

My father told my mother that Paola was the love of his life. This was when I was seven or eight and all my clothes came from the Goodwill.

Most mornings—our first year in Calgary—after a night of transporting the sick and the dead, my father went to the public library to use the internet. Often he returned home upset. In Bucharest he had been a chemist, though I never understood why. He was never practical or methodical. “Girls,” he told us, “in Romania, if you could go to university you went. Everybody, even the actors, the dancers, went and were transformed into scientists. It was for the state.”

Some years later, his degrees were recognized and he quit working as a hospital porter and taught college chemistry. Then he would come home unhappy in the late afternoons and lock himself in the basement bathroom with his laptop.

He could be boisterous. When there was a film he wanted to see, something fantastical with explosions bursting out of explosions, he would insist the whole family go, or years when there was enough snowpack in the mountains early in December he would wake my sister and me and drive us recklessly to Lake Louise in his snarling ten-year-old 4-Runner. On every drive—I swear—he would tell us how in Romania there had been no lifts and he had carried heavy

wooden skis on his back up the hill. “It does not get so cold there; the snow is of better quality.”

All these things cost money, of course. Probably we would have moved into the townhouse in Evergreen a year sooner had my father not been so impulsive. The summer we moved into that house he disappeared for a month.

“Do you know where he went?” you say. You are my first real lover. This is the night before our big trip, the first international flight without parents for both of us. The paper map outspread on the carpet, not being looked at: France and the low countries and a little wedge of England in the top corner, like a cloud. We lie on the bed, sun slanting goldly through the curtains. My jeans unbuttoned, your hand inside. Your two fingers pressing like you’re checking for a pulse. We don’t dare remove any clothing with my mother downstairs. The air is sweet with the beet soup simmering in the kitchen directly below us. You’ve been told not to call it borscht because borscht is a Russian word.

It’s probably time to confide this in you. “He left you, and then he came back?” you say. You’ve never understood this magnetic tug. You were weirded out the first time you witness me leave the bathroom door agape so I can keep talking to my sister. My family is close in a way yours isn’t.

I believe my mother always knew. When we needed to get out of Romania, there were no flights. The man enlisted to drive us to the border was a relative of Paola’s. Initially, my mother refused

to go; she wouldn't take charity from that woman, she protested. From there we took a bus to Budapest. All I remember of that city is the bus halted in traffic on a wide boulevard, and on the median a woman was standing, totally naked, waving at drivers. She stood on a cement pedestal where there should have been a statue, and may recently have been. Many countries were taking down their bronze Lenins and Stalins. She waved at us, and my sister and I waved back until my mother covered our eyes with her fingers.

"In the eighties there were so many secret police," he would say, "kids in love were the only people who could sneak around without being disappeared." Paola was the same age as my father, but went to a different school in Timișoara. They met clandestinely in shops or public parks. They hitched rides into the hills and hiked to old monasteries, collected mushrooms. My father knows the Romanian, Latin, and English names for all wild flowers.

Paola's relatives were connected. She had an uncle or a second cousin who was close to the Ceaușescu. Her place at university was assured. So my father had to study hard, even the sciences—which he did not care for—so that he might earn himself a place at the same university in Cluj Napoca. His exams and his own father's position gained him a spot at a local institute. His parents hated anyone who wormed their way into the party elite. But Toma, my father, chose to wait a year and retake the exams.

People were being encouraged to marry and reproduce. There were posters and murals in every village: Ceaușescu watching over children playing, Ceaușescu smiling down at mothers clutching

infants. Paola's parents would never let her marry someone so lacking in connections. The same week he received his acceptance letter, he heard Paola had married some official at the Directorate for Internal Security.

Eugen the Brute, we called him. They came for dinner a few times when I was small. All I recall is that Eugen seemed to be always in the act of drinking țuică or refilling his glass. He only poured one finger at a time, and then he would tip his head back and mutter "Salud," without any inflection, as though this were another joyless, time-filling activity. In my recollections of these visits, Paola is somehow larger than my mother, even though she is probably shorter than I am now. But maybe it was because I was used to being smushed against every part of my own mother's body, knew the warmth and the give of her, while Paola was a glamorous apparition in so much scent it was like a miasma around her. I remember brushing against Paola's shiny dress in the dark hallway. It seemed to give off a dim light, like when my father showed me Mars through a telescope, but when I at last touched it, it felt rough and somehow counterfeit. Paola looked down and thoughtlessly stroked my cheek.

After the Ceaușescu were shot we heard gunshots for several days, and then other party higher-ups took over. Few of Paola's connections fared well after the revolution. This is what my parents had hoped for, the death of that motherfucker (a cherished English word my father reserves almost exclusively for Ceaușescu), and yet the new regime was uncertain and just as perilous. My father's English was proficient enough for Canadian Immigration; my

mother's still would not be. A distant cousin lived in Edmonton, so that's where we started out. After four months sleeping on the floor of his apartment—during which my parents would slip out to the balcony to argue—we took a gleaming new bus down to Calgary.

Paola fled Eugen and emigrated. She must have landed in Vancouver the summer I turned ten, because that's when my father left us for the first time.

“North Americans and Eastern Europeans are the same,” my father said.

You must remember this night: It was Easter and my mother cooked lamb. You couldn't get good lamb in Canada, my father commented. He delivered criticisms like that, always a thing that was out of her control. He was a paper boat tossed by whatever feeling took him in a given moment.

“They are the same,” he went on, “because both are ascendant. Western Europe is in decline. Crumbling. Here—and in Romania, in Poland, in Hungary—we are building up new things.”

You opened your mouth to disagree—seldom a good idea with my father. You said something about fascists taking over Hungary. He allowed this, feigned mature consideration of your ideas, until you slipped in a dig at the Conservative Party.

“I came to this country, and they have more than one party here, so I vote for the furthest thing from socialism. I hate socialism. So why not the right?”

“Toma, you are just like the Communists,” said my mother. Fifteen minutes or so had passed since he insulted the lamb. That was how my mother took revenge. “You see the Conservatives are what the public supports here, powerful people give them money, so you vote for them.” You grinned, probably not for anything she said but because you think my mother sounds like Count von Count on Sesame Street. “They're almost Americans.”

“You want to be ruled by United Nations?” my father parried. “It'll be worse than Romania when the EU came in. They put fences around everything.”

“You blame the European Union for every single thing in Romania,” my mother chided. In some languages the u in Europe is a v, and that's how she pronounces it. “Before that we lived in fear of the Communists. You think the years in the middle were so good? They were criminals.”

“You weren't even there. We moved to this townhouse with fucking aluminum siding.”

“It could be worse,” my mother let her fork clatter onto her plate. “We could have moved to America. I, for one, do not enjoy their sort of culture. Their movies, they are the worst. Always everything must have a happy ending.”

It was at the university in Cluj that my folks met. “Sometimes this is how love occurs,” my father told me when I was thirteen. “The universe puts you in the right place.” He was agnostic about most things, but in this he believed.

My mother did not meet people easily or actively. Her evenings were spent in the library, where she took in not only the required Chemistry but whatever French or Russian novels had eluded censorship. These languages Miruna absorbed when she was young and optimistic about the world. English she never had the desire to master.

My father began hanging around outside her classes to talk to her. Hours were spent at the library, hardly studying. This I'm sure you can understand. He still loved Paola, but he was a desirable young man. Miruna grew up in an apartment block in Bucharest, and had not ever been skiing or mushrooming. When at last she agreed to go out with him, she was so receptive to everything he said. Miruna shared his and his parents' rancour for the party. He loved being listened to like that.

After one term Paola left school and married Eugen. There were rumours of a pregnancy. My father even suspected it was his. If it were, perhaps Eugen would divorce her. Whether she had taken an abortifacient, or had miscarried, or had never been pregnant to begin with, no baby came. He told me this in his version of "the talk," which consisted of this story and the warning, "Don't get pregnant until you have a university degree."

Toma and Miruna were married the summer before their final year, his parents travelling to the ceremony held at a municipal office in Cluj. She already owned a modest wedding dress. She had been engaged before.

Both graduated with degrees in Chemistry. He taught her to identify mushrooms and wildflowers; she introduced him to Dostoevsky and—later, after the revolution—Kundera. For long stretches they were happy with one another. When my sister was old enough to walk they took us to Czechoslovakia once, and in the dark of the hotel room I could hear them making love.

He said he missed us too much to stay away. "Sometimes you go on a long vacation," he explained to my sister. My theory is things just weren't working out with Paola. It had been so many years: how could they have become lovers again so suddenly? And Paola was inured to powerful men. Toma, just as in Romania, could not be all she wanted. It was the same the second time he left us.

"The second time?" you exclaim. How could I love him, you want to know, if he kept doing this? How could my mother readmit him to her life all these times? You are someone who would never cheat. You would do many hurtful things before you'd cheat.

He did his best to be at least a good father. The trouble was that he didn't quite know what that meant. Sometimes he would occupy weeks teaching me the layers of the earth, the names of constellations. Sometimes he would impose discipline on the house. My mother, whose method of discipline was a complex language of sighs, found these periods jarring. The house would take on a martial atmosphere. He concocted chores for my sister and me to do. But he tired of being stern, and would always be the first to rebel against his own authority: driving us to some mountain lake

or buying a new video game that we would play for days on end, without bathing.

What happened the second time was that Paola relocated to Calgary. There seemed to be many Romanians in Calgary by the time I was sixteen. We were always going to Romanian weddings, and it was at a wedding that I first understood what my father felt for her. He wore a tweed coat, plaid shirt, and a striped tie. My mother had told him several times on the way that you couldn't wear such things together. He looked coldly at her and jerkily shifted the gears of the Toyota. Paola was at the door of the church, tugging on his tie. "Still you don't know how to dress yourself, Toma," she said. He laughed. "I love this tie," he said. "It was a present from one of my daughters." It wasn't. I can't recall if it was a Catholic or an Orthodox wedding—only that for most of the dull service my father had his arm around me. Then he got to his feet, whispered, "Need to piss" (the sibilance audible to everyone), and shuffled to the end of the row. After the couple was married and we were allowed to get up and put on our coats, I stole through the same door my father had. I knew there was something to see.

It was a library or a choir room. There were men's and women's washrooms down this passage and I had already looked under the stall doors of both. I heard my father laughing. There were days of hopelessness, during which he could be interminably silent and there was nothing my mother could do, but such small, pleasing things would cause him to erupt, boyishly and jubilantly and out of proportion to anyone else's happiness. It would have been impossible for him to carry on anything with Paola in secret.

I heard him laugh, then saw her bright skirt. The door was open enough for one eye, and I pressed up to the gap and held my breath. His hands were on her skirt and her hands were keeping it down. His forehead was against hers. They rubbed noses.

"Not even for a wedding you shave?" Paola said, stroking his stubbly cheek.

"It's not even family," he shrugged. "We come to these things so Miruna can speak to other Romanians."

At the mention of my mother's name, Paola looked away. For a second I thought she could see me. But her eyes kept drifting, and I could see everything that was going on behind. She loved him, and yet knew it was impossible—not only because my father wouldn't leave my sister and me for good, but because this bumbling man would never deliver the life she wanted. "I thought you came to the wedding to see me," she joked.

"Yes, that as well," he grinned. "Mostly it was that." He hadn't understood her look as well as I had. They kissed, and it was as though a car had struck me crossing the road. My loyalty that should have been to my mother was smashed out of me, and landed with these two. There was, in that kiss, twenty-two years of being in love with one another and knowing at all times it was doomed. It is against this that I measure the words "in love," and why I don't use them often.

I still hated him for leaving us again. I was sixteen. One of the worst things about growing up with parents who don't get

along is the age when they stop trying to conceal it from you. My mother drove us to school every day and told us how irresponsible my father was. “Do you know how little he has saved for you to go to university? Better get jobs, both of you. You know, in Europe, university is free. It’s much better there I think.”

He didn’t disappear completely the second time. He would return some nights to fetch clothes or books he wanted. My sister would emerge from her room and hug him. I never did. There was a month or so like this, in which all I knew of him was this rustling and banging in the evenings, the door opening and closing. I didn’t know if he had shaved, or if more of his hair had fallen out, or if he looked happier in this new arrangement. When he returned he was desolate. Some months later, over supper, my mother told us she had heard Paola was getting married. She smirked. “He has an oil drilling company.” It was her smirk that made me forgive him.

After supper I drive you home to spend a last evening with your parents. They backpacked through Europe in the Nineteen-eighties—never as far as Romania of course. On their recommendations you have most of the trip plotted, what we will see and not see. You have this unblinking assurance about the world and its contents.

You began to see my father differently after I told you a little of Paola. Some of it I told you because I’m afraid something new will happen while we’re away. You are who I talk to when I’m afraid, though you sometimes don’t seem to want the responsibility.

I think I told you about the night of the field party. I was seventeen. Maybe the story didn’t mean anything to you.

I had some friends at the time that neither of my parents trusted. There was a party, out in a field somewhere on the edge of the city. A fire. We drove—mostly in our parents’ cars—out over the rutted ground and still-bowed grass. There was drinking, and some kids acting crazier than a drunk person honestly would. The blue and red lights of a police car came bouncing over the field, and everyone who could drove off. In a sudden depression in the ground where I guess never got as much sun, I got the Toyota stuck in mud and melting snow. The police believed I wasn’t drunk, but I still needed to have the Toyota winched out of the muck. My mother just wept. I was her daughter, she said, and it hurt not to be able to trust me. Toma sat down beside her. They talked hushedly as I slunk up to my room. From the top of the stairs I saw him stroking her hair. She leaned her head into his chest. I assume he told her only that he would deal with me, and not how he planned to do it. The following weekend, he told me to sit down on the sofa. He returned with a six-pack of beer, and we watched one of the Lord of the Rings movies and drank. “Drinking,” he said, “is not such a big thing. You don’t have to act like an idiot.”

After his second beer he said something I didn’t understand: “How can a person be a Buddhist and be always thinking about money?”

I was midway through my second beer, and that was enough courage to ask, “Are you talking about Paola?” I don’t know if I’d ever said her name before.

“I email her sometimes,” he said. “We’re very old friends. She reads a lot about Buddhism these days. Won’t even eat meat. But still, she lives in this great big house out in Springbank. I have driven past. How is it possible to do both these things?”

After that, when we had people over for supper, I was allowed wine. They had all the same friends, either Romanians or people from the university. From time to time Paola came up in gossip: if she was going to leave the second husband or not.

My parents seemed to settle back into the routine of being with one another. There were weeks when my father slept on a couch in the basement. He claimed it was too hot upstairs. It was clear they hadn’t got their story straight because my mother said it was because my father refused to bathe, especially if he was told to. My mother finally found employment. She gave up on chemistry research (more of a language problem than an issue of credentials) and enrolled in a pharmacy course. At first this seemed absurd to us. She hates drugs, won’t swallow any pills. “Go away and drink some water,” she says to us when we’re sick. Apparently this makes her popular with the immigrant women who come to ask her advice. She confirms for them their own wisdom.

My sister was leaving to attend UBC. You and I have discussed moving in if we pass the test of this three-week trip together. Toma has not done anything wild for so long, even with this twenty-year encumbrance of responsibility being cut away. He and my mother are kind to each other. Weekday mornings they eat breakfast together and he drives her to the LRT station.

As we begin the drive to the airport, the three of us are silent but not unusually silent. He’s been seeking advice from colleagues about investing, so at first there’s nothing odd in the fact that tucked into the netting behind the driver’s seat is a book called Introduction to Investing in Canada. Pages bend as I tilt the book to see the one behind it: Basic Teachings of the Buddha.

“It’s too quiet in this car,” he booms, grinning back at us. Did he see me looking at his books? “Want some music?”

“What kind of music?” you ask.

“Do you know the Clash?”

“Haven’t listened much,” you mumble.

“On second thought, I don’t know if you would appreciate them. We used to hear them sometimes on illegal radio stations.

How about a philosophical question?” He continues as if we’ve agreed. “You two are in love, yes? Do you think it’s possible to be in love with more than one person?”

“Well,” you begin academically, “there are different kinds of love.” You won’t meet his eyes in the rear-view, instead looking out behind me on the green of the roadside.

My father ignores you. “I think you must choose one. What good is it to be in love and not be with that person?”

## Fiction

Of course my father is someone who drives fast. I grip your hand tightly until I see him looking at our hands in the mirror.

“Do you go to the one you love most, even if it can never work?”

You said farewell to your parents at home that morning. They aren't the kind of people to insist on hugging at Departures. You come from a different sort of family, I guess. You have not fled across continents with one another.