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b. 1956

He graduated from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest in 1980. In 1999 he obtained his PhD with a thesis on Romanian postmodernism. ● As a student, he was an active member of the Monday Literary Circle at the University Centre in Bucharest. He made his debut in print with poetry called Headlights, Shopwindows, Photos (Cartea Românească, 1980). ● Other books: Air with Diamonds (an anthology together with Traian T. Coșovei, Florin Iaru and Ion Stratan; Litera, 1982); Love Poems (poetry, 1983); Everything (poetry, 1985); The Dream (short stories, 1985) The Levant (poetry, 1990; second edition, 1998); The Chimeric Dream (essays, 1992); Nostalgia; (short stories, 1993); Love (poetry, 1994); In Disguise (novel, Humanitas, 1994); Dazzling. The Left Wing (novel, 1996); Double CD (poetry, 1998). ● His poetry was published in anthologies in Romania and abroad. In Ireland, together with Romulus Bucur, he published the book Poetry at Annaghmakerring (Dublin, Dedalus Press, 1994). His fiction books The Dream and In Disguise have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Hungarian, and Dutch. He was nominated for the award "The Best

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THE GAME

I dream enormously, in demented colors. I experience sensation in my dreams that I never experience in real life. I have jotted down hundred of dreams in the past ten years, some of which return convulsively, over and over, dragging me down the same humiliating paths of shame, hatred, and loneliness. Some say that a writer loses a reader with each dream retold, that in a story dreams are convenient, if boring, and obsolete methods of *mise-en-abîme*. It is rare for a dream to be meaningful to other people. Writers may also counterfeit or invent dreams to give shape to and highlight the diffuse reality of a story, just as one will place the cap of a pen in the middle of a page of distorted scribbling to glimpse the outline of a naked woman. And since I want to begin this story with a dream, I’m just trying to protect myself from the automatic accusation of laziness and naiveté.

I am, as you know, an occasional writer of fiction. I write only for you, my friends, and for myself. My real occupation is dull, but I enjoy it and know its tricks. The tricks of writing, however, don’t impress me. From your Sunday meeting, which I’ve been attending for the past year or so, I have learned a lot about the techniques that make a story work, but I’ve been afraid I won’t have very much to say. As a matter of fact, until the night I dreamed the dream I’m about to tell you, I was convinced there was nothing in my life worth shedding light upon. So I won’t try a *mise-en-abîme*; I’ll just start at the beginning. I believe that, both in life and literature, the beginning sets the tone. In madness too. I remember how the mental rumblings of a former friend began. One evening he came to my one-room apartment in a very agitated state and started to tell me, with unusual coherence, what had happened to him an hour before. “I took the streetcar to go and see an acquaintance. It was so cold outside that the windows of the car were steamed up. Sitting in front of me was a woman dressed like a peasant, in a dirty brown windbreaker and a green kerchief. I didn’t notice her until she raised a hand, gloved in coarse cloth, to wipe off part of the steamed-up win-

dow. I looked out through the clear spot she had made on the glass as the tram entered a tunnel. Suddenly the sport was pitch black, in stark contrast to the icy white of the rest of the window. The black patch looked like a perfect reproduction of Goethe's profile in the famous Chinese silhouette. It had everything: the straight nose beneath the slanting forehead, the wig ending in a pigtail, the firm lips, the rounded chin..."

To make a long story short, let me tell you my dream. About two months ago I dreamed I was shut up in a jar, of all places, but a jar that seemed to be carved out of rock crystal. I turned round and round in the jar, which shimmered with rainbows from time to time, and gazed with contentment at the fluid, flickering world outside. A bird came waddling up toward the jar from some distant mountains, and the closer it got, the wider and more arched its image became on the curved walls of the jar. When it got very close, I saw its huge almond-shaped eye spread out as if under a magnifying glass; suddenly it enveloped me. I buried my face in my hands with a terrible feeling of shame and pleasure. When I looked up again, I saw the thin contour of a door, dreading it might be open. It wasn't: an enormous padlock, as soft as flesh, hung at the door. I breathed a sigh of relief. Then I saw a little girl coming down the path that began in the mountains and ended outside my door. As she approached the door – her braids tied with big bows, her small mouth moist – I could tell she was a well-behaved child. The walls of the jar were now as straight and clear as glass. All of a sudden I felt an inexplicable fear, a terror such as I had never experienced. The little girl walked up to the door and began to knock on the thick crystal with her small, ivory fists. Frightened, I hurled myself to the ground and started writing, but I never took my eyes off of her. When she grasped the padlock, I felt my heart explode, my gut tear open. The little girl broke off the padlock and, her hand smeared with blood, pushed the heavy quartz door open. She stood petrified on the threshold with an expression no words can describe. And then I found myself outside, looking at the scene from behind the girl, on my way up the path on the faraway mountains. I could now see an ever broader expanse within the massive ice or glass or crystal walls of the jar. The jar itself was no longer a jar at all but a huge castle, a heavy structure with cornices and plaster, molding and gargoyles, skylights and balconies, crenellations, watchtowers and rain gutters, all made up of the same cold, transparent material. I saw myself on the ground in the midst of the thousand rooms, with translucent walls. The girl stood framed in the wide-open door, and behind her, from the entrance the castle to the chamber in the center, I could see a hundred doors standing open, their padlocks stained with blood.

I woke up with an odd feeling that nagged at me all morning, but I didn't remember the dream until after lunch, first as a flash of pure emotion in the pit of my stomach, then at school – while I was listening to my student's lessons – like unintelligible, recurrent stabs of pain. It was only the next day that I was able to reconstruct what I've told you so far. I don't know why. I

even have the feeling that I've forgotten some of it in the meantime. Yes, it strikes me as I write that I knew what gestures the little girl made and what words she said, but I seem no longer able to focus on them. I hope I'll remember them as the story unfolds.

After I jotted down the dream, I tried to psychoanalyze it as usual. I began randomly, attempting to recall any detail I could link to one point or another. After two hours of daydreaming over my coffee cup, my eyes fixed on the plastic butterfly stuck to its side (a scarlet butterfly with gold, and a body like a disgustingly smooth worm), I spontaneously scribbled the following entry into my diary: "In my dreams, a little girl jumps out of her bed, walks to the window and, her cheek glued to the pane, gazes at the sun setting over the pink and yellow houses. She turns to look at her bedroom, which is as red as blood, and coils up again under the wet bedsheet. As I dream, something approaches my immobile body, takes my head in its hands, and takes a bite from it as from a translucent fruit. I open my eyes but don't dare move. Then I jump out of bed and go to the window. I look out: the sky is filled with stars". And as if having uttered a sacred formula, I started putting bits and pieces together, I couldn't remember all of them, but I did recall that the story of the jar had originated in a telephone conversation with my former girlfriend that is, when she told me she had bought a pair of hamsters and kept them in a jar lined with wood shavings.

Then my earliest memory came to me: I was two, and lived with my parents on Silistra Street. The owner of the house, a man named Catana, had given me a little bell. To this day I remember with perfect clarity how I walked out of the yard in my little boots and waded into a large puddle in the street. I dropped the bell into the muddy water, and although I groped all over the puddle's bottom, I couldn't find it. I can still recall how puzzled I was. This made me realize I should have set the dream even further back in my past. I concentrated on the little girl, on her braids tied with enormous bows of starched white linen I thought she looked like one of the peasant women painted by the Dutch masters, women who wore large, richly embroidered veils on their heads. I thought of the sheets of holland linen on which the superbly arched nudes of Ingres reclined, and suddenly my memory blossomed: the little girl's name was Iolanda. Then the glass door to Stairwell One – so hard to open – appeared before my eyes, the Dîmbovița flour mill, my toy watches with their crude, gaudy coloring, and the view of Bucharest from the rooftop terrace with red and green neon light flashing to and off at night. In a state of sheer exaltation and in a matter of minutes I had dug out of my memory all these things I thought I'd forgotten, realizing that this period in my life contained all that was authentic and perhaps a bit unusual about myself. I don't know how that perfect, ivory-colored globe had survived until now, stashed away beneath the gray layers of my existence as a bored, unmarried school teacher whose life goes on solely because he was born. But I felt very happy to have found some interesting things to relate from my

own experience. I'm thinking less of writing a story than a sort of memoir, a brief and sincere chronicle of the most (in fact, the only) strange period of my life. And the hero, though only about seven years old "at the time the action took place," deserves to be described, since he forever affected the fate, albeit subconsciously, at least in my case), of all the children playing behind the apartment building on Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard.

The building was eight stories high, and there is a parking lot behind it now, where cars shiver side by side in the winter's frost. When we moved in twenty-one years ago, my mother had just come out of the maternity hospital where she'd had my sister. I remember how, in the middle of a bare white room where the blinding white spring sunlight came in through a curtainless window my mother sat on a chair and breast-fed her baby. The top of my head barely came up to the kitchen sink, whose enamel was so chipped at the bottom that the dark stain looked like a reproduction of the continent of Africa with its great deserts and rivers.

The apartment building was in the final stages of competition. At one end it abutted on an edifice that always troubled me because of its turrets and crenellations and infinite vistas (which I later rediscovered in De Chirico). At the back of the building, opposite the mill (another medieval edifice, of a sinister scarlet hue), there was still rusty scaffolding was torn up by sewage ditches, which in some places were over two meters deep. This was our playground. Separated from the mill yard by a concrete wall, it was a different world, dirty and mysterious, full of hiding places, where we, seven or eight morning, armed with blue and pink water pistols we'd bought for two lei at the "Red Riding Hood" toy veritable old Obor, which always smelled of the gasoline they used for waxing parquet floors.

Our gang had a hierarchy based strictly on physical strength, that is, who could beat up whom. I remember some of its members: Vova and Paul Smirnoff (how surprised I was later to learn about the vodka of the same name); Mimi and Lumpă (I don't know what their last name was); Luță; Dan from Stairwell Three; Marconi and his brother "Chinezu"; Luci; Marian (or Marșianu, or Marșaganu, or Țaganu, or Țacu), who married a candy salesgirl two years ago; Jean, from the seventh floor; Sandu, my next-door neighbor; and Nicușor, the boy from the stairwell adjoining ours. Each boy was interesting in his own way. Paul ate tar and sucked butterflies' abdomens, claiming they contained honey. His brother Vova was shy and quiet, but had a mania for telling everyone about the Titanic, which, he said, was taller than three apartment buildings stacked on top of each other and had a thousand propellers. Mimi had a pet hedgehog and collected foreign cigarette packages, some of them made of thin plastic. He was the biggest and could beat up any one of us. That's why, though he was as dark skinned as a gypsy, he was our leader. His brother Lumpă, however, was as weak and helpless as Mimi was strong. Lumpă was swarthy too, snotnosed, and whined constantly about things, which is why we called him "Symphony in C Major". He must

have been about four at the time and was probably retarded, since he could mumble only a few words. Luci, whose nickname was “Luciosu”, just as mine was “Mirciosu”, was my best friend. I followed him everywhere, listening to his stories about horses galloping in silk-draped arenas and wearing flower-print cashmere slippers over their hooves. Luță was grim and brooding; when his older brother finished secondary school, he climbed up to the roof and threw himself onto the asphalt below. I was in my room folding paper saltcellars when I saw his big body falling, making strange flapping movements. Then I heard the thud and looked out the window. Dressed in his school uniform, Luna’s brother lay on the sidewalk by a Russian Pobeda car, his noble profile outlined by a slowly widening stain of cheerful scarlet.

The gang had other members too, of course, but they were less important or memorable. There was the little boy from Stairwell Six who had had polio and whose leg was encased in a complex metal contraption like the one Eminescu’s sister Harieta must have worn. His grandmother brought him out behind the building, where we watched us play Witchy. (No one ever paid any attention to him). By the way, I almost left out Dan, Crazy Dan, whom Mimi had nicknamed Mendebil. To this day I have no idea where he picked up such an odd name or how it came into his thick mind. Dan used to sit astride the banister bordering the rooftop terrace (which the rest of us didn’t dare even approach) and shout down to us from the height of eight stories, making wild gestures and pretending he was falling.

The little girls our age were not included in the gang, of course. They spent their playtime drawing innumerable landscapes on the pavement with blue, yellow, and cyclamen-pink chalk or pieces of red brick. They played their games of Handkerchief, Prince Charming, Give a Kiss, Patty-Cake, Patty-Cake, and Precious-Stone-Like-Unto-None. I’ll mention a few of them: Viorica, the daughter of the deaf-mute couple, the only one in her family who could speak, though she used sign language with her parents; Mona, Dan’s sister, a psychopath just like him, with small yellow eyes glaring with hatred, the only girl allowed to play Witchy with us boys; Fiordalis, the daughter of a Greek family named Zorzon; Marinela, to whom Jean used to sing “blonde hair, high in the air”, to the tune of “Marina”; and finally Iolanda, the girl who appeared in my dream.

But enough about them. These fragrant colorful little clouds are merely picturesque, and I don’t want to bore you with picturesque stories. Background – that’s what we all were for the little boy who came and changed something in us, or at least left his mark on all of us. It’s hard to explain. He couldn’t even beat up Lumpă, yet for a while even Mimi obeyed and followed him. Everything I’ve said so far has been nothing but a prelude to this story, but it’s worth going through it, even if it comes from a teacher used to repeating thing over and over again: every composition must have an introduction indicating time, place, and characters, as well as a body and a conclusion. I’ve strung out my introduction a little; I have yet to come to the

body. But first I must show what our pastimes were before the “main character” moved into our apartment building.

Most of us hardly ever strayed beyond the area behind our building. Pressed against the Pionierul Bakery, as if growing out of it, stood a gnarled old horse-chestnut tree, its large hollow filled with cement. A long rusty nail jutted out crookedly from its ant-ridden bark. Sandu, Luci, and I used it as a step when climbing into the tree, where we felt as much at home as the old people in Truman Capote’s story “The Grass Harp”. Up where the branches forked there was another hollow, and there we rested our feet. Early that summer we had found a cache of Chinese plastic pencil sharpeners there, a treasure trove of pastel colors that took our breath away. There were more than fifty, in the shapes of all sorts of gentle animals – bushy-tailed squirrels, white rabbits, rocking-chair horses, Disneylike deer, and tiny blue-eyed frogs. There were red and green rockets as well, translucent pink barrels, tortoises and giraffes that moved their heads and tails. The night before there had been nothing there, and we arrived early in the morning. No one but us prowled around the tree during the following days either. We concluded the pencil sharpeners must have grown there, opening like a fairy-tale blossom once every hundred years. Yet a stern, unforgiving steel blade lay concealed beneath each rabbit, beneath even the most benign-looking deer. We took them home with us.

There in the chestnut tree we would sit and confer among ourselves like wise old Indians. When Luci got bored with his horse stories – after heaping the creatures with all that heavy silk and ruby-studded brocade he ran out of things to invent (he claimed he really kept such horses in the country) – and when Sandu, who would never become a mathematician, had irritated us with the absurd statement that he had an arithmetic book where they used letters instead of numbers to do addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, and after I had sworn that I had seen a ghost once, we would pass on to serious matters. Did that short word written on concrete walls or scrawled on the tar wrapping of sewage pipes really mean that all grownups...? That’s what I thought of during the long, agonizing afternoons when I had to take a nap. The red-gold light would slowly fill my bedroom, bouncing off the glossy wardrobe door and falling on my cheek. I would lie in bed with my eyes open and gaze through the window at the bright fairy-tale clouds rolling along whimsically in the summer sky. Sometimes I got up stealthily from under the starched sheets, sharp as glass but light as paper, and went to the window. I could, stretching to the horizon, first a cluster of old houses with gutter pipes and casement, windows, with skylights and massive oaken doors, then big blue gray buildings with countless windows, then the high-rise in the center, with its Gallus chemical ad like a big blue ball on its roof, the Victoria Department Store, the Fire Watchtower on the extreme left, the arches of the apartment buildings along Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard, and, in the distance, the power plant, its huge chimneys spewing out tick threads of

steam. All this I glimpsed though the rustling leaves of poplar and hornbeam trees, whose canopies of clear emerald or dark green surged here and there between the buildings. I never felt like going to sleep. I would quickly jump back into bed at the slightest creaking noise, knowing it was my father, his head wrapped in a stocking, coming to see if I was still awake.

Our games were cruel sometimes, even barbaric. All day long we would chase one another through the maze of sewage canals. We reached them from points known only to ourselves, stepping along tar-covered pipes and over huge spigots, the smell of earth, of worms and larvae, of fresh tar and putty permeating our nostrils, mingling with our very blood. It maddened us. Armed with water pistols, masked with pieces of corrugated cardboard from the furniture warehouse (we colored the masks at home, making them as frightening as possible with grinning fangs, goggling eyes, and puffed-out nostrils), we would grow darker and darker. When, rounding a corner, we came face to face with the enemy, we would roar and charge at each other, scraping ourselves and tearing our shirts and undershirts. I don't remember who came up with the game we called Witchy, but we played it for years and never tired of it. (We were still playing it in eighth grade). It was a combination of tamer games: Cops and Robbers, Hawk and Doves, Prison Warden: Be On Guard. In the beginning there was only one witch, whom we chose by counting. She was the only one allowed to wear a mask and carry a stick stripped of its bark. The witchy would count, facing the wall, and then rush through the canals in search of victims. We could leave the canal but were not permitted to escape to the stairwells of the nearby buildings or jump over the fence to the mill yard. The witch would hunt us through the evil-smelling tunnels, and when she managed to touch someone with her switch she would let out a horrible scream. The victim had to freeze. The witchy would drag him to her lair, where she would pound him on the head a set number of times. Thus initiated, the victim would himself turn into a witchy. He would put on a mask and the chase would continue. At dusk, when the first stars shone in the still-blue sky above the huge mill towers, there was generally only one survivor left, hounded by a horde of witches emitting sinister cries. The residents dreaded that moment and threw potatoes or carrots at us from their balconies. The cleaning women came out and threatened us with their brooms. But to no avail. The witches would not rest until they had caught the last victim, a little child who, seeing that it wasn't for fun any more, would be seized with panic. (At night it was terrifying enough to be confronted with one masked witchy, let alone a whole host of them.) The last one to be captured was carried to the nearest stairwell, where the others made faces at him and pretended they were going to eat him up, until our exasperated mothers came and dragged us home.

When we didn't feel like playing Witchy or erasing with the flimsy soles of our tennis shoes the blue houses, yellow trees, and green mothers the little girls drew on the pavement (just to hear them cry and run indoors), our

gang would sit together on the curb and tell stories or play alphabet games with film titles. I remember Martiganu telling about an adventure in the mill yard. "I jumped the fence by the house with the skull and crossbones on it. I got to the mill. A miller saw me. Other millers came and I fled. They threw stones at me, but I dodged them. When they ran out of stones they took out their pistols, but they didn't hit me. Then they started using machine guns. When they aimed high, I crouched down. When they aimed at my legs, I jumped up. They rolled out their cannons, but I kept ahead of them. They chased me with tanks, but I kept running. They sent bombers after me, but I made it to the fence and jumped over it right here, where the gate is." He would say it all so seriously we almost believed him. Hardly anyone dared whisper "Oh, sure." When we played the alphabet game, everybody knew what films went with what letter. A Sometime Fiend was followed by A Sometime Thief, and the third had to be Agatha, Stop Your Crimes. The first movie for B was always Babette Goes to War. When one of us ran out of titles, the others would prompt teasingly, "Say The Iron Ship", and when that boy finally said "The Iron Ship", he would be told disdainfully, "There's no such movie".

One day a mother and her little boy moved into a second-floor apartment off Stairwell Three. I had just turned seven and would be starting school in the fall (Vova Smirnoff was in the third grade and Mimi was in the fourth – he had been put back a year). The new boy was about my age and at first I didn't notice him. But his mother was extraordinary, totally different from the other mothers, who washed and scrubbed all day long. She was so tall you could hardly see her face; it was lost high up in the blue of the sky. Tall, thin, and dreamy, she glided among the pieces of furniture on the first floor landing, giving instructions to the moving men who were dragging hemp ropes to and fro. I never saw her wear any color but deep red. Even her housedress was made of red satin. She had black hair, and her face always seemed to have a bluish tinge to it, with highlights of pink and ivory. The child sat aloof in a old armchair whose large flower pattern add him seem even smaller than he was. He was thin and frail, with an intent and dejected look about him. For a moment we abandoned our tunnels and went over to him. We asked if he was moving in and if that towering woman was his mother. Where was his father? "Daddy's a carpenter," he said, as if that answered the question. He stared at us and gave one-word replies, so finally we left him alone. He told us his name, which we promptly forgot. It was Ion or Vasile, something ordinary like that. We dove back down like devils into our tunnels and began playing Witchy again.

The next day the little boy came up to us. His clothes were very clean. He wore "lederhoses" (as my mother used to call them), short bouffant yellow pants with suspenders. He didn't say a word. We asked him to join us down in the tunnels, but he refused. He would only watch us from above. Having a spectator made us lose all interest in our games. He watched the little girls

with equal avidity, which made us despise him. He even asked Mona, of all people, for a piece of purple chalk. Mona, never one for polite conversation, turned her backside, clad in tan pants, to him and slapped it. "Why don't you kiss this instead?" The boy gazed at her indifferently and walked away. Every day for about a week I saw him talk with the little boy who'd had polio. He explained all kinds of thing to him, occasionally scratching drawings on the pavement with chalk brought from home or making gestures that I would now call ritualistic. At times he seemed to be brushing off invisible cobwebs; at others he pointed to the sky and smiled enigmatically. In the mistenshrouded evenings we would watch the two of them form our tunnels, our faces shielded by our cardboard masks. As the twilight mist changed from purple to brown hues, the metallic glint of the orthopedic brace worn by the polio victim and the sibyl-like gestures of the new boy grew stranger and stranger. We could make nothing of them. They went home earlier geometrical figures on the bluish asphalt. We erased them furiously.

The new boy was trying to impress us; we concluded he was a show-off and decided, by choice or by chance, to force him into a confrontation. If he joined us, fine. If he didn't, ever better, since we felt the need for a real enemy. We had tried once before to define ourselves as heroes and had failed miserably. We had gathered behind the building and in the raw, saffron light of a bonfire of television boxes had armed ourselves with thin planks from the furniture warehouse. Then, in complete silence, we set off to attack the children living over the Circus Lane flower shop. Masked and screaming at the top of our lungs, we charged from behind the building, routing the children playing foot tennis and kickball. Shrieking, the little girls rushed inside. We took only one prisoner, a tiny child no taller than Lumpă, whom Crazy Dan dan Paul were trying to make eat a caterpillar, when all at once three or four fathers in their undershirts emerged from the building. At the terrifying sight of adult males with hairy arms and chests, we dropped the little boy and raced down the street. Since the newcomer had no gather (at least none had appeared so far), he seemed a manageable enemy.

One morning we surrounded him cautiously, as the senators surrounded Caesar, and dragged him to the sewage tunnels. We were going to make him a witchy. He dug in his heels and thrashed about fiercely. From up close his face looked totally different from that of any child we'd ever seen. His hair was chestnut colored, slightly wavy, with golden highlights reflecting from each curl, and puffed out on top, as if teased in a reddish cobweb. He had bangs, and his thin eyebrows arched above his half-closed oval eyes. The halves of his violet irises shone through the lashless, black-tinged lids. The circles under his eyes were somewhat darker than the delicate copper tinge of his cheeks. His nose was long and thin, but straight, the groove underneath the sharply outlined nostrils unusually deep. He kept his lips firmly shut, almost never showing his teeth, though occasionally his moist mouth would open in a smile, a mixture of cunning, sarcasm, and genuine kindness. Now,

however, as we carried him down into the tunnel, his face showed extreme concentration. It wore us out just to look at him. I was holding him by his left arm when, at the edge of the tunnel, his struggling, suddenly increased. He thrust his narrow chest forward, as if trying to push it through his shirt, while tensing his shoulders with such strength that we let him go and, backed away from him. For a moment he continued to flail about, twisting his back as if he would break it. Then, with a groan, he slowly dropped to his knees, large tears falling from his eyes. The rest of us fled to Stairwell Three and climbed up to the roof, from where we looked down at the boy's mother, her red pleats and flounces flying as she ran out from the building's entryway. She gathered the boy in her arms and, still running, disappeared into the building.

I went home. After lunch I was again subjected to the torture of the afternoon nap: I could never sleep. The most agonizing thing was that I had no clock, so I never knew when my two hours were up, the two hours of lying in the bed I had come to hate, in the summer's dry heat. Through the window I watched the shimmering blue clouds spin past endlessly, as if brushed away by the tops of the poplar trees. Later I went back to our playground and found the gang reassembled. The boys were gaping up at something that was apparently quite shocking but that I couldn't see from where I was behind the building. "Hey, Mirciosu! Come here," they yelled at me: "Come see Mendebil the Second! This one's even crazier than Mendebil!" Even Mimi and Vova, who were older than the rest and not so easily impressed, seemed hypnotized. Luță, the boy with the dark face and no eyebrows, stood by. Nicușor, plump and wearing fancy clothes and John astonished, irritated expression of the nearsighted. I went up to them, then stopped short.

Near the scarlet walls of the Dîmbovița Mill and beyond the concrete barrier looms the Pionierul Bakery, an old building with a zigzagging roof and round windows with flour chutes coming out of them. Lumpa would stand astride the barrier all day, waiting for the workers to send him for cigarettes or newspapers. In exchange they gave him golden-brown buns or hot rolls, which the snaggletoothed little than our apartment building; it rose, heavy and rust red, to the clouds through the oval coins of the acacia leaves. I had never examined it up close, but now I could make out a fire escape, as thin as if etched by a pen nib, that ran the length of the chimney and was surrounded by protective metal rings, which made it look like a huge trachea. Three-quarters of the way up, about level with our building's seventh floor, there was a yellow blotch. It was the new boy who, in his yellow spielhosen, was slowly and carefully climbing to the top of the chimney. His thin torso, covered by a flowery short-sleeved shirt, was barely one-fourth of the width of the balconies crowded with television aerials and pickle jars and were shouting to him to come down. But Mendebil (because that's what we ended up calling him, Dan being left only with the nickname "Crazy") kept climbing, rung by rung. When he reached the top, he clutched the rim of the chim-

ney, hoisted himself onto it, and squatted there for a few moments. The screams of the women on the balconies grew louder, and a couple of bakery workers in white coats and aprons ran across the yard toward the foot of the chimney. As if to defy his spectators, Mendebil rose hesitantly until he stood erect, thin as a nail, at that dizzying height. He glanced up, then as a nail, at that dizzying height. He glanced up, then waved down, probably to us, and began descending the metal steps, passing through all the rings of the fire escape until he disappeared into the foliage of the acacia tree. A short while later we saw him through the diamond-shaped openings of the concrete barrier. He clambered with difficulty over the wall and jumped into our midst. His cheeks were red, but the rest of his face was yellow. He fixed his gaze on Mimi and said, "I don't like to play Witchy."

Some of my prose-writing fiends, for whom I've been trying to write this story for several days, may no longer be playing attention. I may seem to have strayed onto the beaten (or overbeaten) path of the child-hero who sacrifices himself for a noble cause. Mendebil, as I knew him, did have something of that archetype in him. But, as I hope will become clear, he was not in the same league as the Scouts of the Cherry Blossom or Nemecek of Pál Street. His actions and words, which I remember with a suspicious clarity though they have lain for twenty-odd years in the multicolored mists of my subconscious, had nothing childish about them. Rather, they seemed compelling fantasies that caught us, slowly but surely, in their net. I should add that I dreamed of him last night, that I saw his face distinctly, which is why I could describe him so minutely a few pages ago. Yet I wonder if Mendebil really looked the way I saw him in my dream. In any case, I'm haunted by his eyes, dark lined as if bordered with eyeliner, and his ambivalent expression, firm and gentle at the same time.

From then on we let ourselves be swayed by Mendebil's charm. Next morning we didn't go to the tunnels at all, through the smell of the earth enticed us. We surrounded him instead and listened to his stories. He told us (as I know now) the legends of the Round Table, Charlemagne and Arthur, tales of cruel pagans and a sword that had a name. Then he started on "The Brave Man in the Tiger's Skin" but stopped halfway. That wasn't a good place for telling stories, he said. The dirty ditches, the mounds of earth, and the putty-smearred pipes disturbed his concentration. "I know a better place," he said with a smile, and took us there. It was Stairwell One.

Stairwell One could be reached only by an extremely dark and narrow corridor jammed between our building and the research institute next door. Up to then, during the two months we'd all been living there, we hadn't been curious enough institute next door. Up to then, during the two months we'd all been living there, we hadn't been curious enough to explore the lugubrious passageway. But now we followed Mendebil in single file, brushing against the whitewashed walls for about twenty meters, the length of the corridor. Finally we came out into a courtyard bordered on three sides by our

building and the institute and on the fourth by the concrete wall of the mill, acacia leaves and twigs poking through its crevices. It was a small yard, paved with asphalt, very clean compared with the back of our apartment building. On one side was the glass door to Stairwell One; on the other, high stairs led to a small platform enclosed in stone, ending at the bricked-in door of the institute. We called these stone steps "The Bridge". Against the wall stood a block of concrete topped by a slightly dented metal basin. We never found out what of was for. We called it "The Throne". One last peculiarity of Stairwell One was the huge transformer with curved pipes and a concrete facade which, as I recall, was always covered with Mendibil's large, colored-chalk handwriting. The transformer must have been broken, since it stood there abandoned for a long time.

This was our playground for about a month. We thought only of Mendebil's stories, which we awaited day after day. When he didn't feel like telling one, we played kickball, told jokes, traded soccer stories. He didn't take much part in these activities, which we accepted as normal. We had quickly come to realize that the boy, through younger than most of us, was ahead of us in ways we hadn't even considered. At home we drove our parents wild with "Mendebil's done this, Mendebil's done that..." Gradually he stared talking about thing other than knights and swords from his concrete and metal throne. Sometimes, as if dreaming, he would interrupt a story and in a altered voice, firm and hard, impossible to contradict, come out with ideas so bizarre we simply couldn't grasp them.

This is what I want to talk about. I shudder to realize I can remember words I didn't understand at the time, words I though I'd forgotten as soon as they'd been uttered. Some of Mendebil's strange "theories" contradicted outright what our parents had us or what we had heard on the "Windrode" science radio program or on the "TV Encyclopedia" show. But the boy made his ideas attractive, meaningful. I don't know how – perhaps through his mere presence, his voice and features, to say nothing of the words themselves having something otherworldly about them. Only one thing I have ever read compares in spirit with what he used to tell us: the description of the haven of the blessed in Plato's *Phaedo*. Anyway, to give you an idea of what I mean, let me jot down a list of what few theories I still remember, ideas he expounded during the blazing red evenings or cool blue mornings we spent near the shiny yellow walls of Stairwell One.

1. In my head, under the arch of my skull, there is a little man who looks just like me. He has the same features, the same clothiers. Whatever he does, I do. When he eats, I eat. When he sleeps and dreams, I too sleeps and have the same dreams. When he moves he right hand, I move mine. He's my puppeteer.

But the arch of the sky is only the skull of a huge child, who also looks just like me. He too has the same features, the same clothes. Whatever I do, he does too. When I eat, he eats. If I sleep and dream, he too sleeps and has

the same dream. I have only to move my right hand to make him move his. I am his puppeteer.

The world around us is the same for me and for him. Both my puppeteer and my puppet are surrounded by a Luță, a Lampă, and a Mimi, and by all of you. And they are just like you. That beer cap down there exists both in the teeny-weeny world of my puppeteer and in the gigantic world of my puppet. Because everything is the same.

But inside my puppeteer is another puppeteer, who sits in his skull, looking like me. And there's another one even smaller inside him, and so on, ad infinitum. And my puppet moves another puppet, a much puppet one. And there's puppet living in its skull too, which that puppet handles. And so it goes, ad infinitum. And their world is the same as ours.

Even I don't know which of them I am. Right now, as I'm speaking to you, there's an infinite line of puppets and puppeteers somewhere, speaking to an endless line of children, using the same words I am.

2. The earth is an animal that thinks and lives, only its will is much stronger than ours, glued as we are to it. Birds and butterflies have an even stronger will; that's why they can fly. As for us, we can become as light as air if we try hard enough. (Mendebil once demonstrated this theory. He crouched in the hall of Stairwell One, his arms clasped around his knees, and threw his head back. He squeezed his eyes shut and tensed himself so hard that we were terrified. His face became inhuman. He shuddered, his lips tight, his cheeks bulging like sacks furrowed by blue veins. Then Marșiganu and Vova, standing on either side of him, raised him up to the ceiling with only one finger. We tossed him around for about fifteen minutes, a living ball, curled in fetal position, as light as a balloon).

3. Women do not mate with men. They carry a cell in their stomachs, and when they reach the right age they need to give birth. So they start the "birth" stages, which are: a flea comes out of the cell, a bug comes out of the flea, a frog comes out of the bug. Then a mouse comes out of the frog, a hedgehog out of the mouse, a rabbit out of the hedgehog, a can out of the rabbit, a dog out of the cat, a monkey out of the process at any stage. Some women give birth to frogs, others to cats. But most of them want children. They could give birth to creatures far more wonderful than children, because the birth stages do not end with humans. ("I've seen a creature like that," Mendebil said in conclusion.)

4. Not all humans are the same. There are four kinds: those who haven't been born, those who are living, those who are dead, and those who have neither been born nor are living or dead, and those who have neither been born nor are living or dead. These last ones are the stars. (This very short sentence was one of the last Mendebil uttered before his fall from power. I can still see the scene before my eyes. It was about nine in the evening, and we were waiting for our parents to call us in from the balconies. So deep were the shadows of the night that we couldn't even see the white of each other's eyes.

The sky shone indigo above the mill. A red star twinkled in the distance, the star on top of the Scînteia Publishing Complex. It was as if Mendebil had had a premonition. Because we had never sensed so much suffering, longing, and nostalgia in his voice as at the moment when he suddenly raised his hand and pointed to the star-dotted patch of sky above the chimneys).

5. (He uttered the following sentence after overhearing an argument between Paul and Nicușor. The two boys had just come out into the yard, waving some paper flags, both red and Romanian tricolor. "My father's brought me ten flags from the parade," Paul said. "My father's brought me fifty," said Nicușor. "Well my father's brought me five hundred," Paul retorted. "And mine's brought me a million", Nicușor countered. "My father's brought me a billion flags from the parade," Paul went on. "And mine's brought me five million hundred zillions", Paul declared. "Well, my father's brought me an infinity," Nicușor replied. "And mine's brought me a million infinities," Paul rejoined. "That's impossible. My father told me that infinity's the largest number. There's nothing bigger.") There is in fact more than one infinity. There's an infinity of infinities. Along this line ten centimeters long there's an infinity of points, but along a line one meter long, there are more. I call one particular infinity The Bull, because I've got this purse around my neck that has a bull embroidered on it. And I believe I have an infinity in my purse, a whole universe in which there are several worlds like ours. But what is this purse compared with me, who's made out of an infinity of points? It's a smaller infinity. And this apartment building – if it's a bigger infinity than I am. In the whole world there are only bigger or smaller infinities. A chair is one infinity, a carnation's another, this piece of chalk is yet another. Infinities crowding into each other, eating each other up. But there's an infinity that includes all the other infinities. I picture it as an endless herd of bulls.

6. When you die, you walk along a very long road. It goes up and up. You walk and walk and little by little your features change. Your nose and ears sink into the flesh of your face like the muscle of an oyster. Your fingers sink into the flesh of your palm and your arms are swallowed up by your shoulders. Your legs sink into your hips and you can't walk any more. You float along walls of red brick, leaving your shadow behind like an elongated disk. You are so round you become transparent and you can see on all sides around you. As long as we're alive, we can only see things as if through the slot of a mailbox. But when we die, we see on all sides, through our skin. As we float through the air, the fleshy red brick walls getting closer and closer, we come to a place that's round like a circle. In the middle there's a cell, because we're inside a mother's belly. We enter the cell and look through the eyes of all the creatures as the birth stages unfold – the eyes of the flea, the bug, the frog, the mouse, the hedgehog, the rabbit, the cat, the dog, the monkey, the man – and, if we're lucky, we get to look through the eyes of the wonderful creatures that come after man. A dead man looks at you through my eyes.

7. (Actually the seventh point is not a “theory” at all but a few lines Mendebil wrote in big letters, in different colors of chalk, on the smooth, slightly slanting concrete surface of the transformer in the corner of the inner courtyard. Maybe he’d woken up early one morning so he could write them. We discovered them unexpectedly in midsummer some three weeks after Mendebil had moved into our building, and they became a thorn in our side. He had told us nothing about the deed. After making sure we had all read the lines, he climbed onto his metal chair and went on with the story he’d begun the evening before “The Stories of Asian Peoples”).

WE SHALL NOT MAKE FUN OF LUMPÄ
WE SHALL NOT TORTURE ANIMALS
WE SHALL NOT TEASE GIRLS
WE SHALL NOT PLAY WITCHY
WE SHALL NOT GET DIRTY
WE SHALL NOT USE BAD WORDS
WE SHALL NOT LIE
WE SHALL NOT TATTLE ON ONE ANOTHER
WE SHALL NOT QUARREL
WE SHALL NOT FIGHT

(The moment we saw these words, we felt we had to take them seriously. There was something in us that made us want to obey them. For two or three weeks we did none of the things Mendebil had prohibited).

I don’t remember other similar “theories” – I’m only using the term for lack of a better one – but just about all of them were in the spirit of the ones above. We were fascinated because they were so much a part of Mendebil’s character. You should have heard him speak, seen him gesticulate. You would have felt the charm, the terror, the melancholy of those evenings. It was as if we were watching a strange film, in browns and grays, against the maroon background of the mill and the blackish green of the acacia leaves. In the middle of some story or other, about Arabs and galleons, he would pause and prepare us, wrapped up as we were in the harsh perfume of the tale, for the revelation.

We spent a whole month that summer gathered around Mendebil. We did nothing without asking him first, and our parents, through surprised at how clean our shirts and undershirts had become, viewed our dependence with a jaundiced eye, as day by day we grew more abject. “What’s that child doing to you, darling? He’s got you all under his spell.” But all we cared about was The Brave Man in the Tiger’s Skin, Ruslan and Ludmila, Tristan, and other heroes from Mendebil’s stories. The little girls forgot about singing “The Stone Bridge,” abandoned their tangled drawings of green women with blue legs in orange focuses, and gathered around the concrete and iron throne, sobbing turning her back on Mendebil and started looking at him, her eyes two green slits, with less hatred than at the other children. Iolanda was the closest to him, and we saw them quite often chatting together. She had huge

bows in her pigtail and addressed everybody, even her dolls and cats, as “my dear.” Once she had tossed red barberries at an enormous spider hanging immobile in its cobweb between two trees, and when the black bunch of claws and legs tried to escape to the edge of the web, she cried, “Where are you going, my dear?” Yet Mendibil maintained a certain reserve in his sporadic relations with the girls, which was more than we did anyway, since we never spoke to them at all. Naturally, from time to time we would play soccer or table soccer with buttons or bring out the chessmen. But they were no longer our main interests. And whenever we played, Mendibil would go find the little crippled boy and have long conversations with him.

About five or six months ago, in February, I took a stroll through town on my day off from school. I had just come out of the Mihail Sadoveanu Bookstore and was passing by the Cyclops Garage when a violet flame suddenly shot through my stomach, an unbearable memory. I had glance at the little display window to the right of the garage (which reeked of tar) and as I gazed at the selection of cigarette lighters, the sight of one of them, the kind you throw away after the butane’s gone, made me stop short. Like Proust’s madeleine, this ordinary object had a color that brought back a strong emotion from the period I’ve been telling you about. Of an odd purplish pink, streaked with yellowish half-moons, it had a soft and fleshy opalescence in its slightly curved plastic surface. It was the same color as my cheap watch, the one I had bought that summer, the first of the twenty-one summers I lived in the building on Ștefan cel Mare Avenue.

I distinctly remember that afternoon when a man in a red-checked shirt came sneaking along the corridor that linked Stirwell One to the rest of the apartments and, creeping like a caterpillar between the two buildings, almost got caught on the gas meter. He finally emerged – panting as if after a strenuous climb and wiping the whitewash from his elbows – and called out to us, pulling something out of his pocket as he spoke. I can see only a white balloon. But the things he displayed in his open palms I can picture down to the last detail: the cellophane-wrapped chewing gum tables, yellow or cream-colored, with raised drawing on the packages; the tin watches covered in gold foil, with multicolored plastic bands; and the pastel-hued whirligigs, with their two-winged propellers twirling around twisted wires and whizzing in circles up to the sky. We gathered around him and asked how much each object cost, then scattered to our apartments to get the money. For fifty bani I bought a watch that had a strange purplish pink strap. Mendibil bought a colored propeller. Then he watched the man as the crawled back through the narrow slit of the corridor. His eyes half-closed as if in a dream, Mendibil stared rather vacantly at the base of the two filcolored wires started rotating all by themselves, spinning faster and faster up the wires and rising a meter high into the air, where they went on whirling for several minutes. The boy looked on, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere.

Before he left, the man in the red-checked shirt had shown us one last thing, holding it feathery and stroking it from time to time. We drew in closely. It was a black fountain pen. On one side there was a rectangular window through which you could see a woman in a black one piece bathing suit. If you held the pen with its nib up, what at first looked like the black top turned out to be a liquid that descended slowly, revealing first the woman's breasts, then the rest of her body, until she was completely naked, as we had never seen or imagined a woman. "It's 25 lei," the man told us chuckling "A little out of your league".

At about nine o'clock that night, after most of the boys had gone home, Luci and I went behind the building and climbed the old chestnut tree in which we had found the pencil sharpeners. For some fifteen minutes we talked about the peddler's visit, all the while glancing at our golden-tin watches by the pale neon lights of the mill yard. Luci had just started on another tale of horses bedecked with cloth of gold, when I saw Mendebil step out slowly, tentatively, from the stairwell and head for the sewage tunnels. We couldn't believe our eyes when we saw him step gingerly into one of them. We craned our necks so hard we nearly fell out of the tree. There he was, walking to and from in the dirty labyrinth and making strange gestures that reminded us of Witchy. At one point he took something out of his breast pocket and pulled it over his face. As he came closer we could see it was a watercolor mask, by far more terrifying (with its teeth bared menacingly) than anything we had ever invented for Witchy. It was about ten o'clock when Mendebil came out of the ditch and went back into the building.

(Let me interrupt the story here for a moment. From time to time I have felt the need to come up for air, but never so much as now. Maybe I've been trying too long to keep my head and floating hair under the gelatinous waters of that summer, and now my eyes are stinging with the golden light of theater's reflection. But there's another reason for my shortness of breath, a more profound one. I'm no longer so sure I want to read this story at the writers' meeting. There's too little literature in it and too much of something else. I've beginning to feel the need to jot down thing that would have no place in the "chronicle" I mentioned earlier. Simply put, I can see how the act of writing is changing me as a person. If I don't write, be it at school or in my leisure time, I feel and behave like someone hallucinating. I haven't been able to grade this week's papers because pale images keep erupting on the glossy surface of my brain, images that torment me even when my students are reciting their lessons. I've also been having bad dreams, so bad I can't talk about them. And it all came to a head – or at least I hope it did – last night, when I was awakened by a steady loud noise. On the desk at the foot of my bed, in the dark, my typewriter was typing all by itself. I got up mechanically, turned on the light, and leaned over to see the patten advancing across the page, with a clatter of keys and ringing of belles. I read what was written there. The invisible fingers had tapped out my story from the

beginning; they had arrived at the dream about the glass jar and were now at the sentence, "When I looked up again, I saw the thin contour of a door in the wildly sparkling wall of the jar." As I read, I was overwhelmed with awe at a prophecy fulfilled. It grew to infinity, accompanied by an unbearable golden-yellow buzzing in my temples. I felt as if my skull were dissolving in flames of terror. Only then did I fully wake up, and even so, as the bluish night faded into morning, I wasn't sure if I hadn't passed into another dream. Anyway, if I continue to write this, it's only on impulse and only for myself).

After the peddler's visit, harmony in our gang slowly disintegrated. Mimi, Lumpă, Luță and Marțiganu listened with only one ear to Mendebil's stories, and Mendebil himself, as we soon came to notice, had started to neglect his audience. He still sat on his throne of concrete but no longer said anything new, starting in on the knights of the Round Table all over again. He stopped frequently, unable to recall any words for minutes at a time. He would stare vacantly at the wall, and in the awkward silence we could hear the truck engines' whir as wheat was being unloaded in the mill yard. But only Luci and I sensed that something was really wrong. Every afternoon, awake in my bed of torture, I would look at the bright motionless cloud and ponder what I had seen that night: Mendebil, a cardboard mask over his innocent face, wandering through the maze of dirty, noisome tunnels as if playing Witchy all by himself.

Summer was coming to an end. It must have been early September (I recall my parents scrambling to get me a satchel and supplies for my first year in school). One evening, Mendebil had been going on and on about Ruslan and Ludmila when suddenly he uttered those words I still cherish: "Humans come in four kinds: those who haven't been born, those who are living, those who are dead, and those who have neither been born nor are living or dead. The last kind are the stars." Then, as many times before, he gestured to the stars above the mill's high towers, as if on the verge of vaulting himself toward them. As we walked home down the narrow corridor, I asked him what he meant. He was silent until we reached the back of the building, but there, looking down at the ditches, he said he didn't know. He asked me to come and see him the next day; his mother had no idea what to get him for school and wanted to know what my parents had bought me.

At nine o'clock the next morning I was there. His mother was wearing a scarlet housedress and seemed dizzyingly tall, but she talked like my mother, like all the other mother in the neighborhood. She brought us a plateful of apple strudel and let us "play" in Ionel's or maybe Vasilică's, or George's room (I don't remember what she called Mendebil). He had a surprising number of toys in his room, most of them in pieces. You couldn't find a whole toy car anywhere. The body of a tiny ambulance lay abandoned in one corner; the engine and gears had been discarded in another. A tin frog lay belly up, the spring inside gushing out like a shiny intestine. A triggerless rifle had been thrown under a chair with a lacquered pink back. The shelves

were lined with books (though not so many as I had expected), most of them thin, with large lettering, like the ones young schoolchildren use. I no longer remember what we talked about, but let me get to the point: as soon as Mendebil left the room for a few minutes, I pulled several books off a shelf and saw something fall onto the polished ledge below. I'd never been so astonished, not even when I saw Mendebil in the sewage canal. Hidden behind the books was the black pen with the woman on it. I replaced it carefully, and when Mendebil came back, I told him hurriedly that I had to go. As I rebuckled my sandals in the hall (his mother had asked me to take off my shoes when I arrived), I glanced once again at the mother and son standing in the doorway, he with his arm circled lovingly around her waist, she with her hand resting on his shoulder, towering and misty in her red satin housedress. They both wore the same smile, a smile that could mean so many things, cunning, sarcasm, or simply kindness. Both had lashless eyes, delicately bordered in black. I was deeply troubled. Outside I ran into Luci and told him what I'd seen. I couldn't figure out when Mendebil had bought the lurid pen; the peddler hadn't been back to our building since we'd first seen him three or four days before. Even now I have no idea how he got hold of the pen.

Oh, God, if I could only describe the image that hangs on, alive and painful, in my memory! Maybe then I could get rid of it. But even if I tried, would I really want to? Or is that I just wish to see it more clearly, again and again, each second of my life? It's only now that I've reached – whether I'm ready for it or not – the high point of this “chronicle”. I don't care if it seems unlikely; I'm writing for myself, and I did see what I'm about to relate. It still makes me shiver, so maybe it's the translucent egg I've been hatching all unawares for twenty-one years. Who knows what monstrous chick may emerge from it? But I won't think about it any more; all I need now is the strength to describe the scene “realistically”, though it almost seems beyond me.

Mendebil had started to act crazy. Or at least that's what most of our gang thought, since we couldn't account for his embarrassingly long speeches now filled with gibberish, for his aimless wandering in his yellow spielhosen along the dirty walls of Stairwell One. He hardly ever told his Oriental tales any more, and even “The Wooden Cup and the Clay Cup” or “The Genie in the Bottle” he would leave unfinished. He stared for hours at a time at the whimsical drawings the girls made. He even began talking to the girls. Iolanda, the girl with the huge hair bows, had become Mendebil's “intimide adviser” and confessor (or so we thought), replacing the crippled boy with the nickel-plated leg braces. Mendebil would talk to her all the time, his expressive arms describing strange arcs in the air. The evening before his fall from grace, Iolanda at his feet and all of us around him, he told us the most beautiful story we had ever heard. It was almost group hypnosis: we stayed until ten o'clock, when we could no longer see each other's faces, until all

that remained in the world was the square of dark blue sky, streaked over by the stars powdering the Milky Way. It was "The Tale of the Eleven Swans." The boy's voice rose and fell, enveloping us, until we were wild with grief. The little mute girl knitting nettle garments for her brothers who had turned into royal birds, their flight across the churning green sea, the boy left with a swan's wing – it had all been familiar to us for a long time. He was only reinforcing the story in our should. When he stopped, we could hear the streetcars going down Ștefan cel mare Avenue, rumbling in the stillness of the night.

The next day was to be the last. In the cold light I got together with Luci and Sandu and climbed into the horse-chestnut tree laden with large prickly fruit. All morning long we peeled the pods off the glossy nuts. It was then that Sandu found (I remember his cry of surprise a heavy, glittering crystal under one of the thorny green pods. It looked like a glass egg, and light twisted through it strangely. It's a bad sign, I thought, when a chestnut tree grows this kind of fruit.

Just before noon – Mendebil hadn't yet come down to Stairwell One, and everyone was listless – we thought of an old game, one we'd played before Witchy, called Explorers. Halfway down the building wall there was a tin-plated door studded with rivets and painted gray. It was the entrance to the inner sanctum of the basement. We opened the door carefully so it wouldn't creak and started down the metal steps of the spiral staircase, avoiding the tar-slathered walls lined with with electrical panels. The father down we went, the darker it got. Finally we reached a long, narrow room smelling of putty and rust-soaked hemp. Pipes of various size sprouted from the walls and served around the corners like tangled entrails, covered with sprockets and manometer. A light creeping through a tiny barred window near the ceiling gleamed dully on the damp cement floor. We stared in fascination at the pipes. Some were thicker than we were, others as thin as fingers and infinitely long. We crossed the room in silence and opened another metal door, which led to the boiler room. The dozens of pipes had pierced the wall and were now embedded in immense metal bellies, scarlet in color and girdled with rivets as big as fists, like iron pigs lying on cement platforms. Here and there manometer with black numbers and green glass covers glinted threateningly. We felt we were inside the temple of potbellied monsters, we tiptoed to the furthest room, a tiny chamber deep within the bowels of the building. It was the domain of the maintenance man. Its door was also made of metal, and had a small window. We peered through the glass, raising ourselves up as high as we could. Then we froze.

The room was traversed by a broad beam of light coming from a barred window near the ceiling. There was a luminous steam around the trail of light, and in its brightness we saw something we would never have thought we would see. Two naked children stood facing each other in the small bare room. The light filtered through the boy's hair and delicately outlined the

girl's ankles and feet on the rough cement. The children were incredibly beautiful. They appeared very blond in the golden haze, the boy's hair glowing with reset and gold curls, his face lit up by his black-bordered eyes. The groove under his nostrils seemed deeper than ever. A strange, inexplicable smile kindled his tightly pressed lips. His slender body, the muscles framed by curving yellow lines, the frail ribs visible, the thin, firm legs, was like a finely traced, disquieting silhouette. The girl, shorter, her braids caught up in white satin bows, the bangs curling on her forehead, smiled awkwardly as she gazed into his eyes, the way I have since seen all naked women smile. There was almost no difference between their bodies. Their clothes lay in oddly neat heaps on the cement floor. They looked at each other with no definable feeling, their faces waring inhuman expressions, like those of statues, or maybe ever colder. When the girl raised her hand and touched the boy's shoulder with her fingertips, Sandu jerked away from the window and raced back through the boiler room. Terrified, Luci and I followed him. Even now, when I remember the scene in that room, I shiver and sob. Even now I can hear Iolanda's scream of terror when she heard our feet pounding on the cement, a scream that shattered my eardrums as it reverberated amidst the boilers and the pipes and pursued us to the outside door.

We ran until we reached Stairwell One, a deserted place at that time of day. We couldn't look at each other. We couldn't do anything. Luci shook as if in the throes of a fit, and in fact he came down with fever the next day. At noon I babbled incoherently, my head buried under the sheets. All I could see was the two frail bodies facing each other in the solitude of the maintenance room. I could make no sense of it, none. Why had Mendebil changed so suddenly, so completely, after the peddler's visit? But I couldn't even formulate questions any more. Sandu reacted differently; he was furious, indignant. In the evening, when the old gang gathered outside Starwell One, he recounted the whole story, even expanded on it. From the way he talked, Mendebil had led us all on with his idiotic prattle, but now he had shown his true colors. Vova and his brother rushed to the transformer and wiped off with their palms the sentences which Mendebil had written in colored chalk, which we by turns had since reinforced several times. Mimi was triumphant. He climbed up on Mendebil's throne and from there – big, potbellied and swarthy led the debate over what Mendebil's punishment should be. Of course he wasn't able to come up with anything beyond "Let's really give it to him." Marşiganu suggested we play Witchy again, since we hadn't for a long time. We rushed behind the building and descended once more into the grimy ditches, taking in the beloved smells of earth and caterpillars and milky chrysalides, and with them the pungent scent of fear. We put on our cardboard masks, reverting to devils and monsters, giants and dragons and savages, and began chasing one another through the maze of canals.

Mendebil showed up at about eight o'clock. We could hardly believe our eyes when we saw him approaching the ditch. We thought he would stay

locked in his room for a week at least, and his daring to confront us seemed like a slap in the face. We stopped playing and turned our grinning masks up at him. He tried to do something, but Paul picked up a ball of dirt and threw it at him, hitting him hard in the leg. Jean did likewise, and Mendebil fled to Stairwell One amid a shower of dirt clods. We dashed after him, shouting, our faces covered by the mask, our pockets filled with clumps of dirt. Rushing out of the narrow corridor, we gathered in the middle of the inner courtyard. There was no way he could escape us there. We couldn't find him at first, but finally caught sight of him hiding behind the stone walls of The Bridge, crouching in the dark on the small platform that led to the bricked-in door. We screamed and began hurling more dirt clods at him, but he yelled even louder and fought back like a demon. In the neon light of the mill yard we could see that he too was wearing a mask, his terrifying watercolor mask. Dirt hit him from all sides, though he was protected by the stone enclosure, high up on the platform, while we were out in the open on the ground. He hurled the dirt back for a long time, maybe an hour, until at last a clod hit him hard on the head. In the twilight we saw him slowly sag to his knees, his body arching backwards, and start to jerk violently. We came close, but he didn't seem to see us. Tears streamed down his cheeks; he groaned and howled amid spasms that controlled his body into impossible positions. We were so frightened that Luță ran to Stairwell Three and rang the doorbell to Mendebil's apartment. From our hiding place behind Stairwell One we saw the woman in red rush out and take the tormented child in her arms. She could hardly squeeze him through the narrow corridor that connected the stairwells.

And that's how everything ended. Mendebil's mother must have sent him to his grandparents or a boarding school or somewhere. We never saw him again. The next day it started to rain in small, freezing drops, and the area behind the building turned into a swamp, impossible to play in. School began about a week later and, by the time it was summer again, our gang had finished secondary school, military service, the university. And here I am, part of the Establishment. But for three months now, since the dream with the jar of hamster. I have felt like a different person. I can't stand it any more. Night after night I have bad dreams, so bad I don't dare log them in my journal. I feel something coming on, a smell of poisoned ice that makes me shiver. Sometimes, in the anteroom, I sob nervously, without tears. I have a feeling of imminent disintegration. I had one such fit just yesterday, after describing the scene in the maintenance room. What will happen, now that I've finished this tale that sprang up so miraculously from my memory? Will I start wandering aimlessly down the street, go into shops and restaurants, create a disturbance in movie theaters by telling Mendebil's story out loud? Because I feel I haven't told it all. Because I can't help screaming at the top of my lungs this truth that is mine and only mine. Because I can't hold in my sorrow any longer. I just can't. No, I won't be reading this at the writers' meet-

ing. For these pages aren't rally literature; they're a horrifying prophecy. I'll take them and read them on the streets in a snowstorm, by the light of the shop windows, on streetcars. I'll find people who'll understand and follow me, and we'll go searching all over town for Mendebil, and at last we'll find him. And we'll know it's him, and we'll cry and sing together. And Mendebil, wrapped in rays of light, sending out bolts of blue lightning, will lift up his arms and ascend, illuminating the city as if it were day, up to and beyond the stars. And we'll be left behind, like white ashes, becoming even more pure... I can't go on.

This morning, as I was looking for tape to mend a book cover, I came across these typed pages, which, by the look of them, are more than two years old. They were lying on top of the wardrobe, underneath some laminated pictures. I read them and couldn't help jotting down on the last page how surprised I was. They were written on my "Erika" typewriter, no doubt about that, and they refer to a definite period in my childhood; I recognized some of the facts mentioned in the "chronicle". I did live in the apartment building on Ștefan cel Mare Avenue; the mill, Stairwell One, all parts of the scenery are real and exist even today. All, that is, except for the underground heating complex; our building never had boilers in the basement. The children are real too. I remember their names. Some I still run into. But the whole story about Mendebil seems absurd. There never was a child wise beyond his years living in our building. Vova Smirnoff is an engineer now. Lumpa clears table at the Athénée Palace restaurant; I often see him there. Sandu's an engineer too, Marțiganu's doing something somewhere, and Nicușor is my friend, Nicolae Iliescu. But what's become of Mendebil? Where on earth does this story come from? I should read it again, but I'm afraid to. There's something sinister about it. I can't make up my mind what to stumble upon it again. I'd better put it away somewhere, find a place where it can stay forever and not, like so much else (thanks to my wife's masterful touch), be tossed out with the newspapers.

Translated by
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