

Ella VERES

REFLECTIONS ON *THE SCOURGE* OF ALCOHOLISM

Abstract. *Reflection on the scourge of alcoholism* is an applied study based on the Theater of the Oppressed method, combined in a series of interviews, with the purpose of healing and change, giving a voice to relatives who still suffered quietly after they lost their loved ones to alcohol. All the materials can be used as a base for dramatic writing. The applications are a direct result of the field research made in various locations as Zalău, Cluj, Budapest. The reserach was made with the help of students from the Babeş-Bolyai University, Deparment of Theater and Television, The Cinematography, Photography, and Media Wing.

Preamble

A month ago, I returned from Transylvania, Romania where I worked with local people and the students from the Babeş-Bolyai University, Department of Theater and Television, The Cinematography, Photography, and Media Wing on a material about alcoholism. For the following days, I slept and slept and slept. Then I plunged into tumultuous New York life during recession. Fellow artists would eagerly ask me how my trip was. I'd recount, I'd entertain, I'd marvel, I'd try to sort things out, and couldn't. Even my travel notes would not gel into a coherent report. Finally a few days ago I was asked by Professor Doru Pop, the organizer, to write about my experience, my methodology, the people I collaborated with, so here I am today, endeavoring to write a relatively academic report that measures the success of our enterprise.

I belong to a school of thought that finds the objective/omniscient third person used

in academia alienating and inaccurate. I can speak at ease only from my subjective perspective.

Methodology

I use the self as a vehicle for my work. I use my personal experiences as a starting point of exploration. I am a testimony and an exploration, a sacrificial guinea pig and a cultural agent of change. At times it is dangerous, it cuts to close to the bone.

We decided with Professor Doru Pop that we'd create a material about alcoholism. I felt strongly about the horrific situation in my hometown, Zalău. My younger brother died because of alcoholism, my father stopped drinking only last year, when he was 74 and a diabetic with a blood clot in his brain he acquired falling on the ice while being drunk. All the friends I have in Zalău had at least one dear person dead because of drinking.

Yet, there wasn't much talk about it in the public arena. Among others, I am a journalist by training, so I use interviews as fodder for my stage work. I also am a Theater of the Oppressed practitioner, which is I use theater, photography, video etc. as a tool for social change. I hoped these techniques would help on the enterprise, but I was ready to shift gears in case they proved inadequate in the field. In preparation for the trip, I researched the situation on the internet and made various contacts that could lead to interviews. The main one was the Alcoholics Anonymous at St. Dimitrie Church. Its founder Floyd Frantz was eager in his support.

Budapest Interviews

In Budapest, where I landed, I was reminded that this was not just a Romanian state problem, but the entire Eastern Europe, Russia was drowning in alcohol. Come to think of it, it's a global problem. My host in Budapest, Patrick Mullowney, took me to a party that I had to flee, since the revelers were smoking me out of my lungs and merrily emptying bottles. On the street, in bus stops, you'd see gatherings of red-nosed workers sipping from bottles in the middle of the day.

Zalău Interviews

Upon arrival in my hometown, we went to the cemetery with armfuls of chrysanthemums to sanctify the tomb of my brother, since it was the Day of the Dead. The entire town converged on its tight alleys. Many tombstones showed how young were the deceased. However medieval it sounds, the alcoholism is a scourge, a plague. I interviewed my friends. Their sorrow and anger nested in me. I observed my own family, and tried to imagine how our lives would have been different without alcohol. Too late. Yet, to see my father sober, working the garden, joking with my mother, felt warm.

But my younger brother is gone. One of my main fears was that I wouldn't be able to rein in my own sorrow during the trip. I often prayed for strength so I could fulfill my duty, lead the participants on a journey of discovery, thought, and change, without me crying, and to my surprise, I was always in control of my emotions, to the point of polite numbness. I said to

myself, *This is my brother's funeral, this is his tombstone, my wreath of flowers for him, may his death not be in vain, may he be loved in death, may we be forgiven that we didn't know better to stop death.*

Cluj

Upon arrival I met with a volunteer group of acting students (Lavinia Cosma, Florina Florian, Rares Lucaci, Raluca Lupan, Gina Murgu, Ingrid Robu, Raluca Sava, Eliza Tuturman and Alecu Vacarus) that I'd contacted over the email, thanks to Michael Page, their previous Shakespeare professor. I was a bit anxious as to how to approach them. My Romanian was rusty and they were utterly quiet. After I described the aim and timetable of the event, – we had one week to gather the material, experiment with it and then make a public presentation, – I asked them to read various fragments from two texts that I brought with me. They found them interesting and not at all traumatizing. Good.

For the next days, we followed the routine: in the morning and early afternoon field videotaped interviews, in the evening rehearsal/experimentation with the students.

In the field we – my assistant Mihai Leaha, and I – had to win the trust of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous. After three days of visiting, we managed to interview several of them. We also interviewed the managing staff, a social worker and the priest-in-chief. Overall, it was a good material. We proceeded to transcribe several chunks of interviews. It

was a tedious affair, my assistant being a busy graduate student, and myself juggling rehearsals and making appointments. But we managed to have enough material in the end. We also interviewed various professionals, from the Anti-Drug state run program to university professors like Eugen Băican that specializes in addictology, and Ruxandra Cesereanu, a cultural and social philosopher. We hounded down policemen and psychiatrists but didn't manage to meet anyone willing to be interviewed.

As to the students, they were extremely obedient. At the beginning never offered an opinion, unless painfully coaxed to. We had a discussion, inviting them to be more outspoken, we were collaborators, I deemed them artists, they were already that, life didn't start upon graduation.

In the end, I came to regret that, alas, because to my surprise the anti-American sentiments were strong. Not that they'd previously traveled to America. I guess Bush and other ugly Americans abroad ruined America's image. Oh, well.

We had sessions in which we worked with texts based on the interviews, or we experimented with Image Theater techniques, creating sculptures of oppression. Then we created scenes based on newspaper articles. One of them, a brawl in a casino, won the prize, which is we developed it for the public presentation. It was an interesting material because when I went back on the internet and found more texts about the incident it seemed that actually the drunken aggressors were in truth victims. I explain the students

about Forum Theater and offered them new lines from the internet material. They were splitting with laughter at the colorful, bawdy lines, but when it came to use them on stage, none of them volunteered. The impulse to be 'nice' to the audience at the cost of misrepresenting reality won. I blamed it on self-censorship, a sequel of communism. It was amazing to observe it. Twenty years had passed since the fall of communism but people didn't seem at ease to exercise their freedom of speech.

Anyway, we presented the material to the symposium participants. Various professors gave us much appreciated feedback. The next day we had the second presentation. The interviewees, the press, the townspeople and studentship flooded the theater hall. The actors begged me to preface their performance with a disclaimer, explaining the interviewees that we used their words just as a launching pad for our artistic process, so they shouldn't take offense. They didn't. It was a warm audience. I introduced the interviewees to the actors that portrayed them and the actors were amazed how appreciative the real persons were. My understanding was that these actors never performed a text based on real people before.

I also hoped that they understood they could become themselves agents of change, that the entire society is a stage, that they shouldn't measure their professional success only by the work in black box theaters. Or when they have a booking slump and have to take menial jobs like many actors in New York do,

they could still be artists. Students rolled their eyes at the dire prospects. But truth is they all fear their future since there's an inflation of actors in Romania.

Evaluation

I think I accomplished what I promised. I introduced some new techniques to students and professors. I made them think about alcoholism. One evening they started discussing it spontaneously. Then, while we interviewed, we were an agent of healing and change, giving a voice to relatives who still suffered quietly after they lost their loved ones to alcohol. Then the two professors that we interviewed had interesting points to make, though some contradictory. It was great to give a place to their thoughts too. The most moving thing was the presence of those from AA in the audience. The anxiety of the actors, and then seeing them embracing at the end of the show. The warm appreciation of faculty. Also, we had a media presence. Paula Boartă published a large article in the *Adevărul* newspaper.

The people from Zălau were eager to see the pictures and the texts we created based on their words, since they weren't able to come to the event. The St. Dimitrie staff was inquiring about creating a publicity spot together. Mr. Frantz also was excited about possibly creating various short films based on the texts, to raise awareness. Prof. Băican can't wait to show the resulting DVD to his addictology students.

Also by presenting these techniques and controversial subject matter, I was invited

to see the dismal situation of the people at the garbage dump in Pata Râtului, and we will create another awareness campaign there.

Future

My hope is that after we all spend happy winter holidays, we manage to process the material, we get some sponsorship and finalize the transcription and transposing for stage of the written material, both in Romanian and English, and we have it performed both in Romania and in the USA. I aim for a bigger impact.

APPLICATIONS

Sudden letter from my brother

Anda imagines a prison cell. Her Brother, a charmer, painstakingly scribbles a letter. He has a hangover.

My Dear Sister From America:

Know that the other day both our parents died in their sleep and I'm right now already across the border heading to the Canadian Consulate in Budapest to ask for visa for Canada since many people from home went to Canada. I have several high school pals now living in Montreal who admired me since I was the best in our class at algebra and often let them copy the answers to the midterm tests and finals; actually all of the tests. They gave me cigarettes in return, of course. I'll be heading towards Canada, so I won't be at the funeral, but I thought you should know what's going on before our sister, the doctor, calls you.

He stops writing.

The lies she always tells concerning me!

The other day she started to roll the so-called "Persian" rug from the guest room to take it to her new backwoods husband and I told her it was not hers, it was yours, but she said it wasn't true and I was a drunk and she knew all I waited for was for our parents to die so that I can get it and sell it for nickels to my good-for-nothing drunk muggers. Sell it for a bottle of plum brandy, such an excellent rug! I don't even drink plum brandy anymore, for that matter, and the rug was not hers! But she thinks she can do whatever she likes just because she got married again and is a doctor. I'm a highly educated chap myself, as you know, and though it took me ten years to graduate from the National Aircraft Design Institute, I did it in the end, though I wanted to drop out every so often. You know I hated it. What's the point in designing airplanes, helicopters nowadays? What's the deal? Work on a military base, an obscure one of course, where the captain didn't even finish his primary school but got to be a captain because he had a healthy social origin and kissed the right communist party asses. And have all those buggers order me around? No, thanks. Or go to work for the Russians? No, thanks. It's not that the money won't be good, but the first time they wanted us to practice piloting and parachuting, I vomited my guts from fear and that was the end of my highly elevated career.

I will never forget how I saw those cabbage patches from up there, like skulls of all those former hopeful souls that were protecting the father land from the

capitalist aggressors, and I had a vertigo and puked on my instructor who hollered at me *Sunofabitch! Yellow faggot! You'll never graduate from my course, you idiot! Daisy faggot!*

I'm not a faggot! Half of our town young ladies can testify to it! I'm a stud! Anyway, I paid for the dry cleaning, and father brought him ten bottles of plum brandy. You know mother and father, pushing me to graduate, and nagging me to death, so I finished it, slowly... It was okay. I would have dropped it altogether but I liked night-life in the capital.

But you know all that, what's the point of this recap? I just wanted you to know that while you're there meeting famous people, I'm on my way too; and to give you the news about our poor mother and father. Such an unfortunate event! You should have seen how she fell on the rug, like a cotton-filled doll. Didn't even squeak. I was amazed this was so easy! Well, at least now we don't need to wait until they die to squabble over the house and garden. I can't tell for sure, but I think our doctor-sister made them sign the will that she would inherit the house. Now I know for a fact, as well as I know my name, that mother don't want to do that! She said this is the parents' house, each of us should have a place to come home, each of us should have a room. But then our dear sister cornered her while I was hung-over after a one-week festivity and told her she was the one who would take care of her and father, obviously, not me, since I was a drunk, or you, who went to America to become rich and famous!

I have a splitting headache. I need a shot of plum brandy, but they don't let me out of the detention center until they finish fingerprinting and interrogating. They say,--listen to them!--that they called home and my sister told them I killed our parents! I told them I did not, it was our sister who did it! Mother was on the rug, saying to her, *You'll have this rug only over my dead body!* and the sister said *Very well, then*, and went to the kitchen, grabbed the rolling pin and hit her in the head, and poor old woman fell on the rug saying, *Your American sister will take care of you two, scoundrels! She'll take care! You'll be punished by the appropriate authorities*, and she gasped and died. Her nightgown with lavender flower pattern was rolled above her knees and her skin was alabaster white and smooth like a baby's.

I immediately took off, let your sister roll the carpet and take our mom into the woods and bury her, or chop her with the axe and give her to the pigs, whatever, I'm out of here! The only thing that made me stay in that town was her. Not that I helped her a lot, but I just couldn't get the courage to go away, so much she nagged me! I wanted to be a rock star, but she said I had the voice of a bullfrog. Drinking, I can drink, I can drink, I'm a king at drinking! When I drink I don't need to answer foolish questions, I just drink and am happy. I get my booze whichever way I can. Lie to her, steal it from papa's cellar, talk my pals into buying some for me, anything. The women, oh, they love to drink with me. Then, they want to reform me! But still they give me some money to

cheer up so that I can jump their bones. Which I do. I do very well. I'm a king at it! I'm a stud!

Anyway, this is crap! I just wanted you to know the truth about our parents.

Father died yesterday, too. None of my fault there either. He came home dead drunk and gave me a sermon about how a drunk pig like me should be ashamed and is a curse on his old days. I should go and work, he doesn't need my help in the market. For all the help I give him, he loses money on the days I carry bananas for him in the market. I denied it, but it might be true. I always pinch a bit of money when I deliver the bananas and he is busy with the boxes and counting the fruit bunches and plastic bags and checking the invoice. I get some dough and whistle to the pub. What does he want? I'm a man! I know what I'm doing! And I don't pinch that much!

So he was pissing me off and I told him to shut up! Our dear mother was dead. I just hit her by accident with the rolling pin and she fell flat, bleeding on your rug, yelling at me I was a murderer! Me, who was protecting her from my sister who hit her with the rolling pin!

I told him *Shut up, if you please! Shut up!* He screaming like that in my brains! and he didn't shut up, 'cause he had to say how I was a miserable parasite and I could pee on my airplane diploma, I could fly on a broom to Canada, for as much as he cared and I told him to shut up! but he went on how at my age he had a family and kids and his own house and was well respected. Crap like that makes

me see red! So I took that rolling pin and cracked his fucking baldhead! He looks like an ostrich! Hope I won't look like that. Didn't take much, one fine melon bash! Hit him once more to get him on the floor and I let the fucking Madam doctor deal with the stained carpet.

I had to go. I told them I'd leave three nights before. Cross the green border to Hungary in the night with my buddies, then go by boat. Warned them. Mother was again bitching with the neighbour on the porch that *Young people fall drunk on the street! It's full of them. It's a painful misfortune. He has weak will. The doctor said his liver is huge, he should stop drinking.*

I don't think so. That day I get up. I tell her I'd not drink this time, but in an hour all was crappy so I go, tell the old woman I'm going somewhere to fetch something, meet some buddy on urgent business, but I go for a stinky shot at the Cherry Brandy Tavern and I decide it's time to have some action: *To Canada, my friends!* I tell mom! The nasty sister says she'll take the rug then! Everybody goes to Canada, goes to the USA, she'll at least take the rug for herself. Feather her nest. We should just all go to Canada, let her take care of the old folks! Let her bury them and feed them when they'd be all slobbering, paralyzed around the house. Yeah, right! She can't wait for them to die so that she can put her big butt in the house and kick me out.

I haven't killed our parents.

Please, dear sister, expedite the visa for Canada for me, and help me get out of here. I'll give you my share of parents' house, or take care of your kid, teach him

how to be a man! I'll sleep in the kitchen if you don't have much space there in the USA, and we'll be one happy family again, until I find an Asian girl for myself, what do you think? I'm still good looking! I'm your little brother who loves you, though you don't write home and don't call as a good, nice daughter and sister should.

So if the detention authorities call you, tell them I'm an okay guy and didn't murder our parents! Please vouch for me, and get me out of here so I can establish myself a grand future like you did.

God help us all.

Blackout.

Learn to love what you have

An imaginary visit back the parents' home in Transylvania. In the kitchen. Mother, 70s, small, white hair, tattered clothing, stirs the polenta boiling in a cast iron cauldron, sits and looks at a picture of her grandson. Anda, unpacks her suitcase and a pulley bag that are spread around the floor. We hear Father in the backyard chopping wood.

Mother: What a pity you couldn't bring Sandu with you. *Looks at the picture.* He's so handsome, my darling little grandchild!

Anda: He has a girlfriend, what do you know! He bought her a stuffed animal for Valentine's Day.

Mother: What's Valentine Day?

Anda: Something they have in America. Sweethearts' holiday. They give each other gifts wrapped in red or pink heart-shaped boxes. Mostly red.

Mother: Do you have a sweetheart?

Anda: I don't know. Where do you keep the toothpicks?

Mother: You're funny! In the lower drawer.

Anda: It's the jetlag....

Mother: You need to marry again.

Anda: Oh, no. I've lost the ability to love.

Mother: You can't lose that! I've loved your father for 52 years. You just haven't met the right one! It's hard to meet a decent man when you have a child.

Anda: It's not hard at all, Mom. I've met about four decent guys since... October? No, November. What's today? April. November, December, January, March... six months. Four guys. Each of them interesting, charming, exciting and I went out with all of them.

Mother: At the same time?

Anda: Well, at times with two of them.

Mother: Oh, dear!

Anda: Mom, it's not like here where you know everybody in town!

Mother: But still! Four men! You slept with four men in six months!

Anda: I didn't! Not because I'm virtuous! It's a bit funny! One day I daydream about one, the next day about the other! I wish I could make one out of two. I would say *I love you* to one, but then in a few days, or weeks, or months, or hours, I'd love the other one and say *I love you truly* and mean it, but in the end,—and there is no end of guys there, people from all over the world!—in the end I'd just not trust myself anymore, Mom. How can I love one, then not love him, then love another one... And you know what's even more perplexing? I just forgot about them all. Not that they

were very insistent either. We just drifted away. I have no ability to love! I space out! I'm a balloon. I drift in the wind, not even a decisive blowing wind. A breeze would do. How have you stayed married to Papa?! I can't feel anything!

Mother: I love him. We had you, children.

Anda: What's to love about Dad? A stinky drunk.

Mother: He is old now, but... He loves you.

He's better now. He stopped drinking when the Pope died.

Anda: *Doubtful.* It'll be something if he stays sober while I'm here. All I want is quiet. No yelling. No body odors. No crying. No hugging. No kissing....

Mother: You should call more often. You can even call just to whine about things! I'll listen!

Anda: I'll call, but I won't talk to him! He gets weepy when he drinks. Ugh, how he used to curse and smash things! Beat us up! I hope he has a fast death to spare you.

Mother: Please, don't...

Anda: "Don't-don't"... Why can't you just all die at once?! First my husband, then my brother, then my boyfriend, then my granny, now my father. Just die all of you NOW! Once and for all.

Mother: We're trying...

Anda: *Laughs. Hugs her.* Sorry, it's the jetlag. I'm actually sleepy all the time. I couldn't sleep well this spring. I don't know if it's because of the bad news or the endless rain or the neighbor. We live in a basement and I was apprehensive we'd

be flooded. We weren't, but I couldn't sleep. Also about the time when my brother wrote me about dad, our neighbor with whom we share the basement is a drunk too, started to lose control over his bowels.

He vomits in the sink. We find residue of food in the drain. Probably pees too. We disinfect the sink before touching it. We didn't catch him at it, so what can we do? Besides, he is a quiet drunk. I hate the smell of him. And he is not even a friend or a lover or anything for us to put up with him.... Only if he moves out we might get a worse neighbor, one that screams at our door in the night, or beats his girlfriend, so we pretend he is an imbecile pet, a dog that shits all over the place, the nuisance.

One day I was coming home thru the endless rain and he was in front of the house, his pants down his hips, his big belly running out. He was carrying yet another six-pack. He couldn't open the door for the last half an hour, couldn't think what was wrong with that door.

The great man never cleans after himself. Sandu said the pig peed all over the bathroom floor, and so he, my son mopped up the pee – it is his chore to clean the bathroom floor and wipe the mirrors.

I still didn't say anything. That night, shower time, my son comes with one of the towels I love, and shows it to me, full of yellow brownish marks. "Did you do this?" he asks me outraged. "No." "What is this?" "Well, shit is what it is." I say, "I'll deal with him tomorrow, please."

Sandu said, "Well, we don't have to say anything, Mom. We'll take our towels away. When he enters the bathroom he'll see the door of the closet on which we hang our colorful bathrobes and various towels, empty, barren. Not even a hand towel. All gone. That will say clearly to him, 'Don't shit on our towels anymore!'"

I felt bad. My son shouldn't know about all this! I wanted to give him a better life. I'd stay up late in the night remembering ugly things about my childhood, my father. My own father is dying of drinking, my brother died because of that too. Squandered life. He had a pungent smell of sweat. Why didn't men use deodorant then?

Mother: There was no deodorant... Or warm water, or toilets, cars, TV. Why can't you remember the nice things? Unpack later. You have to eat now!

Pushes the suitcase aside so she can sweep. Clamps it shut.

Anda: I struggle to, but the bad ones stick out their noisy heads. It's not that he abused me or anything, like you see on TV, or he fondled me or anything. He just beat me, burned my library books, remember?

Mother: No.

Anda: He shouts. Never talks; he just grunts and orders.

I ran away from my drunken father, so you know. It was not communism or this provincial town. It was the smell, the sight of my drunken father that drove me across the ocean.

Why can't we have a loving family?

I said to my son, "Sandu, you have no idea how lucky you are that I'm your

mom! You don't know how horrible it was growing up with your grandpa! How horrible to have your own parent shit on your dreams!"

Mother: Watch your tongue!

Anda: Sorry. Sandu says grandpa is funny and talkative. Maybe father is different with him. Sandu small, grandpa big.

Anda sets the table.

All I knew was absence. Your constant fights. The disgust he provoked in you. Where is the silverware?

Mother: In the corner. Your sister moves things around...

Anda: Mom, once when you quarreled he said in anguish, "You made the children hate me."

Mother: He was drunk...

Anda: Maybe you did... Maybe I'm brain washed. He did work hard and people always praised him how kind he was and how he always smiled. Peasant women at the cooperative farm beamed when they met him which was startling because around the house he was despicable. Mumbling with a hangover or in degrading drunkenness.

Mother: He was the boss. He cheated on me with any dirty wench!

Mother sweeps.

Anda: Did he?... He never stood up for me. When hoodlums gang raped me, he blamed it on me. You locked me in the house until the bruises on my face went away.

Mother: But the neighbors...

She sweeps the dirt under the carpet.

Anda: Sorry, Mom... I came home to see spring green and flowering trees... I

really don't want to bring up the past. I sorted out the past.

There are perfumed memories too. When I was a small girl my father took me in the buggy. The auburn back of the horse, the clip-clop, the whip speeding it up... The huge pyramids of straw... The peasants following my father's orders... Or when he took me to ride his horse. Me, small in the slippery saddle, high up there in the saddle, clip-clop on the paved village street, tiny kids running around the horse, cheering.

Do you remember? When I came out of the hospital recovering from hepatitis and it was pig killing time and I was confined to bed and the doctor and you forbade me from eating pork. I was enraged, "I'll never, never forgive mom! She won't let me have just a bit of pigskin!" Father was crying by my bed.

Mother: You were a willful child! *Calling out.* Papa, dinner is ready!

Anda: I should have brought Sandu. He would make him happy. Sandu will be a great father! He is already so supportive and responsible, though he's just 14! He goes, "We shall overcome, Mom! We'll make it, you'll see! I love you very much, Mom!" It's just the two of us and we are happy. He is very wise. I should say, "That's it, father! Don't shit on our towels anymore."

Mother: It would be nice to see Sandu one more time.

Anda: Come on! Granny lived to be 96! And she had twelve kids, not four like you! I wish you'd say something to make me love my father. I read all these

books they have there, about anger and how parent figures impact your love life, and I believe some, but what can I talk to him about? He doesn't listen anyway. He won't turn into someone else... Well, at least I came to see you, then I'll go back. But I'd like to do something for him. I'd like him to understand who I am.

Mother: *Settles at the table.* He always loved you children. What's the matter with you? You're a bright girl. You don't need to say anything special to him. He'll make peace his way. You came home. Good. The little time he has to live we should try to be happy. Then at least there'll be no remorse left after he dies. It's hard to live with remorse.

Anda: I don't know what to say to him. I came to make peace with him, but it's revolting....

How are you, Mom?

Mother: Oh, I'm well. Your sister is an angel. My son-in-law spoils me. We had an exquisite Easter feast. I planted flowers in the garden, I listened to music. My aunt invited me to go to Paris for a month, or two. I couldn't be happier. Were it not for the untimely death of my son, I'd be happy. I still can't believe he's gone. *Silence.* We gave away Babette.

Anda: What a weird dog.

Mother: She wasn't weird!

Anda: She would barely give birth to puppies then the next morning she would bite their heads off!

Mother: It happens. This is what our motherland did to us. Ate us alive. You can't judge us! We had it very hard. Most

of the relatives on my father's side died in concentration camps.

Anda: Mom, we are not Jewish!

Mother: That's right. We are Gypsies, which is worse. We were lucky. In our village a kind family hid us, though we were Gypsies. My father was a good blacksmith. I lived thru two wars and two revolutions. We lived under the Russians and under Stalin and Ceaușescu. It was not easy! What did your generation go thru? Not much. You yourself have had a hard life too, you should understand us more. Your father worked all day in the sun and rain for you children! A bit of drinking now and then, what...

Anda: It was not "a bit!" It's.... One would like to have an ideal father...

Mother: But we wanted to be ideal! I kept two jobs to earn money to take care of things!

Anda: Well, my father is Robert Redford. Robert Redford, my father, when something bad happens to me is full of wrath and fights back. Robert Redford, my father knows who he is and is proud. Robert Redford, my father is elegant, stylish, witty. Daring. Robert Redford, my father knows how to turn tables and doesn't succumb to stupid tyranny. My father was none of this.

Mother: There is a saying, *Azt kel szeretni a mi van*. Learn to love what you have.

Wood chopping noises stop off stage. Anda gets up.

Anda: I should help him with the wood...

Mother: Yes. His hernia bulged out. He's not supposed to lift things. You can make new friends, but parents... you can't buy.

Anda: Every month I'll send you a bit of money thru Western Union. After he dies I'll bring you to America. You should sell this enormous house he bought against your will anyway, and come!

Mother: The house will go to the dogs without me. Father drinks himself to death when I'm not around. Besides I can't speak English.

Door bangs off stage. Anda is on her way to help Father.

Anda: In our neighborhood there are plenty of little old ladies you can have coffee with, gossip in Hungarian, Romanian, even Russian. You can go to your own church, Reformed, Protestant, what is it? The church you were born into and had to give up for father.

Mother: Reformed.

Anda: If you prove to be a tyrant, a disheartening bitch, we'll ship you back to my sister. Then you can go to the cemetery every day for the rest of your life. Talk to the tombstone. "How are you, Papa? Do they have plum brandy in Heaven?"

Mother: Watch your tongue! *Calling.* The soup is getting cold, Paaa!

Blackout.

Button – Jewelry bride

A sidewalk café in Budapest across from the Synagogue. Marylyn a Welsh-Hungarian elegant blonde, mid-30s, poses for quite a while for her bridal photo album. She's dressed in a diaphanous lacy tulle white gown. Her Mother

shows up in a pink satin faux-bride gown split in front. She has an incongruous Jamaican bandana, sunglasses and black leather pants under the gown. Colorful socks drop around her ankles. The Photographer takes pictures, unaware of Mother.

Mother: Hi sweetie! What's the occasion?

Marylyn: My wedding photo album.

Mother: In this unsightly garb?!

Marylyn: Mom! Get out of my way! It cost me a fortune to hire this chap! Once in a lifetime is my wedding and you're upstaging me again!

Mother: Hardly! You look like a refugee. Did you buy it from a thrift store?

Marylyn: It's my wedding gown. I got married.

Mother: Joke aside, I could have made you a fabulous gown! Look at mine! No old hag here! We went with Alfonso for a ride to Balaton Lake. We got lost for three days in the country! What a delight! We stayed at a hunter's lodge! You should have seen the retiree couples giving me and my juvenile Alfonso with his cute driver cap and hot pants the evil eye! I rummaged in a small boutique in Győr and bought for nothing this pink satin. I made my gown last night waiting for you to show up for our bridge party.

Marylyn: You'll have to find yourself another partner. I go on my honeymoon.

Mother: You don't spend time with me.

Marylyn: Mom, I devoted half of my life to you! I never remind you that you left your mom behind and never saw her until she was on her deathbed!

Mother: Ah, but it's not the same! I had to flee the country. I was endangered. It was the bloody '56 revolution. Your father would love to see you. He'd have a grand time. A few palinka shots and he'd be a delight. Flirting with the ladies, flattering every one, pinching their love handles.

Marylyn: Gross. Forcing unwilling people to make a conga line. An embarrassment. My worst nightmare, father ruining my wedding feast.

Mother: I wondered why already 37 and not a sign of getting married. He just needed a bit of palinka, to get over his shyness.

Marylyn: Mom, let's not go there. He was an alcoholic. We should have never come back to Budapest. We should have stayed in London where liquor was expensive. You saw we couldn't control him here. In two years he was gone. He was drinking palinka at breakfast!

Photographer: Please don't fidget so much! It will come out blurry!

Mother: He died of leukemia, not alcoholism! French people drink wine. A glass of red wine a day is healthy.

Marylyn: Mom! Red cells are manufactured in the liver. His liver was sick with alcohol!

Mother: Were we to just listen to his ailment litany. I thought it was just his usual hangover whining, "I need a drink to stop my pain!"

Marylyn: Binging, hangover, grand resolution: no more drinking, two days later binging again. Then leukemia.

Mother: Such a kind man. He never said a bad word about anybody. Never.

Marylyn: He loved me so very much. I need a smoke. I waited for the Giant since four! He's never late. Only once when the police caught him.

Mother: You should try again therapy, Marylyn. Making beads out of plastic buttons is hardly a career. You don't mount to much.

Marylyn: In rehab they said I don't have a drug problem, I have a mom problem.

Mother: It might be an underlying depression. Your serotonin is low...

Marylyn: A mom who is jealous of me. Jealous of my father loving me, sharing his attention. Seeing me young while she grows old, stealing her lime light. Jealous of me. Never loved me, mom never loved me.

Mother: I labor over your beads! I've organized the women at my assisted living to make your beads. It is not my fault you don't focus, to teach you fashion design. I had a good life making gorgeous gowns. I share my money with you. We live comfortably.

Marylyn: He was a good man. A fine writer.

Photographer: We should try some standing.

Mother: Did you get in touch with Meryl Streep? Her publicist? Her agent? I'm sure she's little Emese. Reach out to her. She'll be a sister for you.

Marylyn: *Stands up.* Mom, Meryl Streep was just acting in *Angela's Ashes*, she's not an Auschwitz survivor. Little orphan Emese was what? four years old when they took her away to America.

Mother: I know she's Meryl Streep. I hold that child in my arms for two years! I fed her. I made her dolls and watched over her playing with the kittens. When she cried she looked like Meryl Streep. I should have hidden her.

Marylyn: But you have me! You've always pushed me away. Did you fear you lose me like you lost Emese? Did your love dry out? You never have that look of tenderness for me like you have when you remember little orphan Emese.

Mother: Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. [Exits]

Photographer: Will the bride smile?

Marylyn: Yes, the bride shall smile.

Marylyn poses. Blackout.

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