

The Loathsome one¹

Mister Gheorghe started it all. At about three o'clock in the morning, at which time, during the Loathsome one's he'd get up to go and buy milk. No matter how hard he had tried, he never managed to be the first in line. He needn't set the alarm clock to ring as Mamaé, many times, woke him up even earlier than she should have. She'd driver her wheel chair up to his bed – "Gheorghita, are you asleep?", she would ask – more out of boredom, as the night was so long and there wasn't a soul she could talk to, and, to an eighty-year-old woman stuck in a wheel chair, such conversations are sometimes vital. "If you are asleep, it's all right, go on sleeping, but if you're not would you mind going to buy some milk? You don't mind, do you? Madam Artemie asked me to do her a small favour."

Mamaé couldn't stand drinking milk, instead she had made a hobby out of selling it for a slightly bigger price; back then two pints of milk was worth lei 2.20 at the grocer's and she would resell it for lei 2.50. Nowadays, such an occupation is known under the name of *Services*. Out of four bottles of milk that Mister Gheorghe could buy, if he got to stand in line twice, Mamaé would gather up enough money for a pack of *Carpati* and she would have cigarettes to smoke for the whole day. Eventually the Lord had mercy on her and called her unto Him just a little while before the Events².

20 After the Events things have changed a little in the sense that three o'clock in the morning is a very good time for car thieves.

Mister Gheorghe went out of the house dressed in a cotton robe and with some old sport shoes on, for which he had spent a long time looking in the closet, so he wouldn't make any noise down the stairs. The cold humid air of the dawn crept up under his robe and under his pyjamas making him feel as if he had stepped into a pond. "The chill of the morning makes me feel alive", a singer, sometime during the Loathsome One's, used to say, when Mister Gheorghita was still young and waking up in the morning made him feel like he had some kind of power over life; at 3 a.m. the gravity decreased a little, the world seemed larger and, because of that, breathing was easier. Now, the chill of the morning, went up the stairs bringing along a faint smell of mould, moving, here and there, the spider webs at the corners of the walls. There was no light at the last two stories so that, in the dark, you almost couldn't make out whether you kept your eyes open or closed.

30 "Hey, Simon, are you asleep?", he asked whispering.

"Yes".

"Would you like to chat for a while?"

"Gheorghe, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Come on man, at this time of the night?..."

40 "I've insomnia", explained Gheorghe.

No matter how hard he tried to speak in a low voice, the silence and the dark made the whispers reverberate as bell rings. Somewhere downstairs, a dog which settled down,

¹ A common reference to Nicolae Ceausescu, president of the former Socialist Republic of Romania and head of the Romanian Communist Party between 1965-1989. He was accused of crimes against the Romanian people after the Events in Timisoara (see note 2) and executed on the Christmas Eve of 1989.

² A name which designates the social movements which started on December, the 20th, 1989 at Timisoara and spread all over Romania in a matter of days and lead to the dissolving of the Romanian Communist Party, the end of Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship and his execution on December, the 25th, 1989.

God knows how, at the bottom of the stairs – somebody must have left the front door opened, coughed like a sad man. The shuffle of the brooms and the voices of the passers-by laughing or fighting over a trifle were to be heard outside in the street in a little while.

“Ever since the Events I can hardly sleep, and if I happen to wake up in the middle of the night I can’t sleep at all until dawn”, mister Gheorghe resumed, after he had kept quite for a while to make sure there wasn’t anyone else around to hear what he was saying.

10 “Is that why you are shooting the sling?” Simon wanted to know. “I heard you built a sniper sling”.

“Oh, no, the sling is a whole different matter altogether”, mister Gheorghe assured him.

Simon didn’t ask what that matter was so mister Gheorghe kept silent waiting to be asked something. After a while, noticing that the silence drew out more than it should have and fearing that Simon may fall asleep without asking him anything further, he spoke again.

20 “As for the sling, things aren’t as easy as some think: I had a problem with Ceaucescu. During that time everybody hated him for different reasons. Either because he’d give us soy bean salami or because there weren’t any football matches on TV, not to mention the fact that he’d make us wilfully work every Sunday. In the evening before I fell asleep, I’d think about how I could do for him in all possible ways. I’d imagine how I would make a laser gun, or something like that, and hide it along in the block across the street from the *People’s House*³. I’d squat somewhere there, on the top floor, and watch him come by car, the *Securitate*⁴ people following him. I’d purposely allow for him to enter his office, watch him through the lens drink his black coffee, he had diabetes you know, or change his blood, you know he used to take blood from children in the orphanages and put it in his veins to make him younger, I was in no rush because I knew what would come next. If his wife came in as well, it was all the better. In the meantime, if a *Securitate* man on patrol drew near, 30 I’d set the laser on him and put him away in no time. Other times, instead of laser I had some reactive cartridges with explosive, extraordinarily powerful that I’d shoot out of some special gun with silencer, so the *Securitate* people wouldn’t know where I had hidden, they were running about like crazy not knowing what to do while the *People’s House* would blow up to kingdom come. And that’s how I’d fall asleep careless every evening after *Telejurnal*⁵. Many times I wouldn’t even get to the part where I’d shoot him, I’d just set the tools in their proper order, as conveniently within reach as possible, knowing I have him at hand.

“Where would you get the cartridges”, Simon curiously wanted to know.

40 “Well, I had a network. They were most intelligent people, some dissident scientists that especially concerned themselves with that problem. They worked in some underground bunkers built by myself right here near Bacau, on the Magura Hill. You know that up West towards Onesti there is an iron deposits, they wrote in the papers about it, where if you shift your car to neutral, it goes up by itself instead of going downwards, because of the magnetism. I built a supply tunnel from there that came on surface through the underground passage at the railway station, nobody suspected

³ An immense, tacky building in Bucharest whose building cost a lot of human lives, a symbol of communism in Romania and one of the Ceausescu residences.

⁴ The political police in Romania during Nicolae Ceausescu’s regime.

⁵ The only news bulletin broadcasted during Ceausescu’s regime which glorified the figure of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife’s, and the extraordinary achievements of the Romanian Communist Party.

anything. My brilliant scientists invented those cartridges that were in fact some miniaturised hydrogen bombs. Do you get it? So there wouldn't be any radiations that could harm the population. I had found out that he set up this underground anti-atomic shelter, but I was no fool myself: I was counting on the element of surprise."

Simon got to thinking again. It seemed to be about a guerdon organization with large branches according to what mister Gheorghe was saying, except there was a slight doubt: how could he have possibly gathered so many dissidents?

"Eventually, some other people shot him", mister Gheorghe sadly finished.

"They beat you ahead", Simon remarked.

10 "Did you see that? I cried when they showed it on TV".

They remembered silently the Christmas evening. The weather was warm as if people had expected the Easter instead of Christmas. A few days before the demonstrations started in Bucharest, there was a huge rainbow over the valley of the Trebes and the people in Bacau looked dazed over there, wondering what that could mean. Many days after that they kept gathering in front of the Prefect's office where different kinds of intellectuals took turns speaking their opinion, some reciting poetry, some remembering how they had been persecuted, the archpriest showed up as well to sprinkle with holy water, then a public prosecutor commanded them to kneel for two minutes in honour of the victims of the revolution in Bucharest, where soldiers shoot each other. When, after a long while, the silence started to make him anxious again, mister Gheorghe cleared his throat several times.

20

"Maybe I bothered you. Did you want to sleep?" he asked in a low voice.

"I was examining my conscience" Simon announced him. "Gheorghe, can anything good start off with something bad? Sometimes I almost believe that that's the reason why we can't get rid of troubles. This democracy of ours started off with a crime."

"My trouble is that, ever since they shot him, I can't sleep any more. If there still had been lines for milk in the morning, I'd volunteer."

Beyond the elevator's door there was some noise and Simon's shuffling his feet, maybe he had changed his position.

30 "Are you all right sitting there, are you numb already?"

"I brought a stool from my apartment" Simon answered. "Tell me something, why don't you give it a try with these new ones that took Ceaucescu's place? Do something to them, some lasers, some explosives, or at least place some tear gas grenades, to drive them away, maybe this way you'll fall asleep easier."

"These?! ..." mister Gheorghe wandered disappointed, in a voice suddenly seized by compassion and a kind of resigned, incurable sullenness. "You think I didn't? But, I don't know why, I can't manage to hate them at all. They are no fun. You get sick and disgusted only by watching them as if you'd have to squash with your finger nail a green fly filled with shit ... I had been thinking of something else for a good while, I

40

shifted towards social problems. My organization wasn't into politics anymore but with educating the masses. There are plenty of callous people who spit, crack seeds, throw papers and cigarette butts in the street or on the bus etc. I was at odds with these. I'd form up teams of three or four agents who monitored the situation. If they came across a case, a loafer for example who carelessly threw a paper, my people would pick it up and return it to him speaking as politely as possible: <<if you don't mind, you dropped something, perhaps by mistake>>. If that person refused to take the paper or got stubborn, they'd club his back – to teach him a lesson! It worked for a while but after that I started to feel pity for them. Do you have any idea how bad that rubber bat can hurt? They're human after all."

Simon didn't contradict him, and he didn't seem to have any idea how to help him either. For the time being mister Gheorghe didn't have anything more to say. He had squatted by the elevator door, his eyes half closed, his back leaned against the heater and holding his knees with his both hands waiting for a piece of advice that wouldn't come. He felt well like that, warming himself up, like a little child in a bed of freshly cut hay, protected by the superior force of his father, who during that time was busying himself somewhere or feeding the cattle. It didn't matter what happened here or there, all the noises reached him smoothly as a sea wave flattened on an empty beach, when, at the end of the day, it comes shuffling on the sand behind the foot prints, apparently calling out for them, begging for their touch. It was as if a window had opened in time. Old memories flashed before his eyes, out of an echoless past, so far away that it almost wasn't his anymore; the one then glided into the depth of the silence, melted into its soft wave without touching it, until his heart beats and its painful turmoil revived this or that detail, a field of flowers, a narrow street with shadowed walls, a pair of socks hung by the stove door to dry... . Living creatures and almost alive objects stooped and span slower and slower as in a merry-go-round whose engine had stopped, but whose inertia still pushes the little horses around its axis, while the fading toll of the little bells can still be heard. At a certain point he heard Simon's voice calling him like in a dream – and he startled. When he opened his eyes, the first signs of the approaching dawn could be seen in the air, vague shadows like milky clouds floating in the dark. The people living in the block started going about their business. Somewhere downstairs somebody flushed the toilet and after the upset gurgling of the water, there followed a long hiss growing fainter and fainter. Then he heard the noise of a car drawing near and going away He understood, only after he had really woken up, that something had happened: he had fallen asleep.

“Listen here Gheorghe, be careful and try to understand what I am going to say to you so I won't speak in vain! Although a warm body seems to be one single thing, the warmth of the body is different from the body. In the same manner, the good and the evil stuck to man, mingling, like the body and its warmth – and only at the end of time will they be apart. By the nature of things, the evil is just how much the good is lacking, in the same way as the cold is the lack of warmth and the dark the lack of light. Where there is no man, there is no evil and there is no good: there is no light where there are no eyes because it is the eyes that make the light and all its colours. Don't fool yourself: if you didn't have the eyes you wouldn't be able to see the dark and everything that is not colour; what you can see with your knee, that would be the world, without light or darkness. Just like the tympanum produces the sounds that you can hear by vibrating. Until it hit the tympanum that sound was something else other than a sound; and the light was something else other than light before it met your retina, and if it had stopped there you still wouldn't call it light – as it is not the eyes that are watching but something else inside of them -, but it went further on taking a different shape, lead by the nature of things, through the nervous connections up to the most hidden place deep down inside the core of your shell that calls itself, from time to time, I: and maybe beyond that and even further on, to the prime source, to the far away places where it came from, where it met at the beginning of the world, the sounds and the odours and everything else felt or thought – nobody knows for sure where. So remember, light and darkness were inside before they were outside, and when you receive them they return where they left – the same the good and the evil. This is in short my answer: if you want to know how God made the world, search inside you and you'll find out”.

Mister Gheorghe listened rubbing his eyes and tried hard to think as seriously as he could of the things he was being told.

“Do you think I’ll be able to sleep easier like that?” he asked.

10 “To begin with, quit shooting your sling at the wind shields of the cars, the price for them has gone up and the poor people can’t afford to buy others. And in order to be able to sleep, think sooner of Hagi and the national football team. Wouldn’t our boys deserve to beat the Germans and the English? Wouldn’t they deserve to become world champions one day? Sure they would, but they need a secret weapon and a manager such as yourself to teach them tactical manoeuvres and such kind of things. You take
care of them. Select the most valuable players in the country, take them to training
camps, personally take care of their physical training Start off with a team here, in
Bacau, you win the Championship and the Cup, then you beat the Italians and the
Spanish and all the others that you play with. Remember well: you must not lose a
single match! You may let them score once or twice at the beginning, so they
wouldn’t suspect anything, but during the last quarter you release your secret weapon.
Be careful, before that, for your gifted scientists of yours to invent it. You’ll figure out
the rest yourself.”

20 Mister Gheorghe stood up but he was still hesitating to leave, he would shift his body weight from one leg to the other. He ran his hand through his beard and rubbed for a long while its rough hairs that had grown very fast.

“There would be one other problem though”, he objected. “I forgot to tell you that one of the scientists is of Hungarian origin.”

“Well, in that case, let’s say you get a draw with the Hungarians, so they could be pleased. Now go and get some sleep. Say 12 times <<Our Father>> and at last address our Jesus Christ’s Holy Mother.”

“Why twelve times?” mister Gheorghe asked puzzled, and Simon’s answer puzzled him even more.

“Because twelve were the peoples of Israel.”

30 According to his own testimony, mister Gheorghe returned home, but he didn’t get to go to bed, as in the mean time it had become day light and he had to get ready for work. After that he had been sleepy all day long, and in the evening, when he returned from work, he fell asleep right after his head hit the pillow. He hardly managed to design two or three attack positions towards the opponents’ goal, staring Hagi, this Eminescu of the Romanian football, as an inspired sports commentator recently put it.

(Excerpt from *Simon, the Lift attendant – a novel featuring angels and Moldavians*, Editura Compania 2001)