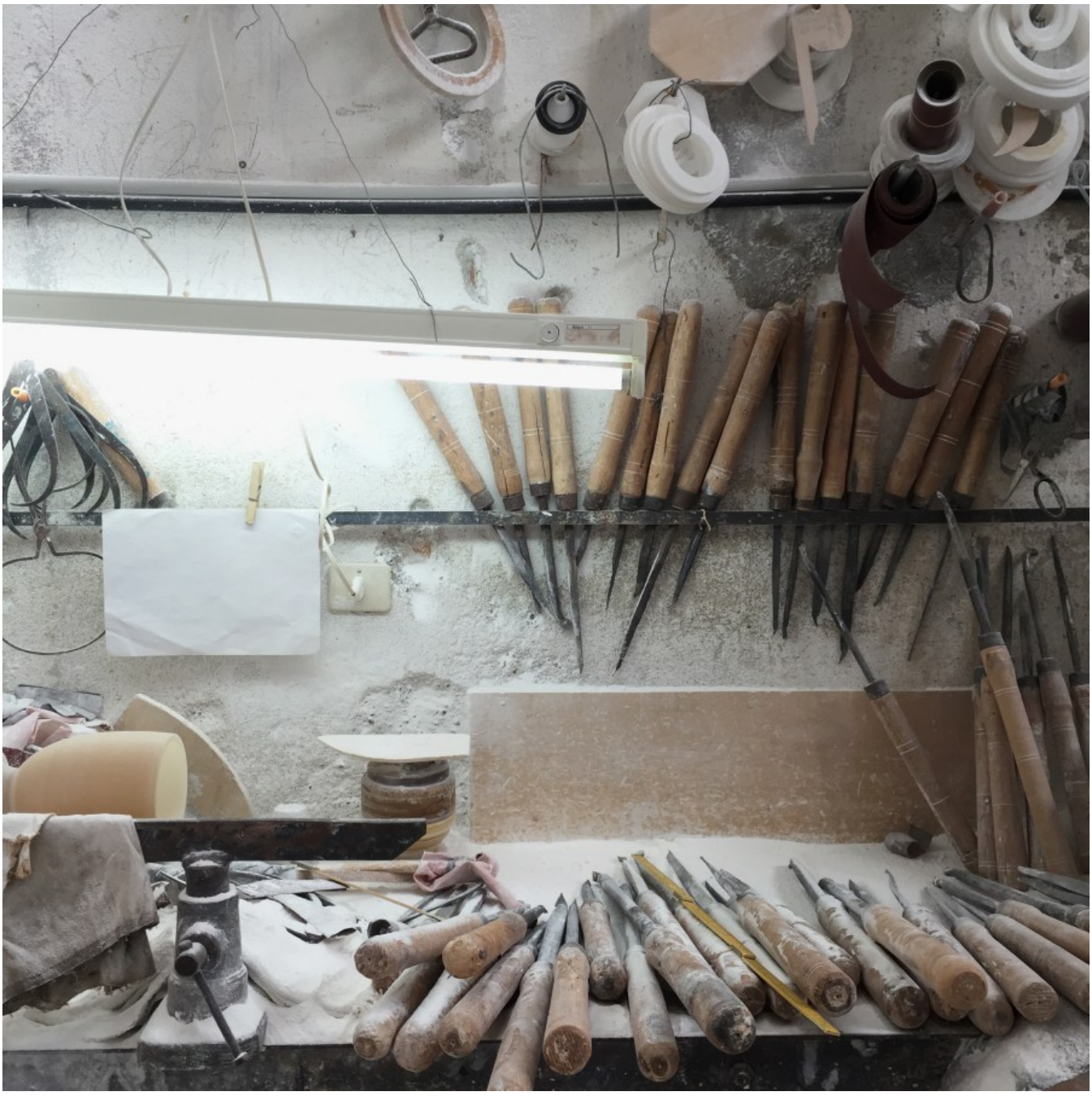

Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

During the first interval of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, my friend Marcel, the scenographer, who had offered us the tickets, came to greet us. My wife and my daughter praised his original scenography with vocal enthusiasm, but he wanted to hear my opinion, so he advanced a provocation: "What about this live theatre, dear dig site chief, instead of the rotten smell of your Neolithic tombs!"

My first impulse was to be polemic and say something like: tombs resist time, performances don't, or

to explain to him that archeology has nothing to do with the morbid bent for cemeteries. Yet, instead of launching into a *pro domo* speech, since it was his day, I played the card of diplomacy: “When art is powerful, it makes life worth living, and you are quite good at that!”

He called me a shameless flatterer, but deep-down was pleased. Then he answered my daughter’s question about the choice of that huge movable veil in the background. As he started to explain it was meant to suggest the elusiveness of feelings and their metamorphic character, I heard a familiar voice a few steps away and turned in that direction. Yes, there she was, Mira N. the actor’s daughter, one of the most desired, envied and gossiped about girls of my generation.

It was more than 20 years since I had last seen her. Meanwhile she had become an established theatre critic. Every so often I read her reviews: the author, very self-confident, made drastic comments in a style of elegant irony. Then, by and by, I could detect her father’s bitter sneer, maliciously hidden behind the lines. Sometimes I even spotted some of the old man’s catchphrases, and I couldn’t help smiling at the thought that she had nothing personal to say but was merely voicing her father’s rancor over the theatre world.

Seeing Mira again after so many years troubled me. She passed by our group, accompanied by a young, elegant man, who listened to her with reverence. They stopped to greet a lady and started talking animatedly. I knew her father had died years before, and Marcel had told me in a casual conversation she had never married and had only passing flirtations, mostly with men who were younger than herself. For a second, a sort of free space formed around her, and so I could take a better look at her: she had hardly changed at all; she was tall and slender, with the same white face and black hair, the same straight fringe. In her black dress adorned with heavy silver chains, she looked like a pagan priestess. For a second, I thought I had captured a sort of void in her expression, disguised in polite greetings, and I heard her uttering a sentence on the first act, with the same, unchanged deep voice and her precious pronunciation marked by a French “r.”

After twenty years, beardless and grey-haired as I am now, I knew she wouldn’t recognize me. Still, when she seemed to direct her look to our group, I lowered my gaze and turned slightly away. Eager to recover the past in my profession, I am still convinced that, in one’s personal life, certain things must stay buried in the past.

Today I can't explain that moment of sudden inspiration when, after two years of studying electronics, I decided one day that my vocation was archeology. I prepared the entrance test in secret and, after passing it with a surprisingly a high grade, I headed home to let my parents know about it. My poor parents were shocked. Electronics had a bright future, archeology sounded to them of little utility. They thought they could stop me by denying me any support. Their decision had a contrary effect: it pushed me to try and succeed no matter what, in order to prove that it was not a whim.

First, I packed up my things and moved in with a friend, sharing a little rented room, which deeply hurt my mother. Then I let my beard grow, as I knew it would irritate my father. This attitude gave me the energy to do everything I could to support myself: I gave private lessons in math, physics and history, and I even copied architecture projects for lazy students, as I have always had a good hand at drawing. Saturday afternoons I used to go to the atelier of a ceramist: I lent him a hand with his works which served me to understand how vases were made in archaic times. We became friends, and I stayed on in the evenings, when nice girls in search of interesting artists would drop in. He was the one who chose, but even I, as an apprentice, had my experiences. In that sort of continuous excitement, willing to embrace life in all its forms, I started to attend a poetry circle at the Faculty of French. I went there the first time with a fellow student who had tried his hand at writing verse. Next to the French literature professor, short-sighted and wrapped in a large shawl, sat a student who caught everybody's eyes: black hair and dark eyes, a pale face and a deep voice. Her harsh criticisms of young poets were accepted with respect by the public. My colleague whispered to me at one point: "Look at her! She's a queen!"

I took a longer look at her and nodded.

"You know, she has already published theatre reviews in a few journals, she's the daughter of the actor N."

That was an important detail: being the daughter of a popular actor meant being a sort of princess in the Bucharest of the time. From the excitement in his voice, I understood that he had a crush on her. At the end of the session my colleague went straight to her and started asking questions all red in the face, with a sheet of paper in his trembling hand, on which he had taken notes. He tried to court her so ridiculously that I felt bad for him, while she froze him with a contemptuous reply. As we were heading to the trolley-bus station, I tried to dissuade him from a frustrating passion for the wrong

object: “It’s not difficult to be charmed by her. She is beautiful, clever, highly cultivated, the daughter of the actor we all admire, definitely she embodies an ideal. Then her way of keeping people at a distance is a way of making herself even more desirable, she cultivates consciously the charm of unattainable things. I think she stirs in you a sort of destructive void passion. I wonder if she could be really interested in us, maybe she has people from her father’s environment that court her.”

As I tried to save him from a misplaced passion, the same desire to court her was rising in me. I was convinced I had more chances than him: I did not write poetry, but I was taller and more imposing with my beard, and I boasted a certain experience with women my ceramist friend had contributed to. Next time at the poetry circle my friend introduced me to her. She scrutinized me with her deep eyes, in which there was a sort of shameless call she immediately converted into ice-cold irony as soon as she saw I was responding. I attended the rest of the session getting ever more irritated at her acid comments about the young poets. At the end of the session, she came directly to me, and, ignoring my poor friend who was red with emotion, she asked with a subtle smile: “Well, what do you think about our circle?”

I knew very well I was not supposed to manifest admiration. In a deep voice and with the tone of a connoisseur, I replied: “Interesting, but at the circle kept by the critic S, one hears better poetry.” I had been only once per chance at the other circle.

She took this in, a little hesitant, then grabbed my arm, as if we had been close friends and lowered her voice almost into a whisper: “If you are trustworthy and you understand poetry, come to my private soirées. Here, with all these people around, we cannot speak freely.”

This is how I joined the group that met every Monday evening in her father’s house, to participate in their “jour fix,” she specified with a coquettish smile, suggesting she was imitating the high society ladies of before the war, who were imitating French ladies.

They lived in the center, on one of those streets that preserved the quietness of old times, concealed behind the tall blocks that flanked the boulevard and away from the rush of buses and cars. The flat was on the ground floor of a villa built in the thirties in quite a fancy style. I was particularly struck by the marble stairs flanked by two columns of about one meter and a half. On top of the columns two hemispheres of the same marble stood out like two enigmatic breasts placed at the entrance to a

classical temple.

For almost three months I climbed those marble steps every Monday afternoon with a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates in my hand: Mira welcomed me with an ambiguous smile, something between open friendship and convention, and invited me into the book-lined living room, where I almost always met the same fellow students of Mira: three plain girls and two thin young men with narrow shoulders. Every now and then new characters turned up: theatre students who were in the class of Mira's father at the Theatre Institute. At the beginning I did not join their conversation, as I was not updated on the gossip regarding our writers, or the most recent publications in France. At that time, I was reading mostly ancient literature, as it served my studies, and I had a secret desire to make a discovery inspired by poets, as Schliemann did, taking Homer as a guide.

I listened to their comments, distracted by the image of Mira, who presided over the evening seated in a large armchair. Her splendid legs could be seen through the slit of her long black skirt. As soon as I understood that, in order to draw her attention, I needed to cut a figure in the field of French culture, I started reading all the publications my artist friend received from his uncle who had emigrated to Paris, including those of the philosophers in fashion at the time.

I really hit the mark with that, for Mira was immediately warmer to me, and this made me lose my head. I started imagining the reaction of my ceramist if I showed up with her at the opening of his next exhibition in May. Meanwhile I continued going every Monday to Mira's and doing my homework; I started citing Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Bachelard. The whole experience was stimulating. I was discovering new authors, and I liked how they picked some idea and starting from it they engaged in long speculations. I interpreted it as a form of cultural dissidence, a way to take a distance from the official culture imposed on the masses.

The evenings at Mira's place took place according to the same ritual: we warmed up under Mira's intelligent and ironical smile, then some ideas were repeated with more emphasis in front of her father, who always appeared later to increase our sense of expectation.

Mira's father was still a very handsome man, imposing and attractive (she resembled him very much) with a bitter, disdainful smile on lips darkened by age and make up. He was very well known; he often recited poetry on the TV or radio, in particular classical authors. I found out that he himself had

published two volumes of sonnets, a few of which everybody in that room knew by heart. The scenario was the same: one of the guests asked him to recite one of his sonnets, and he accepted after insisting they were not masterpieces, better if he recited Shakespeare instead, but in the end, he gave in. I have to admit that he created a powerful atmosphere: even if his sonnets sounded like variations on classical themes, he knew how to capture his audience.

The poetry recital ended with our applause and his moved bow in front of us, thereafter he played a classical music disk, and he dropped a comment like, “Music, as Greek philosophers used to think, shapes our souls and calms the beast in us,” which sounded so powerful.

After the musical intermezzo, Mira reappeared with snacks and cakes and we begged her father to tell us spicy episodes of his actor life or talk about the great actors he had known in the past, at the beginning of his career, and whom we had only heard of. He was very entertaining; he knew his job, so we listened to him completely absorbed.

As we were paying compliments to Mira for the snacks, the atmosphere changed, became more profane and her father passed to contemporary theatrical life, and could not help criticizing actors and stage directors. Maybe one of his regrets was that he hadn’t done enough films, but then he somehow classified many of them vulgar, provincial, unaccomplished.

As he was entertaining us, Mira, seated in the armchair with crossed legs, was launching a proud gaze, meaning *Have you seen how great my father is? Which of you will ever equal him?* None of us could, of course. And yet, each of the males there hoped secretly to be chosen by her, and even the girls competed for her friendship.

The more I saw her next to her father, emphatically repeating his comments, the more I understood that he was the one rival I had to fear, not that entire court of admirers. The two of them dominated the house. I saw her mother very few times, in the corridor passing between the living room and the bathroom, like a shadow, and she looked sick. Somebody told me that she had studied the piano before marrying the actor, and in fact sometimes we could hear some melancholy piano pieces played in a distant room.

I continued to attend their soirées with a stubborn hope of conquering Mira. But she knew how to

manipulate her admirers, showing each of us a gesture, a sign of particular attention, only to deny it soon after, with a cold look, as if to suggest: *Don't dare!* Only once did I have the chance to converse longer with her, and I dropped in this comment: "You are so much a creation of your father!"

She was pleased with my remark and added: "Yes, he's my Pygmalion!"

Some Pygmalion, I thought rancorously on my way home that evening, *Pygmalion gave life to a marble girl, this father was a vampire sucking his daughter's soul*. *And turning her into a mirror of himself*. Once I understood this, Mira appeared suddenly charmless, and I ceased to desire her. Even those encounters became less exciting: the discussions turned around the same subjects, the poems the actor recited on call were more or less the same, as were his ironical comments on the world of the theatre. I put an end to those visits, as I also had to prepare my exams.

When the exams were over, I went to Predeal in the mountains to ski, and, on my return, I was invited by my friend the ceramist to the inauguration of an exhibition. Mira was there too, and she came straight to me with a reproachful look: "How come you stopped coming to us, without any warning? Shame on you! But I am ready to forgive you and I invite you to the carnival party Dad and I are organizing this Saturday. Obviously if this doesn't bother you, I wonder what important circles you are seeing lately…" She then mentioned some of the guests, known figures of the intellectual milieu.

I thought that was an attractive idea, why not? I had to decide which part to dress, but then with my beard and a pair of jeans I thought it was easy to play the hippy, even if their fashion had arrived surreptitiously and vaguely in our country. I even added a piece of jewelry I found at my friend's studio, which one of his female visitors had left behind. My friend made me a round peace sign to attach to it. Mira was dressed unsurprisingly as Cleopatra with a beautiful costume her father must have borrowed from the theatre and two snake shaped bracelets on her arms. The surprise was that she wanted to dance with me, and I was inebriated by her strong perfume, trying to avoid her cold eyes that were studying me from the closest distance. Then with an insinuating smile she asked me in a whisper that softened her French r: "Your faculty must be very interesting. Are you doing digs?"

"Yes, this summer we'll start a dig site following the project of one of our professors."

"What is it about?"

“He hypothesizes pre-Roman traces on a line that goes from the Danube to the Black Sea.”

Her eyes were shining. My cold, scholarly tone excited her.

“It must be fascinating! When I think how much time we students of philology waste on turning pages, while you are doing something concrete!”

I was taken by a new illusion. This time her inviting smile did not turn into a cold, spiteful grimace. I was wrong. She danced with all the young men invited and conversed with them making the same gestures and gratifying them with the same smiles. She was obviously trying to make sure our admiration for her was unaltered. Deluded, I sat next to a young journalist I had met the previous summer in a student camp and started a conversation with him. He was very realistic, in my opinion sometimes cynical, and in fact he met with some success: today he is the chief editor of a newspaper and has an important role in the Journalists’ Union.

The conversation topics were trivial and playful, fit for a carnival. At some point, after some good drinks, I asked him in a low voice: “How can one get a chance with this beautiful young woman, bypassing her father?”

He looked at me stupefied, then with a sapient and sly smile: “What?! Nobody is running after her. She picks someone up every now and then one from the public to fool around a bit, and that’s it. Then along comes the next!”

His comments sounded vulgar and not plausible. The following day I came upon the journalist not far from the University, very well dressed, perfumed, freshly shaved, with a bunch of flowers in his hand. He was heading towards the exhibition where I had met Mira the previous week. I stopped to greet him, but he was in a hurry: “If you don’t mind, I won’t stay with you. I have an important appointment. A lady is honoring me!”

I found his words so quaintly old-fashioned that I became curious. I crossed the street, entered a bar and sat next to the glass wall to be able to spy on him. A few moments later I saw him kissing Mira’s hand in a perfect courtly manner, offering her the flowers and leading her inside the exhibition hall. Once they were out of my visual field, I decided to forget about Mira.

I took my summer exams brilliantly, then I went to the dig in the Dobrugea with a group of students led by our professor and his lecturer. That was geologically a very old piece of earth. The landscape was monotonous, only flattened hills, large valleys with threads of water, almost dry from the summer draught. Those hills had been a mountain chain millions of years before. We students were taking them in without enthusiasm, they looked uninteresting, worn out. On the slopes the peasants had planted vineyards. The tops of the hills were bald. The professor observed these flat tops, and, breathing in deeply, he said happily, “Contemplate these hills. The verb is not “look,” it’s “contemplate.” The first secret of an archeologist is to know how to read the earth. These hill tops are weary, this is not only geological weariness, it is also historical weariness. One can see that right away. They are weary because they have nourished many lives. A piece of earth full of ancient life closes upon itself to let the dead rest. They do not welcome visitors, even the plants know that and cease to grow there, in order not to disturb the sleep of the earth with their rhythms. On the way up hill, very few plants grow, only some wild rose bushes. If the tenacious peasants had not planted vines, this place would have been arid.”

The village in the valley was fairly recent, it was barely a century old, which is a short lapse for an archeologist. The peasants did not have a deep relationship with those hills. They told stories about the mountains their ancestors had come from after a war with the Turks, so their folklore was of no help.

We were accommodated in the village. In the morning, my host, a mature woman with a maternal bent, offered me fresh bread and milk, and wished me a fruitful day. I put on my knapsack and crossed her garden, paying attention to avoid being scratched by the wild rose bush on the other side of her fence; then I crossed a thin rivulet, walked by a maize field and from there climbed up the slope of the hill. It almost took us one hour every morning to get there. The professor was always there before us: “I need to be here, I have to study the place, to understand it better.” When we students arrived, he had already made measurements and incised traces on the ground with the help of his lecturer.

We worked passionately right from the beginning, trying to ignore the scorching sun. We interrupted the work only to have lunch: bread, cheese, bacon and potatoes we roasted on the open fire.

For about a week our diggings revealed nothing. Then one day a girl came upon a fragment of

ceramics. We shouted “Eureka!” and were very happy. The professor’s hypothesis could be validated. From that moment on the discoveries followed. We were so eager to unearth as much as possible that we worked as long as there was still a bit of sunlight, covered in sweat and mud. There were novelties every day: after the fragments of ceramics that belonged to a vase, we found a pair of bronze earrings and a bracelet. Then came the skeleton of a woman.

Late in the evening, after having had dinner with our hosts, we joined our professor in the large yard of the peasant house he lived in. Seated on grass, with glasses of wine and dry and hard biscuits that someone passed around in a brown bag, we absorbed the professor’s words: “Our main task is not to mark the breaches in time, the discontinuity. Beyond any historical fracture there is a continuity of human life on earth; if you don’t have this sense of continuity, you are not suited to archeology.”

His words resounded solemnly in the night. We listened to him in silence, between the sky crammed with stars and the crickets chirping, and we felt transported back in time, towards those distant ancestors whose objects we touched during the day, and who had seen the same stars and heard the crickets as we did.

“If you do not fill the ruins of the past with life, this profession has no meaning. You have to live the past as you live the present, with the same emotional intensity; the past is not so distant as you think, and it is not vague at all. All our affections and impulses are as old as humanity: its past is here!” and he pointed to his heart.

I was so inflamed by his words! I owe him all the passion I put in my work. What a pity that such a mentor had a sudden heart attack and passed away before he was fifty!

Slowly we touched with our hands our connection to that primitive world. And we grew convinced that we were actually very close to those distant ancestors. It sufficed to live outside the city comfort in simple conditions, and life was reduced to elementary things. Modern civilization dwindled away; it seemed a superficial layer very easy to remove. Everything turned natural. Including making love. One evening I left the group with one of my fellow students, a young woman with round breasts, short hair and glasses. As we passed by a maize field, she took me by the hand and led me to a hidden grassy place; then she put her arms around my neck and we made love without words, letting our bodies enter in communication spontaneously. We continued with our encounters at night in the

open, and to me it was part of trying to live as naturally as those ancestors.

One day I was fortunate enough to find the handle of a bronze vase. The entire vase came out after the patient work of the whole group. Its handles were in the shape of snakes with human heads, which gave the professor the opportunity to speak about the cult of the snake in our folklore. It was the most important discovery of that digging session, and we had the satisfaction of seeing our names cited with the Professor's in a newspaper. Thanks to a coincidence, as we were talking about the symbolism of the snake, a car parked at the foot of the hill, and after half an hour the young journalist I had met at Mira's and a photographer materialized on our site. The journalist interviewed our professor, recording it in shorthand in a notebook. The photographer took some pictures of the site and the objects found. I greeted the journalist who recognized me, and when nobody was close to us, I asked: "How did it go with Mira that time? I saw you offering her flowers."

He avoided my gaze: "You know, Mira likes to have admirers, but stays out of reach." Then he walked away embarrassed to give one more hint to the photographer.

At the end of summer, we finished our work. It was time to close the site with a view to opening it again the following summer. We placed our discoveries under lock and key in the principal's office in the local elementary school. The professor decided our lecturer and I should come with a van to take the objects to the national history museum, where they had to be registered, cleaned and dated with Carbon 14.

I returned to Bucharest with everybody else. I had lost weight, was sun-tanned, had a wild beard. It was an effort to readapt to city life.

In the center I met Mira, elegant and suntanned; she stopped in front of me with a brilliant smile. She had barely returned from the film festival in Costinesti, on the Black Sea Coast, from where she had sent film reviews for the newspaper the journalist worked for. I did not respond to her adoringly, which she may have expected. I was rather quiet. She went on: "I've read about your discoveries. Your name was mentioned in the paper."

I thought how generous our professor was to name us all. Then Mira faked a reproach, pouting her lips: "You're a bad boy. I told you I was interested in your site, and you never offered to take me see

it."

I smiled, looked down at her elegant summer sandals: "I could not imagine you in that place where we ate unwashed fruit and took a rest lying on the earth."

"False idea! I adore the countryside!"

"Ok. You can still see the things we have found before we bring them to the museum. Will your father agree?"

She replied with a trace of embarrassment: "Dad will not know. He's on a trip to Budapest."

I thought: her interest in archeology was as fake as my beard was real. But then, I conceded: why not, she's eager to experience unusual things, let us give her a chance. Her father's absence made me accept the idea lightheartedly.

We travelled on a morning train in a full compartment, without much conversation. Seated by the window she admired the sunflower and corn fields in a pose of studied melancholy. I looked at her beautiful profile and wondered really what was genuine in this young woman, raised in the cult of her own beauty and intelligence. I wondered if she had had an affair with the journalist, but I decided that she had only flirted with him, to obtain the job as a newspaper correspondent to the film festival.

At the railway station, a peasant offered to give us a lift in his horse-drawn cart. When we arrived in the village, we went directly to the house where I had lived during the work at the site. When she saw Mira, the peasant woman who had hosted me exclaimed: "My God, what a beauty you are, my girl!"

The woman's spontaneous admiration pleased Mira so much that she took out a shawl from her luggage and offered it to her. As we were dining, she talked mostly to our host, asking her ridiculous things about the life in the country, and almost ignored me. I was ever more convinced she had not come for me, but to add an "exotic" experience to her life. At the end she asked a room for herself. The woman was puzzled at first, but then she shrugged whatever questions she might have had off, and her gaze to me meant: *a beauty does as she wants*. I went to bed convinced that I was only her guide through this experience, abandoning any hope of an adventure.

Next morning, I found Mira in the kitchen, chatting joyfully with the woman; without makeup she looked fresher. The new environment had done that for her. I was curious at that point what kind of a person was hiding behind the character her father had molded. After breakfast we walked to the school where we had left the objects from the dig. She dressed for the occasion with a pair of shorts and tennis shoes.

It was late August, a beautiful day with a very clear sky, rust-colored earth and vines loaded with mature grapes. I told her briefly the history of the village and explained that the zone had long ago been inhabited by other people. She took me by the arm, and I hoped that gesture was her acceptance of a closer bond. The school was locked, and we had to find the janitor who opened the principal's office where we had left the objects. I was not going to open all the cardboard boxes, but I showed her ceramics fragments, the bronze earrings and the bracelets. As she was looking at the objects, touching my hand when I was giving them to her, I started wondering again if she had come there merely out of cultural curiosity.

She was holding the jewels in her hands and whispered in a quivering voice, "Who knows what beauty may have worn them!"

It dawned on me she realized that, though the beauty had died, her accessories survived thousands of years. She was revealing her deep fears maybe. I started to speak in a pale imitation of my professor: "These relics you are impressed by are like seeds buried in the earth meant to speak to us about life, not death. Isn't it strange that lifeless objects are a testimony of life itself? Of course, we only guess the meanings those people attributed to each and every object, and why it was placed in that woman's tomb, but, beyond meanings, there is the pulsation of life they evoke."

She was listening mesmerized: I was able to say things her friends accustomed to literary criticism never thought about. Her disconcerting arrogance was dissipating. I had the impression for the first time that I could lead the game and the idea exalted me. I imagined myself attempting to cancel the bookish sophisticated Mira and pulling out her vital instinct instead. What a nice impact our professor had on me!

We had lunch with our host, and I was pleasantly surprised to see Mira eating fried chicken and polenta with her hands. In the afternoon she asked me to take her to the dig. We took the same path I

had walked daily through the summer. As we were crossing the garden she asked, “Tell me, how do you imagine the world you are unearthing?”

I started to talk with passion: “It was a simple world; those people did not live very differently from the peasants who inhabit the valley today. They roasted their meat the same way and ate it with their hands, as you did today. Yet I think they were more in harmony with nature and the cosmos than we are.”

“Can you imagine me in that world? Who could I have been?”

“You would have been the tribe chief’s daughter, of course. The most beautiful and most desired. The one touched by the grace of gods.”

At that point I was shamelessly courting her, but she liked it.

“These places,” I went on, “were only a little wilder than they are now. They may not have had ordered gardens, like our peasant host, but I’m sure the hill slopes looked more or less the same. Unless the climate was different. And the wild rose bush you see there, may have grown out of roots that have existed since then.”

“Was this the only rose they knew back then?”

“Yes, but it may have been important in their rituals. One could conjure up that its thorny twigs could have been used in initiation rites for the young boys, and the fruit placed on the women’s womb for fertility purposes. And, yes, the older women decorated the hair of the tribe chief’s daughter with its delicate flowers.”

At that time of the year the flowers had turned into red fruits. Mira reached out to pick one of them; as if that wild bush had required a sacrifice, a lower branch scratched her above the right knee. Despair rose in her eyes at the sight of the blood line. I was quick to say: “As the tribe chief’s daughter you cannot make a fuss about this little scar.”

Then I knelt spontaneously, seized her leg and sucked the blood, cleaning the thin wound with the tongue, as animals do, the peasants' children when they get hurt, and those distant primitives did. Mira was very tense; she hadn't expected such a direct contact with me so soon.

We continued to climb the hill on the narrow path, I walked in front of her, she followed in silence. Close to the top I turned around and took her by the hand, to help her with the last strap. When we were on the dig site, I showed her where exactly we had found each object, I talked to her about the woman's skeleton, that was now well packed at the school: "This tomb must have belonged to an important woman of the tribe. She was buried with much care. She could have been the tribe chief, if they practiced matriarchy, or the priestess who directed all the rituals. She must have known a lot about life and death, about the spirits that kept nature alive." I was sure I was conquering her with my words. Her comment cut my enthusiasm short: "Why don't you write all these things? You could have many readers."

She had not been carried away at all, everything had to be turned into written fact, into a cultural expression to impress the others. No thought was allowed to get lost in the wind.

My answer betrayed my disappointment: "Listen, I just want to study archeology. If one day I write about my work, that will be fine. Till then, I'm practicing how to situate myself in time, read the messages of the past. I am not a showman. Not everything has to be published."

I was touching her sensitive points, she was hesitant for a second, then she sent me back a glint of anger, quickly turned into cold contempt, as if saying: *you do not grasp much, do you?*

"Listen," I added, "let us leave archeology, and take a walk through the vineyards to see if the grapes are ripe."

We walked on the slope in the burning sunset light; the scenery was absorbing, and she liked it. We found ripe grapes, I took a grape, broke it and said: "My granny told me that since she was a little girl she used to pass ripe grapes on her lips, so that her kiss would be sweet in the future."

This was true, I hadn't invented it. Mira liked that; she came closer with a provocative expression. I opened the grape and passed it slowly on her lips, she did not protest at all, and then we met in a

timid and slow kiss. I had a moment of loss, I believed for an instant that she could hide a welcoming woman inside. She seemed to have forgotten her self-control. But I was wrong. She opened her eyes, detached herself from me and said in the indulgent tone of a school mistress, “Not bad! Not bad at all!”

“Never mind,” I commented downcast. My romantic side reclaimed some emotions to be experienced together. I hated her being so detached. We walked downwards towards the valley in silence. I was cut off, she seemed to panic. Walking side by side with a man indifferent to her charm was the worst thing that could happen to her. She tried hard to start a conversation on primitive life. I answered her questions unwillingly.

“See, we are no longer able to live in a natural way like those ancestors. We are full of mental constructions, intellectual prejudices, we repress our instincts, we are not free, we apply our critical spirit to everything…”

Mira put her arms around my neck: “I would like to be lost in nature like them, to abandon all my cerebral constructions, to be spontaneous.” She sounded sincere and this gave me an unexpected inspiration. What if I could help her free herself? I took her by the hand and when we reached the riverbank it was already dark. We picked some dry wood and I showed her how to start a fire with sticks, then we roasted some corn on the cob. She seemed more relaxed; she enjoyed those carefree moments. As the corn was roasting, I held her tightly in my arms, as if she were a small child. She seemed to abandon herself finally. I kept speaking, looking at the sparkles of the fire: “We have to discover what makes us feel close to those ancestors. We meet in the reverence of the sacred, in our feeling of fear, in love. In the ritual that has joined a man with a woman for millennia.”

As I was speaking, I started caressing her arms. She let me do so, a little rigid, her eyes lost in the flames. I could not perceive any responsive resonance in her, she was just passive. I made love to her at first with tenderness and curiosity, then I became more and more obstinate and lonely. Her body was joined to mine, but I could not understand if she was minimally desiring me, while I was sure that her mind was wandering away from there. At the end she turned perfectly lucid and cold.

“What is going on?” A cold shiver was running down my spine.

“Nothing, nothing at all!” she reassured me and pushed me away with disgust. “Truth is all this is absurd and it’s better not to waste our time,” she said while tidying her clothes and her hair with nervous gestures. We ceased to talk to each other. I put out the fire, and we returned to the peasant woman’s house, crossing the dark fields, accompanied by the crickets’ chirping. I walked in front of her, feeling bad, she followed quietly, withdrawn within herself. I tried to remember the entire afternoon and understand where I had gone wrong. I wanted to hold her by the hand, to help her walk in the dark, but she rejected me. When we were back at the peasant woman’s house, I could see her in the light: she had an offended air, and I had an intuition: “You do not feel…”

She was deeply troubled by my words and blushed: “It’s not true… actually you men lack the subtlety… you are not competent.” She looked at me as if I were a disappointing object.

Then I understood it all: Mira had never loved anyone beside herself and her father. Maybe her father had planted deeply in her soul the contempt for all her possible admirers. She could not help feeling their touch as a profanation of her body, and her critical sense prevented her from letting herself go. If making love was not joining with a man in a rhythm, why was she doing it? Was it out of a sense of duty to her emancipation, or because she aspired blindly to feel the ecstasy of that union without ever reaching it? Poor Mira! She did not even guess that in love you have to offer yourself recklessly, otherwise you remain in the barren domain of death. I stayed awake till late with a sense that I was wrong: I was too presumptuous to think that I could change Mira. Then exhausted, I fell deeply asleep. When I woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. My host told me: “I tried to wake you up, but there was no way… The Miss left very early and did not want you to know, but I came in secret, I thought it was better if you were warned… the train left a while ago.”

At that point I stayed on another few days, until our assistant lecturer came with the van to collect the objects. He was glad to find me there. We covered the site and checked the roof the carpenter of the village had built above the excavated part, as the rainy autumn was only weeks ahead. Then we went to the school, checked each object with the list, packed them carefully and placed them in the van. In a corner we set our tools, mattocks, trowels, brushes and the two shovels.

The lecturer took a train to Constanta: he said he needed to visit some relatives. I was alone with the driver; I had the entire responsibility of taking the stuff safely to Bucharest. As the van was making its way on the country road, I noticed a wild rose bush on the roadside. I asked the driver to stop, put on

a pair of dusty work gloves, picked up a shovel and ran towards that bush. With decided movements, I dug around it, until I was able to pull it out, with part of its roots. Then I placed it in the van over the carboard boxes. The driver asked me: “What the hell are you doing with that piece of weed? Where are you going to plant it?”

Late at night, when we arrived in Bucharest, I asked the driver to take me first to Mira’s address, and once there, I pulled the wild rose bush out of the van and planted it on the stairs, between the two marble hemispheres, rigid and cold, meaningless as the breasts of a sterile goddess.

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.