

PROLOGUE

People forget years and remember moments.

Ann Beattie, *The Doctor's House*

It is raining this February morning in Guadalajara, Mexico. The thick drizzle passes through the thin cotton curtains, sending cold waves into the apartment, chilling my body deeply. The friendly Mexican couple above warned us that this season we would see powerful gusts of wind and dust storms, but something must have gone awry. Late last night dark clouds, heavy with water, expanded suddenly in all directions, covering the city. Now I feel surrounded. From the wardrobe, I grab my only wool sweater—I didn't think I would need any here in Mexico—and put it on. Framed by my office window, the rubber tree in front of the house looks undaunted as usual. I see it there every morning, solidly planted, with thick roots, the size of my wrist, running up and down on the outside of the dark brown trunk, pushing out in every direction to escape the gray cement that covers the sidewalk. Nothing affects this tree: the rain, the cold or the heat. Not even the people. About two months ago a couple of working men dressed in blue overalls came from the municipality.

"The tree is too dense and the leaves cover the street lights above," one of them said, "so your neighbors feel unsafe. It's too dark." The workers' eyes were a little pinched, like those of the natives. On their feet they had huaraches, worn-out brown leather sandals, and sharp machetes hung loosely from their belts. The two men pulled out their

machetes and with strong, deep blows, they cut deeply into the tree. One of them was on top of a short aluminum ladder; the other one, on the main trunk. When they were done, the tree looked as if a hurricane had just torn it apart. Beyond a few short, lateral branches sticking out from the main trunk like chopped-off arms, there was nothing left. No leaves. How could they do that? I thought, looking at what remained of that beautiful tree.

I walked out to ask one of the workers, “Won’t it die?”

He saw my dismay and smiled at this gringo who doesn't know about trees. “Don’t worry! It will be back in a few weeks, with heavier leaves and thicker branches.”

Listening to this man speak with a deep friendly voice and courteous smile about the rubber tree, I remembered something that by then I should have known well, something I saw in my own parents and my uncle Zoli, my only relatives who returned from the concentration camps: their tenacity, their will to live and persevere under any condition. Always.

I sit now at my desk, in front of the light-blue Macintosh screen, as I have done almost every morning since we arrived here from Poughkeepsie. I am often interrupted by images of my children: My son Dani's beautiful brown face, framed by his thick black hair, his svelte eleven-year-old body seated on the floor, his eyes concentrating on his beading, carefully passing the needle through tiny colorful crystal balls while following a precise pattern he thought out by himself; my eight-and-a-half-year-old daughter Maya lying down on the couch, her feet in the air, holding in her hands, above her face, the first volume of Harry Potter, following the lines on the page with her tiny index finger so she won't miss any detail of a book she has already read twice. Her black hair is parted in the middle and sticks out in two pigtails like Pipi Longstocking's. She stops her reading every so often, and on a small four-by-six card she makes a list of magical spells, memorizes them carefully and later tries them out on me, extending a threatening short wooden stick in her right hand.

I freeze, fall over, make faces or try to levitate while she laughs, her black eyes on fire.

I try to recall scenes from my own childhood, playing with my parents, but nothing comes to me. Those moments must be lost somewhere in the folds of my own memory. Or maybe they never existed. I don't know. Both my parents returned from the concentration camps without their spouses, children or parents. I do not remember them playing with me. I don't think they played. They carried their own memories, without sharing any of them with my brother or me probably trying to shield us from the horror they had lived through. But they could not shield us from their pain, from their sense of doom and depression, which both my brother and I internalized so well.

After surviving Dachau, my father returned to Cluj, his native city in Romania, and buried himself in his work, attempting to reconstruct his life while living in a harsh socialist regime. He was a quiet man, walking softly on the earth as if trying not to make noise. He accepted whatever came towards him, acquiescent, even resigned. But there was strength in him, a stubborn desire to go on and survive at any cost, despite all odds. So he lived until eighty-four and proudly saw his children escape to the West and succeed: my brother Ferkó is an accomplished medical doctor in Canada and I am a college professor of Spanish and Latin American Literature at Vassar.

Mother was a frail person. She was depressed even before she was taken away to Auschwitz, and when she returned she never found her purpose. The two children she brought into the world with my father helped her for a while, but she was not a fighter. She didn't have it in her, so little by little she faded away, brokenhearted and sick. As a child my brother tried to stay away from her unhappiness and depression as much as he could. I, on the other hand, sank into it, trying to hold her up and be there for her. It is easy for me to recall the shape of her head on my shoulder, crying

softly. She died in 1969, shortly after my brother and I escaped to the West. I wish she could see us today and be here with our families, with our children.

Dani and Maya are at the American school in Guadalajara studying half of the subjects in Spanish during the morning, and the other half in the afternoon in English. They can switch easily between the two languages just as I could switch between Romanian and Hungarian when I was their age. My wife Anne is also at school, learning Spanish, while I am here remembering my own childhood and seeking to make sense of my growing up in Cluj, a small city of about two-hundred thousand inhabitants in Transylvania, the northwestern part of Romania. I hope, through this recollection, to understand my history and that of my parents, to figure out why so much of my life in Romania was foreshadowing my escape from there, my need to leave and find another country and a better life. And what propelled me to live in Israel and Italy, Sweden and Canada before I finally settled down in the United States? What is it that made me stop being a lathe operator and urged me to study Spanish and French and become a professor?

Memories do not come easily to me, and their meaning is far from clear. For a while I actually thought that I had no memories, and that my childhood of thirty-five years ago was lost. However, as I start to write, bringing back scenes from my childhood and adolescence, more and more of my past rushes in, calling out to be seen, recognized, recorded so it will not be forgotten. I know that I must recount to my children these stories of growing up in Romania and of my escape from behind the Iron Curtain. They will need them as I also need my parents' stories in order to understand who they were, who I am. I wish my parents had spoken to me more about their past and their childhood and had described what happened in the concentration camps, no matter how hard it was for them. But they didn't. So besides a few stories, I am

left with their sense of depression, of impotence, of inadequacy, which permeated the second part of their lives after their return from the camps. I carry with me some of those feelings without the specific stories that would explain them to me.

The drizzle outside stops for a moment, and the sun will soon dry up the pavement. The tree in front of the house appears dressed in a thin fog, an almost transparent veil, which looks familiar. I have felt surrounded by such a faint, almost transparent fog ever since I left Romania and stopped fully using my mother tongue. It feels as if I can never fully understand everything, as if my vision is always slightly obstructed, and I can never get to the bottom of what surrounds me. This is true despite the fact that I speak several languages. None of them however is completely mine, not even the two languages I grew up with. Not after all these years. So I stand here like a suspended bridge, in between languages and identities, writing in a tongue that is almost mine. I truly hope that my children will never know this fog, and that they will learn to feel at home in more than one place and with many languages. I hope that these stories will help keep their bodies warm and their minds clear.

Guadalajara

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