

Ground floor

The Way to Oz

By Mihaela Iancu

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I could have just sent the recording I had on the recorder, but I erased it after I had transcribed and rewritten it. I loved the sound of my voice too much. And this is a dangerous thing for my honesty. Frank Wheeler from *Revolutionary Road* was suspecting April of the same thing. And I believe he had his reasons.

This is a recollection on low-volume.

A man would visit her every week. I have never seen him. I never went out to get a glass of water as long as I heard his voice in the hallway, no matter how thirsty I was.

It never happened in the same day of the week, but I could easily figure out when she was waiting for him. I would open the kitchen door and find her next to the window almost naked, wrapped in soft towels. She smelled strongly of perfume and the room was full of steam from the burnt salts. As I was pouring a cup of tea, she would press her thighs and cover her chest with her arms. She glanced at me, her hair falling over her green eyes and her lips remaining closed. I would nod and leave. I went straight into my room and closed the door behind me. It was creaking terribly. Each time I told myself I would lubricate it, but I never did.

He always came around midnight. Until then I had enough time to eat, to hide my shoes near the closet and to take a long and hot bath. I would put the cherry jam on the desk, next to the papers and bring the powder near the headboards for the morning. I did all the things I could think about, which I thought I needed, I piled them up in my room.

Upstairs you could hear the TV. Women and men were speaking loudly and distressfully about serious things which I didn't understand and which bored me. Now and then I heard their dogs tramping. One of my favorite games was to guess their right course, lying on the bed, with my palms opened and my eyes closed. Then he rang the doorbell. Her feet were tucked in the fuzzy slippers and her steps were sticking to the cracked grindstone. She first unlocked the top lockers, and then the bottom ones. She would say to him "How are you, love?" Always the same tone. I could almost hear her bottom lip rise to the corner of her mouth. Right after that, her wiry furred dog would run to his feet and bark. "Let me take off my shoes" he would reply. Zmoah, zmoah. They were kissing noisily. Then shuuup once, shuuup twice. I could have recognized this sound from a thousand. The apartment on the first floor must have been full of wardrobes with folding doors. Someone started their work early, woke up at six o'clock for it, then took the folded clothes: shuuup once, shuuup twice. "Silence", he sometimes said to the dog. And the dog kept quiet.

All three of them went into her room, next to mine. They said something to each other. No matter what it was about, she was always the one who did most of the speaking and got stubborn: "Down! Get out of the bed!" She was silent for a while. "I said get down!" The dog yelped and landed forcibly on the floor. After that, no sound was heard, as if it had been caught frozen in the head-lights. The door opened. "Get out now", she said.

The dog started to bark as loud as it could. Its paws were rustling on the grindstone. He wandered away from the door and then struck against it, but the door didn't move and nobody answered. It stood up on its rear paws and scratched it dumbfound. Finally, he gave up and silence overtook the entire house until you could hear something resembling stinging, heavy slaps over naked skin.

Nothing could get you prepared for the door handle which would open with the sound of dried plum tree branches cracking. This time, no slippers could be heard. There must have been bare feet. I could see them clearly as I closed my eyes – pink, narrow and hot, raising and leaving behind a fine trace of water which the cold air would erase as if no one had ever taken a step in there.

The shower was running as a hot summer rain and it lasted just as much. I opened my eyes, now that everything was about to come to an end. There was no trace of light shimmering beneath the door. Everything was done in darkness. On the first floor, at times, someone was sneezing loudly, two-three times in a row.

The same soles were now making their way back, cleaner, drier and colder. The door handle was cracking again, leading to another silence. “No”, I heard her saying. “You’re not allowed. Get out.” She entered after it and raised her voice. “Tonight you’re sleeping in the lobby. I said get out.” A taxi was passing by our windows. “Out”, he told the dog too, sturdy and lightly. Then the dog went out.

I believe that after that we were all trying to fall asleep.

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