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*Now She Dreams Of War
and
Other Stories from Transylvania*

Editura Ink Story
Pucioasa, 2024

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Now She Dreams of War¹

When an individual acts upon his most evil impulses, we call that a crime. But when the deluded masses do the same, we call that war, Rania pondered as she stared out the window. Many sleepless nights molded her thoughts about war, suffering, and compassion.

Six years ago, she was still in Damascus, often sitting by the window during the long blackouts and drinking tea to relieve her hunger. Her brown eyes, marred with terror and disbelief, would follow the Syrian Army's planes on their way to strike the 'enemy' occupying the other side of the city. She used to cross herself and pray that no innocent would be harmed — only the vile terrorists.

It's not the peaceful people's fault that terrorists took over their areas and used them as human shields. May the Lord protect their children. They should be playing and laughing, not living through this awful war, she'd think. But the more those steel eagles roared in the sky and the more mortar shells came from the other side, the less she thought about the innocent. Eventually, she stopped praying for them. Things became simpler to her: The heroes were the soldiers protecting her neighborhood and church, and the villains were those raining bombs on her people.

The problem is and will always be that there is

¹ This story was first published in *Agape Review* on July 29, 2022.

nothing simple about war because it is altogether evil, and evil, though condemnable, is ultimately complex. In war, there is no time to reflect. You just go on. You fight until you drop. And if there is still life in you, you get up and fight some more. Because once you stop, even briefly, you'd inevitably think about the absurdity of it all, and that would be your downfall. It is either you or your enemy.

At seventeen, Rania didn't grasp the moral ramifications of embracing such simplicity. She had little to lose, but she adored what she had: the small apartment she grew up in, her saint of a mother, and the vague memories of a father who passed away when she was only five. His black-ribboned photo; an Orthodox icon of the Virgin Mary and her wide, solemn eyes; and a silver cross rosary adorned the living room's white wall. Her father's long, thin face often reminded her that Syrians could still die of natural causes.

This thought would often come to Rania whenever she sat in the under-furnished living room, listening to the sound of war — a cacophony of bombs, gunshots, and car alarms. The noise often came in waves. The first was usually a strong explosion that shook buildings and set off car alarms. The second was the engine noise of fighter planes followed by machine guns. The third was the piercing sound of the siren. No one could anticipate how many vicious cycles there would be.

Eventually, the fighting around Damascus ceased. Russian weapons proved more potent than all the zeal of the Mujahideen. The terrorists were crushed, and so were the innocent people and children on the other side. Damascus was safe at the cost of Syria's turning altogether into a giant graveyard, where the dead decayed right next to the hopes and dreams of the

living.

The new Western sanctions hit Syria hard, collectively punishing its people: those who supported the government, those who didn't, and those in between. Thus, the four-hour blackouts doubled, then tripled, and then quadrupled. Water followed suit. During the limited supply hours, people had to race to the faucets and fill up anything capable of holding liquid.

No one knew when that misery would ease or end, and Rania's mother couldn't let her now eighteen-year-old daughter perpetually suffer. Despite Rania's protests, she sold the little gold she had, borrowed money from her friends, and bought Rania a Swedish visa. She paid the slimy travel agent eight thousand dollars for a one-month tourist visa and an airplane ticket.

She returned home beaming that day. "It's done. You've got the visa. You shall have a better future, my child," she said and hugged Rania.

Rania could feel her mother's protruding spine. "I don't want to leave without you." Her eyes became wet, then she burst into tears, holding on to her mother like a terrified toddler.

"Shh, my child." Her mother embraced her tighter. "You'll get there, apply for asylum once you set foot in the airport, and when you get it, you'll apply for a family reunion, and I will come to you."

From then on, they frequently wept, and their weeping was desperate and long. In two weeks, they were in the crumbling Damascus Airport, their tears lost in the sea of murmur around them. From a distance, they looked like people, but in reality, they were simply two festering wounds clothed in flesh.

"I love you," Rania's mother said and slipped the silver cross rosary into her daughter's pocket. "Take it.

May it protect you like it protected your father.”

But dad died of cancer! she thought before saying, “I love you, too.”

When Rania boarded the plane, she immediately blocked the memories of her life in Syria. Even the sight of her mother’s tears and the smell of the laurel soap on her skin were now in a dark dungeon somewhere in her subconscious.

Rania couldn’t bring herself to eat. Instead, she told the flight attendant, whose hair was dyed blond, to keep the meal and give her some tea.

“Sure,” said the woman, took a paper cup off the tray, and began pouring.

The burbling noise annoyed Rania, but she still said, “thank you” and began drinking, her eyes fixed on an unusually peaceful sky.

The tea’s strong taste began conjuring up visions of the army’s airplane and the long white trails they left behind. But Rania fought the urge to dwell further, finally managing to disassociate from her former self again, focusing only on the lonely and long itinerary ahead.

She crushed the empty paper cup, then crammed it into the seat pocket in front of her. She put her hand in the side pocket of her worn-out jeans and felt the cross rosary. It was her only companion now.

After transiting through Armenia, Rania was finally in the cold and gray Sweden. She shook as she told the border police that she wanted to apply for asylum. She spent two nights in a police station, and then she was released into the care of a social worker. After that, the process was simple: a couple of interviews to go through and some documents to sign. They took a photo of her against a white background and handed her an ID.

“Valid for two years — humanitarian asylum,” it said.

The migration department authorized her monthly stipend and gave her a small, one-room apartment. “The rent is paid for a year. Once you learn the language and find a job, we will give you a permanent residence permit, and you will be able to apply for citizenship and even for a family reunion,” a broad-shouldered, elderly officer told her and handed her the key with a smile upon his face.

The first period was pleasant. Rania enjoyed steady electricity, water, and heat. With no explosions or sirens, the quiet seemed bizarre to her — almost insidious. Now that she had time to think about those on the other side, despair, guilt, and sorrow rose like the undead from the soil of her subconscious. Panic attacks became nightly visitors. During those awful episodes, she’d collapse in a fetal position on the floor next to her bed, shaking and twitching. Sweat dripped from her forehead onto her eyebrows, then lashes. Her vision would get blurry and her cheeks flushed. The heart palpitations, however, were the worst. Every heartbeat felt like a dagger stabbing the inside of her chest and keeping her awake.

“I’m fine. Everything is great here,” Rania would tell her mother on the phone, then sob.

“Why are you crying then, my angel?”

She’d collect herself and reply, “Because I miss you and wish things were different.”

Her mother’s voice would falter. “I miss you, too. So much. So, so much.” The dignified agony in her voice was tangible despite the distance.

“I love you, mother,” she’d squeak before hanging up.

Now, she was sitting in the waiting room of a

psychiatrist, her eyes fixed on the cloudy, miserable sky. "Rania, the doctor is ready to see you," the receptionist said.

Rania got up, smiled at the lady, and went to the doctor's office, knocking on the door before entering.

"Hello, Rania." He motioned for her to sit on the chair opposite his desk.

"Thank you," she smiled and obliged.

The doctor's thick blonde mane quivered when he bobbed his head. He then smiled too, and the light-colored stubble around his jaw lines became briefly darker. "You're smiling today, Rania. That's a good sign."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I think so." She paused, bit the side of her lower lip, and continued, "I don't know if I feel better. Although I don't panic as often, I still don't sleep well."

"The antidepressants didn't help at all?"

Rania looked into his blue eyes and saw compassion surfacing in them. This made it easier for her to let go. "I still sleep less than three hours a night." Tears overcame her. "I just want some rest, you know."

The doctor half stood up and put the tissue box on her side of the desk.

She took one and patted her eyes gently not to smudge her mascara. "I just need to sleep. It's been two weeks since you put me on antidepressants. They eased my anxiety and panic, but I still can't sleep well."

His voice softened. "Don't worry, Rania. The antidepressants must build up in your system first. It's too early to judge the treatment now. Two weeks aren't really enough. It's a good sign that your anxiety symptoms have eased. For now, I can prescribe you Zopiclone. It's a very effective hypnotic. You can take it for a short period until your other meds work."

Rania felt a little hopeful, optimism coming from within. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Has your social worker transferred you to a psychotherapist?"

"Yes, I'll begin next week. I'll have a session every week," Rania replied.

"That's great. I believe a combination of talking therapy and meds will benefit you greatly." He grabbed a pen from the leather penholder and began writing on the prescription pad. He looked at Rania and said, "The side effects of Zopiclone are generally tolerable: daytime sleepiness and a metallic taste in your mouth. In rare cases, hallucination may occur. If that happens you immediately stop using the medication and call me. Under no circumstances should you exceed the dose. Take it for two weeks only." He tore off the prescription and gave it to her. "That's it for today. Please tell the receptionist to schedule your appointment two weeks from now."

Rania bade him farewell, did what he told her, and went to the nearest pharmacy.

Back in her apartment, she lay down in her bed, gazing heavenward. She sat upright, looked at the blister pack of Zopiclone, hesitated for a second, then impulsively popped a pill out, put it on her tongue, and drank some water.

She threw herself on her back again, her hand reaching for the button to turn off the bedside lamp. Darkness flooded the room. Within minutes, Rania's eyelids got heavy. She put her hand in the pocket of her nightgown and felt the rosary cross.

She recited the Lord's Prayer, and when she said, "Amen," her drowsiness intensified. She closed her eyes and prayed again; this time, her prayer was long and

personal. "God, let me see the truth," that was her last request.

When Rania finally slept, she began dreaming of fighter jets, machine guns, sirens, and explosions. She woke up terrified, her heartbeats stabbing on the inside. She sat upright and began sobbing. Her sobbing came in waves, much like the sound of war. She cried, hyperventilated, and calmed down, then did it all over again. After many vicious cycles, she lay on her back again, knowing there was no escape. She could only dream of war now. It was too late to dream of anything else, for no one was alive on the other side of Damascus.

Al Mansia

I still remember the first time I met my friend. It was an awful winter afternoon. The leaden sky hung close to the muddy ground of Cluj-Napoca's Central Cemetery. Like a rabid cat, the cold Transylvanian wind dug its sharp claws into my face and bare hands. After the other few mourners had left, I stood alone, a useless pole of flesh, gazing at that recently carved tombstone. I wept before my father's grave, and my mind became a rusty caldron seething with horrific images. My father's decaying face, with its receding lips and hollow eyes, flashed before my eyes. I imagined earthworms climbing up his luscious, white beard, then entering his nose and getting out of his eye sockets. His whole body bustled with those flesh eaters, as a broken TV buzzes with static.

My mother died when I was an infant, and now my father dies of cancer when I'm only twenty. I'm now all alone in this world, I thought before my friend touched me for the first time.

"You'll be fine. I won't let you be alone," he said as he put his hand on my shoulder.

The first thing I noticed was that majestic beard. It gave him an air of trustworthiness and familiarity.

I said nothing.

"Let us go home," he whispered.

That night, my friend moved in with me into the ground-floor apartment I'd shared with my father. That

was the beginning of our companionship. After that, we became inseparable, living in seclusion off the money I'd inherited and entertaining ourselves with my father's abundant collection of books and encyclopedias.

My friend always stayed in the apartment. "You go buy the necessities, and I'll be waiting right here. I don't belong to the outside world," he'd often say.

I'd venture outside once or twice a week, then return to him. I never questioned his desire to shun the world, for that was something we both craved. Oh, how I hated my neighbors' uninvited knocks on my door. "There's a terrible smell in the building. We think it's coming from your apartment," they'd say.

I'd quickly shut the door in their face, muttering, "I smell nothing. Go away."

I often heard their muffled curses through the thick wood.

After their knocking became too frequent and bothersome, as my friend suggested, I sealed all the window and door frames and filled the apartment with incense and snake plants.

"We should open the door as little as possible. Maybe you should go out just once a *month*, get whatever we need, and then bunker in here, unbothered," he said.

I obliged, and we didn't hear from the neighbors anymore.

Henceforward, utter isolation engulfed our entire existence. During the day, we'd religiously read H. P. Lovecraft and marvel at his brilliance.

"Do we access worlds beyond this mere physical one when we sleep? How can we tell that we're not dreaming right now?" my friend asked me often.

"I don't know. You tell me. You seem to have all the good ideas," was my usual answer.

Our infatuation with the master of cosmic horror led to a tenacious fascination with his character Abdul Alhazred, the Mad Arab — the poet who sought forbidden knowledge, dwelt in places inhabited by otherworldly entities, and spent his last years in the Syrian capital of Damascus authoring an opus of immeasurable irreverence.

Eventually, we became obsessed with Greater Syria, and that passion became all-consuming. We spent endless hours devouring books about that strange land's ancient culture and mythologies. And in idle thought, we fancied ancient Syria as a utopia whose world was not alien to us.

Our obsession grew more peculiar when my friend and I began having the same daily dream about living in a village on the bank of the Euphrates in early antiquity. During our long waking conversations, the two of us exchanged notes and described our experiences in vivid detail. The conclusion was clear; my friend and I were visiting the same place called Al Mansia.

That riverside paradise was blessed with enduring pleasant weather where the sun shone brightly and the rain was kind and gentle. The clear sky and mighty river embraced one another on the distant horizon as the tall Lebanese cedar looked in awe at that marvelous sight.

The inhabitants of Al Mansia, who spoke a Semitic-sounding language that was native to my friend and me in our dreams, were a fair race of people. Their eye color ranged from light brown to black and was in perfect harmony with their olive skin. No obesity, deformity, disease, senectitude, or death existed in Al Mansia. Everyone seemed to be happy, healthy, and vigorous. It was the custom that men and women worked as farmers while only men fished and hunted. During our oneiric