

LOVE ODYSSEY

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INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS

"Three thousand years have not changed the human condition in this respect; we are still lovers and victims of the will to violence, and so long as we are, Homer will be read as its truest interpretation."

*-Homer, The Iliad, Robert Fagles (Translator),
Bernard Know, (Introduction)*

PROLOGUE

I have often tried to understand love.

Is there a logic, a pattern, a process? Does it begin as a chemical reaction, consciously or unconsciously? Does the heart tell reason that there is no reason at all? Or does the mind direct all feelings? How does it happen that love can transport us to a state of being that we have never known before? And why do we journey so far, so blindly, so willingly, for the person we love?

I have wondered if we love only once. Or do we love different people with different loves at different times? Is it possible that love can transform itself into something sinister and unrecognizable and still be love? And if we should choose to reject love completely, what is life without loving?

My story is one of love, colored with tender moments of pleasure and heights of ecstasy. But also shadowed gray when love was crushed by shame. Lies turned passion to pain.

I remember when the doubts began. It was an autumn evening in Transylvania, October 1970, when golden days of yellow leaves turned to bitter nights and evenings began to smell of burning wood from fireplaces.

Communism was at its peak under Ceausescu. No one could do what they wanted if the government did not approve. I was outspoken, independent, not cooperating. I was being watched.

Alec, my best friend from childhood, had come to our two-room cottage late at night to give me and Petre, my husband of three years, some confidential information. I remember the storm that night, lightning and thunder, even hail. But that was our good luck, for the police preferred to stay indoors, drinking with their buddies rather than patrolling town or watching us.

Alec had been my father's student at the University of Engineering, and his helper on Sundays in our basement, where they both sent secret messages to unnamed people in mysterious countries. He had graduated to become the chief engineer at the Ministry of Agriculture. My husband, Petre, was a doctor, specializing in endocrinology. He was in charge of the clinic in our small Transylvanian town, Dova.

Alec came to tell us he had news- one of the Austrian tractors the government was using to clear the Transylvanian fields for wheat was defective. The parts weren't available in Romania, and the tractor would have to be sent to Vienna for repairs. Alec knew I was pregnant. He had an idea to get me out of Romania: one night hidden in the tractor as it traveled by hydrofoil up the Danube from Budapest to trustworthy contacts in Vienna.

"I won't go," I told Alec and Petre.

Petre was insistent. "This is your only chance. You can't have a baby in this country."

"I will not leave without you."

"I'll follow," Petre promised.

"I can make another defective tractor in three months," Alec told me. "But you must take this one first."

Petre was pacing our small living room. I had never seen him this worked up before. "The Secret Police have started an investigation on you."

"How will I get to Budapest?" I asked them. "The borders are locked tight like an iron gate."

"The tractor will be hauled in a truck from Transylvania to Budapest," Alec answered. "I'll create space for you under the tractor's seat where you'll be hidden."

"What about food and water?"

"It'll be next to where you'll lay comfortably on a mattress."

"Comfortably?" I said, raising my voice. "Do you realize what will happen to me if the Secret Police search the truck or tractor with dogs?"

"As director of the agricultural project, I have the right to escort the tractor all the way from here to Vienna."

Petre took my hand and looked down. "Alec will protect you. He has contacts."

"No." I didn't like the plan. "It's too risky."

"You must take this opportunity!" Petre insisted. "The chief of the region is in charge of your case. He has proof you've given antibiotics to Gypsies and non-communists. The police might torture you. You could lose the baby."

I remember crying, pleading my case to both men, but as I felt the baby kick inside me, I knew they were right. "Petre, you promise to take the second tractor?"

"Yes," he assured me. "I'll be at your side when you give birth. I promise."

Was I wrong to have agreed? I wonder now, what was Petre's true motive to get me out of the country? Did he know then that the promise of three months was just a subterfuge? Over the years, I have tried to analyze the truth as well as the

lies. I wanted to forgive Petre, to feel less for him, to live my life by reason and accept my fate. Or so I thought. Until one morning when a newspaper and a telephone call turned my ordered world apart.

PART ONE
PENELOPE and ODYSSEUS
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10,1989

CHAPTER ONE :

NEW YORK CITY

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10,1989

*"So that I could meet the Odysseus I long
for. Yet the evil is endurable, when one
cries through the days, with heart
constantly troubled."*

-Homer, The Odyssey, Book 20, lines 79-90

Rubbing sleep from her eyes, Anca opened the front door of her Upper East Side apartment and picked up *The Sunday New York Times*.

The kitchen was still shadowed in morning darkness as she placed the newspaper on the marble counter and mechanically opened the refrigerator to take out the espresso can.

She stared at her face on the metal container as if she were a stranger—the straight black hair cropped short, green-blue eyes so sleepy that the almond slits looked buried within high cheekbones. The lips looked full above the pointed chin, and the face appeared younger than its forty-two years. She stretched her body in her blue bathrobe and tried by playing with the can, to get her thin, 5'7" image fill the silver container.

Until the coffee was ready, she scanned the first page of *The Times*. She stopped cold at the headline, ROMANIA AND IRAN: PARTNERS IN GOLD AND EVIL.

"Twenty years of friendship and billions of dollars in trade between Romania and Iran," the article read. "First with Shah Reza Pahlavi, then with Ayatollah Khomeini, and now with Iran's new President, Rafsanjani, with whom Ceausescu deposited millions of dollars in gold in November and December 1989. The question is why? An investigation has been traced to Transylvania in Romania."

Anca took a deep breath. Transylvania. She remembered the beginning of love. Even now, she felt her body shiver and turn warm as she thought of Petre. Her skin tingled, and she tightened her legs together to quiet the unsatisfied desires filling her thighs. She could feel his touch, his lips caressing her body. Such deep pleasure. Wanting more and more.

"Would you like a glass of wine?"

It was during the harvest, a September evening when pine trees in Romania turn gold and the Gypsies were gathering grapes.

Anca closed her eyes to keep the memory alive. She could feel Petre's presence, strong and soft.

"The wine from the barrel is warm."

The fiddler played a Gypsy song, 'Te iubesc pe vesnicie,' I will love you forever.

Was she strong enough for feelings she had never experienced before?

She allowed the wine to cloud her mind and she followed for the very first time, as he led her to a path through the valley. He caressed her cheeks and she closed her eyes, the wine making her bold. He brought her closer, tighter, and placed her lovingly in a bed of golden leaves.

The next evening, with love-making inside her, she went to the Gypsy camp in their small town and had overheard them discussing, "A woman loves only one man in her life." Anca wondered, was that a prophecy for her?

She recalled how each year the harvest varied by a few days depending on nature's whims and summer rains. In Romania, there was no calendar to tell the farmers when to start picking the grapes. Instead, they knew because of the Gypsies who wandered in from Hungary and Serbia. They arrived saying that they had come to work; the grapes were ready. And then on the last day of the harvest, they disappeared, late at night, not to be seen again until the next year when the grapes were ripe.

Anca wiped tears from her cheek remembering three years later when Petre had sealed her fate. He had told her she must escape.

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CHAPTER TWO:

BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1989

"Sing in me, muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending, the wanderer, harried for years on end."

-Homer, The Odyssey, Book 1, lines 1-4

"Atentie. Stop. Don't move."

"Oh it's you, Petre. Sorry," a Romanian guard said as he put the pistol back inside his torn coat. "I didn't recognize you in that long coat." He bowed to the tall blond man who barely flinched at the sight of the gun.

"I'm visiting the Leader," Petre answered, pointing to his black doctor's bag and taking off his hat and scarf. He walked through the concrete tunnel that led to Ceausescu's underground bunker system. The hidden labyrinth, located underneath the Presidential Palace, was equipped with food, medicine, and supplies for the Ceausescu family and their Secret Police. In case of an uprising, the dictator could live in hiding for several months. It also included offices, a prison, a clinic, a cinema, and dozens of bedrooms. There was even an underground heliport from which Ceausescu and his family could flee, if needed.

Petre passed through the tunnel's underground archway that connected the medical dispensary to Ceausescu's private quarters.

"It would have been easier for me to examine him in my office," Petre said to himself, as he passed his medical suite.

He climbed up several steps that led to an opulent room that was shining bright with several Baccarat crystal chandeliers. So odd, Petre thought, Baccarat in an underground bunker.

He knocked on the door, a butler answered, "Da?" and Petre turned the crystal doorknob. Each time he used the doorknob, he thought of Gheorgheiu-Dej, Romania's dictator before Ceausescu, who had met his fatal end with the doorknob to his bathroom that was filled secretly with radioactive matter.

"Wash your hands first," the butler said to Petre, handing him a bowl of water and towel. They both knew the routine Ceausescu requested of each guest.

The dictator walked into the room, and without shaking Petre's hand or saying good morning, told him, "I'm not well."

"Sorry, sir, I will see what the problem is."

"I know what the problem is! I've had a headache all night and couldn't sleep. Went to the bathroom every hour. Too much beer last night."

"Sir, maybe your blood pressure is high and your diabetes isn't regulated. I can test your sugar level."

"Just tell me if I'm strong enough to travel?"

Petre didn't answer, not wanting to anger the dictator more. Instead, he took from his black bag, a blood pressure machine.

"Don't you have anything more modern than that?" Ceausescu snapped at him. "Why do you think I let you leave this country to go to international meetings? The Germans must have something more elaborate than that ridiculous blood snake!"

Petre tried to smile at what he pretended was a joke. But he realized Ceausescu was nervous. Perhaps he knew an uprising was brewing? That's why he's going next week to Tehran to deposit more of his money and gold?

"President, sir, this is all the world has as of now to measure blood pressure." Petre put his stethoscope under the dictator's pajamas and bathrobe to listen first to his breathing. Yes, he's nervous, Petre thought as he listened to the breathing that sounded like wheezing. He's probably worrying if Rafsanjani, Iran's new president, will receive him with fanfare and press. Certainly, he'll accept his gold.

"Petre!" Ceausescu yelled at him. "What's taking you so long? I asked you a question and you didn't answer me! Should I increase the dosage of my insulin?"

"Do you have symptoms, sir?"

"What does that mean?"

"Do you have polyuria? Polydipsia? Polyphagia?"

"What language is that? Are you making fun of me? Speak in a language I can understand!"

"Yes, sorry, sir, do you have an increase need to urinate? Increase in thirst? Increased appetite?"

"Of course! It's all the fault of the beer I drank last night. I was feeling uncomfortable. General Babescu has been plotting against me."

Petre stopped moving and listened, intently.

"With the Russians. Gorbachev. I had no choice, but to kill him. I invited him here last night for dinner with his wife and daughter. All three didn't walk out."

Petre knew General Babescu well. He was the Minister of Defense and worked with Ion Iliescu, Ceausescu's right hand man.

Just as Petre was trying to figure out who had squealed on the general, and if Ceausescu used terrorists or Iranian revolutionary guards for the killing, a guard entered the room. "Sir," he addressed the dictator with his head bent low. "Excuse me, sir, for interrupting... your wife said I should... your son, Nicu..."

"What's the matter with him, *now*?"

"I don't know, sir, but your wife said to come."

"That's enough, Petre. You're not helping me anyway. Leave me some medicine for my blood pressure and headaches. Check the insulin dosage."

"Yes, sir, of course."

Ceausescu left without saying goodbye and slammed the door.

Petre quietly re-emerged in the clinic. A guard approached him, bowed deferentially and saluted to him before speaking.

"Are you expecting a patient that I should bring to you?"

Petre shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe," he said.

"If he does, probably one of the Iranians," whispered another guard. "Or maybe a terrorist. Someone important if the person is to be seen by Ceausescu's private doctor."

Petre pretended he didn't hear their hushed chatter. Instead, he thought angrily of terrorists infiltrating his country.

"What do we Romanians have to do with all these people?" a guard barked. "We're Christians!"

The guards stopped talking abruptly. They looked around, afraid that someone had heard them and they'd be denounced.

One guard moved closer to Petre and said, "Uranium and plutonium. Centrifuges. Atomic reactors. Terrorists. I wish they'd get out of our country before we're blamed by the entire world for starting a nuclear war."

Petre shrugged his shoulders again. "What do I know about politics?" he replied. But he thought to himself, "Soon, I'll show everyone my answer."

Petre passed through the tunnel's underground archway that connected the medical dispensary to the prison. Another guard saluted him, and Petre waved him away so he could be alone in the clinic. When the door closed behind him, Petre took two keys from his pocket and opened a metal cabinet. Checking to see if anyone was near, he took five vials of penicillin and six capsules of antibiotics from a medicine cabinet, hid them in his bag and locked the cabinet. Turning his back, he put the keys in his coat pocket and left.

He moved toward a narrow opening in the tunnel that was hidden behind a stone pillar. While the guards were busy talking, he removed two loose bricks from the wall without being seen. In one second, he took several vials filled with tetracycline and put them in his pocket. As he returned the bricks, he eyed a rat scurrying from its hiding place.

Hearing a clanging of chains, he turned his attention down the hallway to a guard who was leading a man through the dark tunnel. All Petre could see at first was the shine of the Securitate's rifle digging into the man's back and the glare of steel balls and chains locked around the culprit's legs. The prisoner had been stripped to his underwear despite the freezing cold. His back was bleeding from dozens of whip marks. He cried, "I'm not guilty. My cousin did it."

"Swine! You don't even have family loyalty."

The guard pounded the man over the neck with a flogging stick. Then he took his gun and shot several times at the ground near the prisoner's feet.

"Dance! When I say dance, you dance!"

The man tried to move, but his chains shackled him in place. The guard laughed.

Petre came out of his hiding place and pretended he hadn't seen the guard brutalize his victim. He didn't want to make a scene. Not now. Instead, he signaled to the guard, pointed to his doctor bag and nodded goodbye.

To all eyes in the dark tunnel built by a vicious keeper, Ceausescu's personal doctor was doing his duty. Putting medicines in his bag was part of his work. The doctor's importance gave the guards little reason to doubt him at all.

Petre climbed up a small staircase that led to a trap door. He pushed open the heavy lid and walked into an outdoor garden filled with dry brush. Picking up a handful of leaves, he covered the trap door and sealed Hades from the rest of the world.

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