

Ears

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DEDICATION

To my Mother, for getting me hooked on beautiful words,
sounds, and pictures, which were my solid shelters during
many storms.

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I. PORTRAIT

At first, there was one ear.

Just one, due to laws of optics that not even the absolute powers of the Leader could alter. One visible ear attached to a well-known and ubiquitous face; a face immortalised by a photographer from a semi-frontal viewpoint, which rendered the portrait benevolent, almost fatherly.

It was *the* portrait, hung on the wall in every office and in every classroom... It hovered with a fatherly smile in the peripheral vision of pupils who stared at the mostly terrestrial, sometimes hellish, and very rarely heavenly things that used to unfold on the blackboard.

The same portrait smiled at us when we opened any of our battered and almost disintegrating schoolbooks... Those books were handed to us, at the start of each school year, in a storeroom that was filled with huge piles of amorphous-looking cellulose. It was a room where the smell of mould and rot in our very young minds created the mental image of something that was not a fountain, but rather a very old well of knowledge.

One of our key tasks, as soon as we got our hands on the schoolbooks, was to check very carefully that the portrait was intact. Had anybody drawn anything on it during the book's

previous autumn-to-summer lifecycle, during which the book had been spreading spores of knowledge mixed with ideologically altered lies? Had it been altered later, during its summer hibernation, in the mouldy storage areas? Had it been damaged or torn? Or, Heaven forbid, had someone removed it?

One had to report any anomaly immediately, in order to avoid accusations of subversive vandalism, which always had scary consequences.

Then, after a summer that we had again spent near a stoic river, far from dangerous ears, under a sky packed with ideology-free sunshine, came a very memorable autumn... The mouldy and smelly room, the source of the new school year's worries and revelations, greeted us with heaps of previously unimaginable surprises.

Some schoolbooks were new; others had survived their usual summer hibernation as collections of pages held together only by the cohesion force between the thoughts expressed on them - but all the books of that special autumn contained a change, which was beyond our wildest imagination.

The previously untouchable and unalterable portraits had changed in the smaller heap of new books. In the old books, the portraits had been changed by an act of cosmic proportions: something had ripped out the old portraits, and then replaced them with new ones, which were glued to the front page.

The new portraits were showing *two* ears.

Two ears, on a full-frontal portrait of an alien-looking creature - the result of a new photo shoot that occurred twenty-odd years after the previous picture. It was the result of photochemical processes that could only depict a much-aged man in front of the lens, and of a heavy, overdone retouching job.

It represented an artificial perfection, which *had* to have, obviously, ears that were no longer obscured by the laws of optics. The monumental cost of reprints, replacements of zillions of portraits in every possible size on the walls and in

books did not matter. It showed unequivocally just how strong bionic arms could the regime flex, whenever it wished to alter appearances.

The legend goes that the Leader was told by someone in his entourage that his previous portrait had been imperfect... because of those darn subversive laws of optics.

From a distance that does not reveal the heavy, bizarre retouching, behold - a flawless portrait of a flawless man, the immaculate Leader, who had shaped and would forever shape an equally flawless model society.

It had one more ear, for overhearing dangerous thoughts voiced by careless, unsuspecting lips; it also illustrated the desperate strive for the sustaining of a fake image of a darker reality...

While I was remembering the unexpected metamorphosis of that portrait, countless other memories and images flooded my mind. However, memoirs are usually written by people who go through rustling bundles of sepia-toned images and yellow, stained pages of the mind... before that treasure chest terminally decays together with the valuable, fading relics it had been keeping for many years.

Then there are people with memories that, after a while, start to seem like acquired collections of someone *else's* surreal celluloid strips, film cells seen at some point in the past and now rapidly fading - a decay hastened by the clash between their very absurdity and the rational mind's immune reaction. That mind, instead of blocking them out, just mellows all those irrationalities and all that absurdity into a bundle of seemingly second-hand, indirect experiences.

The world that surrounded me during the first nineteen years of my life, a world shaped by Ceausescu's regime of daily Kafkaesque assault on rational thought, has been radically changing since the Christmas of 1989.

There have been many volumes written about such societies, countless hours filled with documentaries on the vast political, economical and of course, ideological forces at work... The following recollections though, from the Romanian pre-

and post-Revolutionary years, are street-level snapshots with often-surprising similarities between the old and the new country.

They come together not as a grand portal into the past and quasi-present, but a small window for just one head at a time to peer through it.

These are my film cells, my cut-up, fading film strips... projected for the first time in a continuous passing through the personal chest of relics, just when I am about to truly begin to believe that these are just somebody else's visions seen in a cinema I have never been in, made by a cinematographer who never existed.

After I had left that country almost twenty years ago, I regularly returning there to this day; there, I can still meet and converse with many ghosts who cosily nest in the altered, and recently turned ultra-materialistic, world of the Carpathian Mountains.

This book is about the past in which those ghosts still possessed powerful bodies in my weathered homeland, making Europe seem just some distant mirage; it is also about the present in which that world, still silently and slowly being kneaded by these ghosts, has hastily re-decorated its façade for the suddenly so reachable and tangible Europe...

My homeland has been copying the West indiscriminately, eagerly, and *desperately*. While it is copying, in every respect, the world that has become my new home, latter seems to have been gradually permeated by thoughts that I was hoping to leave behind in terms of both time and space. The eerie resurrection of totalitarian concepts and violations of basic human liberties in the citadel of democracy in which I live in, all committed in the name of building a "safer" society, were terrifying for someone who had seen the very same thoughts and strategies in action - albeit in a very different world.

During the regime, we had been having just one major fear in our everyday lives; later, as we began to copy the West, we have successfully created a new way of life in which we have the hard-earned freedom to choose between many new fears...

We are as fearful of calories, germs, wrinkles, and interest rates as the world that we are copying is.

Still, my former home is a place of pilgrimage where I go to re-charge my emotional batteries. It is a world where, despite the still dire economic situation and everyday hardships, people have not yet forgotten how to be human and humane. That place of pilgrimage is also one that, to this day, reminds me of just how much good and how much evil people are capable of.

Seeing shades of that evil emerging in the West under different colours and façades is an experience I was not expecting. I was able to follow how one society was desperately trying to deny the existence of its sinister ghosts, while another was happy to invoke them as cures for its new problems.

While I was gathering courage, and ended up embarking on this rather lexical voyage, I realised how much I owe all those close-by and remote voices, columnists, writers and “ordinary people” who managed to capture, and still have a brilliant grasp on, the many facets of past and present realities. They are doing this without having lost their sense of proportion or their reference points in the maelstrom of still ongoing changes.

II. HOME

My hometown, Marosvásárhely (or Tîrgu Mures in Romanian), is one of the medieval cities that are scattered between the mountains that surround Transylvania.

It comfortably rests in the valley of the river Maros, in just one of the many valleys that spread themselves on the map like half-open protecting hands... Often, these valleys had not been protective enough, but at least they had been able to soften the sounds of thunderstorms and of much too numerous battles into a gentle rumble, which had reverberated along the many rivers of that bruised land...

During peacetime, my hometown used to gaze down on lively markets that were unfolding their tents on the plains that lay outside its old fortified walls... hence the city acquired its name, which means marketplace on river Maros...

It had seen very turbulent and often blood-red waters flow from the mountains, pass under its walls... Between contemplative rests that it had managed to spend by the river, it had endured many unpredictable, howling storms, which had been brought to that valley by both Nature and Man over the centuries...

The old city walls are still standing on those hills, layers of the more recent past are expanding around them in all

directions. The multi-coloured mix of stones, bricks and concrete had flown from those heights, like some artificial lava flow that had spread and changed over many centuries and many miles.

Some parts of that flow coagulated into a glorious historical city centre... and, having left there most of its colours, the remaining grey concrete flow continued further down, followed the river Maros, gradually aged and sedimented into monochrome deserts of communist blocks of flats... Then, just before it completely settled, its edges finally solidified into the shape of a monstrous chemical plant on the edge of the city. Beyond that, untouched green land lies next to the river; the two of them are reminiscing about the more distant centuries, which only they can remember.

The house in which I grew up in is on the edge of the historic city centre. Since the 1840s, it has endured all the regimes and changes that history has brought. It still comfortably rests its back against a steep hill. Acacia trees grow on the slope of that hill; their dizzying scent has been gently rolling downhill into our courtyard.

At just a few minutes' walking distance from there, in a place where suddenly the multicoloured noise of the city changes to green stillness, the all-muscle river that rushes down from the mountains is being lulled and hushed by the great water lock that protects the city.

All this sits pretty much right in the middle of Transylvania where, unlike vampires, eminently non-fictional creatures had been spilling and consuming blood for too many centuries.

They had been doing this in broad daylight, immune to garlic; they had been casting onto those hills and plains of ever-changing colour very long and very dense shadows that persist to this day in political life, in the ethnic tensions arising from the echoes of annexing this former Hungarian territory to Romania... These shadows are also present in the collective psyche, which a quarter of a century ago freed itself from the most recent non-fictional, demented, but very calculated, Evil.

I grew up there, during Ceausescu's so-called Golden Era...

I cannot recall whether there was one certain moment when I realised that everything that had surrounded me had been an absurd play set in a tiny, claustrophobia-inducing theatre.

I still find it difficult to reconcile those two sides of me... One side is that small kid who was opening his eyes and ears tentatively and, initially, very fearfully; a happy kid who was maximally enjoying a truly minimalist childhood, who was accepting the food rationing and power cuts, propaganda and fake celebrations as normal, and the one and only possible, reality. Then there is that other person, the grown-up, who is looking back, finding that reality a weird one that is filled with funny and sad absurdities.

There is also the dilemma that Krzysztof Kieslowski wrote so eloquently about... What do I consider home? Where do I feel at home?

Transylvania is still criss-crossed by as many ethnic tensions exploited in everyday and political life as many mountain streams it possesses, hence it makes one feel discriminated against. Hungary, the land of my mother tongue, has had enough of tidal waves of Transylvanian Hungarian immigrants, so it does not quite look at them with fondness. It gave them the possibility to obtain Hungarian citizenship; however, ordinary people there still look at the Transylvanian Hungarians as people who are primarily economic migrants. Then, there is Great Britain, infused with very familiar-sounding, extreme and xenophobic thoughts, partial truths and astounding distortions that are coming from certain major parties. Latter are gaining more and more support, whenever the emotional (and always irrational) buttons about immigration are pressed in order to gain some political advantage.

In the end, the answer to the question that Kieslowski posed is actually quite simple...

I still go *home* when I fly to that bruised land surrounded by mountains. I still only feel at home among those people whom I share common experiences with – people, who had not

forgotten how to be human even during extremely inhuman times.

III. LIGHT

Schooldays arrived in my life well after I had learnt the fundamental physics of light and heat. Of course, I had not understood by then their complex laws - but I certainly knew how ideological darkness and cold political calculation could fundamentally affect them in my everyday life.

Due to shortages in classrooms, we were doing 'afternoon shifts' on certain weeks, whilst during normal weeks we used to start school at 8AM... Each day the joyous, and often luminous, games of the mind that filled the hours spent in the school were quite different from what used to come after school.

I used to find my way home on streets that were rendered pitch black by power saving measures introduced by the Party. The streets between my school and my home were just constellations of warm orange, yellow, and reddish flecks of lights, which were seeping through the curtains of myriad windows, originating from petroleum lamps, candles, and battery-powered torches. These sometimes projected on the curtains the shadows of tired bodies animated by even more tired souls.

The economics of these regular and long power cuts never made any sense, because the energy consumption of the

general population was infinitesimal when compared to what old-fashioned and hopelessly obsolete industrial monsters were devouring. For example, the aluminium plant at *Slatina* was making deplorable quality aluminium via an old electrolysis method, soaking up every electron that the also terribly inefficient old power plants around it could squeeze out of low-grade coal or methane.

Therefore, there was no point in doing calculations about the economics of our blackouts... but these power cuts, during which the flames of a petroleum lamp in the kitchen were projecting our quivering shadows onto our walls and curtains, were meant to make us very aware of the powers that governed our reality.

Darkness, physical or mental, is a powerful tool – especially when both kinds are combined..

I was lucky to live a mere fifteen minutes' walk away from my first school, and this manageable distance shrunk as my tiny legs grew.

Only half of this daily journey consisted of a dreary walk on dark streets, where I always lost my shadow - like a true Transylvanian creature of the night. Still, from those dark streets I could always see in the distance an oasis of light: just one part of one street, which always stayed immune to the exasperatingly regular power cuts.

The small oasis of light that I used to encounter every day on my way home happened to be on our street. The oasis did not quite reach as far as our house, but it still allowed me on every winter afternoon a glorious transition from darkness decorated by coloured specks of light to a cosy, yellow world lit by sodium vapour streetlights.

After that oasis, came a transition back to the darkness in which I used to reach our house.

I used to find my mother immersed in the silent joy of crossword puzzles, near a petroleum lamp in the kitchen, always waiting for me, always ready to serve a tasty, hot meal cooked with glorious imagination from desperately simple ingredients.

The reason for the existence of that small and very rare oasis of electrical bliss on our street, an oasis where my shadow used to return for a while, was a non-stop bread factory.

As we had to stand in huge queues for our daily bread rations, we never managed to figure out where that factory's output was disappearing to, but that grey temple of beautiful smells possessed its own power line. Somehow, that power line, which had been giving the factory its vital juice, was not separated from the circuits that used to supply electricity to a few dozen houses and streetlights around it..

The mighty flows of electrons used to return to our homes eventually, just before the evening TV programs.

We were treated to three hours of TV per day on two national channels that were carried over the Carpathian Mountains by a few relay stations. Without their help, the TV programmes would not have been able to cross the mountains and to bring into our home that Voice and that Face..

However, as he had done so countless times during history, Man managed to spill his evil over mountain peaks – but this time round his dark emissaries were riding on electromagnetic waves, which were reaching every corner of Transylvania, every day, after too many hours of hissing, grey static..

Those three hours were mostly filled by a tedious, but always victorious, newsreel that showed that day's amazing achievements... Then a program of made-up pseudo-folk music and dance used to follow; this alternated with odes and hymns, which had special lyrics praising the glory of the Party...

However, usually once a week, there was some TV moment about *something*. A play. A fragment of a classical recital that was filmed somewhere. Rarely, some imported joy - maybe an old Thames Television play with (so they thought...) ideologically safe Shakespeare. Sometimes, they aired some foreign science program about the future, about technology - a future that, of course, would arrive a lot sooner in the glorious society we were building...

The TV schedule used to stretch to an awesome five or mind-blowing six hours on Saturday afternoons, and two long

chunks on Sunday. These, too were of course mostly filled with propaganda and folk music – but they aired some carefully filtered glimpses into that vast world that was hiding beyond the Iron Curtain.

The classic trick that they used in order to make us sit in front of the propaganda shows, even if we never actively watched them, was to announce the screening of a film. They usually cut it in half, with a second part that was to follow at some point later. The first part usually aired as scheduled, but then we had to sit and wait during grossly over-run propaganda shows, hoping and hoping – just to find out much later that the second part was cancelled.

It was then rescheduled, and often cancelled again on the following week. Eventually it was aired of course; otherwise, the bait would not have worked after a few months of such manipulative fun. I still recall how I managed to watch, for the first time in my life, *Gone with the Wind*, stretched over a three-month period in short chunks - as if they were body parts torn apart by the gusts of communist propaganda.

Oh, but we also had TV series like *Dallas*, because anything that showed the decadence of the West was deemed educational. Thus, while we were trying to forget about our monthly food rations and daily power cuts, we could watch, and empathise with, Miss Ellie Ewing. Poor old woman was being torn by a terrible dilemma: whether she should drill on her husband's land, ignoring the old man's dying wishes or... maybe make some extra millions of dollars from the oil she was expecting to find there. Obviously, we could so identify with such dilemmas...

But... there was also radio.

It truly *was* magic... with its countless channels of radio waves that were bouncing off the ionosphere, all carrying on their invisible and undulating shoulders messages from distant lands... All those waves were being transformed by our ancient valve radio into allowed, or much forbidden, sounds and words.

Later we bought a sturdy, indestructible and so-called portable transistor radio, which was packed full of the super-dense neutron star material of Soviet engineering. It was indeed portable, if one possessed decent muscles - since it was over-engineered to survive maybe even blasts from imperialist missiles...

My father once managed to knock this VEF206 radio down from the top of the fridge... Of course, the black plastic skin was smashed to bits, but the radio's massive endoskeleton stayed intact with all the electronics inside it. With stoicism, which was in sharp contrast with our panic that unfolded around its shattered body, it continued to croon. Later we glued together the plastic bits, and this gave the radio a rather strange shape...

Those boxes of magic sounds were keeping us entertained for many years. Most of the time we tuned in to the few channels that managed to cross the border between the more liberal Hungary and our homeland. We used to listen to these particular stations because they were in Hungarian, my oppressed mother tongue - but also because they were talking openly about things we could not bring up in a public conversation.

Radio Kossuth, a station named after the great Hungarian, used to bring into our home radio plays and political satire that was way beyond anything we could have said on our streets infested with opportunistic informers.

Whenever we craved seriously dangerous thoughts, we tuned in to *Voice of America* and *Radio Free Europe*; both used to broadcast in Hungarian and Romanian languages. Their precious waves were always fading in and out, occasionally perturbed by jamming stations that, ironically, seemed to be hampered by the geological realities of Transylvania, so they never operated well enough. Being reported for listening to these stations meant serious trouble.

Via these radio stations, we could hear from dissidents who had escaped our world and had settled in various other worlds where, as we used to believe, freedom was as normal and

abundant as air was. We also heard about events we did not know about, due to local media blackouts.

Such news and thoughts, from thousands of miles away, used to help us get a better picture on our local reality...

My uncle, who lived in a block of flats, had to listen to his VEF206 radio at very low volume, just to make sure that the heresies carried into the small flat by unstoppable waves of the ether could not be heard through the thin walls. The small, battery-operated and ultra-heavy VEF206 transistor radio had become the most valuable object in our house. With its sounds, it managed to paint vivid tableaux that our TV set, connected to an aerial that could only receive national TV channels, could not.

Later, toward the end of the 1980s (and the end of *that* world), analogue satellite receivers were smuggled in. Small companies began to manufacture satellite dishes, and for many people this meant that their field of view onto the outside world radically widened. Many, like our family, could not afford the 'imported' gizmos, so we invented ways of peeking through the same electronic window that others had installed in their homes.

Such peeking only necessitated a well-calculated simple antenna aimed at some neighbour's satellite receiver. It managed to capture faint, wobbly images from the already demodulated TV-band signals, which used to escape from the analogue tuner boxes. The resulting images were sometimes with sound, often without, and were always conditioned by what the others were watching and when... In blocks of flats, neighbours often agreed between them to share the costs and they split the signal into several flats; they used to agree with the owner of the receiver what to watch.

We installed our concoction in the loft of our house, and aimed it at a neighbour's house *vis-à-vis*. Later on my first cousin, whom we shared the courtyard with, installed his own satellite dish and tuner in our loft, via the good old who-knows-who network and some extra money he decided to sacrifice. Whenever they left for the weekend to visit the wife's

parents in a nearby village, my cousin used to leave the tuner turned on for us - and then we had two days of continuous satellite TV heaven.

We were lucky (again...) that the satellite dish was not visible from outside the house. This proved to be important, because in the autumn of 1989, just months before the regime's glorious and overblown hot air balloon took a fatal puncture wound, the regime had decided to make satellite equipments illegal.

They simply wanted to close that enormous electronic window, which offered sweeping vistas onto an enormous world out there, beyond the Iron Curtain. Police began to knock on people's doors, enforced the new measures that had been born, like everything else during those final days, out of chemically pure paranoia. None of that really mattered any more, though... as we found out not much later, when December 1989 arrived.