

## *In between Father and Mother*

*I wake to* loud voices in the kitchen. Through the closed bedroom door I can hear Tata and Mama shouting in anger. A faint light from the street lamp comes through the thin curtains covering the bedroom windows, but it is not enough to make out things in the room. Maybe it is still only evening, and the whole night is ahead of me? My older brother Ferkó, who sleeps alone in a large twin bed, is not moving.

I feel alone and miss the comfort of Mama's warm body. I reach over to Tata's bed, thinking that I might somehow find him there, even though I can recognize his voice in the kitchen. This darkness surrounds me tightly. I wait patiently, hoping that the voices will stop and Mama will come back. But Tata's anger pounds through the door like a weighty hammer. I've never heard him so angry. I cover myself with the thick woolen blanket and shut my eyes, trying to force sleep to come. If only I could not hear them! But they go on and on.

My parents have twin beds pushed together, and I am supposed to sleep in the middle. However, being in between the two beds is not comfortable, so I always end up on Mama's side. I have been there ever since I can remember.

Tata goes to bed early because he is the first to get up in the morning. I, on the other hand, often go to sleep with Mama, feeling her surround me like a soft and secure comforter, her left arm folded over me. I like playing with the soft skin of her bent elbow. Tata is always close by, though at arm's length, and I can usually hear his heavy breathing. His pinkish dentures are on the night table in a clear glass, his face is puckered up, and his lips tremble ever so slightly as he snores.

I don't think Tata likes this sleeping arrangement with me in between the two of them, especially now that I am eight. One night when I was much smaller I woke up realizing that I was in his bed, while he and Mama were together in the other bed, whispering. Feeling like I had lost my rightful spot, I started whimpering, pleading to be allowed back by Mama. It was really dark, but I remember after a while Tata lifting me with his strong hands and depositing me by her.

"Here. You can have him," he mumbled while Mama embraced and kissed me softly on the hair as I found my usual spooning place in her arms.

"Sleep sweetie, sleep," she whispered in my ears. Enveloped by her warmth and soft fragrance, I felt victorious as I fell asleep.

It is dark now, and the loud voices in the kitchen will not stop. Why are they fighting?

Tata almost never raises his voice towards Mama, and when that happens, she never returns his shouts. She turns her back on him and on us too, and spends days in the kitchen nook, working quietly and crying softly. She can cry for days. I am so afraid now that I finally get up, walk over

to the door and open it slowly. The strong kitchen light hits me in the eyes, and I can barely see. My parents stop, surprised, but turn back to each other almost immediately. Tata is by the kitchen stove in his long cotton nightshirt that reaches almost to the ground, moving his arms as he yells. Suddenly, his right hand rises and he slaps Mama across the face. It makes a very loud noise. For a moment they are both suspended, as if in disbelief.

When she starts crying softly, I run over and embrace her legs, her robe smooth on my face.

"I don't care if you leave," Tata shouts. Then he turns around, walks into the bedroom and slams the door behind him.

Mama collapses back on a kitchen chair and lays her head over her crossed arms. I do not want her to cry, so I hug her. I caress her hair. I softly kiss her. She lowers her head onto my shoulder in a familiar gesture and goes on crying.

"Are you going to leave?" I ask. I wonder where she would go in the middle of the night. We don't have any relatives in Cluj.

"Yes," she whispers quietly, weeping on my shoulder now. "I cannot live here any longer."

After a while she looks me in the eyes and strokes my head. "I must wash and pack my suitcase."

When she gets up from the chair, I hold onto her arms, not wanting her to leave. Finally, I plead, "Will you take me with you? Please take me with you. I want to come with you."

She looks at me sadly and hugs me. After a long silence she says gently, "Let's go back to bed, Misike."

We enter the dark bedroom with her hand weighing on my shoulder, as if I am carrying her. Tata is still awake, but his body is turned away from us, facing the window. I can hear his fast, angry breathing. I snuggle up to Mama

without saying a word, close my eyes tightly so I won't see him and fall asleep in her arms.



My parents, more than any of my friends' parents, are not shy in showing their love for me. I can still feel the soft, round shape of Father's loving body surrounding my shoulders with his arms. He gently rocks me back and forth, places wet kisses on both my cheeks, and scruffs my hair while looking at me with a deep smile. Sometimes, in the passion of his embrace, his denture falls a little out of place, hanging as if in mid-air in his open mouth. I know never to laugh at him because of the intensity of his expression, which at times almost scares me; it is as if he is overwhelmed with both pleasure and pain. If I have a headache, he massages my forehead with rubbing alcohol, moving his short, thick fingers from the center of my forehead towards the two sides, carefully delineating my eyebrows, following down behind my ears, towards my nape. At this point he always makes me laugh by putting one of his hands under the collar of my shirt and softly tickling my back. Next he rubs my hands, pulling and twisting my palms and fingers, pressing into the flesh of my forearm all the way up to my elbows, and ending the session by suddenly twisting my head towards the right and left, as though checking if I am still hurting.

I think Ferkó is Father's favorite child. He receives from Father all the affection and support he does not accept easily from Mother. I, on the other hand, always run to Mama. She is a soft, loving person, silent and demonstrative in her affection. She spends almost all the time in the kitchen, working, and with me she is present in a quiet, sometimes distant way, looking on and encouraging me with her eyes. On my first day of school Mama crouches at

my level by the kitchen table, buttoning my dark-blue school uniform all the way up. She hands me my new brown knapsack.

“I made you a cheese sandwich and an apple.”

I tighten my arms close to my body, refusing to put on the knapsack, and tears come to my eyes. “I don’t want to go to school, Mama! I don’t!”

She remains silent for a while. “Misike, you will like it.” She wipes away my tears with the tips of her fingers, which feel warm on my cheek. “Remember how much Ferkó likes it.”

My brother Ferkó went to the same School Number 5 on Emil Isaac Street, where I am headed. Even though we speak Hungarian at home, our parents decided that we would attend a Romanian school. “It is more practical,” Tata said, “and if you want to get ahead, you can do it much better in Romanian.”

On Ferkó’s first day of school, I accompanied him and Mama, amazed at how happy he looked. He always liked school and did well in it.

“But I don’t like school, Mama, even if Ferkó does. I want to stay home,” I persist.

Mama takes my hand and slowly pulls me out of the apartment without saying a word. We walk through the courtyard, exit, and go along Emil Zola Street towards the school, which is only a few minutes away. The morning sky is covered with dense black clouds, moving fast, preparing for a late-summer storm. Out of the corner of my eye I see other kids with their mothers, walking in the same direction. No one is crying, and I feel ashamed.

“Mama, I don’t want to go to school.” I stubbornly pull on her arm, pleading again.

“Come on, sweetie. You’ll be all right.” Her hand feels warm and reassuring.

At the corner of Emil Zola and Buzăului Street I notice that Mama is not picking the most direct road but

leads me towards a narrow side street. A boy my age accompanied by his mother is catching up with us, walking in a hurry. He is dressed in a blue uniform just like mine and wears a similar brown knapsack on his back. They are chatting, so I bury my face into Mama's soft skirt to hide my tears. At the end of the street, she nudges me to turn around and head back.

"Are we going home?" I ask, a glimmer of hope in my voice, but Mama doesn't answer. However, we are still going in the direction of the school.

Eventually, when my crying stops completely, she crouches down and looks me in the eyes. She kisses me tenderly on the cheeks, wipes a few remaining tears and hugs me. Then she brushes off some dust from my navy blue jacket. "Do you still like your uniform?"

I nod and smile. It was Ferkó's uniform, but he outgrew it and they bought him a new one when he left for Bucharest. Mama spent two days adjusting the hand-me-down uniform so it would be just right and look like new on me. She had me stand perfectly still on the kitchen table, while sticking needles in the pants and the sleeves of the jacket. She cut, sewed and ironed everything carefully. When it was done, I stood all dressed up in front of the mirror in the bedroom. I liked it a lot.

"It makes you look older and more handsome," Mama said, standing by my side and looking at me in the mirror. "I am very happy that you're going to school. You will learn a lot of new things."

"But I don't like school, Mama."

"Why?"

"I want to stay home with you."

"Did you know that Romi will be in your class?"

I did, but it didn't matter that my best friend would be with me.

"It will be very much like kindergarten, Misike. You went there for a few years and you liked it. You already

know how to write your name, don't you? And tell me, who was the best math student in kindergarten?"

Mrs. Volnea, my kindergarten teacher, made us all come to the front of the class and sit on the shiny parquet floor while we practiced addition. Whenever someone did not know the result, she would look at me for the correct number, and I felt truly proud when I answered. When Tata and Mama came to visit in the spring, she explained to them how good I was with numbers. Tata looked at me proudly and hugged me closely. "You will do well in school."

"Misike," Mama tells me softly now as we stand together on Buzăului Street, "after school I'll wait for you at home with dinner ready. I'll make macaroni with farmer's cheese and lots of sour cream on top, the way you like it."

We start walking again towards the school. As we get closer to the main iron gate, she squeezes my hand tightly. We enter the familiar courtyard. I often come here with my friends to bounce the soccer ball off the cement wall of the gym. The schoolyard is full of children now, running around happily. Mama pushes me softly towards a group of adults. An older woman in a grayish dress and a dark-blue sweater notices us. Her black hair is tied up in the back, and she wears glasses.

"Good morning! This is Mihai Grünfeld," Mama introduces me in Romanian, and I shake my teacher's hand the way Mama told me to do.

The teacher looks at me through her thick glasses, smiles and tells me to go and line up with a group of children by the wall. She'll be over in a minute. Mama walks with me, holding my hand tight, and when we get to the wall, kisses me a last time. Suddenly, we hear a ringing sound and see an old man nearby shaking a bell with both hands raised above his head. I wish Mama would stay with me longer.

“Good bye, Misike,” she whispers softly. “I will wait for you at home.” She turns around and walks away slowly. At the other side of the gate she waves to me again.

Then I hear my new teacher's sharp voice: “Line up children, in groups of two.” We are marched up the stairs into the building.



My parents are not demonstrative towards each other. I almost never see them kiss or embrace, or even fight. They are supportive and considerate, but they do not speak much. Engrossed in their own thoughts they live together, yet very separate. Before my brother and I were born, they must have shared with each other the horrors of their concentration camp experiences. Father survived Dachau and Mother, Auschwitz. The names of these two places sound terrible, but I don't really even know what country they are in.

They must have felt horrible after liberation, when they returned to Romania and their spouses and their families did not come back. And when they started a new family and had two children—my brother and me—they must have felt hope. But they never share these memories with us, or in front of us. I remember them holding hands once—only once—while looking at each other with desiring eyes.

It is a Saturday evening and I am seven years old. I am playing with my stuffed dog in the bedroom on my brother's bed—Ferkó has been sent to Bucharest—bandaging with pieces of cloth the dog's broken glass eye. He is my only stuffed animal. Evening is slowly coming, the lights are on, and I can see shadows through the bedroom windows. The round brown pupil of my dog is gone completely, leaving half a grayish white globe that makes him look as if he is glancing constantly to the left, in pain.

Tata and Mama are getting dressed quietly. From the wardrobe by the bed, Mama selects a brownish silk dress with tiny white polka dots. She puts on thin nylon stockings and brown high-heeled shoes. Tata is almost dressed: white shirt and a colorful tie with diagonal black-and-red stripes.

“Do you have the shoe polish,” he asks Mama, holding a pair of black shoes in his hands.

“The jar is in the kitchen, in the corner under the coat hanger.”

Mama is slowly brushing back her brown-grey hair in front of the mirror. She puts on red lipstick and powders her cheeks from a little round container. When they are both ready, they walk over to where I sit with my wounded stuffed dog on Ferkó’s bed. Tata is holding Mama’s hand and his eyes are shining.

“We are going to go to a movie tonight.” His voice is soft.

“Can I come with you?” I ask.

“No, tonight we are going just the two of us.” He puts his arm around Mama’s shoulders and draws her near.

“But it is already dark outside!” I insist, still hoping.

“You can lock the door. No one will bother you. Mama left you a cup of chocolate milk on the kitchen table, and some bread for when you are tired. You can eat and go to sleep.”

“When will you be back?”

They look at each other and smile. “In a few hours. After the film.”

“I am afraid to stay home alone,” I plead.

“You will be all right, Misike,” Mama reassures me. “I will put the radio on for you, so you won’t feel alone. When you are tired, just go to sleep.”

When Tata kisses me good-bye his face is smooth, smelling freshly of eau de cologne. His eyes are full of laughter. They shine like coal. Mama looks beautiful with

her hair newly curled and her red lipstick. I badly want to go with them, but I know that there is no space for me in between them, not this evening.



Mother and Ferkó fight a lot. He always defies her. Their relationship is a continual power struggle out of which Ferkó emerges victorious more often than she does. She tries to reason with him, to reaffirm her control, but the struggle always ends in a loud screaming match, and Ferkó leaves the apartment, slams the door and does not return for hours. Mother collapses on a chair, sobbing. At these moments I hug her softly and let her weep on my shoulder for a long time, imploring her not to cry while caressing her soft hair and wanting to cry with her. After a while she calms down and quietly goes back into the kitchen nook where she withdraws, sometimes for days in a row, depressed and unavailable. At meal times she silently comes out, serves us food without even a glance, and returns quietly to her work. There is nothing I can do to cheer her up.

One autumn evening Mama and I are sewing together in the kitchen. It is dark outside. Mama sits high up, on top of the table, close to the hanging light so she can see better. Her feet are resting on the chair beside the one I am sitting in. In her left hand she holds a shiny wooden mushroom with a stretched brown sock on it. She is patiently mending a large ankle hole, while I am doing cross-stitching.

“Misike, would you thread the needle for me? I cannot see the hole well enough.”

I take the tiny needle and the black thread happily, feeling proud to be able to help her. I wet the end of the thread in my mouth, the way she showed me, twist it between my thumb and index finger, put it through the

needle and return it to her. With two fingers, she makes a knot at one end and goes on sewing.

When I finish my line of stitches, I show it to Mama. "What do I do at the corner?"

"You should go on for a few more crosses, but don't start the other line at the end. It looks better if the two lines overlap a few crosses at all four corners."

I do what she tells me and admire the result. It is going to be a real mat. Maybe for beneath the flowerpot on the round bedroom table.

"Mama, when is Ferkó coming back from Bucharest?"

Last summer my brother left for Bucharest to stay with our relatives and attend school there because we did not have enough money for all of us to live on. Ferkó cried a lot the day he had to leave, and I felt really sorry.

"I don't know, Misike," Mama answers. She remains silent for a long moment.

"Is he coming back next year?"

"I don't know, my love, I told you, but you shouldn't worry. He is safe with Zoli *bácsi* and Ida *néni*, and he likes it there."

Mama seems to be concentrating on her sewing, carefully filling in the ankle hole with tight crisscrosses, but when I look up I see on her face, illuminated by the light bulb nearby, a few teardrops slowly rolling down. She seems to be looking out the window, even though it is dark outside.

"Why are you crying, Mama?"

She remains silent. Her glasses are fogged up a little, and her brown grayish hair, parted in the middle, surrounds her face.

"Sometimes I feel very tired, Misike," she says after a while, looking at me through the curtain of her parted hair. "I just feel very tired."

"Why, Mama? Do you wish Ferkó were here?"

“Yes. But that's not why I am crying.”

“Do you wish Tata earned more money?”

“No, Misike. I am just very sad about everything. There are times when I wish that an atom bomb fell on us. That would end it all.”

“Do you mean, like a bomb falling out of an airplane?”

“Yes. Like in Hiroshima.”

“What happened in Hiroshima, Mama?”

“The Americans dropped an atom bomb, and it all ended in one second.”

“Would we all die, if an atom bomb fell on us?”

“Yes. Everything would just stop.”

I don't know what to say. Mama's eyes are still shining with the teardrops. From where I am, in my chair, I embrace her feet. “I don't want to die, Mama.”

She continues looking out the window towards something I cannot see.



Father works constantly. Monday through Saturday, and half the day on Sunday. He leaves for his job at the market long before I wake up and returns for our main meal at 1:30—around the time I also arrive home from school. We sit together at the kitchen table. Mother serves us. After bringing the food, she also sits down, across from me. We do not talk much, but eat and are done. Mother gathers the dishes, takes them into the kitchen nook and washes them on the stove in a large dish with warm water. From the radio behind him, Father grabs his old reading glasses, sets them on the tip of his nose, turns his chair at an angle so he can cross his legs, and settles in for half an hour of reading *Elöre*, the Hungarian paper we receive daily. After a while Father walks into the bedroom and lies down for a short sleep, snoring softly with his dentures just a little out of

place. He only takes them out at night. Around 4:30, he returns to work and does not come home again until late in the evening, when he has a light supper—which we do not eat together—and goes to sleep early, all by himself.

Father seems old to me. He looks a little older than my friends' parents, and is different in other ways too. He hates noise, so we can never speak loudly or slam the doors, which I would really love to do; whistling irritates him terribly, and he cannot stand any kind of loud music. He never sings, and I do not play with him—at home or in the park. He does not take me to the public pool, or even read to me from a book.

Sometimes he goes by himself to bathe in the River Someş, and on a rare occasion he takes me with him. By the tall bushes on the side of the river he strips down to his long underwear—he does not own a bathing suit. Feeling the stones under his feet, he unsteadily walks into the middle of the river and sits down in the shallow water. The complete whiteness of his body against the shining water and green trees always surprises me. He soaps up, sitting there all by himself, as I watch from the riverbank—he never submerges—and splashes water over his soft upper body. This always seems a little odd to me, but I wait patiently, pretending that he and I are not together and hoping that no acquaintance comes and recognizes us.

May 1<sup>st</sup>, the Workers Day, and August 23<sup>rd</sup>, the National Liberation Day, are special, and Father and I always spend the whole day together. Father has to participate in the twice-yearly marches past the city authorities, celebrating the communist leadership and all their accomplishments. This is always a happy day for me.

Early in the morning, I put on clean shorts, a white shirt, and around my neck, I tie my red triangular Pioneer scarf. Father also dresses nicely: a clean short-sleeved shirt, freshly ironed pants and highly polished shoes replace the

half-destroyed boots he always wears for work. After a slow breakfast, he and I walk over to Napoca Street.

Most of the city is gathered there in groups that are formed according to types of workplaces. Father and I look for the employees of *Aprozar*, the state enterprise he works for, and when we find them, we receive banners and pictures of our national leaders whose names I recognize but do not know much about. Attendance is taken by someone, and we all practice shouting as loud as we are able slogans in the leaders' praise. I am happy and excited out there, surrounded by the crowd and feeling the spring sun warm me. I like being with Father. When the time comes, we start marching, holding a placard up high. I walk beside Father, feeling his strong, rough hand envelop mine. When we arrive at the bleachers, built in front of the Romanian City Opera especially for this occasion, we start shouting the slogans and waving the pictures.

"Look straight at them," Father says, pointing to the people on the bleachers.

From up there, unknown faces are looking in my direction, smiling and waving their hands. Then, a few blocks down, as the crowds disperse, everyone going their own way, and we head as fast as we can for Union Square, where we take the trolley to Hoia. This is a wide meadow on a hill, a few kilometers out of town, where we just lay in the grass, drink beer and lemonade, eat *mititei*—Romanian hamburgers—and watch folk dancing and puppet shows the entire day.

One spring we push our way into a bus to Hoia so full we barely fit in it. We get off twenty minutes later: tired, sweating and happy. Tata takes my hand, and we start off up the unpaved dusty street, with no sidewalk. I can feel his rough hand full of tiny cuts, with wide palms and thick fingers. His hand is always warm and solid, even in the winter. As we reach the top of the hill, the early May sun heats the crown of my head and my shoulders. Tata

breathes heavily, and he wants to stop for a second and let others get ahead of us.

“There is no hurry, Misike. We have the entire day here. Your mother is not waiting for us with dinner.”

“What is Mama doing at home alone?” I ask. She never comes with us to Hoia, and she must be lonely.

Tata does not answer, and we start walking again. We turn to the left and face a large meadow sprinkled throughout with small groups of people sitting on the grass, mostly gathered around a podium in the middle of the meadow. Ahead of us the road full of people follows the edge of the forest over a hill to more meadows, with more podiums and more music. On the right the wooden water mill of the Folklore Museum is closed. The familiar sound of folk music blasts out of two huge loud speakers by the podium, and a small group of people are folk dancing on it. We head towards it, and on the way Tata stops at a stand and buys himself a bottle of beer and me a couple of *mititei* and a bottle of green lemonade. We find a place not so far from the podium on the sloped hill about eye level with the performers—which surprises me since Tata cannot stand loud music—and we sit down on the grass. A group of about fifteen dancers, men dressed in colorful peasant suits, hats with flowers and short sticks in their hands are performing a dance called *Călușarii*, from Oltenia, a southern region of Romania. They dance in two rows, facing each other, jumping over their sticks and feigning a battle. I watch their familiar hopping movements to the fast music while I tap the rhythm with my fingers and imagine myself as one of the dancers. I would like that.

After finishing my *mititei* and lemonade, I lay my head on Tata’s lap and look up at the sky. It is mostly blue and wide and silent, while the music by the podium is jumping at a fast pace. High up there, the strong wind blows the white puffy clouds as if hurrying them somewhere, maybe towards the city and out of my sight. Tata lays his

heavy hand on my shoulder, arranges my body a little so my head fits comfortably. I like the friendly weight of his hand on my shoulder and cover it with my own hands, recognizing the dry thin skin of the back of his hand. We just lie there silently, staring into the deep-blue sky and smelling the fresh green grass around us.

"Tata, do we have any relatives in America?" I ask after a while. He does not answer immediately.

"Why do you ask, Misike?"

"I don't know. I was just wondering."

"I don't think anyone survived when I returned from the concentration camp. Everyone died there."

"Did your sister, Blanka *néni*, also go to the camp?"

"No, she was not deported. She was lucky."

"Who died there, Tata?" He remains quiet for a long while. Then he whispers. "Listen to the music, Misike." He seems to be somewhere else.

We keep quiet for a while, not knowing what to say, but soon I continue my questioning. "Tata, how do you know that everyone died?"

He looks at me gently, but I feel his heavy hand on my shoulder tighten a little.

"Actually, I don't know. Maybe someone did survive."

"Could they be in America?"

"Why do you ask, Misike?"

"Maybe someone could send me a pair of blue jeans from America." There is silence for a while, and I wonder what he is thinking about. He slowly caresses my shoulder. "Would you like that?"

"Yes, very much. I would really like to have a pair of blue jeans. None of my friends has one yet, so I would be the first one. And they are fantastic."

"Misike, do you know something? Maybe someone did survive and I could try to find out. Would you like me to do that?"

“Yes. Please.”

“I will write to America, Misike,” he whispers. “I am sure we will find someone to send you a pair of blue jeans.”

A new group of dancers come up onto the stage. I look at their wide cotton pants, embroidered at the bottom, and their tight vests. I like folk music, but not the way they dress. I don't like peasant clothes. Maybe Tata told me the truth, and I will really get a pair of blue jeans. American blue jeans. Wouldn't that be great! I close my eyes and slowly drift away towards the city along with the white puffy clouds, wearing a new pair of blue jeans as all my friends, from the ground, admire them.