

In the back

The Way to Oz

By Mihaela Iancu

December 9, 2010

It's strange to go out into town with ten women. The minute I sat down and watched them all, seated along the three joint tables, I felt that something was missing.

Anyway, I was happy that we went in to warm up. We had been running for presents in the snow for more than three hours. My socks had got wet in my boots, my fingers had frozen through the wool gloves and I was shaking with cold.

The bar was almost empty, it smelled like oranges and cinnamon, and the waitresses were talking in the back of the room something I couldn't hear because of the TVs broadcasting rugby games on Eurosport and planned explosions on Discovery Channel.

We ordered eleven mugs of mulled wine for us and one fruit tea for Dani, Cristina's brother. She came up with the idea for all of us to go out, since at work "we don't even get to smoke our cigarettes together".

Dani was nine years old. He was sitting on my left and I was wondering what he would think if I suddenly kissed him. I've seen him moving a laser on my clothes in the shops. He lolled in his chair, with his mouth ajar and his look engrossed in the architecture of the bridges over water and the setup of the missiles.

I was sitting at the end of the table near the door, together with the non-smokers. I was planning to sniff the wine steams for a long time, to drink it slowly and not talk too much. Andreea was the only one in the group who actually interested me, but she was a smoker, sitting right in front of me, three tables away. She was like me, something more and something else less.

Then, the two of them started:

"God, this feels so good.", said Eleonora. "Three years ago I couldn't even enjoy this snowfall. Or this mug of wine. Actually, what am I talking about? I couldn't enjoy anything."

"I remember", replied Flavia. "Almost every relaxing moment was a waste of time for you. You were always on the run. Sometimes we would wait five minutes for them to bring us the bill at lunch, and for three of these five minutes you complained that you could have written ten more lines in your reports. You went to the movies with us, but you constantly repeated how much there was left for you to do at home."

"Do you know which word I was using mostly then? I must. I must. I must. I must. Everything was a must."

They talked as if about something intimate, that you're proud of because it has healed in the mean time.

My elbow was touching that of Eleonora's, but I swear I didn't want to listen. I was trying to see what Dani was seeing. He must have looked at things clearly.

"You know what this means, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. After three years of personal therapy, I know."

I heard them both at once.

"Control".

Then they laughed long.

"I have this too." Flavia spoke with emphasis. She loved consonants. I must admit, I like them too. They are tough.

"I mean, there have been situations in my life that I couldn't take control of, and which afflicted me" she said again, "and now I'm trying to recover every time I get a chance. I simply can't help myself."

"I've been wearing a mask all my life. You couldn't get to me. Nobody was allowed underneath."

"Self-control, Eleonora."

"Self-control, yes. And after the divorce, when David saw me for the last time, he told me <<And maybe I could have been what you needed. If only I had known. But you never let me.>> I don't believe I hated anyone until that minute. And I don't think there was someone who ever made me feel a greater regret. I mean, to put that mirror in my face. Like that. Then."

I was looking at Dani. He was watching the dust clouds that shook the earth on distances of tens of kilometres. He wasn't a grown-up man yet and only a few things are equally challenging as a boy in whom you try to guess the future man. A few things are more challenging than inability.

"Yes, but what you need is one thing and what you want is another.", Flavia told her. "It took me a while to understand the difference."

"Exactly. Do you know what hurt me the most? That I never even asked myself what I needed. I only knew what I wanted. Oh, I knew it so well. And I was always reproaching him for not being what I wanted. Well, I was reproaching him in a manner of speaking. All reproaches were silent. He had to guess."

Eleonora forces a laugh. But who am I to judge? I swallow and I swallow and it has nothing to do with the wine.

"This guy, the last one, whom I kicked out of the house four times, could have given me what I needed. What I want instead..."

They're right on my left. It seems as if they are whispering it to my ear and it is exactly for that reason that I forbid myself to look back.

"What I want", says Flavia, "is not possible. And not because it's impossible, but because I act as if only reality were to blame. I come with this conceived image and nothing I'm offered is exactly like it."

All I wanted was to warm up and drink a mug of wine. You're not supposed to talk about this sort of things in public. You don't know who's sitting next to you. You don't know what he's going through.

"David wasn't what I imagined him to be." I hear Eleonora's mug as it flops resoundingly on the table. "I think it's more frustrating to realize that your woman, even though she had the best intentions, didn't love you, but instead one of her fantasies, with your face."

Soon, the mouths open only for a smoke. All the pairs of eyes at the table turn to Eleonora and Flavia. The smokers squint and try to understand what they hear from their corner. Eventually, I hear one of them saying:

"Oh, it's good that I sat here. They talk about serious things there. I don't need this tonight. Come on, girls, let's order another round."

And some raise their hands to the waitresses.

I can see Andreea lip reading. I know she would like to be in my chair. I eye her and try to tell her "Just say something. Fix things." I don't know who I take her for.

"I'm glad I can talk about all this right now", I can hear from my right. "Three years ago, I used to think that silence could only mean virtue".

Dani has rubicund cheeks. There's one thing I'm almost sure about, or maybe I just really want it for him. "Don't make things complicated" I wish to tell him.

Instead, I draw near his ear and ask him " How about a snow fight?"

I see him getting up from his chair at once. He thrusts his cap over his ears, puts his coat on, and until he finishes pulling his gloves over his fingers, I open the bar's door and I wait for him with my hand on the knob.

"Cris, I'm going outside.", he announces and turns to me.

The boots tramp on the parquet. I smile at him. He replies from the corners of his lips, and then he stops in the doorstep, with his eyes on the snowfall.

"Wooooooooooooow", he says.

All the good in the world was in front of me.

I stay still for a few seconds, so relieved that I'd turned my back away.

Then I embrace him and flung him in the intact snow.

Finally, I'm holding him in my arms.

Translated by: **Stela Cucu** and **Mădălina-Ioana Borcău**

MTTLC, Bucharest University