



How I lost My Memory and Never Got It Back

By **Domnica Radulescu**

I lost my memory that fateful September 5th of 1983 in old Bucharest that was glowing in the late summer light. The Gypsy at the street corner was selling orange chrysanthemums and pale roses. I wanted to lose my memory, drop it off the plane that took off towards Fiumicino Airport in Rome, Italy, sealing my fate as a refugee, exile, émigré, vagabond, nomad, homeless, uprooted citizen of the world. I saw my memory fall and fall and pulverize into millions of pieces above the neatly cut squares of Romanian agriculture – rye, wheat, corn, sunflowers – particularly the perky shameless sunflowers – until all of me and my memory of me flew in all directions and settled onto the rye and sunflowers and potato cultures like ashes from a recently incinerated corpse.

I had cried all morning holding on to the bathroom sink trying to get a hold of myself while my mother who was also crying and was holding on to the newly renovated bathtub kept saying: “Go, go, you have to go, it’s your only chance, it’s now or never.” “How about never?” I kept thinking. We had a newly renovated bathroom, in a new apartment building in a newly renovated Bucharest neighborhood. My new boyfriend lived next door, I was finishing up my studies in English literature at the University of Bucharest, the late summer light was honey like and the lazy street cars and trolleybuses seemed particularly endearing that morning – a picturesque sight of the old world, the Communist world, my world, the one I had grown up in. The only world I knew. Suddenly things didn’t seem that bad. Why had I been so fiercely determined to leave the country? In fact at that moment in the newly renovated bathroom, my life seemed sort of sweet. My mother said: “Go, go” as she was wiping her tears. I was crying and vomiting in the newly renovated bathroom sink saying: “I won’t go, I won’t go. I don’t want to go mama, leave me alone!”

I wondered for a second what was the point of all those bathroom renovations since our water was rationed and we only had hot water once

a week? What was the point of our shiny bathroom anyway? I clung to that critical, defiant thought and tried to pull myself together. So little made sense in our Communist society – shiny bathrooms with no use, short stories that were rejected for the simple reason that they were not about our luminous leader or about some textile factory exceeding their five-year plan, and university diplomas that gave you the right to be sent by the government to work in a rural area in the middle of nowhere doing something that had nothing to do with your university degree. Go, go, go! I had planned this for months, I had to go through with what I had so tenaciously planned and fantasized about. Freedom, the Western world, the United States, a huge throbbing world out there in which renovated bathrooms actually had running water and where you might have a chance at publishing a short story even if it didn't extol the virtues of the president of the country and his party.

I gathered all my strength that morning in the renovated bathroom with pale blue tiles. Miracle of all miracles, an anemic jet of water was actually coming out of the shiny new faucet and cooling my tear smeared face. I remembered my mother having said when I told her of my decision to leave the country: "What a pity, just now when we have renovated the bathrooms!" Maybe I should have left before they renovated the bathrooms. But that morning of September 5th my mother was standing next to me in the bathroom trying to give me courage for my departure – for my leap into the world, for my escape, my running away, my radical gesture of defiance. The way to the airport in the taxi was a surreal glide through a city that was already no longer mine: the wide boulevards, the long rows of chestnut trees, the old buildings in the nineteenth century French style, the luscious parks, the Gypsies selling flowers at street corners, my old school with the large inner courtyard where I had spent hundreds of hours playing volleyball with my school mates during recess, the beautiful Athenaeum where I had listened to the world's best classical music, the old churches with fading frescoes and the shadow of me gliding through all of that. The shadow of the one I had been and that I would never be again floated uncannily around the city. I remember very vividly the glowing light that seemed to envelop everything in a sweet blur the morning of my departure – an image seen through a thin layer of water – swaying and not very clear but wrenchingly beautiful. "The last time, the last time, the last time" was all I could think of.

At the airport it all went fast with the exception of the episode with the border police woman that seemed to take forever. She checked my luggage and asked questions about each single item in the carefully packed suitcase: "What are you doing with a winter coat in the summer?" "I'm

going on a trip in the Alps.” “What are these typed pages doing here?” “They are school work for when I come back.” “Why are you leaving so late in the summer, don’t you have school?” “Yes, I do, but I asked the permission of the Dean to be a couple of weeks late.” I had planned it all and anticipated all the questions. This was my hardest exam ever. Only I hadn’t anticipated the knot of fear in my chest and my mind racing: “What if she stops me, what if she stops me, and I’ll never leave again?” And the knot of grief in my chest seeing my mother and father wait behind the line to see me go and my mind racing: “For the last time, for the last time, for the last time.” I walked towards the plane at a steady pace without even looking back at the suitcase or at my parents, not knowing if my luggage even made it on board the plane. I didn’t care about the suitcase. I was my one and only suitcase. And when the plane took off and flew above the symmetrical squares of Communist agriculture, that was when I let go of my memory, that was when I knew it would be splintered into a million pieces, that was when I knew I was light and empty, and ferociously hungry for what was to come.

In the summer I go back like thousands of other Romanians from all over the world. We are returning, grieving our lost memory and selves, rejoicing in the encounter with the familiar sights and smells, or just happy we can see our families and eat Romanian pastries. Romanians are proud of this mysterious word “dor” that is supposed to express an ineffable and inexplicable longing, a deep melancholy for what you’ve lost and can never get back, for what you could have had but never did, for what you might have had if you hadn’t been born in Romania and you hadn’t known of this ineffable mysterious word “dor.” It’s pronounced almost like the English “door” only with a shorter “o” and the “r” is rolled. It’s a word like a pebble hitting a clear pond: “dor.” We feel “dor” when we get close to the squares of Romanian agriculture. I know it from the way in which my compatriots look down surreptitiously through the airplane window pretending not to care, that it’s not a big deal, but then somehow it is and we are glad to see that the symmetrical squares of agriculture are still there. And we know we’ll have to leave again like we did the first time and we already anticipate our “dor” for when we take the plane back to our various homes spread all over the world.

This next time as the plane hovers above those light brown and yellow and green squares right before landing, I plan to pick up the pieces of my memory and put them back together somehow even if the puzzle of me will be all jumbled up. The pieces are all there but put in the wrong order, exasperatingly in the wrong order – a walk in the park in Bucharest catching a bleeding chestnut tree leaf in its aimless flight, a little startle that your mother is not on time and your father will have another asthma

attack because of the secret police following him, an American lover that makes you think obliquely and unsatisfyingly of your first Romanian lover, your first lover that later becomes a character in your first novel about which everybody asks you whether it's autobiographical or not, a taste of snow on your tongue as your son born on American soil, first child of your lineage born on American soil pulls you down in the snow – he can be a president, he can be a baseball player, he can be a neuroscientist or a welder working in a foundry – he can be everything in this big American experiment, dream, melting pot, where memory melts like the metal in a welder's foundry.

I see myself already on that next plane hovering over perfect squares of carefully organized agriculture as I am desperately trying to put back together what had been broken and splintered into millions of pieces thirty years ago and I realize it will never work. A big gaping feeling of “dor” that you don't belong anywhere takes over you. You've accomplished everything you wanted: university career, scholarly publications, a novel that sells all over the world, a large house with two acres of land and most importantly two beautiful sons who are your pride and joy. You should feel rooted, content, accomplished. Yet there is always a gnawing feeling of something stuck in your throat like a nagging cough. It's usually triggered by small things: someone asking you for the millionth time where you are from, your best American friend not inviting you to her celebration party, the mechanic looking at you stupefied after you've explained the problem with your carburetor in perfectly clear English and saying “Ma'am?” And you're never fully at home in your own native country either, because it's been thirty years and you've lost big chunks of experience and memory. There is “dor” everywhere you turn.

You have linoleum on the floor of your renovated American bathroom thirty years after you left your tiled Romanian bathroom and with each new story, it's an exasperatingly new beginning. You don't have to write about the president or about American textile factories because all textiles are made in China anyways but you do have to make your editors “fall in love” with your story. It's the key to the American success. And you can't help wondering if it was worth splintering yourself on that September day in 1983 and leaving your memory sprinkled like ashes all over your native agriculture never to be recovered. And perversely, you know you would do it all over again, for the thrill of leaping into that vortex of the unknown as your plane takes off and for the thrill of sprinkling your memory all over the world. And for the thrill of being your one and only suitcase. You can take it everywhere.

AUTHOR

Domnica Radulescu immigrated to the United States in 1983 after she escaped from her native Romania into Italy. Presently she is the Edwin A. Morris Professor of French and Italian literature at Washington and Lee University. She is the author of two best-selling novels: *Black Sea Twilight* (Doubleday 2010 & 2011) and *Train to Trieste* (Knopf 2008 & 2009). *Train to Trieste* has been published in twelve languages and is the winner of the 2009 Library of Virginia Fiction Award. Radulescu's play *The Town with Very Nice People. A Strident Operetta* has been chosen as a runner up for the 2013 Jane Chambers Playwriting award given by the Association of Theater in Higher Education. Her play *Naturalized Woman* was presented at the Thespis Theater Festival in New York City in 2012. She has authored, edited and co-edited several scholarly books on theater, exile and representations of women and received the 2011 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. She is also a Fulbright scholar and is presently completing her third novel titled *Country of Red Azaleas* and a new play titled *Exile Is My Home*.