

SUZĂNICA TĂNASE

A THOUSAND
DIVIDED
IMPRESSIONS

A Novel

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“Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.”

Joan Didion

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | PROLOGUE: I WILL GROW UP ONE DAY |
| 19 | I. THE DIARY |
| 36 | II. WHEN ALL THE ROADS GO AHEAD |
| 52 | III. BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY |
| 66 | IV. A BEGINNING |
| 84 | V. SHADOWS ARE SHADY |
| 102 | VI. LOST |
| 113 | VII. RETRIEVAL |
| 128 | VIII. SOME DOORS NEVER OPEN AGAIN |
| 144 | IX. I SURPRISE MYSELF |
| 162 | X. BAD NEWS FINDS THE SHORTEST WAY TO REACH YOU |
| 173 | XI. THE LAST JOURNEY |

PROLOGUE: I WILL GROW UP ONE DAY

I can hear them again.

They're everywhere, loud, cheerful, frightened. Voices, over and over again.

Not all of them seem to be my age, although many are of the same height, with the same gaze, sometimes fearful, sometimes begging. All lost in a desperate search to find a place, to impose themselves, to be important.

The same screams to get someone hear them, continuous pushing around for a touch, a hug, an extra word.

There are few educators, but they're the focus here. We all look for their attention, their gaze, sometimes their slap on the wrist. We all want the same thing. To be important. To outstand among so many others.

I've been here for a few days, and though I don't know why I was brought here, I get that I have to survive somehow.

From the very beginning I was told that I was good-looking, I was told I was shy, they led me to believe I was cherished to some extent, and this sometimes makes me feel good. Just sometimes.

Otherwise, I keep hiding.

It's cold and dark here, but only here can I rediscover myself with my thoughts. I can be myself only here. I, the shy one, the frightened one, the kid without a way. Just me.

From here, from the basement, I can see their scary shadows, I can hear their steps squeaking on the green, slippery linoleum. Sometimes just a scream is enough to make me jump and wish to hide more deeply into the darkness of the cellar.

I'm not afraid of the mice or the insects that sometimes tickle my bare feet. I'm afraid of them. I'm afraid of them all.

I've come here every day since they first brought me to this place. Nobody has discovered me yet.

I don't want things to change. This place is the only one that belongs to me. It's mine, protected from their eyes.

Here, I've got my world. I can dream in the shade, create clear images as before, using only my mind and my inner eyes, I can hope they'll come to take me home.

Here, I can stop pretending, I can think of everything at will. Here I'm safe.

I can hear again the pitter-patter of the steps on the wide stairs of the childcare facility. They'll call me soon and soon they'll start looking for me. The previous time I was the last who got to the table and I was hit so hard over my face that I felt hot tears sliding along my chin. I know they're gonna punish me again. It's a fact you need to get used to here.

However, I don't want to leave yet, darkness doesn't scare me. Actually, I'd like to stay here forever, and no one will remember me. I want them suffer the way I suffer. I want them be judged the way I'm judged.

One day everything will change...

"Lorian!"

One day I'll have the courage to come to light.

"Lorian! Where are you?"

One day I'll be strong.

"Get out of your hiding right now!"

One day I'll show 'em... One day I won't be a six-year old kid any longer.

Sunday afternoon. Still sunny.

Somewhere in the air, one can hear the soft sound of the piano and the clinker of porcelain dishes.

Through half-open window, Hanna feels the breath of the autumn wind and the slow rustle of the leaves still stubbornly held by branches of maple trees. With a smile, she's humming in her mind Keith Jarett's song.

How long has it been since she's lying there, eyes lost in a forgotten past, only known to her? Her legs had been numb for some time, but she knew that any movement would give her reason to ask for help, and she still didn't want to be disturbed. Not then. She felt good then. She felt lost, but she still felt good.

She got the letter two weeks before, with the photograph that messed her up, silencing her, and she didn't know how to reply. Where to start? But should she do it?

Maybe the last question was the most disturbing for her. After so many years, why now, why, when she tried so hard to forget everything? To forget him.

And now that past came back; that past that nobody knew, not even her daughter. Nobody. That past she wanted buried and that was only hers.

At the sight of the letter, the photograph and the name written in small and sloping letters, she realized that everything she tried all those years failed. She didn't forget anything.

She didn't forget him, as she desperately tried to lie to herself, and those feelings she considered memories of a tragic story, were alive, breathing the same air as hers.

And now, after almost sixty years, the feelings had that long forgotten intensity once again.

Sixty years. An eternity. A man's lifespan. A war, a marriage, a family, a fulfilled career, grandchildren, suffering, joy...

Where to start? And should she do it?

"Grandma, are you awake? Grandma," Hanna heard the familiar voice.

They saved her, as usual. Her grandchildren were there to awaken her from the remorse of the past. She'll have time to come back to the reality of those very hard times. So sweet and yet so bitter.

"Grandma, tell us that story again, please..." the three grandchildren's voices echoed again.

Vlad, the eldest child in the house, the first love of the family, just started the fourth grade, and out of boredom, he kept buzzing around his sisters. Amelia was the youngest one, the much-wanted little girl. She always asked for a story and because she promised to be nice during the meal, Hanna had to obey. That was quite rare, because Amelia used to act like a rubber ball trapped in a golden-haired little girl's body. As she was lying on the couch, Hanna could see her legs wearing polka dot socks and her knees covered in green ink. She used to pick the story, always the same, with an atypical princess who cuts her hair, turns into a boy, and successfully faces any danger. She loved brave female characters, those who won the king's love through cleverness and derring-do. Sleeping Beauty, Snow-White weren't stories for Amelia. For Clara yes, but not for Amelia's taste.

And then there was Clara. That good, quiet, shy child, belonging to everyone and to no one at the same time. That child who didn't have enough time to feel the sweetness of cuddling, for the stormy Amelia came into being after a difficult pregnancy and many sleepless nights. Clara, however, didn't seem to suffer because of the little injustice of her destiny; on the contrary, as an already experienced mother, she left her brother and her younger sister to be her voices, and she was pleased with their joy.

Of all the grandchildren, she identified herself the most with Amelia. Looking behind, Hanna knew infinite generations

of children, children now having children, and their children had children in their turn. She didn't live so many days in her life as the number of young people she had her hands on. But one of them touched her, one in particular.

Hanna shook her head, lifted the cushion against which she leaned, and began the story quietly. She knew countless stories, and she knew them as she knew her evening prayers without thinking of them, without searching for words. Even voices, change of tonality came naturally. They were all there, trapped in her mind, organized on shelves, according to age, preferably, also, according to the lesson that had to be learned at the end of the story. An entire architecture of stories. And now, another story, different from everything memorized, was about to come out. Her own story.

Hanna used to visit her daughter several times a week and, under the pretext of not letting herself carried away by sneaky loneliness, she developed a habit of cooking for the family and telling stories to her grandchildren. In fact, she never felt alone; not the way people around her believed. She always loved evenings lit only by a diffused lamp in the corner of the room, the smell of a candlestick with lavender flavor burning on the windowsill and the peace around her, that heavenly peace that inspired safety to her.

After her husband's death and her only surviving daughter's ruined marriage, Hanna learned to enjoy the silence once again in her life. That silence fallen like a smoky curtain over the remnants of a show played to exhaustion. She just stopped waking up early in the morning thinking of making breakfast and she didn't care that much about everyday matters. She was more apathetic, or, as she often liked saying, "she was going through another stage."

She was happy many times, fewer times than she wanted, but she lived many rewarding moments, sometimes tiring sweet, tiring loud and tiring frequent. Now, after many years of being

alone, she sometimes felt guilty about this selfish pleasure of making her coffee in the morning, walking barefoot in the narrow balcony, full of hanging flowers, a balcony with a view of the Cișmigiu Park alleys. She was far from everything that once meant her universe, her life. She imagined herself away from the annoying phone, her daughter's inappropriate visits, away from the same common questions: "How do you feel?", "What did you eat?", "Did you take your medicine?", those pressing questions that reminded her that her life journey had somewhere, in a not too distant future, its end.

Maybe that's why she decided to visit her daughter three times a week, to have the rest of the days for her. Only for her soul. Then she spent hours in the capital's antiquaries and met her few friends of about her age at the same tea-house in the Roman Square in Bucharest. She sometimes enjoyed a whipped cream cake, away from her daughter's disapproving gaze, who, of course, only wished her well—a healthier, longer life...

But Hanna didn't want a longer life; not even a shorter life; she only wanted as much peace as possible. A life without answers to provide, without worries to share, without feeling her soul tied in thousands of trouble knots. At age eighty-one, Hanna wanted what every flower in a garden might want. Lots of sunshine, a little rain and the freedom to rise, as long as she could find a way.

Everything seemed to have settled in her life; these visits, the pleasure of being once again among children willing to listen to her, and have her around, mature harmony, without too many words, between her and Teodora, and her invaluable moments of loneliness. Everything was settled in some kind of calm, like a gentle summer breeze.

Except that letter. A letter in another letter.

The first was more a telegram than a letter. The few words placed on an elegant sheet of paper made her lose balance she built in so many years.

Eyes closed, Hanna saw those lines again, as if she read the letter for the first time:

"Grandpa wanted you to know he loved you. If you want to open a gate to the past, I'd love to listen to you; I'd feel that I fulfilled his last wish. I'm waiting for you..."

That "gate to the past" troubled her, quite horrified her. The lines were signed by Adina Moranu. His granddaughter. The second letter, written by himself, was long and painful.

And the photo... the photo didn't say a thousand words, but it triggered thousands of feelings. Their photo, she, in that simple black dress, with her mother's pearls around her neck, holding a bunch of wild flowers, he, a young man with big, black, curious eyes, his hands deep down in his pockets, and beside him, the others like him, lost among thousands of destinies that were to haunt her in all the post-war years. That were actually still haunting her.

*

She decided to go for a walk on her own, without her grandchildren, and without Teodora, her daughter, who would immediately realize that something was different with her and would trouble her silence.

They used to talk about anything, unlike before, sometimes repeating the same sequence of events, similar to beads in a rosary, just to feel close to each other, not because the events would be relevant anymore. Most often they talked about Teodora and Sebastian's divorce. He was the man who took her daughter away from her. From the beginning, Sebastian didn't inspire confidence to her, and a mother feels everything. But she was silent for many years, trying to trust Teodora's words.

Lawyer, just like her, they seemed to have a great future together, trips abroad, ambitious promises, but everything

changed gradually, almost imperceptibly after Vlad's birth. Suddenly, Sebastian kept missing from home more and more frequently; he had more cases in court, he spent much less time with his family, and Teodora seemed lost in a new world in which she became a mommy. Hanna felt her daughter's true isolation only at that point. Then she saw an impenetrable wall rising between their realities. She knew Teodora wasn't ready yet to admit the failure of her marriage; she wasn't able to look her mother in the eye, and therefore she didn't feel entitled to intervene. Any word of hers would be superfluous, and it would back her away even more, and the alternative was sad and inextricable.

Her life with her daughters' father wasn't like that, but Hanna knew a lot about suffering, secrets, losses, feelings and emotions stuck in heavy trunks of one's life.

Like any mother, Hanna was sure she knew how to give advice to her daughter, but at the same time, she knew the mystery of mankind, people's impulse to choose the lie to the detriment of the truth when they aren't ready to speak out. Didn't she do the same so many times?

Eight years and two more children did Teodora need to admit this lie, eight years to speak out the truth, then to follow another path of life, bearing the seal of failure, alone and divorced.

It wasn't easy for her, and Hanna knew that, going through all emotional stages beside her daughter. They went through other tragedies together before, the loss of a father and a husband, the loss of Natalia, and all these brought them closer, like two Siamese connected by tricky suffering.

Now, after so many years since their death, Hanna became accustomed to life, as it unfolded before her eyes, like a graph, broken too many times, a chart marked in dozens of stages, so different one from the other and sometimes so frightening, that it was difficult for her to believe that she lived them all.

She no longer wanted tumult, noise, or emotion. She lived them all. Now she wanted simple, banal and not complicated things.

But life is never the way we imagine it or the way we want it when we hit the road, and again, you bet, Hanna was once again facing another puzzle, one for which this time she had no answer, one she abandoned so many years ago.

She didn't want to remember anything, and she thought she succeeded, like a man who sees the light after a nightmare, to forget everything. In fact, she tried to conceal everything, somewhere in the depths of her mind, to forcibly forget any feeling, any sensation, anything that came to her since then.

At the time, Hanna was another person. Then, a long time ago, she had a thirst for life, a keen desire to rise, to love, to trust people, to trust a reality that rather reminded of fairy tales fantasy than banal existence of cruel and ruthless life.

Panting, Hanna stopped in front of a maple tree with almost purple leaves, about to build up a real fortress at its roots, once the autumn wind was to get angry and go wild. The maple tree was his, the apple tree was hers.

Why now? Why does the destiny force her relive something she so long wanted to forget? And where did he find her address? Did he know about her life all the time? How did he survive?

"Grandpa wanted you to know he loved you."

What ominous words, written on a sheet of paper! That meant he told everything, he shared his past with someone. It meant he was stronger than her. But she already knew that. She always knew that.

Hanna bent down and picked up a pinecone, which she instinctively smelled, eagerly breathing in the scent of earth and dead nature. On a bench, a few yards away, two lovers smiled at her with the typical attitude of young and fearless guys, who only see the present.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be like that," "It mustn't be only bad," she heard her thoughts. Those youngsters had another chance, they loved each other, they weren't living her days, they didn't go through a war, they didn't even know what a war meant. Not everyone had to suffer.

Although it was early October, summer didn't seem to give way. Hanna smiled, thinking that soon they would celebrate another Christmas together. Christmas was her favorite time of the year, only those several days, cutting the fir tree, decorating it, surprises well-hidden from her grandchildren's curious eyes, the tinkling of their laughter at opening the presents, the supper and the children's dance and poems, well-prepared at school. Those were her moments, she wanted to live there forever; she wanted to stay there forever.

Why would she threaten all this with a ruined, buried and painful past, which would bring nothing but suffering? Why to relive everything? Her life was at the end anyway, and once she was gone, her secrets would go with her. What she lived was just a story, another dream in a life record.

I THE DIARY

Another sugar cube at the noon supplement. Another little mock illusion.

I don't complain, however, none of the guys here expect anything else, but I look at the youngest of us, the ones who have just come, standing, palms stretched out, quietly waiting for their share, then running as far as possible one from the other to enjoy the sweet sugar crystal, sugar that will be bounced around through their hollow jaws and then hidden back into their little fists, as many times as needed to prolong the dessert sensation. At the end, their fingers are sticky and their eyes sweetened with the little fleeting miracle.

Something sweet, and what wouldn't an orphan do for some extra sweets here? Anything. He would rub with their sleeves older guys' shoes, he would give away the chicken chunk in the soup, the shoe laces, the pajamas, anyway insufficient for everybody in the unit. He would do almost anything.

But I don't complain. I still think about the cynicism of the situation from time to time, still with the noon supplement in my pocket and my hand protecting the pocket. I'm cynical too.

I sometimes gave away to the others; I also felt pity. I also expected gratefulness for my giving away; I even asked for it. Moreover, I also let them polish my shoes to get that feeling. I didn't get anything, just felt some burden over my soul seeing

what I was doing, behaving like the others. The conclusion affected me, but I also let it go with the same satisfactory and so banal arguments as the others'. Why should I care?

I got to the infirmary again yesterday, this time not out of my fault. I don't even know how it all happened, nor do I know when I got the broomstick over my face, wounding my eye arc just because I was playing with a baby bird. How stupid!

Everything happened so fast that I didn't get to see the woman well; I didn't manage to even blink. I recognized her much later, when it didn't matter any longer, the eye being bandaged and rage faded. I recognized her by the color of her shoes, serving a heavy-footed lady always ready to chase somebody along corridors of the bedroom, and by the broomstick.

I saw the bird fallen beside a bench, lame, broken from the forced jump it got probably out of the desire to fly. A naive desire, which secretly soothed my soul.

It was so small in my fist, so helpless, with wet and alert eyes, and a little heart pulsing with life. I didn't want to let it go yet, and for a few minutes, my mind carried out crazy plans to hide it, to protect it somehow. I was trying to remember the biology lessons, class I often skipped, to smoke on Fox Hill. It was still a baby and I knew it wouldn't survive. I was desperately gazing at the sad branches of the surrounding trees, at the rustle of the leaves, hoping that someone would call it, someone would miss it, but the birds were singing the same monotonous and neutral song.

Then that smacking noise, deaf pain and purple darkness. Now I wonder what happened to it.

Resigned, I got back to that bench, my eye covered like a solitary pirate's, looking for the baby bird that could be only mine. Abandoned for the second time, I thought then. Just like me, hit, lost, just like me. Just like me.

Now I'm sorry I got scared, and jumped, and got stuck at the moment focusing on my own pain; I feel bad I lost sight of

it at that very moment. Maybe I could hide it, help it, love it, advise it, tell it everything or whatever. But I didn't find it anymore.

I disappointed it or maybe it was all in my head. I was the disappointed one.

I sometimes wonder if my parents were forced to leave me here, to quit me. Or more correctly said, to abandon me. I often lie to myself that there might be circumstances beyond my ability to understand; I imagine, eyes wide open, a mother forced to flee with me on her back, forced to hide me in the middle of the night somewhere, then in the morning, shedding heavy tears on her angelic face, gently leaving me at the locked doors of the Center, waiting for the painful times when the gates would open, and I would be picked up and never returned.

I sometimes live out of illusions gathered in my mind; I sometimes don't let myself tortured by the same tiring thoughts. I know what happened in reality. I know the abandon; I still remember it. I can still see my mother before I fall asleep, not as divine as my heart wanted, but really necessary.

Here, at the Center, we often hear the educators explaining to the younger ones that once they get "older" (hard to understand for me where "young" stops, breaks and gets blurred becoming "old"), they can understand more; they'll have explanations for everything. We all want explanations for the same persistent questions. Why? Why me? Why did it happen to me?

No matter when you get to the Center, at what age, under which circumstances, there's a moment, sometimes just a second, or even years of searching, when we all want to get that explanation, and the explanation isn't enough. Some, however, believe them, they think they're convinced; then they start new searches, never pleased with the answers.

I don't believe anything any longer. I was young and I was old and I still didn't understand anything. Over the years, hatred, frustration, self-pity, out of inability to stop the swirling