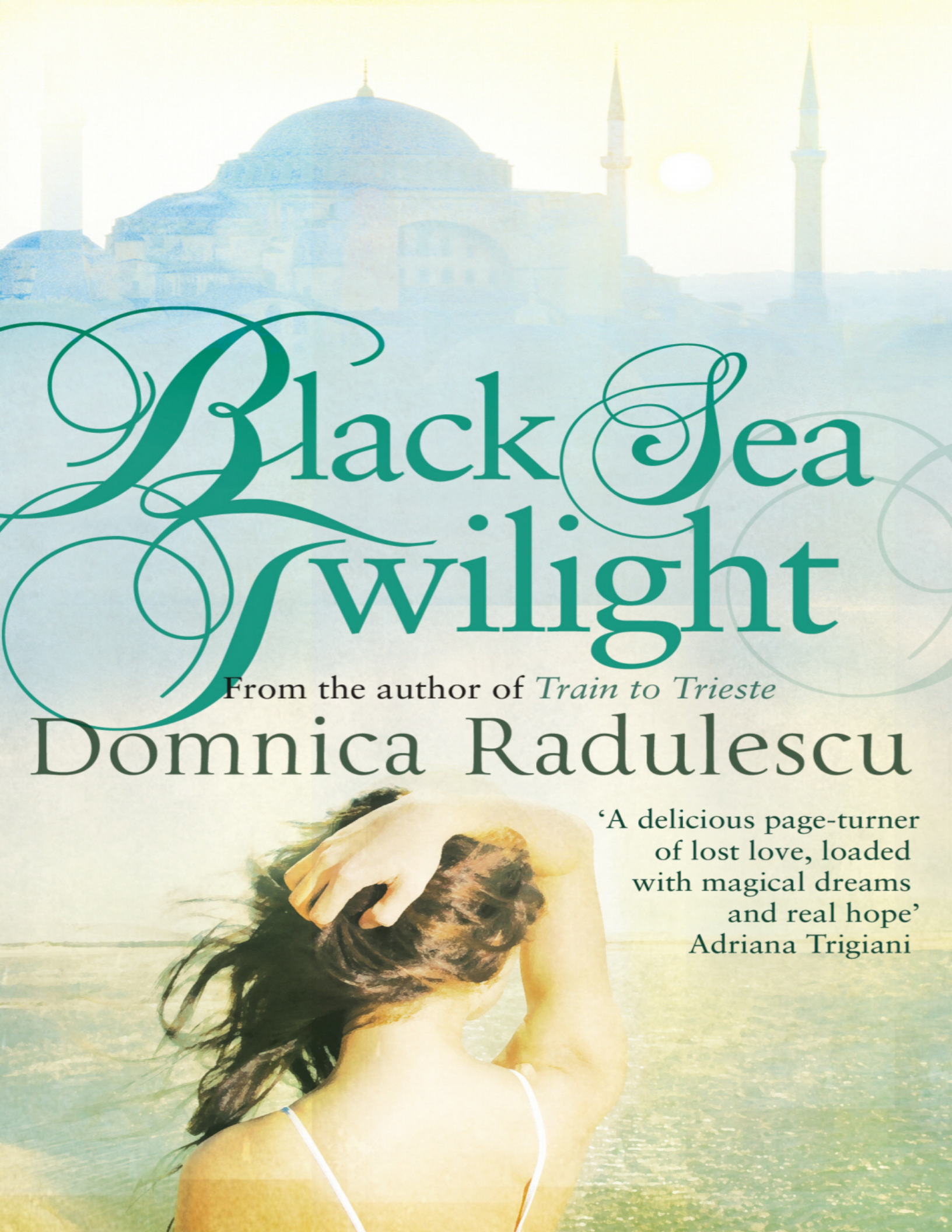




Black Sea Swilight

From the author of *Train to Trieste*

Domnica Radulescu

‘A delicious page-turner
of lost love, loaded
with magical dreams
and real hope’
Adriana Trigiani

About the Book

1980s Romania:

As the sun sets on the magical shore of the Black Sea and casts its last rays across the water, all Nora Teodoru can think about is pursuing her dream of becoming an accomplished artist – and of her love for Gigi, her childhood boyfriend from the Turkish part of town.

But storm clouds are gathering as life under Dictator Nicole Ceauș becomes increasingly unbearable. His secret police are circling, never far from the young couple's doors. Nora and Gigi make plans to escape to Turkey, but nothing can prepare them for the events that follow.

Five years later, the Romanian revolution is over, and Nora is on her own in Paris trying to make it as an artist. But then Gigi unexpectedly reappears in her life – and they are faced with shocking revelations about each other.

Nora realizes that her life can never be the same . . .

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

How I Painted My First Fish

The Storm before Carnival Nights

Carnival Nights

My Second Sea Painting

My Brother's Arrival

A Box Full of Surprises

Our Communist Youth

My Art Training in Bucharest and the State Circus

About Life and Death

The Investigation and the End of Fairy Tales

Blue May, Cold June

Last Family Portrait

Marița's Secret

Limanu, End of the World

Excuse Me, Is This Istanbul?

Struggling for Memory in Istanbul

Paris Street Corners

Art, Drugs, Dresses and Emigrés

Nora, Come Home!

Stealing the French Landscape

Music like Water

Ablaze

Stranger Love

Acknowledgements
Bibliography
About the Author
Also by Domnica Radulescu
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Black Sea Twilight

Domnica Radulescu

For all women artists, known and unknown.

'I hope the exit is joyous and I hope never to return.'

Frida Kahlo

How I Painted My First Fish

'JUMP, NORA! JUMP!'

'No, Gigi, I won't. Never!'

The sea is a blue mirror sprinkled with millions of diamonds in the morning sun as he pushes me and I fly through the air. I cut through the liquid silver mercilessly and with precision. Like a blade. I go deep, past glossy fish, translucent jellyfish twirling in their tutus, confused crabs and green, slimy algae, keeping my eyes open to see everything and to see him come down to meet me. He appears right in front of me, his reddish curls sticking up in the current, his eyes bulging at me in the water, his cheeks swollen from holding the air in. I must look just as funny. He wraps his arms around me and we go up, up, holding our breath one more second, then gulp for air, screaming and splashing in the blue-green water.

'Ninety seconds,' he says. 'Better than yesterday!'

I have known Gigi for as long as I have known myself. We do this almost every day in the summer, learning how to hold our breath longer and how to become stronger under water. Only the days of bad storms, when his father's boat is docked, keep us from the sea. I hate diving, but I love swimming under water and watching the green insides of the sea. Gigi has to push me, as that's the only way to get me to jump. We pretend we are having a fight, and then he asks me to dive. I say no and he pushes me, but he always

comes down after me the next second. It's a special ritual we have created over the years, a little drama to make us feel adventurous.

In the dining room at our house there's a lacquered cupboard where my mother keeps all our family portraits, from our dead ancestors to the youngest members. Here I am in this photograph with a white face and dark long plaits down my back. No, correction! That's how I imagine myself sometimes, based on a reproduction of a mosaic I saw of Dido, Queen and founder of Carthage. In reality, I have a round swarthy face, curly brown hair like the people on my mother's side and green eyes like no one else in my family. Gigi says they are the colour of the sea, that exact hue of green, like the seawater deep down. When I spend time with Gigi at the beach in the summer, the way we have done summer after summer since the age of six, I forget about my imperfection. My mother calls it 'unevenness', though once she called me a cripple, which made my father furious. When my father's sister, Tudorița, married Doru, the architect whose right arm had been cut off in a railway accident when he was fourteen, my mother said: 'That's all we needed in our family: another cripple.' I was only ten then, and my father was furious because he knew she meant the other 'cripple' was me; he picked me up, swung me in the air and yelled at my mother: 'She is no cripple, woman, she is the star of all stars! Don't you ever dare call her that!' She never did, though she still mentions my 'unevenness' once in a while, as if somehow my birth defect was my own fault or some punishment I deserved.

My family is noisy, turbulent and violent. It is unpredictable and tormented, and I often wish to escape it. We blame it on the Communists and on 'all the tragedies our people have suffered' but I think we would be the same even if we lived under the Sun King. We have secrets and relatives that we talk about only in whispers. Like my twin brother Valentin, who doesn't live with us in Mangalia but

with my mother's sister Raluca, in Bucharest, because he is some kind of piano prodigy and needs to be in the capital to get proper piano tuition. Raluca wanted very much to bring up Valentin because of the tragedy she had suffered, and she kept pushing my parents to let him live with her in Bucharest. First it was for a few months, then the few months became years, and soon enough it was the eighties and we both turned fifteen. I have only seen my brother a total of five times since we were very little: the times he and Aunt Raluca came to the seaside for the summer holidays. And because my mother never got used to Valentin living away from her and she resents her sister for 'stealing' her son, she always mentions his name in a whisper, as if he were a saint whose name we should not take in vain and use any time and in any way we felt like.

Gigi, who is already sixteen, has dreams of becoming a naval officer and a captain like his father, Luca. He imagines himself sailing our seas on his father's cargo ship and transporting iron ore from port to port. Nobody knows where iron ore is shipped from and to, but our city of Mangalia is proud to be Romania's largest naval base and Gigi is proud of his father's prominent role in the port. During the short breaks from working on the cargo ship, Luca usually takes a small fishing boat out to sea in the middle of the day, letting us dive and swim under water while he throws out the big fishing nets to catch carp and sturgeon and very small fish called *guvizi* and *hamsii*. As they are Turkish, Gigi and his family live in the area behind the Post Office, where the little stucco houses with vegetable gardens, small vineyards and red beaten earth stretch out like a different kind of town. Once in a while Gigi and his family go to the service in the mosque on Fridays, but he says it's no big deal. What makes them Turkish, he says, is the food they eat and the language he speaks at home, mostly with his father. My mother, on the other hand, makes a big deal about us being Christians,

though we hardly ever go to the Orthodox church in town, except for Christmas, Easter and a wedding or funeral. She refers to all the people of Turkish origin in town simply as 'the Turks', and Gigi as 'the Turk', hardly ever calling him by his real name.

My father says it doesn't matter what religion or God the people in our town believe in because in our country Marx and Lenin and President Ceaușescu are the only gods. We might as well be governed by the Huns or the Visigoths. My mother gets furious and tells him to shut up and not just blurt out whatever silly stuff comes into his head. She is angry for three reasons: first because he blasphemes, second because he could get into trouble if he makes fun of our president and the Marxist leaders, and third because she is always angry.

My mother is afraid that someone in our family will be arrested and killed. Her father disappeared soon after the war, when the new Communist leaders in Romania were 'weeding out' dangerous influences. He had laughed out loud in a town meeting when one of the new Comrades said that everybody would have to give up their property for the common good, and my grandfather said: 'That'll be the day!' He resisted the nationalization of his property with fierce determination. He kept a loaded gun in his study and used to say he would fire at anyone who tried to take away his land. That's what my mother tells us. But he never got to use his gun because they took him away while he was having dinner one night with the family. My mother is always agitated at dinnertime because she remembers how they took her father away. She was only ten. She is also sad because she misses my brother most at dinnertime, when 'we should all be together, not spread all over the country'. She usually eats her supper by herself after we have all finished, and she stares at the weeping willow in front of our kitchen window. Sometimes she gets annoyed at the

willow for being so sad and weepy and says she will cut it down one of these days.

Before I could even talk I scribbled and drew and painted on all the white surfaces around me. I couldn't stand plain white surfaces. I want to be a painter more than anything and to fill white surfaces with my own ideas. Gigi says if I'm serious about my art I'll have to study at the art school in Bucharest after high school. But I don't know about that. Our city, Mangalia, is older than Bucharest and was founded by the Ancient Greeks. They gave the sea the name it has today: *Pontus Euxinus*, the Black Sea. They left two stone columns on the beach as marks of their passage. The Greek stone columns are the only white surfaces I respect and that I have never scribbled on. The idea of living away from the seashore doesn't seem terribly appealing to me. I don't know where I would find all my ideas for paintings.

The Romanian painters of the Balchik school in the days of Queen Marie came to the sea in the twenties and thirties in order to soak up the light and the blues of these shores and then spill all that back in oils and watercolours. In the living room, above the cupboard with the pictures of our family, we have a painting by one of the Balchik artists: a corner of the shore, a golden beach shaped like a horseshoe, a bluish-mauve splash of water and sky, white and yellowish houses layered on a green hilly area. Romanians including my father whisper nostalgically about that inter-war period and that part of our shoreline, while in the same breath they curse the Bulgarians who 'stole it from us' and the Russians who facilitated the 'theft'. I care about the blues and yellows in the painting much more than about the politics and I try to imagine the delicate cameo-like Queen Marie in one of her lacy dresses walking along the horseshoe beach flooded in light. She wanted her heart to be buried in Balchik when she died and indeed it was placed in the Stella Maris Chapel in a castle in her

beloved holiday town. In 1940 the heart was moved to a castle in Northern Transylvania. People say that in the sixties the Communists broke its case with a crowbar and stole the heart from the Transylvanian castle that is said to have also belonged to Count Dracula. Nobody knows where the heart of Queen Marie of Romania is now. I imagine it in a golden box inside one of the ochre-coloured houses in our painting of the Balchik shore.

On some days I imagine people as fish. Today I dreamed of my brother like a fish dressed in a tuxedo and with his tiny, sad face the way it was on the day he and Aunt Raluca took the train back to Bucharest many summers ago: his face was stuck to the carriage window and his lips were glued to the glass like the mouth of a fish inside a fishbowl. He was crying and waving at me from inside the compartment. I thought of a painting of just one rainbow-coloured fish with human eyes and long eyelashes like a girl, rocking in a lacy cradle in the middle of the emerald sea, surrounded by orange corals, algae and shells.

I draw only geometrical flowers and shells, because that's what we did in school for a whole year in art class. Then the following year, when we moved to a higher class, we had to draw our leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, from a model the teacher gave us. She said he should be our highest inspiration. Or the map of our country with the leader in the centre, like the heart of our country. *Like our leader was the beating heart of our country*, the teacher repeated. I didn't want to draw the leader or the map of our country, so I drew lots of geometrical coloured flowers and said I drew them in honour of the leader, because I wasn't yet good enough to attempt to draw the leader. My father laughed so hard when I told him that, and said I was cunning like a ferret. My mother said we would all get in trouble one day if we joked about things like that.

I want to make my first real painting today on the beach at dusk. I go first to Gigi's house on the other side of town.

I want to tell him that tonight I will finally paint the images in my head. I take short cuts I know through people's gardens, stop to pick green grapes from the miniature vineyards in that part of town, and a handful of plums from somebody else's tiny orchard. Marița, the Gypsy woman who used to tell me stories about Turkish princesses when I was little, happens to be walking by and she winks at me and tells me, laughing, not to get up to any mischief. I reach the bazaar, where men with boxy hats and women in skirts like overlapping rainbows sell sesame desserts, the Turkish drink made of barley called *braga*, wooden spoons and pumpkin seeds, round pottery with traditional motifs, colourful porcelain birds which when filled with water sing like real birds, seashell jewellery, lacquered seashells and Turkish *lokum*. I steal a couple of *lokum* pieces on my way through the bazaar and keep running with my mouth full.

I get to the back alleys where there is no pavement, just red beaten earth and thistles. I hurry straight to Gigi's yellowish house with its patch of corn, the three sunflowers and its big apricot tree in the front. Gigi is sitting on the steps eating tiny fried fish, *guvizi*, that are tied on a string. His father, in his white and navy uniform, is standing on the front porch smoking his pipe. Through the open door I see Gigi's mother at the dining-room table in the middle of their tiny house, drawing something and eating pumpkin seeds. She is a geography teacher and can draw the most beautiful maps of different countries, just from memory. I make a sign to Gigi to get up because I have to talk to him. I want to tell him in secret of my plan to paint on the beach this afternoon. His father winks at me and blows the smoke in my direction. His mother lifts her head from her papers and waves. Gigi smells of fried *guvizi* and algae; his tangled red hair is shining in the sun.

'Gigi, I'm going to the beach this afternoon,' I say quickly. 'I'm going to paint something, an idea I had today

... I want you to meet me there after I do it. I want you to be the first one to see my painting.'

'Finally, here is my artist siren. Finally she's got her inspiration,' he says, smiling. 'Can't I come and watch you paint?'

'No, no, you can't. You know that I don't like anyone to watch me paint, or I won't ever paint anything ... ever again.' My voice is raised and I feel my face flush.

'I'm not just anyone, you know,' he says, ignoring my flare-up. 'Don't worry. You know I'm just kidding. By what time will Miss Michelangelo be done with her masterpiece?' He grins and swallows another silver *guvid* whole from the whitish string.

'Come at sunset, you know, just a little before it gets dark,' I say and start running in the direction of my house.

I want everything to be perfect. I want my real painting career to start today, this afternoon at dusk. I decide I've had enough of the geometrical flowers and shapes! It's time I started painting the images in my head, even if they are weird. I take the same route home and even pass by all the traders I teased and stole from only a little while ago, that's how wicked I feel. They all think I'm crazy anyway and once I heard Lili, the one who sells lacquered seashell jewellery and shells, tell another woman in the bazaar that I was 'not right in the head' and generally not normal, what with the smaller breast and arm and 'all that'. I didn't know what 'all that' meant, what else was wrong with me. When I told my father what Lili had said, he yelled that he was going to wring the woman's neck like a chicken, and my mother said it was a very good example to give to his child, to be so violent. 'Don't we already have enough tragedies in our family?' she asked. My father said: 'What tragedies?' Why was she always exaggerating about the tragedies in our family? he wondered. My mother should just go and stare at her weeping willow for a while, he concluded. My

parents always argue and wound each other like that. It's like living on a battlefield all the time.

I arrive at my house panting, sneak in through the back door and try to get to the pantry unseen and unheard, to fetch the easel that my father bought me when I turned fourteen. I tiptoe like a thief through the room that serves both as living room and dining room, and I see my mother with her back turned sitting at the sewing machine in the little sitting room next door. I take a quick look at the painting of the Balchik shore, the blues mixed in with whites and yellows, the light in the painting. It should have been me who painted that.

A seagull shrieks in its rushed flight towards the beach, and when I get to the kitchen it is all flooded with afternoon light, like under orange honey. I open the door to the pantry and see my easel in a corner, behind the huge jars of pickled cabbage and bottles of Turkish *braga*, dusty and covered in spiders' webs. The easel still has the first white sheet of paper on it from the time my father prepared it for me, thinking I would paint something right away. But I didn't want to, because my head was filled with severe geometrical flowers.

Instead of coming out through the house with the easel and paints, I decide to jump out through the pantry window, which gives on to the side of the house facing the beach. I open the window and pick up the easel, breathing in all the dust, and put it outside with a thump, after which I jump too. I feel I am an adventurer, a painter like Van Gogh or Gauguin, about whom I had read in the art history book that I found in the art classroom. The art history teacher told us these were unstable, bourgeois reactionary artists, that we shouldn't waste our time looking at their pornographic art. I didn't understand why paintings of sunflowers in bloom and crooked chairs were reactionary and pornographic. I don't want to cut my ear off or abuse my body like Van Gogh did, but I think that sometimes

great artists have some infirmity. I have uneven arms and breasts. Maybe it's a sign I'm meant to be an artist.

I race on to the warm sand, take off my sandals and carry my easel in my arms like a baby. There are only a few families left on the beach, it's still early in the season and the loud Bucharest tourists haven't started their holidays yet. A little girl with black hair falling in waves is running around in circles and throwing herself on the sand with peals of laughter. I set up my easel at the edge of the beach, next to the dunes which are covered in thistles and prickly plants, so I have the full view of the sea and also of the black-haired girl running in circles. I decide I'll model the fish face after the girl; it will be a wild, fantastical painting, something to really scare my mother and make her go on about how I am crazy like the people on my father's side.

I set all my tempera tubes on the edge of the easel, take the little brown porcelain cup I stole from the kitchen and pour some water from my thermos into it. My heart is beating wildly, like when I am about to jump into the sea and I know Gigi is going to push me. I stick my brush into the water and then into the colour green. I want to start with green, the green seawater deep down where Gigi and I meet after we have both dived in. The girl is shrieking and laughing and running in circles on the sand, and the sea is turning violet the way it always does at sunset, on calm bright days. Only it's a different violet every day. Today it is violet with dark and bright streaks. Something in the way the sun hits the little girl's dark waves of hair produces a short circuit in my brain. I have been in a similar scene before. It was long ago, and my brother Valentin was here too. His dark hair, which used to be long like that of a girl, was touched by the afternoon sun. My mother and Aunt Raluca were both on the beach with us and my mother held Valentin up in the air like a trophy. She had tears running down her face. Raluca also had tears on her face. Only

Valentin was laughing and squealing joyously. I don't know what I was doing. I don't see myself in this memory though I know I was there. I want to make the face of the fish like a cross between this girl's face and that of Valentin.

I paint the sea from the inside and my hand is moving freely over the page, as if it had a mind of its own, filling the white with shades of green, watery, translucent. For the first time I use both my hands to paint the sea, because my hands are different in size, and somehow I get a different effect from each of them. I discover one advantage of having a birth defect. But when I am about to start working on the face of the fish I had been imagining all day, I see instead the face of the leader as it looked on the pictures that our art teacher always made us use as a model during our art classes. The image is like a fly that keeps buzzing around me and I can't get rid of it; it keeps coming back, again and again. I see the rosy skin on the face of the leader, like that of a pig, pink and smooth, like the skin of pigs I've seen in the countryside, in the peasants' yards in the Danube town where my mother's family comes from. The blue eyes, of a blue so fake that you wonder what the artist who made those portraits was trying to convey. Then the lips curl into a perfect smile, the grey hair is shaped in perfect waves, the pig skin and the fake blue eyes. Furiously I start painting my fish in all the colours that are *not* the colours of the portrait of the leader: dark red and orange and green, no pastels, no curls and no waves. But somehow I can't get away from the expression of the leader staring at me against the pink background of the portrait, pig-rosy skin against pig-rosy background. I make my fish of triangles and corners and semicircles, like the geometrical flowers I used to draw. I can't get away from them either. I make my fish with red eyes, and an angular face and long black eyelashes over the red eyes, a silvery body, long and pointy. I take quick turns with each hand, indulging in the eerie asymmetry of the portrait. No smile

on the face of the fish, just bloody eyes and curly eyelashes. I paint corals and algae and other small grey fish swimming around the fantastical fish.

The girl running in circles has left the beach and I can't remember her face. The beach is empty and I have a hollow feeling in my heart. A feeling like the sound of the inside of a shell; people are fooled into thinking they hear the sea when they put a shell to their ear, but it's just air going through the cavities of the shell, nothing else. The sea looks uselessly beautiful in the sunset, just before dark. My fish looks like a heartless shell, like the empty box from where Queen Marie's heart was stolen. Communists are thieves of hearts and of imagination.

'Have you been hallucinating?' Gigi touches my shoulder gently and buries his face in my hair.

I push him away. 'Don't laugh at it, I know it's awful!' I say, resigned.

He says it's not at all awful. 'In fact, it's quite spectacular,' he says, 'but why did you make the fish look like Ceaușescu?' he asks. 'The lips, the smile, can't you see, it's like his smile? Is he your highest inspiration?' Gigi says, quoting my former teacher. He touches the curly lips, which indeed came out curly. I tried to make no curls, no smiles, no waves, just angles and triangles. Somehow the lips still came out curly just like in the generic smile of the leader's portrait. I take Gigi's hand, put the brush between his fingers and move his hand into black paint, then make him move it over the mouth of the fish, round and round with black paint. A big hole, an endless scream! A fish screaming a deep, mute scream from a black mouth in the middle of the green waters at the bottom of the sea!

I start laughing so hard that I can't keep my balance with Gigi leaning on me as I pull his hand and make him paint the black circle of the fish's mouth. We both fall in the sand, the easel collapsing on top of us. The painting falls face down and when I pick it up there is sand stuck on to

the entire page. I want to crumple the wretched painting, to tear it up and destroy it on this day that was supposed to be so special. But Gigi stops me, holds me by both wrists until I calm down and tells me to keep the painting, it will be funny to look at it when I am older and a famous artist.

The waves are making delicate splashes against the shore. The sea usually becomes a bit restless at sunset, before it quiets down for the night. The sun is a dark red ball before it goes down and its last reflections turn into wild purples shimmering one more time over the rippling surface of the water, before the waves greedily swallow them in a few hungry gulps. I am slowly passing my hand over the painting, my right hand, the smaller one, which feels just the right size as it rests over the grainy paper with the fantastical fish and its black silent scream.

The Storm before Carnival Nights

FOR TWO AND a half months in the summer, at the height of the tourist season, most of the rooms in our house are rented out to people from Bucharest who spend their holidays at the beach and want to experience a little bit of rural life, with a back yard and vines hanging above their heads. My mother and Aunt Tudorița cook for them from morning till night because that's the deal, they all get a room and two meals a day. They come in from the beach after many hours of baking in the sun, red like lobsters, dragging their tents and lilos, speaking loudly as if somebody among them is deaf, and their children always whining and throwing themselves down on the cement in our back yard in a temper tantrum. They sit at the tables laid out in the yard and ask my mother: 'What good things have you prepared for us today, Mrs Rodica?' And my mother promptly answers: 'It's your favourite today, Mrs Ramona: stuffed peppers and cabbage salad,' or: 'Today I made your special dish, Mr Dinu: fried carp, baked potatoes and plum cake.' My mother always cooks everybody's favourites except mine.

My parents and I crowd into the one room at the back where it's hotter and stuffier, because the tourists are all lodged in the front rooms that look out on the sea. I spend a lot of the day at Gigi's house. His family don't rent out their house, mostly because none of the Bucharest tourists

want to live so far away from the beach and also because his mother hates cooking and doesn't like having strangers in the house all the time. My mother is so busy from morning till night that she doesn't have a moment to nag me the way she usually does. Just once in a while she tells me not to spend all day long 'with that Turk of yours' and not to 'get into trouble like you always do, shaming your parents', after which she goes back to peeling endives or skinning a chicken. Food is harder to find every year, so my mother and Tudorița now stand in line from five in the morning to get the food for the tourists' meals at the *alimentara*, the grocery store in the centre, or in the market; they even get chickens from the Turks in Gigi's neighbourhood. And luckily, around here there is always fish. So the Bucharest crowds come to the seashore hoping to eat better and then to go back as dark from the sun as the darkest Gypsies, with strings of seashells around their necks that they buy from Lili, the Turkish woman who sells jewellery in the bazaar.

My mother hates the work she does during the rest of the year so much that she is happier spending her summers cooking from morning till night for the spoiled Bucharest people. At least she is freer, she says, and in her own house rather than cooped up in that God-awful office at the school. And we earn a lot of money from the tourists, which my mother says is 'for a hard day'. I also think she is happy to avoid the suppertimes with us, with the sad weeping willow waving its lanky braids in front of our window and her dwelling on how her father was picked up by the Communists from the dinner table and then killed in prison. She works in the same high school where Gigi's mother teaches geography, only in the school director's office, and she is responsible for the professional development of the teachers. She keeps files of their activities and teaching hours, and occasionally holds meetings in which she has to talk to them about the newest Party guidelines, or she has

to organize and keep track of their hours of civic duties, such as doing volunteer work that is in fact obligatory unpaid work for the cooperatives or factories in the surrounding area.

Mama wanted to be a concert pianist like her mother had been before the war. We have a picture of my grandmother standing in front of a grand piano, wearing a sumptuous black taffeta evening gown, a long string of pearls and an orchid in her hair. She is looking slightly sideways with almost a smile, her right hand touching the piano and her left hand casually brushing the string of pearls. Next to this picture on the lacquered pine cupboard in the dining room, because everything in our house is lacquered, there is the only picture we have of my grandfather, the one who was taken away and tortured to death because he had said 'that'll be the day' and resisted the nationalization of his land. He was a landowner before the war, in the region of Tulcea, near the Danube Delta, and loved his land more than anything. Even more than his children, they say. He is known to have once said: 'Your children come from your own loins, but land comes from God's own loins.' In this picture he is standing on his land, which stretched for acres and acres, in front of a crooked bare tree in the middle of an empty field, with a fedora on his head, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and breeches. He has a dark bushy moustache and a fierce look in his eyes. My mother always says he used to work his land right next to his peasants, from sunrise to sunset every day, and that's how much he loved his land, before 'it was all over for him'. That's the highest form of criticism that my mother ever dares to utter of the Communists who tortured and killed him the way they did lots of other landowners after 1945. She says it's best to keep your mouth shut, times have changed and there is nothing you can do about it but try to survive the best you can. My mother also says that with all the people we have in our

house every summer, she wouldn't be surprised if our house was bugged, and she always says it in almost inaudible whispers, moving her hands in pantomime fashion to explain.

Once when I was looking for an old bathing suit early one morning before going to the beach to meet Gigi, I caught my mother touching the keys of the old piano hidden in the basement as if they were living creatures and one long tear on the side of her nose was hanging there ready to fall. I tiptoed out because I did not want her to know that I had seen her in that melancholy state. Then she would have started screaming at me, that didn't I have anything better to do with my time than sneak into the basement. That day I dived and swam in my underwear and Gigi said I should wear that all the time. I didn't tell him about my mother stroking the piano keys and crying in the basement with a huge tear at the tip of her nose, mostly because then every time I complained about how mean my mother was with me, Gigi would have told me to give her a break, it was life that had made her that way, she'd had a hard life and she was bitter, that was all.

When we are bored in the summer, Gigi and I go to the market place in bare feet, dressed in old and raggedy clothes, and pretend we are beggars. We cross ourselves over and over again, saying: '*Doamne ajută, Doamne ajută, dați-ne și noua ceva să mîncăm*', God bless, God bless, please give us something to eat. The tourists who don't know us give us money when they see us looking so sad and poor, but the women in the market shake their fingers at us threateningly. We sometimes stop and pretend we want to buy *lokum*, and we put some in our mouths and run away. I hear the women scream at me that they'll tell my mother what a thief I am. They say: 'Just look at her, will you? That's Sandu and Rodica's daughter: the worst-behaved child in the whole town. She's a bad influence on that nice Turkish boy, too.'

We stop by Marița's corner and try to attract tourists to buy her stuff by buying some ourselves with the money we got from begging. Marița and her daughter Gabi sell everything: beach balls with coloured stripes, sesame sweets and corn on the cob, little coloured pretend-watches for girls, porcelain singing birds, roasted sunflower seeds, pumice stone for women's feet. When I was little Marița would tell me the story of the Turkish princess Esma, daughter of Sultan Selim II, who had the mosque in our town built in 1525 as a sign of gratitude to Allah for having secured her safe passage to this faraway part of the world.

Next week the preparations will begin for Zilele Marinei, the Navy celebrations, when all the ships and boats in the port line up on the horizon with strings of lights hanging from their masts and let off fireworks. That's when Luca takes out his big ship and lights it all up for people to see and admire from the shore. The band plays every night on the pier with the lighthouse, and the whole *faleza*, the high beach walk, looks like a fairy tale, with lights and rows of fragrant petunias. The Bucharest women wear their gauzy dresses made from *panza topita*, burnt cotton, as they stroll on the arms of their husbands or boyfriends up and down the *faleza*. Gigi and I want to go to the discotheque at the big Siemens Hotel where all the foreign tourists stay. I don't want to tell my mother I'm going to the discotheque because she'll never let me, and she'll scream for a whole week about how I'll get into trouble for life and never be admitted to the university if I go to a place filled with foreigners. We are not allowed to speak to foreigners because the Party is afraid that if we did, we might find out that in other countries there is more freedom than in ours and we might be tempted to run away. As if we didn't know that already. My father, who has to work very late every night checking all the restaurants in town because he is the epidemiologist responsible for local hygiene and sanitation, doesn't care where I go, and tells my mother to take a

break from her howling; at least for a few days during the Navy holidays it would be nice to have some peace in the house.

Since my creepy experience with the fish painting at the beginning of the summer, Gigi and I have been together almost every single minute of the day, running around town and the bazaar, hanging out near the casino to listen to the orchestra and thinking up all sorts of new pranks that are getting the women traders red with anger. We make fun of the Bucharest tourists in their fancy clothes and we go around the market stealing little objects. During the day we get better at holding our breath under water. Sometimes we take the mini train that goes to all the modern resorts along the shore, the ones with the names of the planets, Venus and Saturn, Neptune and Jupiter, and we get on and off the train without paying, jumping out into the street with a shriek when we see the ticket collector get on. I haven't had any more painting ideas. It's as if a hole like the black mouth of my fantastical fish had installed itself inside my head. One day I told Gigi that I wanted to become a sanitation and hygiene expert like my father and forget about being an artist. 'It's too hard being an artist in our country,' I said. 'Better to do something practical, with no political implications.' He looked at me mockingly, crossed himself like the superstitious Christians in town and said in a plaintive voice: '*Doamne fereste*', God help us! That's all he said. Maybe the Navy celebrations next week, which Gigi and I like to call the 'carnival nights', will give me new painting ideas. I'm thinking of a painting that captures light in the middle of the night, and the special blackness of the sea under the moon.

Gigi's father is busy from morning till night on his ship, preparing for the Navy days. He asks his friend Mr Bekta, who is also Turkish, and who pilots the tourist ship that goes out to sea and up to the Danube Delta on cruises, to show us his ship. Luca cannot take us on the ship that he

pilots as it's a big cargo vessel. There are always two guards with rifles standing on the pier in front of it, when it's anchored in the port. But Mr Bekta is happy to show us the cruise ship and even lets us wander around on board. We take advantage of all the activity in preparation for the next cruise to roam all over the ship and explore its most secret nooks and crannies, the tiny spaces where the sailors sleep during the voyage all the way to the old city of Babadag and into the Delta, the pilot's cabin with its important logbooks, the large control panel with illuminated buttons, the dining room with the long wooden table in the middle where the crew eat together when they are at sea. Gigi is happiest when he is on a ship, imagining himself in his father's shoes, giving orders to the sailors, operating the complicated piloting system, wearing the white and navy uniform with the white cap.

When his father takes the fishing boat out of the port, we go back to our diving exercises and our ritual of having a fight so he can push me into the water. We have got so good at swimming that now we can cover the two kilometres to the shore in less than half an hour, when the sea is smooth and clear like today. We get to the shore slightly tired and I throw myself on to the sand right where the waves break. The mushy, warm surface of sand under my back feels comforting after the strain of swimming two kilometres in thirty minutes. Gigi runs over to the bushes at the edge of the beach, to the secret place where we always hide our clothes before we go into the water. As I look at Gigi walking towards me against the white columns, and admire his taut and freckled body, I notice the unusually dark clouds that are gathering behind him from the west. A storm on the eve of the Navy holidays is the last thing we want, it will ruin everything. We haven't had a storm for the Navy celebrations since I was ten and my mother locked all the outside doors and hid the keys, for fear I would run to the beach to watch.

‘Look at those clouds, Gigi. Do you think we’ll have a storm?’ I ask, hoping he will say they are cumulus, good weather clouds.

He doesn’t even turn to look. ‘I know, I saw that. There is a big storm coming. No Navy days for us this year,’ he says, resigned.

‘No, no, no, there will be no storm, stop calling for bad things and jinxing the weather,’ I yell childishly, as I pull on the Levi’s that Gigi’s father got for me from Yafsin, an Arab man in town, who got them from another Arab man in the port of Constanța. I put on my burnt-cotton white shirt and throw the wet bathing suit at him in annoyance at his bad weather warning. In one move he turns fully towards me, trying to grab me, but I slip away and run off along the beach. Gigi is a better swimmer but I can run faster; that’s one thing I do better than him. And painting, if I ever paint again! I run in the direction of the lighthouse at the end of the pier and feel light like a seagull at sunrise emerging from the waves. I could run for ever and be chased by Gigi. I laugh and run. The beam from the lighthouse is just beginning to flicker, showing the ships at sea the way to the port; dusk is falling and laying its thin greyish veils all over the water. I slow down because of the laughter and Gigi catches up with me, grabs me and we both fall into the delicate foam where the waves crash against the sand.

Now the sky is black and the waves are getting bigger. We start to run up the spiral stone steps that lead from the beach to the *faleza* and the street, and I already feel large, heavy drops of rain falling quicker and denser by the second. Gigi takes my hand and we run to find shelter in the hallway of the hotel up the street, the Scala Hotel, at the opposite end from the villas where the Party leaders take their holidays. We reach the awning of the hotel and watch the storm in fascination the way we have done so many times, except that now I’m a little less fascinated than usual because the first day of the Navy holiday will be

spoiled. The waves are getting higher and the sea has changed to its angry dark green, with streaks of glassy, lighter green where the water is churning its insides before a big wave rises again. From where we are, I see a blonde woman who must be a foreign tourist from a Nordic country, because nobody in our town is so blonde, running on the sand like she is going to a party, and enter the sea happily, as if it was a sunny day with no waves. Silently I point her out to Gigi.

‘Look at that crazy woman, what is she thinking? Has she had enough of life?’ Gigi says to me, laughing. The *salvamar*, the lifeguard, has tied up his boat on the shore quite a while ago and is whistling and making desperate signs to her to come back. The black flag forbidding swimming is whipping in the wind, which has become quite wild. At first the woman seems to be handling the waves quite well, and we think she’s just going to stay near the shore playing in the water. The rain is pouring vengefully and driving in sideways gusts to where we shelter under the hotel awning. I like to play in the waves with Gigi when there is no rain and thunder, but no native would ever go swimming in this kind of weather. We know better. We know how cruel and irrepressible our sea can be in a storm like this one. No wonder the Greeks called it the Black Sea, the Inhospitable Sea, furious, dark and voraciously hungry.

‘Gigi, she’s going to die, we have to do something,’ I say, grabbing Gigi’s hand.

I feel Gigi’s pride swell up inside him as he thrusts out his freckled chest. Other tourists are gathering at the hotel door to watch the Nordic woman drown herself in the churning waters.

‘I’ll go,’ Gigi says, releasing my hand, and he starts in the direction of the beach. I hold him back and say: ‘I’m coming with you. I’m just as good a swimmer, you know.’

At first Gigi tries to stop me but he knows he can’t. He knows there is no stopping me when I set my mind to

something. We run back to the beach holding hands. The rain is hitting us mercilessly, the waves are rising higher and one of them pushes the woman under. We can't see her any longer. Then her head comes out again for seconds at a time. We fly down the stone steps, take a short cut through the thistles and the bushes, and find ourselves on the wet sand, the wind hitting us full force in our faces. The *salvamar* is still standing and waving on the beach. It's a boy in town we know, whose father works on Luca's ship. We ask him to give us the two life jackets he has. He knows we are better swimmers than he is. At first he hesitates, while the rain whips us with fury and the woman's head bobs between the waves like a miniature yellow buoy. We put on the two heavy life jackets and rush to the water. This is my first big adventure ever. I see us two: Gigi and me, holding hands, as wet as we'll ever be, rushing into the merciless waves, two small silhouettes against foamy, dark green waters, and a sky all in dark oils, thick, impenetrable.

We move through the dark green oils of the sea, violent waves on top of violent waves, and the sand is running quickly from under our feet, and we are just two specks of flesh in an immensity of foaming green. Gigi reaches the woman first and pulls her above the water, trying to make her keep her head up. She seems unconscious, and her head is bobbing back and forth. Then Gigi is hit on the head by an enormous wave. I manage to get to him; he has come back to the surface but he looks dizzy and is making signs to me to help him hold the woman. We both grab her and do our best to keep her head above the water, by wrapping her arms around our necks. Lightning slices across the black skies and Gigi and I know how dangerous this is, that we could be struck any moment and turned to ashes right in the middle of the roaring sea. Another huge wave hits us from the back, wickedly, mercilessly. I am sucked into it, shoved against the bottom with its scratchy surface, then