Train to Trieste

Domnica Radulescu

Published by Black Swan

Extract

Copyright © Domnica Radulescu 2008, published by Black Swan 2009, a division of Transworld Publishers

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Orange Moons

I HAVE LEFT THE BLACK SEA, my skin golden and salty, and my tangled hair brighter from the sun, to take the train that crosses the land by the violet-blue waters and the yellow sunflower fields, then cuts through mountains into resin-pungent forest.

I am seventeen. Every summer my parents and I leave the hot streets of Bucharest to spend two weeks on the beaches of the Black Sea, after which we spend two months of summer in my aunt's house in Braşov, the city at the foot of the Carpathians. I always rush to the mountains, hungry for the cool, fragrant air and sparkling sunrises.

This time I have come only with my mother. The night I arrive from the sea, I want to go out for a stroll around the neighbourhood right away. My aunt Nina tells me I should rest first and not go off like that, all heated up and sweaty. She always gives her advice in a timid, soft way, as if worried she might upset you, unlike my mother, who blurts out her judgements in shrill tones, demanding that you listen.

My younger cousins Miruna and Riri want me to stay and play with them. Miruna, who is almost ten years old now and has the bluest eyes I have ever seen, starts crying, and she says I never play with them any more and that she hates me. Riri, only five, with dark eyes like blackberries, throws a wooden toy box at my head. I tell them I'll play with them later. The only one who doesn't care what I do is my uncle Ion, who is snoring loudly on the sofa in the kitchen, too exhausted from work to even go to bed.

I need to cool off my sunburned body in the fresh mountain air, and I fly down the marble staircase, out into the fresh night, before either my mother or her sister Nina can say another word. By June, I desperately want to leave Bucharest, with its tired crowds and heated pavements, its French-style heavy grey buildings, and its slow-moving trolleybuses. The detour by the Black Sea is like a short leap into a fairy tale. The sight of the emerald-violet sea sparkling in the morning as I look at it through the perfect white columns at the edge of the beach always transports me to the times of Ovid, once exiled on these shores. I like to think of myself as a naiad walking dreamily on the burning sands and gliding slowly into the waters filled with lacy algae and pearly shells. By the end of the second week, my body aches from the sun and from the Bucharest crowds filling every square metre of the beaches with their improvised tents and coloured sheets. That's when I start longing for pine trees and cool shade.

Up here I finally feel at home, not in a fairy tale, not in a place I want to run away from, but in a place where

my body feels whole and where my heart has a steady beat. There are children's voices coming from behind the thick stone walls that line the streets. Blood-red poppies and orange marigolds grow in little beds along the pavements. Right around the corner there is a large open market, and I can hear faint echoes of peasants' voices advertising tomatoes and radishes, watermelons and spring potatoes. The summer open market is the only place where you can still buy food without a huge queue. In Romania, we eat better in the summer.

I run into my childhood friend Cristina. Her two chestnut plaits are wrapped around her head, and she gives me the news breathlessly, without any word of introduction or a hello, as if she had been expecting to meet me in the street tonight.

"Did you hear about Mariana? Mihai killed her," Cristina says. "The two of them went on a three-day trip at the end of April. They were coming down the Rock of the Prince, trying to get back to their tent before dark. He was walking behind her, and he accidentally kicked a rock loose. It hit her in the head and killed her, just like that."

Cristina breaks into sobs. She was a good friend of Mariana's and learned about kissing and lovemaking from her, which she would then tell me. I try to picture Mariana. I used to admire her. I envied her raspy voice and the way she blew rings of cigarette smoke. I loved the way she would throw herself carelessly into her boyfriend's lap, swirling her gypsy skirts. But mostly I picture her boyfriend, Mihai Simionu. He has green eyes and long lashes, and he would pluck the strings of

his guitar and play melancholy songs. Cristina's news of the accident horrifies me, but somehow I don't feel sad for Mariana.

Mihai and Mariana are four years older than Cristina and me, and we used to be fascinated with them and their love. We sometimes followed them and spied on them. I used to watch Mihai from the corner of my eye as he walked holding Mariana's hand and whistling. Now I picture him walking like that, but there's no one holding his hand.

Instead of heading towards the boulevard, we turn back to our neighbourhood. Cristina doesn't want to be seen crying by the whole world. We pass a row of neatly lined-up yellow, peach and blue stone houses towards the park at the end of the street and see Mihai walking circles in the shadows around the wooden bench where he and Mariana used to kiss and sing until late at night. He is unshaven and wears check knee breeches, boots and a wrinkled short-sleeve shirt. Cristina starts crying again at the sight of him, and I tell her to go home and leave me alone with him.

I watch him smoking those unfiltered Romanian cigarettes called Carpaţi, Carpathians, almost like a cruel joke. I never understood why such stinking cigarettes are named after our most beautiful natural assets. Romanian cigarettes are the worst cigarettes in the world, bitter and sour. Suddenly my heart aches for him as he smokes and walks furiously, hurting from his loss. I go straight to him, cross his path shamelessly so he can't avoid me. He has to look at me. And he does. He gives his anger a rest and smiles a little, squinting his

green eyes in the smoke. I ask if he wants to walk with me. He nods.

The moon is full, hanging low. He has his head down and walks fast. I can't keep up with him. My face is still burning from the Black Sea sun and from the summer night, from the full moon and his green eyes. I am burning like embers. I am glowing in the dark.

There is no meat in the shops and no toilet paper. Flour, oil and sugar are rationed. People say it's about as bad now in 1977 as it was during Stalinism. The worst of it is that there are men in black leather jackets with small eyes who watch at every corner, on every floor of every building, and who listen on every telephone line. They want to know if you are complaining, if you make jokes, if you speak with foreigners, if you plan to leave the country, and where you got your Kent cigarettes. Somehow, many people manage to escape the country. There is news almost daily about so-and-so who left on a tourist trip to Germany and never came back or who went to Yugoslavia and then somehow ended up in Italy. *Lucky them*, we always say. *Smart people, good for them*, we also say.

In school, between our organic chemistry classes and our comparative literature or Western philosophy classes, we study the five-year Socialist plans of the co-operative farms and the production of tools and tractors, and about the utopia of Socialist happiness in a not-too-faraway future, where people will give only according to their ability and receive according to their need. We seem to find ourselves in some kind of a transitional moment, when, except for the important

Party leaders and secret police who shop at special, secret government stores, nobody is really that close to getting even the most basic needs met. The grocery shops are empty, and the steel shelves are shiny and clean to the point that you can see your face reflected in elongated shapes in the metal surface of those shelves. If you are lucky, at the most unexpected times of the day there might be a transport of cheese or chicken wings in your neighbourhood, with long queues formed instantaneously. The last people in the queue generally look demoralized: there won't be anything left on the shelf, they know, by the time their turn comes. They will leave with their empty bags and try to find other queues throughout the city, where they might have the chance of being the first in a line for butter or sardines or toilet paper. The running joke is that Romanians don't need toilet paper any longer because they have nothing to shit.

This summer I am seventeen, I am bursting into being a woman, and I don't care about empty shops and sugar and flour rations. My blue eyes are blazing. My long limbs are taut and restless. I have wild wheat-coloured hair that flies in all directions and a great hunger in my flesh. All I care about is that this man who is grieving for his dead lover turn his eyes on me, notice my sun-bleached hair, my burning face and shoulders, and play one of his melancholy guitar songs for me. For me alone. The smell of earth and death coursing through his heart makes me wild with desire. I want to be there in the centre of his heart where it smells like raw earth. I want him to be my first lover: bitter, raging,

smelling of unfiltered Romanian cigarettes, and hurting for a dead girl.

This is the year of the big earthquake, and blood and pink flowers seem to bloom all at once out of the cracked earth. The greedy, unforgiving black earth! I wonder if Mariana had any time to think, to worry, to gasp at the thought of her own impending death. I wonder if Mihai was just careless when he kicked that rock downhill or whether there was anything else that Cristina hasn't told me or that she doesn't know herself. I know other men were in love with Mariana. I know they all went in big groups on their mountain trips. Maybe Mariana had flirted with Mihai's best friend, Radu, a little too much, as she sometimes had the habit of doing. Maybe Mihai flew into a jealous rage. Maybe this was a crime of passion. I remember their fiery fights late at night at the edge of the park where all the kids in the neighbourhood gathered. Mariana always broke into tears and smoked one cigarette after another and swirled her coloured skirts in a move to leave. Then Mihai would grab her violently, and in a second his mood changed from angry to tender and they would start whispering and kissing. I used to watch them with fascination and with an intimation of delicious pain.

As I walk beside Mihai, I am thinking that there never has been such a full orange moon and such a fresh, raw-smelling place in someone's heart for me to install myself like a greedy queen.

"They shaved off her hair," he is saying. "She had a big hole in the back of her head. They shaved off her

beautiful brown curls to look at the hole in the back of her head. Why did they have to do that?"

He crushes his cigarette on the ground and stares in the distance. We walk some more, and the moon is swelling in front of us, orange, round, wicked. I want to take his hand and make him look at me.

I stumble in my flimsy, worn-out sandals. My feet are blistered from the sand and the salt that had gathered in my sandals at the beach. My feet burn with every step as if the earth were boiling. I steady myself by holding on to him and making him stop. His fingers on my arm burn my skin.

"Let's go and get something to drink," I say. "Today is August the fifteenth, Saint Mary of the Assumption. It's my name day."

"I thought you were a pagan," he says.

"I am. I just like to drink on my saint's day. I celebrate my name."

"Your name is Maria? Your aunt Nina always calls you Mona."

"My aunt Matilda, my father's sister, prayed to the Virgin Mary during my birth, so I had to have her name, too, for protection. Mona Maria."

"Mona Maria." He smiles and says he finds the alliteration amusing. He says it's like a movie star's name.

We pass by my aunt's house. I hear my mother call me from the balcony, saying it's late and that I have to come home. I shout up to her to leave me alone; I am old enough and I can stay out as long as I want. We keep walking.

Mihai says there's a liquor store next to the railway station. We walk for a long time without talking. We see a train smoking its way out of the station and a couple kissing at the street corner. I'm jealous of all lovers, dead or alive. I am thirsty and giddy and I fall in love with every step I take at Mihai's side, as I watch his profile. His thick black eyelashes and sad green eyes. Tonight, on my saint's name day, I don't care about sugar and flour rations, so long as the store has vodka, and it always does.

We buy cheap vodka, *țuică*, made from fermented plums, and walk back to our neighbourhood. But just as we are about to cross the street towards my aunt's building, I take Mihai's hand and pull him onto a side street. The darkness smells of my special flower, *regina nopții*, queen of the night. We drink from the bottle in the middle of the street to celebrate my name saint.

I laugh so hard that tears burst out of my eyes. The moons are multiplying. It's wonderful to have moons scattered like stars above your head and to smell the queen of the night and to hold the hand of this sad man who is already thinking about how he will kiss me. I am alive. I am here, laughing in front of him, ablaze and golden and seeing many moons in the sky. I lie down on the strip of grass at the edge of the pavement, under a line of poplar saplings, next to the iron fence that separates the street from the park in front of my aunt's building. The neighbour who lives below my aunt's apartment walks past me carrying a bag of potatoes. She shakes her head and mutters something about "city girls".

Mihai lies next to me, and we look at the sky and at the many moons floating in orange halos. Time stops passing. Time stops mattering, just as when Faust asks the devil to freeze a moment because it's so beautiful. I have just read *Faust* in my comparative literature class. I go to a special literature high school in Bucharest. We read all the books in the world. I have friends who go to the English school or to the French or the Italian schools. My father and his poet and artist friends think it's some kind of a fluke in the system. The Party must have overlooked the threat of comparative literature courses, being so busy destroying everything else. I don't like *Faust*, but I like that phrase about wanting the present moment to stay because it is so beautiful!

This moment – now – this Romanian summer in a small town in the Carpathian Mountains, I want it to last for ever as I lie on the earth. It is there in the middle of Mihai's heart and the overturned earth: I see myself blooming, the queen of the night, fragrant and plump.

I don't know what happens after that. I wake up in my aunt's house in bed, next to my two cousins. My aunt and uncle and my mother all scold me. Several days go by and I don't see Mihai. I seem to be sleepwalking.

Then it's August 23, the Romanian national holiday, the Communist holiday when people are made to march in the streets with little red Party flags and chant *Nicolae și poporul*, *Nicolae și partidul*, Nicolae and the people, Nicolae and the Party. If you don't chant loud

enough, some man in a leather jacket may notice. My aunt and uncle have to go and demonstrate. All the adults are gone, my cousins are at a neighbour's house, and I am alone.

I walk to his street, two blocks away from my aunt's apartment at the end of the row of pastel houses. His house is larger than the other ones and is grey, not peachy, not lime. It is a stone house with a red tile roof. There are three apartments in the building, but it still looks like a house, and the front garden is separated from the street by a brick-coloured iron gate. I know his apartment is on the first floor, because in previous summers I used to see him and Mariana through the open windows close to each other, whenever I walked around the neighbourhood with Cristina. Sometimes we spied on them, and we saw their heads glued to each other, kissing. Other times he played his guitar for her, and the sounds of his strings flew out of the window like whimsical sparrows spreading throughout the neighbourhood. A sentimental song about the mountains in the moonlight.

I walk back and forth on his street, spying on his house. A woman passing by stops and asks if she can help me, if I am lost. I say, "No, thank you. I'm just waiting for someone." Then, as if it were true, the heavy glass door to his building opens, and Mihai comes out, wearing the same wrinkled shirt and check trousers he was wearing a week ago, but now he is shaven. He is walking with his little sway on one side, as if he were limping. I walk to meet him. We stop and stare at each other.

"Come, I'll show you a place in the mountains," he says as if he has been expecting me. "Somewhere you've never been."

"I'm not dressed for mountain climbing," I say. I am wearing a gauzy blue dress and the same flimsy, worn-out sandals.

We take a bus to the end of the line, the foot of the mountain, then a lift takes us midway up the mountain. He leads me to a trail through the forest. There are bright green ferns and blue bellflowers on the forest floor, and the afternoon light is filtered through the branches of the birch trees and the heavy oaks. Our steps reverberate in the silence of the forest, broken only by nervous woodpecker sounds or by a plaintive bird. The air is sparkling with specks of light. Then the path becomes steeper.

I stumble up the road. Pebbles collect in my sandals. The blue dress my mother had sewn from the material of an old curtain is wet with mud. It catches in the bushes that close in on the trail, hiding where it goes. I am red and sweaty as he pulls me by the hand, up and up.

We see wild raspberries, and he leans over to gather them. He feeds me the wild berries, one by one. I taste the tart fruit together with the pine resin on his hand. I know my lips are redder from the raspberries and that he wants to kiss them.

We hear thunder. The rain starts with such fury that I see water rushing down and spurting upward. He makes a sharp turn onto another path, and suddenly we're under a wooden shelter. We're soaked. My blue dress

clings to my body, and I can see my nipples through it. Every part of my body is outlined clearly under the gauzy soaked dress. From the pocket of his knee breeches, he produces a piece of thick white cloth. Winking at me, he says: "You've got to be prepared for everything in the mountains."

He starts wiping my face, my hair, and my neck with the white cloth that miraculously absorbs the water. He is meticulous and precise. The cloth moves to my shoulders, my breasts, my stomach, lingering an equal amount of time on each body part. I feel a strange heat radiating from my body. I am hypnotized. I don't want him to ever stop drying me off with the white cloth.

"There you are. Much better. You can't stay wet for long in the mountains. You can get pneumonia."

I know that when I am old and decrepit and ill, and even on my deathbed, I will remember this moment in the summer rain as I am staring at the lips of this man who knows the mountains and has dried my body with a white cloth.

We stare at each other, but we don't kiss. I can feel his breath on my neck. He pulls me close to his chest and holds me, stroking my hair. I am breathing into his chest, sheltered from the rain.

"It's stopped. We can go now," he says and takes my hand again.

As we get back to the path that climbs the mountain to some mythic rock he knows, we see pink and blue and violet clouds rising from the valleys and surrounding us. The valleys below hang in dazzling, multicoloured mists; the dark green chains of the Carpathians

surround us like a magic ring. Through one opening in the clouds, we can see part of the city, as if through an enchanted keyhole.

"It's a rare phenomenon," he says. "The clouds are moving on, as the sun is trying to come out. It's reflecting itself in the clouds."

We finally reach the big rock. It is a white, sharp rock with a cave at the bottom. The dogs are barking in the valley, and we hear the bells from the Black Church, the Saxon church, which was saved from a big fire centuries ago. We can almost make out the outlines of the church through the violet clouds as well, its straight, dark, burnt Gothic walls and towers shooting upward. The bells echo all the way to where we are, and as we lean against the white rock looking down at the pink clouds in the valley and at the sunset over the city, he tells me I have little stars in my eyes. The church bells sound on and on and on.

I taste the raspberries on his lips. I want to melt into the pink clouds and this kiss that tastes like the wildest fruit of the earth. The church bells toll, and my body is taking the shape of the full moon and the fragrance of the wild raspberries.

The rain has pulled down the banners for the August 23 celebration. When we return from the mountain, we find the streets filled with thousands of torn, wet red paper flags. People are moving hunched and soaked through the puddles and stepping on the red flags. I don't really care. I suddenly feel like I don't live in this country any more. His hand is squeezing mine as we approach my aunt's apartment building. He

asks me to come over to his apartment tomorrow, early in the morning.

It's from this day forward that I start sneaking down the stairs early before everybody is up. I wash my hair in icy water, because we get hot water for only one hour a day, or for two hours every other day, and are not supposed to use it up frivolously. Sometimes we don't get water at all early in the morning or late at night. The Party is always trying to make us economize for something, heat or energy, frantically pushing us towards the Socialist utopia that will be here any day now. I wash my hair with laundry soap in the bathroom sink, as quickly and quietly as I can, hoping the anaemic stream of tap water won't stop and leave me with my hair all gooey and whitish with suds. The mornings are always chilly; I shiver as I shoot down the marble stairs, wet strands of hair falling down my neck and shoulders.

He plays Grieg for me. He first blows the specks of dust off the record, then he places it gently on the turntable and lets the needle drop with one swift, delicate gesture. He stands unmoved for a few seconds, listening to the music with a contented smile.

"Listen, it's like the rain. *Peer Gynt*. I love it, don't you?" he says proudly, as if it were his own music.

"Yes, it's beautiful. I've never heard this before."

"You're trembling," he says. He puts his hands on my shoulders.

Drops of sound enter every pore of my body. His bedsheets are starchy and cool. As I take off my blue dress, the same dress I wore on the mountain in the

rain, I see through the open window the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Nicolae Ceauşescu, the *Father of the Nation*, hanging on the building across the street. They are ugly and they scare me.

I seem to know it all, to understand with precision every detail of every little caress on my body. I am not shy. Waves of heat and sound rise in my body. Limbs, whispers. He bites into my shoulder, I bite into his. I am dazed, curious at what's happening. I hear children playing outside right below our window, a ball hitting the pavement stubbornly, monotonously.

The bearded faces of Marx, Engels, Lenin and the unbearded face of Nicolae Ceauşescu watch us from the building across the street. I can see them right from where I lie, through the window. I close my eyes and don't think of anything. Grieg is playing. Clear notes dripping like rain. Mihai's body is wiry and taut and it smells of pine resin, as if he's sucked all the smells of the mountains into his olive-coloured flesh. I lose myself in this tangle of limbs, in this melting of flesh into flesh. Every part of my body wants to scream and moan as he holds me. Purples and reds burst in my head behind my closed lids and shoot through the veins and muscles in my body. I hold his hand, as he lies next to me, sweaty and trembling.

The lacy curtains are moving in the breeze. Through them, above our heads, the three Marxist leaders and the fourth one, our own *Father of the Nation*, are staring at us. We laugh and make faces at them; we tell them to go way deep into hell. He draws the curtains together and comes back next to me to whisper in my ear. He

says I am his little wild raspberry and he will eat me all up. He says he'll kidnap me and run away with me into the forest where nobody can find us, and we'll live there for ever like two savages, surviving on berries and roots. Then we roll among the cool sheets laughing.

I swirl through the summer, oblivious to everything and to everyone around me, rushing up and down the stairs at dawn, my hair always wet, illicitly clean. We lie in the many forests he knows, under fir trees and in secret meadows by a secret stream, the smell of fir and of earth rubbing against me. At night the moon wakes me, and a golden string seems to tie my thoughts to his, my desire to his. I leave my aunt's apartment in the middle of the night and climb like a thief through his window directly into his bed. I hold his warm, resin-smelling body. I bite the back of his neck, his shoulders, his lips. Always his lips.

When the time comes to go back to Bucharest and start the new school year, there is drizzle and fog on the heads of the mountains and at our white rock. The summer usually ends abruptly in the mountains and turns to autumn over several days during which the nights grow chillier, the morning light has a deeper golden glow, and the air seems to be quivering like a sigh in anxious anticipation of the cold weather. I am starting my third year of high school, and the university entrance exams loom ominously at the end of next year. I feel like I have to grow up overnight, mature like the summer light moving into autumn. The future seems as unclear as the mountain peaks capped in white mist.

The day before my departure, Mihai's mood becomes dark, and he talks about Mariana, about how she used to have toothaches and put vodka on her aching teeth. He remembers how she was running down the rocky path that afternoon, careless and happy. He remembers how his foot accidentally hit a big rock and sent it down the path. He says *accidentally* with a special stress, as if stumbling over the word. It's as if he were enveloped in a shadow. Suddenly he frightens me. He is sitting at the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. Maybe he killed Mariana. Maybe that rock wasn't an accident at all? Maybe I'm in love with a murderer. I startle myself from my dark reverie. I find myself strangely enthralled by the idea. Crimes of passion fascinate me. I've never really thought anyone would actually kill someone else because they are too jealous or too in love, except in a novel. And yet I want to erase the memory of Mariana from his heart for ever. I hate how her absence sneaks in between us. I get up from the bed in a swirl of jealous anger and am ready to leave without saying goodbye. He is sorry for his own sadness. He takes my hand and licks my palm and the tip of every finger. He tells me he doesn't want to lose me.

"I'll kill you if you die," he says.

Then he embraces me fiercely and holds me like that until I am gasping for breath.

"I'm like the thistles in the field. We go on, and on, and we never die," I say laughing, as I move away from his tight grip.

I prick his arms and neck with my nails, to show how

I am like a wild rambling thistle. He smiles. He has forgotten Mariana.

I have a dream about the two of us alone at night in the middle of the street, carrying the old suitcase my great-uncle Ivan was carrying when he came back twenty-five years after everyone had given him up for dead and then disappeared in the Soviet Union again. We sit on the suitcase, there are two moons in the sky, and Mariana comes out of the fog. She comes over to us, smiling. We see she is toothless, that she grins a frightful toothless smile. I feel sadness as deep as death.