



Romania by Taxi

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MONA: A Romanian writer and professor now a US citizen returning to her native country on a fellowship after many years, in the late 2000s.

YOUNGER MONA: An alter ego younger version of MONA who is more like the young girl of twenty some years earlier before MONA left Romania. A different actress would play the younger MONA.

NICKY: MONA's son, a luminous teenage boy, curious, bright and perfectly bilingual in English and Romanian.

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA

WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ANGRY MAN IN THE MARKET

GYPSY KID

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET

TAXI DRIVER WITH SON IN AMERICA

MARIUS WITH THE WHITE OPEL

BEN: MONA's BOYFRIEND

SCENE I. THE RED DACIA

Remote city, Transylvania, Romania: empty train platform.

(MONA and her son NICKY are waiting surrounded by several large suitcases and a couple of heavy backpacks).

MONA: No one, hm! It figures! I'm worried we won't have a place to stay, NICKY. What if we have nowhere to go and have to sleep ... I don't know, in the street for example. I don't see the person who was supposed to pick us up anywhere. Everything has to be backwards if you're in Romania. It couldn't be otherwise, right!

NICKY: It's like everything is the end of the world with you, Mama, you exaggerate everything! Let's just wait a little and then take a taxi.

MONA: I don't know this train station and this city, where the hell are we going to take a taxi to, hm? Man, to think we have to spend the next six months of our lives here! Fall and winter, the whole long and gruelling winter. I wanted the experience of a return after twenty something years, now I have it in full, without a single soul to care about us and wait for us at the train station. Where's that renowned Romanian hospitality when you need it?

NICKY: Mama, stop ranting! Let's just take a taxi and go to the hotel, the man in București told us to go to the University Hotel, right?

MONA: What to do! Yeah, all right, let's take a taxi and hope we have a room at the hotel, that they remembered us and they saved the room, so we don't spend our first night in some random place. Taxi, taxi!

(She signals to a red car, a plump, brand new Dacia, unlike any cars in the days of Ceaușescu. Out of it comes a chauffeur as plump as his car. He has glasses and the early signs of balding. He seems happy that he has clients. But when he sees all of the suitcases and backpacks strewn across the sidewalk in front of the train station he no longer seems so happy and he starts to scold them for having so much luggage).

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: What is this, eh? Where are you coming from, Alaska? You have too many bags, they aren't even gonna fit, you know.

MONA: Please, at least just give it a shot, it should be able to fit! You know, we just came from the United States, and are going to be here for

six months. To think of it it's not even that much for six months. Just try it, all right!

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: So you're coming all the way from USA, heh? Well you have enough bags here for a few years. But that sure is far away!

(A minute later and by some miracle, the taxi driver squeezes the four suitcases and two backpacks in the magic trunk of the red Dacia, endless like a Mary Poppins bag).

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Hey and what's *your* name kid?

NICHOLAS: NICHOLAS, or NICKY ...

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Yo MICKY. MICKY you speak Romanian too kid!

MONA: Yes, of course he does, both of my kids speak Romanian. Can you please take us to the University Hotel?

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: The University Hotel, you said? Yo, but you have two kids, so where is the other?

MONA: He stayed in the United States, he's at the University, in college. Yes, the University Hotel please, you know where it is, right?

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Aha, so he's a big kid, he's in college. But Miss, you don't look like the mother of such a mature child.

MONA: Thank you, I guess ... but do you know where the University Hotel is?

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Well which one of them?

MONA: What do you mean which one of them? They told us it was the university's big hotel, I think it's called Universitas Hotel or something like that.

(She starts showing signs of nervousness that the taxi driver doesn't know where to take them and what can they do so late without knowing a soul).

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Aha, it's the one off of Plopilor Street, right?

MONA: I don't know, but probably, Universitas Hotel, if you think it's on Plopilor, then fine, Plopilor, just take us there.

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA Well there's only one ... only one university hotel, and that one is on Plopilor. Man, you guys are coming from far away. And how long did you say you were staying, six months?

MONA: Yeah, six months.

(She turns to NICKY and whispers).

MONA: NICKY why did he have to ask which one of them, when there is only one University hotel, it all seems like part of some twisted game. I'm so worried.

(NICKY takes her hand and tries to calm her down).

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Why not stay longer? Why not stay a year?

(She seems to be thinking about it in earnest and talks quietly to NICKY or to herself, then looks out the window into the night as they start crossing the unknown city).

MONA: I'm worried about how things will turn out, six months in an unknown city, and I'm not even sure why I chose to stay here for six months and not for a year or for four months. I don't know, maybe this was a huge mistake.

(Then she starts talking to the taxi driver again, getting more irritated yet answering his intrusive line of questioning as if despite herself).

MONA: That's what I decided, all right, because I didn't want to leave my older son alone for so long. Wow, look at the pastel colored, baroque buildings. It's pretty, NICKY, isn't it? It reminds me of my childhood, though it's not quite like the Braşov of my childhood, or Sinaia, or Bucureşti. I don't know, there's something about it ...

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Well our city is beautiful, have you never been around here before?

MONA: No, I haven't been, it's the first time. But my mom was born here. Yes, my mother is from here. *(MONA turns to NICKY in a nostalgic, dreamy*

manner). Just look at that, such a grandiose Gothic cathedral in the center, and these ornate buildings in all the colors of the rainbow, bright orange, pink, yellow, lime green. I feel like I have been here before, in a dream... I remember something, a photograph in sepia, my grandmother wearing a long manteau that flows elegantly and my mother and her sister holding each other's hands with fur jackets and identical hats tilted to one side, in front of the cathedral, a few silhouettes in the background, everything in sepia, yellow-grey, an autumn day in the thirties ... so long ago, long before I was even born ...

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: You haven't been back home for a while now, have you. Well a lot has changed, here in the center they renovated everything, but now there are too many cars everywhere.

MONA: The center is pretty. But is it much farther to the hotel?

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Well there's not too much left, look we'll go this way down the tram line and we'll get there before you know it. Yo MICKY tell me, are you excited you came to Romania?

NICKY: Yeah, of course, it's beautiful.

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Look we're finally here, didn't I tell you it was this one, on Plopilor? I told you so!

MONA: (*to NICKY, whispering ironically*). It's not like I contradicted him about Plopilor street or about whether he knew how to get there.

(The taxi driver helps them bring all the luggage into the hotel lobby, shakes NICKY's hand and kisses MONA's hand in the ceremonious old world way).

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: Have a good stay here in our city. Here is my card with the phone number on it, in case you need a taxi to take you around, all right!

(Universitas Hotel, modern and sparkling clean. The woman from International Relations is waiting for them in the large modern hallway).

WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: I'm so, so sorry about the mix up at the train station. Florica, give them the key, will you! Here let me help you with this. Florica, can't you hear me? Come here with the key and help Miss MONA with the luggage.

(A young girl working at the reception, dressed in tight jeans and even tighter shirt showing a revealing cleavage comes to help them. Together with the WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS they manage to stuff all the luggage inside the elevator and they all get in standing tightly against the walls).

WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: You've come a long way, haven't you! I've been to the United States once too, I didn't like it too much. There was no one in the streets, no people in the streets.

MONA: Where did you go?

WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: In Omaha Nebraska, that's where. It seemed like a deserted city, a ghost town. But well, you are not here to listen to my American experience. I hope you will like our town, it has a lot of culture.

MONA: Yes, I could see that even driving from the train station.

WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: Oh you haven't seen anything, wait till the morning, then you'll see.

(The elevators arrives at the 10th floor with a big thump and a shake. Everybody waits in silence until the automatic doors open. The WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS leads NICKY and MONA inside a clean, large but very austere room. MONA looks around, inspects everything and once the two women are gone she sits down exhausted on one of the small twin beds).

MONA: She seems nice in a way that I never remember any person from any reception ever being when I left, during Ceaușescu's time. Things have certainly changed from my time. We'll see. What are you doing sitting there unmoved NICKY, have you frozen up? Start unpacking!

NICKY: *(Going out onto the small balcony)*. Look Mama, the tram, wow it's cool!

MONA: Yes, of course, we'll take the tram to the center tomorrow. So here we are, at our destination, in my mother's city of birth, and the Universitas Hotel! Our first evening didn't turn out too bad after all, did it? Look at the hills over there, my mother always talked to me about the hills around her native city ... Dealul Feleacului ... what a funny name! There's something so familiar, you know, even though I've never been here and yet also very strange and very foreign. I don't know ... We'll go to the market first thing tomorrow morning, all right NICKY, we'll take the tram, you'll see it's fun.



Author's mother and grandmother in Cluj, 1939



Photograph of the author's mother and her sister in Cluj, in 1939

SCENE II

From the market

(MONA and NICKY stand by the side of the road with their bags from the market: luscious red apples and grapes from Vrancea, honey with the honeycomb, cheese pies, tomatoes, peppers and a pair of bootcut jeans).

MONA: You can find everything in the market nowadays, all the things that I loved and was never able to find when I was growing up.

(Three kids in rags approach them, begging for money. MONA takes out her wallet and gives them some of the new bills. Some Romanians still call them by the old denomination of millions even though the many zeros were taken out many years ago and they are now called Ron. An elegant woman looks at MONA with a deathly stare while another man addresses her angrily).

ANGRY MAN IN THE MARKET: To hell with those filthy fucking Gypsies, don't give them anything Miss, they're all thieves.

MONA: Mind your own business! Go to hell all right! Here kid, take another Leu.¹

GYPSY KID: Thank you m'am, thank you m'am, God bless you.

(MONA makes an obscene gesture to the man who was cursing these kids so vehemently. NICKY takes her by the hand sensing her agitation).

MONA: Damn it, new markets, but the same bloody racism and hatefulness as before. "The more things change, the more they stay the same," he was right whoever said it.

NICKY: Let it be Mama, let's just go.

MONA: NICKY let's take a taxi, it's too hot and these bags are too heavy!

NICKY: O Mama, you're so fragile, let's take the trolley bus, it's so fun using public transportation.

¹ The old denomination of the Romanian currency which changed to Ron after the monetary reform in the late 2000s.

MONA: Well you know, I'm not in the mood to take the trolley bus and cram myself in with all of these bags, ok? We'll do as I say, we'll take a taxi. Taxi, Taxi!

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: Good morning, Miss, where can I take you?

MONA: Well please take us to the University Hotel on Plopilor, you know where it is, right?

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: I know, how could I not know, lady? That's why we drive taxis.

MONA: That's true, but there are others who don't always know and I wasn't sure.

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: The ones who don't know have no idea what they're doing. That's how it is, some people work themselves to death and others not at all. Because it's not the same now as it was under Ceaușescu, sleeping at the office and getting paid, now you have to work until you explode. And if you don't, you starve. So what do you have there from the market?

MONA: Well just some grapes and some apples, they have good fruits here at the market.

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: Yes indeed, Miss, they do, all the fruit under the sun. But you didn't get bayberries did you?

MONA: No, I didn't get bayberries, I don't know what they are, really. (*She turns to NICKY and whispers incredulously*). Gee, so many new things, it's like being in a foreign country, next thing you know they'll be asking me where my accent is from, like they do in the States.

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: How do you not know what bayberries are my lady? I buy whole kilograms for my family and make bayberry compote for the winter. It has all the vitamins Miss, it's pure healthiness. Yeah, indeed we have everything in these markets.

MONA: But what are these bayberries? (*Without waiting for an answer from the taxi driver, she turns to NICKY and points nostalgically to a building they are passing by*). Look NICKY, over there, the Court of Appeals,

the sunset – it makes it look so pink, so bright, you would think it was an Opera building, or a huge wedding cake, not a Court of Appeals. I don't even know what a bloody Court of Appeals is. Whatever, it's nice. Sometimes I have a feeling that I have lived here before in a dream, in another life, in my family's memories, a picture in sepia, long time ago before the war, after the war ...

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: Well bayberries they are these small, hard red fruits, and you boil them with sugar and lemon and make a compote for the whole winter until you've licked the whole pot clean, yes indeed m'am.

NICKY: You know mom, he's talking about rose hips.

MONA: No, they aren't rose hips, how can they be rose hips if they are bayberries, can't you hear what the man is saying?

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: I'm telling you m'am, they are small, red and delicious. My whole family eats them.

MONA: Look the Someș river, **NICKY**, it's pretty, isn't it. Well, I'm happy I discovered a new fruit. Or maybe it's not new, I have just forgotten it ... something reminds me of a place, a time, where I have been and never been, I don't know. Here Sir, 10 Lei, thank you very much.

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: God bless you M'am, and may God give you much health. Next time you go to the market, you buy some of them bayberries, all right?

SCENE III

Son in America

(MONA and NICKY are meeting at a street corner in the Transylvanian town, at the end of the school day. It's a beautiful fall day, the long streets are shrouded in a golden sheen, the colors of the houses are soothing to the soul, and the women look proud and elegant as they walk by in their extremely high heels, barely able to keep their balance. Images of the town are projected as a backdrop.)

YOUNGER MONA: *(Appears like in a dream, an eerie apparition moving effortlessly across the stage as if flying)*. How would things have been if everything had been this way “back in my day”, if I had never left, if the Russians had never occupied, if Ceaușescu never happened, if, if, if... I would have never had NICKY. He reminds me of myself and of the days I used to walk back from school on a fall afternoon in București, on some street by the Garden of the Icon, laughing with my classmates from school in our blue uniforms, gathering around a love note from some boy in tenth grade, the smell of ripe mulberries at the start of fall, actors' pictures from the Bulandra Theater, the leaves turning red and falling to the ground in pirouettes.

(MONA waves to NICKY to cross the street and join her. NICKY kisses everybody in his group good-bye and crosses the street to meet his mother. YOUNGER MONA glides side by side with them, a ghostly companion who only MONA sees yet accepts as a normal reality of her life in her mother's native town).

MONA: How was school today? How did you do on your Romanian test?

NICKY: School was really “tight” overall, but the test was “nashpa.” Everybody thought so. *(He now speaks in a mixture of English and Romanian with a lot of new Romanian slang)*.

MONA: What language are you speaking? What the hell is “nashpa?” And why is school “tight”? Are your classrooms too small?

YOUNGER MONA: *(Laughing at MONA's ignorance of the new slang)*. Ha, ha, you're really behind the times my dear, you have no idea of how the kids talk these day, do you?

(MONA doesn't respond, just shakes her head in annoyance at her younger alter ego's condescending tone).

NICKY: (*Laughing at his mother's ignorance of the new Romanian and English slang*). "Tight" is like "cool" and "nashpa" is like "sucky." The test sucked Mama, I had no idea what the questions were all about, I hadn't read the story about the talking magical fish, all right.

MONA: Yeah, well, you should have read the damn story, you know we are here for just a few months. You should make the most of it and you should improve your Romanian reading and writing skills.

NICKY: I am Mama, what do you think I do in school for seven hours, it was just a ginormous story, I didn't get to finish it all right, we've been going to the theater every night, remember, that's learning too, isn't it? Plus I'm learning all the new slang, so you can't understand me when I talk on my cell phone with my girlfriend, ha, ha!

MONA: You have a girlfriend now? What's her name?

NICKY: Maybe. Not really a girlfriend, just a friend girl, alright, don't get all worked up about it.

(*They both laugh wholeheartedly and MONA embraces NICKY lovingly*).

MONA: Let's get a taxi, I have a million books in my backpack and my back hurts.

NICKY: Right Mama, you always find a reason to avoid public transportation. What's wrong with the bus or the tram, hm?

MONA: There's nothing wrong, I just prefer the taxi. (*She waves to a blue taxi*). Taxi, taxi. Are you free?

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Yes, M'am, free.

MONA: Take us please to Băița street, number 7. You know where it is right? It's right by the Mercur market.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Should we take it down Pata, Miss?

MONA: Take us down Kogălniceanu, please.

NICKY: Mama, Pata is the old name of Kogălniceanu.

MONA: (*Talking to NICHOLAS in the back of the car*). I wonder why everybody uses the old street names, even though they've been changed for many years now. I'm completely disoriented, every time I say the name of a street I find out that it actually has a different name. (*Then leaning forward and talking to the taxi driver*). Yes, alright, go wherever you think is best, sir. Wherever you think it will be the least busy.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Well at this hour lady, it's busy everywhere, Goddam everyone of them!

MONA: Yeah, it's very busy, what can I say, people just drive everywhere nowadays.

NICKY: Yeah mom, and how are you getting places?

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: But you're not from around here are you?

MONA: No, I'm not from here, we are visiting for a few months.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Where are you from? If you don't mind me asking.

MONA: Well originally I'm from București.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: But I detect an accent.

MONA: Oh, do you? That's surprising, I grew up in București. Well, now we live in the United States.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Ah, you live in the States? Well I have a son too who's in America. He's in North Carolina.

MONA: Oh, really? We live in Virginia, it's close. It's pretty in North Carolina.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Yeah I wouldn't know, could be pretty, I never been, haven't even seen my son in 9 years.

MONA: My God, how? Why did you never go?

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Well by the time he got settled over there, and he got all his papers and found his job ... now he even has insurance.

MONA: Ah, he's insured, that's nice.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Yes, lady, he found himself a Romanian girl, one of our own kind, a student at the university there and they even have a kid now too. (*While he cuts through the middle of what is supposed to be a roundabout, he leans and pulls out a stack of pictures from the glove compartment and hands them to MONA*). Look, lady, all of my kids, the boy in America and my three girls. They are still here with us.

MONA: (*She takes the pictures and starts looking at them, pretending to be interested*).

NICKY: (*He looks at her smiling*). How funny taxi drivers in Romania show you pictures of their families.

MONA: Oh, look at these bright dresses: purple, green, and orange ... you find nice clothes in Romania these days. (*The pictures of the children are projected on a screen: the one with the girls in Romania is in a crowded Romanian apartment with lots of furniture and china, and the boy with his wife and the baby in front of an American house, with a lawn and neatly cut bushes in the front. Everyone is smiling, everyone is wearing bright and colorful clothes in America and in Romania*). Over there is "ours" and now over here too is "ours."

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: But there's a lot of those darkies over there in America, isn't there?

MONA: (*She doesn't answer right away as she is shocked and embarrassed by the taxi driver's comment; she turns to NICKY and says to him in English in almost a whisper*). I can't believe how racist and stupid these Romanians of mine can be, how they just vomit everything that comes to their head.

MONA: There are people of color, yes, that's America for you.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: It's not like I have anything against them.

MONA: Well what a relief, that's great you have nothing against them.

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: (*He gets MONA's sarcasm and changes his familiar tone to a colder, more professional one*). Look miss, we're here, is it okay here at these stairs?

MONA: It's fine, yes, right here. Damn, this heavy backpack!

(*While she is frantically looking for ten Lei for the taxi driver her bags are falling, tomatoes and turnips tumble on the sidewalk, the backpack slides off her shoulder. NICKY has got out of the car in front of the apartment building where they now live and is waiting for her on the sidewalk with his enormous school backpack*).

MONA: Why the hell don't you help me? Did you freeze in that position or something, are you stupid?

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: Let it be, Miss, I can help you.

(*The taxi driver gets out of the car, after which he goes on to pick up all of the tomatoes and turnips carefully off of the sidewalk, puts them back in the bags and offers to help her get up the stairs to their apartment. The three of them climb up the stairs in a single file line. The taxi driver carries all of her luggage up to the fourth floor and leaves it in front of her door, wiping sweat off his brow. He has a tired face and deep wrinkles on his forehead*).

YOUNGER MONA: (*Who had disappeared once they got into the taxi, now suddenly re-appears in a corner of the staricase or the hallway as if out of thin air and as if she has been waiting for them*). What do you want my dear? He hasn't seen his boy in America for nine years. What does he know about Black people? He is no more racist than many Americans from your pretty town with nice people, where they stare at you and your boyfriend when you go out together, or like the time when the cop stopped you on the highway just because he saw a White woman driving with a Black man next to her. It may be the 21st century, but what's America like? Everywhere there are people who are stupid and racist. This is no exception, only it's true it would have been nice if our people were better. Whatever MONA, things are as they are, some things have changed for the better, some for the worst, some have stayed the same. (*For a brief moment everybody except YOUNGER MONA freezes on the staircase like a movie still*). Only I haven't changed, I'm the same as when you left me. I've been waiting for you (*She smiles sadly at MONA and disappears into thin air just as she has appeared. The three of them have reached the apartment on the fourth floor and are all out of breath, the taxi driver is wiping sweat off his forehead, looking exhausted and MONA hands him an extra note of 5 Lei*).

MONA: Oh thank you so much, if you will ...

TAXI DRIVER IN THE BLUE CAR: No, there's really no need lady, thank you.

(The taxi driver descends hurriedly down the cement stairs of their building on Băița street number 7. She opens the door and hears the radio, left intentionally on Cultural Romania, the show she listens to constantly and where now she can even hear shows about environmental issues and violence in schools and interviews about Romanian film and radio plays like the ones she used to listen to with her father in the time of Ceaușescu almost every night. She stands in the middle of the apartment and talks to herself or to NICKY).

MONA: Oh, man how nice to hear these Romanian phrases I've missed this so much, the sound of it, the melody of it ... It's fun in taxis NICKY, right? Look at these beautiful turnips, will you, have you ever seen turnips like these? I think my brains are about to explode right now, everything is so confusing, such a mess of cultures and languages, I miss everything, why couldn't things be like this, better, why couldn't ...

NICKY: *(He drops his backpack on the kitchen floor and hugs her warmly)*. Mama, it is what it is, right, we are here now, it's pretty cool, isn't it?

MONA: *(Wiping tears off her face and hugging him back)*. Yes, it's wonderful, we have Romania and America together, we're lucky I guess, in a weird sort of way

SCENE IV

MARIUS with the White Opel

(MONA and NICKY are walking hurriedly in the center of town at the peak rush hour in the afternoon. She is looking in all directions to catch a taxi at the corner where the Catholic Cathedral stands majestically).

MONA: Jesus, I have loads of things to do today, I don't have time to wait here forever, whatever happened with all the taxis in town, are they on strike or something? Remember that BEN is arriving tonight, but first we have to go to the bus station to get tickets for Alba Iulia. I want to take him there over the weekend and show him the old fort, the museum, something historical. Oh, here maybe this one will stop.

(She makes a large hand signal from in front of the Catholic Cathedral and a white Opel station wagon pulls over).

MONA: Good day, can you please take us to the bus station. Is it far?

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Well it is kind of far, it's all the way by the train station.

(A relatively young lad with short hair and a big smile, more modern looking than previous taxi drivers).

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Well the thing is I have to stop for a sec first here at the service station to do a tire check because a nail got lodged in and we might not be able to make it much farther.

MONA: *(Talking to NICHOLAS as they are getting settled in the back seat of the brand new Opel)*. I wonder why he picked us up if he knew he had a nail in his tire. *(Then louder to the taxi driver, in an irritated tone)*. Well then we'll get out and go with somebody else.

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Hey now, don't worry, I'll take you dear, it's not about to break down just yet.

(As soon as he leaves he starts heading the wrong way down one way streets as if he couldn't see the signs. MONA stays in the car even though she regrets not getting out at the beginning, but somehow feels compelled to stay, drawn maybe by the familiar way in which the taxi driver addresses her, as if he knew her forever).

MONA: But don't you respect the one way? And this isn't even the first time a driver has gone down a one way street as if those signs are only just ornaments put on the street for decoration. What's wrong with Romanian drivers anyways!

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Let it go dear, it's not a big deal, no need to be so anxious about it. Just this one time. And you, what's your name kid?

NICKY: NICHOLAS or NICKY.

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: MICKY, hm? My name is MARIUS.

MONA: *(Almost whispering in English to NICKY).* The first taxi driver with a name. And the umptieth taxi driver that calls you MICKY. It must be a Romanian fixation on Mickey Mouse, one of the many American fixations over here. Yea, my people are obsessed with Mickey Mouse and Dallas, and more recently the new techno music and porn movies. Gee, what is it going to be like when BEN gets here, I hope nobody makes any racist comments in front of him.

NICKY: Whatever Mama, don't worry so much about this all the time.

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Look, we're almost there. And if you don't mind I'm gonna stop here for a bit at the service station to get my tire checked.

(MARIUS drops them off at the bus station and goes to the service station across the street to check his tire. However, when MONA and NICKY go inside the bus station everything is closed, no one is at the right kiosks. MARIUS comes back after several minutes, happy to pick them up again, as if they were a member of his family. They all get back into his white Opel).

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Nowadays man, that's the way things are, you have to work from dawn till dusk or the other way around if you want to survive. I don't complain, I'm my own boss driving a taxi, it's just that I don't get to see my little girl until late in the evening.

MONA: Hey MARIUS, are we still driving around with a nail in the tire?

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Well this one guy from the service station told me to come back later, because I can keep going like this for a while, no big deal!

MONA: No big deal? What do you mean no big deal? How can we drive like this with a punctured tire, are you crazy?

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Don't worry dear, it's all in your head, nothing's going to happen, I wouldn't have taken you if I knew it were dangerous.

MONA: (*sarcastically*). Is that really so? How can it not be dangerous to drive with a nail in the tire? (*Turning to NICKY and whispering to him again in English*). Great, now a super macho reckless driver, that's all we needed today, I'll be a mess by the time I have to pick up BEN at the airport tonight. Who knows what crazy taxi driver I'll get then, maybe someone who drives with no steering wheel and on the sidewalk. Well, BEN said he wanted to know my country and my culture, he's got to see the whole package, the good, the bad and the totally insane.

(*MARIUS drops NICKY off at his soccer practice and turns around to take MONA back to the center. He goes the wrong way down another one way street, with the nail still in his tire, but by now MONA is indifferent to the situation*).

MONA: MARIUS, I'd like to ask you something, tonight my boyfriend from America is coming, would you mind taking me to the airport to wait for him?

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: I'll take ya dear, of course I will, call me half an hour before and I'll come get you.

(*Inside MONA's apartment. NICKY is doing his homework while she is getting ready to pick up BEN at the airport, choosing among her different outfits the one that BEN would find the sexiest. She picks up a red dress with a black belt and a flare at the bottom, she puts on her high heel red boots. It is close to evening and the light is becoming dimmer, a slightly dreamy atmosphere inside the apartment, and Italian music is playing on the Romanian radio. MONA starts dancing around the apartment, lost in memories of her youth. A blueish light is on stage right where YOUNGER MONA is dancing with a young man to the same Italian song. The scene lasts several minutes. Then the blueish light goes off and we are back in the apartment, evening light, MONA is sitting on the sofa out of breath from the dancing*).

MONA: So, it's evening already. Let me call MARIUS now, he said he'll take us to the airport.

(*She calls MARIUS on her cell phone while looking at herself in the mirror*).

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Hello MONA, I'll be right over.

(A brief time passes in which MONA and NICKY are getting ready to meet MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL. They go out in the street and wait for him. He reappears coming once again down a one way street).

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Hello Dear. I fixed the tire so you can relax now, we'll be fine. Yo MICKY, how're you doing man? Did you kick some good goals at the soccer practice?

NICKY: Yea, sure, we played a game too and I scored a goal.

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: You the man! You and I should play together sometime.

(Screen projection/large sign: Airport. They arrive at the airpoort. MARIUS waits for them in front of the airport while the two of them go inside to wait for BEN. He appears through the international arrivals gate happy to see them. While he is still talking to the customs officers, and then walking towards them, MONA talks to NICKY).

MONA: What a funny, weird situation, right, here he is, probably the only Black person within a thousand miles, in this small airport in this town in Northern Transylvania.

NICKY: Yes, right, it's not such a big deal Mama, just another situation. And I saw other Black people in town, you know, students at the university. You'll be fine.

(MONA embraces BEN upon arrival and all three leave the gate and walk outside of the airport to the white Opel where MARIUS is waiting leaning on the car. When he sees them he opens the doors and the trunk).

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Let me help you! Here, put this large suitcase here in the trunk, and the backpack you can take in the back with you. A lot of luggage, hm? Long way from home! It's all right, here is small, not the United States, but we like the United States.

MONA: *(Sitting in the back now, winks at BEN and rolls her eyes, suggesting the taxi driver would just go on about anything).*

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: So BEN, do you speak Romanian?

BEN: No, I don't, I wish I did though.

(MARIUS is happy to oblige and on the way back he tries to teach BEN Romanian, who repeats with difficulty the Romanian expressions for “what’s up,” “thank you” “good morning” “look at that car” while MARIUS repeats each one several times, sending a gentle shower of spit into the air in the wild enthusiasm that overtakes him at the chance of teaching Romanian to MONA’s boyfriend, who is outside of American borders for the first time in his life. MARIUS keeps throwing BEN a punch for every time he repeats a word relatively correctly. Between the shower of spit and the friendly punches, BEN is getting more and more irritated, exhausted after the last twenty hours of travelling).

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: Repeat after me! *Ce faci băi?* – Romanian for “What’s up dude!” and *Mulțumesc!* – Romanian for thank you! *Bună dimineața* – Romanian for Good morning. *Uite mașina!* – Romanian for Look at that car! *(Turning towards MONA with a mischievous smile).* Hey, do you know the joke about Bulă on his wedding night?

MONA: *(embarrassed vis-a-vis BEN, but curious about the joke).* No, I don't, which one?

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: *(Eager to tell the obscene joke and turning towards MONA in the back while driving, which makes BEN very nervous).* So Bulă gets married and has no idea what to do on his wedding night, right? And he calls his father and asks him: “So Dad, what do I have to do to my wife tonight?” And his father says: “Well, you know you have to stick your longest member into the hole.” “Oh, all right,” says Bula happy. “So I’ll go ahead and do that, I’ll tell you how it went after I’m done.” The father calls him the next morning and asks: “So son, how did it go last night?” “Well Dad, not so well, I’m still standing here with my leg stuck inside the toilet bowl.”

(MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL laughs wholeheartedly at his own joke).

MONA: *(Laughing wholeheartedly too, despite herself and also embarrassed vis-a-vis BEN who has no idea what’s going on and even looks a bit jealous of MONA’s familiarity with the taxi driver).* Yea, it’s funny. Now I think I remember it, my father used to tell it. *(Then realizing that she is excluding BEN, turns to him).* Look here is the Gothic cathedral, here is the Orthodox one, and over there is the big park, beautiful, isn’t it?

BEN: *(He doesn’t seem to care).* Yeah, sure, it’s nice.

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: (*Relentless in his national pride and professorial drive, throwing a shower of spit in BEN's direction again*). Biserica, hai spune biserica, church, come on, say church.

BEN: Bi-se-wi-ka.

MONA: (*Laughing at BEN's funny pronunciation*) Good job!

BEN: (*More irritated and tired by the minute*). How much longer till we get to your place babe?

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: We'll get there, don't you worry. "Biserica," hai spune: bi-se-ri-ca, come on say church! (*MARIUS sends another shower of spit in BEN's direction to his great annoyance*).

BEN: Bi-se-wi-ka, all right, there, bi-se-wi-ka, are you happy now?

(*For a brief moment all are quiet and motionless in the taxi before getting out. The atmosphere is dreamy, slightly unreal again. Then YOUNGER MONA appears out of thin air right between MONA and NICKY in the back set of the car, sitting between them*).

YOUNGER MONA: Strange, isn't it? You feel closer to MARIUS with his shower of spit, as if he were a distant cousin from the country, than you do to BEN, who keeps calling you babe, as if you were his child and not his girlfriend, and who is completely uninterested in the landscapes you are showing him. Was it a good a good idea for BEN to come here? Maybe it was better not knowing how many oceans of culture and soul, architectural landscape and humor separate you two. Either way, it's good that now you can say to BEN that look, not all Romanians are racist, look how nice MARIUS with the white opel was, he even tried to teach you some Romanian. Whatever, let's see what happens, maybe BEN will come around after all and you'll have a great time (*She disappears just as she had appeared*).

(*Back to reality. They all get out of the taxi, MARIUS helps them with the luggage, kisses MONA's hand, and shakes BEN's and NICKY's hands. BEN seems relieved to have gotten rid of the taxi driving Romanian Professor. He tries to kiss MONA but she pulls away as if embarrassed to kiss him in front of NICKY and MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL. The neighbor from the first floor, the scraggy man with white hair who smokes on the stairs in front of the building every morning and digs potatoes out of the minuscule patch of soil he owns in front of his apartment is in front of the apartment building, smoking. He stares*

at the multicolored loud group with a proud and disapproving look. MONA is standing in front of the building in a state of utter confusion. NICKY senses his mother's existential confusion and tries to save the situation and pull them all out of the awkward moment in which they seem stuck).

NICKY: Hey BEN, how are the Cubs doing? Have you seen any games lately?

BEN: *(Relieved he can now talk about things that interest him and that he doesn't have to work on his foreign language skills).* Yea, man, the Cubs suck again, but the Nationals are doing really great this year.

(NICKY heads up the stairs with BEN. MONA follows behind them and is making plans in her head about their activities for the days to come).

YOUNGER MONA: *(Appearing again like a Cheshire Cat right next to MONA climbing the stairs side by side with her).* So what if you called MARIUS again to take you all on a short trip somewhere around the area, in his white Opel with a patched tire. Maybe in the end BEN and MARIUS will become friends. Ask him to take you to Vlad the Impaler's birth town two hours down south of here. *(She disappears just as they all enter the apartment).*

MONA: Hey guys, what do you say I call MARIUS tomorrow to take us to Sighișoara, we can see Vlad the Impaler's birth house?

BEN: That sounds great babe. Am I going to get the Romanian lessons again from MARIUS?

MONA: You'd better believe it, it's good for you to learn some Romanian.

BEN: So how do you say "you look hot and I missed you" in Romanian?"

MONA: *(Laughing at BEN's words).* Let's wait for MARIUS to teach you that!

(They all laugh. Romanian pop music is heard on the radio. ALL the other characters from previous scenes walk onto the stage including YOUNGER MONA. All except YOUNGER MONA surround MONA and address her, some in reproachful tones, some in angry tones, others in tender yet condescending tones. The scene and lighting have to be eerie, dreamlike).

WOMAN FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: You've come from far away, haven't you? All the way from that United States with its empty

streets and ghost towns, you've come here to our Transylvanian town to show off your American dollars, haven't you?

TAXI DRIVER WITH SON IN AMERICA: That's right, yeah, you've come here to preach to us about them darkies, haven't you, to bring back Communism and drugs and eat our turnips.

TAXI DRIVER FROM THE MARKET: Take some bayberries, will you, they are pure healthiness, you'll never get sick and you'll never die if you eat bayberry compote every day, they are not like them tasteless fruit in that America of yours.

ANGRY MAN IN THE STREET: Yeah, you go back to those darkies in America, don't you tell us how to treat our Gypsy thieves, you live with them to see how it is.

GYPSY KID: (*Talking kindly to MONA*). God Bless you Ma'am, you are a good woman, God bless you and his Virgin Mother. They don't like us here very much, it's how it is. You are kind and generous though. Can't you take me with you to America? They have equal rights over there don't they? Ha, ha. (*Laughs wholeheartedly*).

(YOUNGER MONA takes the GYPSY KID's hand and dances with him to the sound of the Romanian pop music that has been playing all along in the background.)

TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA: And what's with all them suitcases, are you coming from Alaska, did you bring the entire America in it to show off your American stuff? And your American Mickey Mouse kid?

(At the last line MONA moves to the center to join YOUNGER MONA. She looks furious and she slaps the TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA violently).

MONA: You pronounce one syllable about my son and I'll show you my American ways. You, you ... (*She is attacking TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA*).

MARIUS IN THE WHITE OPEL: (*With kindness and understanding, while trying to separate MONA from TAXI DRIVER IN RED DACIA*). Let it be dear, they are ignorant and envious people, what do you expect, don't mind them. We are not all like that, we are not all racist and envious of those who were smart enough to leave during Ceaușescu. Come on, calm down, I'll take you and NICKY and your boyfriend on a tour of the city. And I'll go down all the one way streets in the wrong direction, ha, ha!

(MONA and the YOUNGER MONA move towards one another and start dancing with each other).

MONA: I've missed you, where have you been all this time? Come with me to America, I need you. I need you to tell me everything that happened after I left, to tell me that I am still the same, and also different, you'll like it where I live, I promise. Please come with me.

(YOUNGER MONA embraces MONA warmly, then moves away and leaves slowly while MONA is trying to hold her. YOUNGER MONA releases herself from the hold and runs to the end of the stage. The two take one more look at each other and wave good-bye. YOUNGER MONA disappears. NICKY moves towards MONA. The two embrace).

MONA: Let's go home NICKY.

NICKY: Where is home Mama?

MONA: Good question. I don't know, really. Let's just take a taxi for now.

(Lights off).

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Domnica Radulescu is a distinguished Professor of French and Italian literature at Washington and Lee University, Women's and Gender Studies and the Chair of the Medieval and Renaissance Studies Program. Radulescu received the 2011 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, and is a Fulbright scholar. She is the author of two internationally praised novels: *Black Sea Twilight* (Doubleday 2010 & 2011) and *Train to Trieste* (Knopf 2008 & 2009). *Train to Trieste* has been published in thirteen languages and is the winner of the 2009 Library of Virginia Fiction Award. She has authored, edited and co-edited numerous books on theater, exile and representations of women and two of her plays, *The Town with Very Nice People* and *Exile Is My Home* were finalists in the Jane Chambers Playwriting competition. The latter play was presented at TheaterLab off, off Broadway as a rehearsed staged reading in October of 2014 and is being planned for a full production at Theater for the New City in NYC in the spring of 2016. Her third novel, *Country of Red Azaleas* is forthcoming from Hachette in April of 2016. Radulescu is the founding director of the National Symposium of Theater in Academe. She is working on her fourth novel *My Father's Orchards*.