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ANDREI

GORZO

**WHAT
LEARNED
GRAHAM** **I
FROM
GREENE**
A FAMILY HISTORY

TRANSLATED BY
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TYPE - M

1

A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.

The End of the Affair

The year is 1995, and I am about to turn seventeen. My family lives on a small street near Bucharest's main railway station, Gara de Nord. My father, mother, sister and I stay in a section of a house with a typical Bucharest courtyard, fenced off from the street, and hiding more than one might imagine. When we first arrived here in the winter of 1992, I felt alone with my family, removed from the world, but safe and secure, like in a mountain cabin. The house was not connected to the city's district heating network, so we had to burn firewood to keep warm. My parents invested a lot of money refurbishing the stove for this purpose. Before we moved here, the four of us *and* my mother's parents *and* our cousin lived together inside my grandparents' Bucharest apartment, where the seven of us shared only two rooms.

Our first winter in the new place had been pleasant. Except when my sister walked out on the street and was greeted with a chorus of wolf whistles.

Soon we all realised we had ended up in a slum. Our grandparents' place may have been small, but it was located a few steps from the seat of Government, so we went to a school in

the fancy district of Dorobanți, home to foreign diplomats and the *nomenklatura*.

On the other side of our yard were shanty-huts, inhabited by a couple with rustic looks and an uncertain source of income, and a raggedy old man who wore a threadbare suit, talked to himself and said he was once a teacher. We occupied three large rooms in one section of the building. Starting that spring, new tenants occupied the other sections, including children, adults and their elderly relatives. More and more kept coming. After a while, it was obvious they wanted us to leave. In 1995, my family was engaged in a constant battle with our neighbours. To push us out, they blasted pop-folk *manele* through our ceiling. Our chandelier rattled under the tread of dance steps. The wall between the bedroom my sister and I shared and the rest of the floor kept shaking. One morning my father found the windscreen of his Dacia smashed. My parents were trying to contain their anger, but it threatened to boil over.

Both of them were doctors. My father, Dan Gorzo, was a forensic pathologist who had stopped practising in 1992, and my mother, Gabriela, was a clinical pathologist who wasn't working just *anywhere* but at a polyclinic in the Ministry of the Interior. Meanwhile, we were sharing our house with racketeers who seemed to be involved in currency exchange scams. At this time my parents' language turned virulently racist, and many of our neighbours were from the Roma community. We sublet the place from a guy when he went to prison for a criminal offence. He rented the property from the Romanian state. At that time, the convict, in the presence of a lawyer, drew up a "contract" for my father in exchange for money paid in advance. This was signed by all the parties—the tenant, the subtenant and the lawyer—on

a document which my family has never lost to this day, unlike most of our precious belongings.

Once he was released from prison after a year, the convict changed his mind. He wanted his place back. Our neighbours were his relatives. The law was on his side. The terms of the contract with my father turned out to be worthless. By 1995, the lawyer who had co-signed the deal was in conflict with my father in another case. They kept going to court until 2000, when the case ended without a resolution.

We had nowhere to go. We had no other place to live, either in Bucharest or anywhere else. My mother was earning money, but my father had abandoned forensic medicine in 1992, and his earnings were now fitful. In those years, the post-communist state had returned to him some vineyards his family used to own, near Drăgășani, west of Bucharest, as well as a small piece of land in the same town. This is where his parents' house had stood until 1989, when it was demolished by the communist authorities to make way for new blocks of flats. In the house near Gara de Nord, he invested money not only in renovating its heating system but also in paying handymen to repair the ceilings and fix the chimney. By 1995, it had become clear that this building work had been shoddy. A large section of the kitchen ceiling collapsed in a spot where my mother had been standing a few seconds earlier.

We were not welcome in the house. This hostility came both from the ex-con landlord and his relatives and from the local district's Administration of the Housing Fund (ICRAL), which sent us an eviction order. From the beginning of autumn we prepared our exit. My mother had taken down the curtains from the windows, replacing them with pages of newspaper taped to

the glass. By late November, we hadn't bought any more firewood for the winter. Literally, we were running out of steam.

What were we waiting for?

Since 1991, when we had first come to Bucharest, we had been expecting the state to give us a place to live. This should have been possible because of my mother's job. She had entered a contest between provincial doctors to win a posting in Bucharest and gained top marks, which allowed her to choose where she wanted to work. She picked a position in the Ministry of the Interior because they promised to provide a housing unit for her family. But the Ministry had not given her a place to live—not in 1991, nor in any year after. It was not until the beginning of the 2000s that my parents would finally abandon the hope of a fixed home. But in that cold autumn of 1995, this hope was taking, not for the first or last time, a baroque form.

I don't remember at what point my sister and I found out that our father was working with a state department for combating organised crime. This was a new and experimental initiative—partly military, partly civilian—launched by the Romanian police, under the Ministry of the Interior, which also employed my mother. Its targets were the traffickers of foreign currency, weapons, fake diamonds and radioactive substances, which was a serious issue as this was during the wars in Romania's neighbour Yugoslavia, and many armaments were traded on the black market. His job was to penetrate an underground network with the help of informers by introducing himself as a potential buyer and convincing traffickers to bring their goods to a meeting, where the police could swoop in and make arrests.

In short, he was bait. For this purpose, he had assumed a new identity. His name was Marian Mermond, and he was a citizen

of Belgium. He even had a fake passport, which I saw. He also had a gun, which he kept on his bedside table. I saw that too. Our parents gave my sister and me a quick briefing. Different kinds of people would be calling our phone number (it was a fixed line back then, no mobiles), asking for *Domnul* (Mister) *Marian*. With some callers, my father put on a foreign accent. With others, he did not speak Romanian, only French. When talking on the phone, my mother sometimes had to pass herself off as *Monsieur* Mermond's housekeeper, but my parents never explained to my sister and me who we were supposed to be. Later, much later, in 2019, the last year of his life, I asked my father this question. He answered that this department was new for Romania; in the mid-1990s, it was at the beginning stage, and there were few guidelines. My father tried to put us at ease by claiming that the people who called our home were always middlemen and not the kingpins. Those middlemen had only his home phone number and didn't know his real name. This may have been the case. I clearly remember a few Romanian voices on the line asking for Mr. Marian; it was not a problem for me to answer. But I also remember someone asking for him in heavily accented French, to which I spat out *Il n'est pas à la maison* and, petrified, slammed down the phone.

How scared were my sister and I? I would say *quite* a bit, but not *too* much. Because it wasn't anything new—as I'll explain later. In 1995 we were already used to our lives being thrown into the world of *La Famille* Mermond. Yes, it was something we couldn't talk about at school—and not only because we were forbidden to do so (on the grounds that we would be endangering lives, starting with our own), but also because we wouldn't have known where to start. Mermond's world was unlike anything

our friends and schoolmates belonged to. But then again, this was no longer new to us at that time. Sure, it was kind of weird for all four of us to gather in the living room “to watch Daddy on TV” in a short news bulletin about a crime. But he wouldn’t be presenting the report. There was no interview with him. We would not see his face. There were just a few images of masked men and a hand in the frame which, judging by the watch on his wrist, could have been his. One time, something bad happened. It was worse than weird. It was frightening. He entered the house with a bruise on his face. The trafficker, or whoever he was, had headbutted *Monsieur Mermond*.

But there was a bigger problem. Dad had accepted this dangerous work because it could speed up our chances of securing a housing unit. He held no official position and was only paid periodically per job. It was almost December 1995, and we were living illegally in the house near the railway station. The yard was still filling up with the landlord’s relatives, pressuring us to leave. The stove was cold. The rooms were cold. My sister and I were talking to each other through clouds of breath.

We also had a cat. A female cat. It was not neutered. My parents never even thought to neuter it. A year before, Dad had picked her up off the street and brought her home. Mum hadn’t been thrilled at first. The truth is, my parents weren’t good at looking after pets. Although Dad had grown up on a farm, he never took care of the animals. Before that cat, we had kept a puppy, but not for long, as we quickly discovered it was beset with ticks. My parents decided they could not help the animal. What seems a bit strange to me now, at least as I remember the episode, is that they hadn’t even tried to find a vet. Of course, it was the early 1990s, and there weren’t clinics on every street, like

today. Though my parents continued to feed the dog, he curled up in a corner of our yard and died. My mother still insists that nothing could be done for the puppy, as he was too infested. That may well be true, but what strikes me now, besides the evidence of how overwhelmed they were, is what I call their “fatalism”—something I recognise in myself.

Likewise, when the cat was in heat, they found no solution other than slipping diazepam into her food to keep her quiet. When this powerful depressant failed to curb the cat’s sex drive, Mum and Dad had to spend time and energy finding owners for a litter of four kittens. Luckily, these kittens were blond and beautiful. Right after we found homes for them, the cat went out on the town again and came back with four more in her belly, as well as a coat full of fleas. The second batch of kittens were black, stooping and infested. No one wanted them. It was the autumn of 1995. It was freezing. We hadn’t bought any firewood because we were preparing to leave, hoping against hope for a new home. We sat among our packed belongings, our breath clouding in front of our faces, with fleas leaping around the rooms, waiting for the phone to ring for *Monsieur Mermond*, or for someone to headbutt my dad again.

But no housing allocation came. One evening in late November, my father returned home from work—had he been meeting with a middleman, with a *baddie*?—had an argument with my mother and collapsed on the bed, staring dead-eyed at the ceiling, not before asking, with what seemed like his last breath, for us to light a candle for him. This request froze the blood in my veins. My mother and I called an ambulance, which arrived quickly. The second the medics rushed inside, we saw our house through their eyes—the freezing cold, the newspapers

stuck to the windows, the plague of insects. They resuscitated my father and told him to keep an eye on his stress level and all the other health concerns—he smoked three packs of cigarettes a day, like James Bond (the spy from the books, not the movies).

After that moment, we moved to the apartment of my aunt, who had recently divorced. She let us live in a three-room place in the south of the city, near the nineteenth-century Catholic cemetery, Bellu, for what she hoped would only be a short period. She and her ten-year-old son moved into her parents' two-room apartment, where we had stayed before. My parents had to abandon some of our furniture, but they did find owners for the four black, hunch-backed kittens and their flea-ridden mother.

Shortly after we moved, I became obsessed with the works of Graham Greene.

2

You used to laugh at the books Miss Savage read—about spies, and murders, and violence, and wild motor-car chases, but dear, that's real life.

The Ministry of Fear

Graham Greene was a British novelist whose life spanned almost the entire twentieth century (1904–1991). During his heyday, which overlapped with the Cold War, he was described as one of the indispensable chroniclers of his age. For many years he was on the shortlist for the Nobel Prize in Literature but never won. A convert to Roman Catholicism in his youth, he aroused much interest, after the Second World War, as a unique example of a religious writer who faced the challenge of a modern world which had become hostile to organised religion. In 1951, *Time* magazine put him on its cover and declared him to be a Catholic Dostoevsky. Later he adopted the role of the writer-as-super-journalist, as a war correspondent, globe-trotter and even a mediator between regimes of conflicting ideologies: militaristic, communist and capitalist. He was a novelist whose counsel was sought by Castro and Gorbachev. He was *big*.

That being said, his literary prestige never equalled the heights reached by his contemporaries Hemingway and Faulkner. Nor did he ever produce a *Great Gatsby*—a book that defined its era to such an extent that it earned a secure place (or, at least, as

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Quotations by Chapter

Chapter 1

- Epigraph. “A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses”: *The End of the Affair*, p. 3.

Chapter 2

- Epigraph. “You used to laugh at the books Miss Savage read”: *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 65.
 “Oh, there is a sort of comfort in reading a story”: *The Honorary Consul*, p. 260.
 “[it] appears in the nineteenth century”: Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, p. 473.
 “A crime novel is always a comforting, vigorous and pure read”: Mircea Eliade (1934), quoted in Iovănel, p. 440.
 “It sounds like a thriller, doesn’t it”: *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 65.
 “trundling the wheelbarrow full of leaves and grass”: *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 65.
 “lady novelists describe it over and over again”: *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 65.
 “it was shaken by shunting engines”: *Brighton Rock*, p. 277.
 “In Doctor Humphries’ room there was hardly space”: *The Honorary Consul*, pp. 19–20.
 “Doctor Saavedra opened the cupboard”: *The Honorary Consul*, p. 202.

Chapter 3

- Epigraph. “That morning in my bunk I had read Wordsworth’s”: *Travels with My Aunt*, p. 203.

"Dr. Dan Gorzo, a notorious figure of the Revolution": headline, *Acțiunea*, November 1992.

"By the way, as a forensic doctor, I don't read that kind of thing": interview with Dan Gorzo, *Acțiunea*, November 1992.

Chapter 4

Epigraph. "The other day I was offered money": *Our Man in Havana*, p. 60.

"The writer should always be ready to change sides at the drop of a hat":

"The Virtue of Disloyalty", in *Reflections*, p. 314.

"What about a Luger? I suppose you had a Luger": *The Human Factor*, p. 41.

"[i]t always seemed strange to Wormold": *Our Man in Havana*, p. 37.

"belonged to the cruel and inexplicable world of childhood": *Our Man in Havana*, p. 47.

Chapter 5

Epigraph. "What kind of spy do you think you are?": *The Third Man* (film; the line is not in the printed screenplay).

Chapter 6

Epigraph. "The time had arrived about his eighth birthday": "A Shocking Accident", in *Collected Short Stories*, p. 331.

"through the heart": "A Shocking Accident", in *Collected Short Stories*, p. 332.

"his father would not take human life except as a last resort": "A Shocking Accident", in *Collected Short Stories*, p. 332.

Chapter 7

Epigraph. "[T]he first aeroplane I actually saw": *A Sort of Life*, p. 42.

Chapter 8

Epigraph. "Walking across the croquet lawn": *A Sort of Life*, pp. 34–35.

Chapter 9

Epigraph. "There was another theme I found there": "The Lost Childhood", in *Collected Essays*, p. 17. The essay first appeared in *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951), the volume named in the text; it is quoted here from the Penguin Collected Essays, which reprints it.

Chapter 10

Epigraph. "Doctor Magiot crouched a long time above the body": *The Comedians*, p. 102.

"Some analysts regarded Virgil Trofin as a main contender": Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, p. 210.

"member of the group that had ensured Ceaușescu's victory": Tismăneanu, pp. 210–11.

"Trofin provoked the Supreme Leader's animosity": Tismăneanu, p. 211.

"There are reliable indications that he [Trofin] committed suicide":

Tismăneanu, p. 316, n. 52.

"which certifies that my father did not die of a myocardial infarction":

Mircea Trofin, "Adevărul despre moartea lui Virgil Trofin", *Dreptatea*, no. 26, 6 March 1990, p. 1.

The report of early 1990 and the second death certificate are among the family's papers.

Chapter 11

Epigraph. "[The four Tontons Macoute ...] lifted the coffin out of the hearse": *The Comedians*, p. 135.

"It was my last meeting with him": Ion Iliescu and Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Communism, Post-Communism and Democracy*, p. 109.

The account of the arrest, the trial and its aftermath is drawn from the author's conversations with his mother.

Chapter 12

Epigraph. "Did you torture him?": *Our Man in Havana*, pp. 152–53.

Chapter 13

Epigraph. "'The trouble was,' I said, 'he got mixed up.'": *The Quiet American*, p. 20.

The father's memorandum of the early 1990s is quoted from the family's papers.

Chapter 14

Epigraph. "It makes no difference about the boy": *The Fallen Idol* (film).

"They began again on the first floor": "The Destructors", in *Collected Short Stories*, p. 17.

"I wish I were dead": *The Fallen Idol* (film).

Chapter 15

Epigraph. "Four and a half years of watching films": *Ways of Escape*, p. 45.

"an indicator of the decomposition of the Ceaușescu regime": Liviu Tofan and Stejărel Olaru, *A fost ca-n filme*, p. 7.

The black market's 500,000 lei a day is from Tofan and Olaru, p. 84; Vienna as the Securitate's principal foreign base, p. 29, n. 29.

"you have to break the rules sometimes. Humanity's a duty": *The Third Man* (film; screenplay, p. 59).

"The twentieth century saw Vienna collapse from being a centre": Peter Wollen, "Spies and Spivs", in *Paris Hollywood*, p. 146.

"What can I tell you but you've got everything upside down": *The Third Man* (film; screenplay, p. 57).

"A burglar alarm sent up a futile ringing": *The Human Factor*, p. 64.

"this sun, this music, the rattle of the miniature cars": *Brighton Rock*, p. 3.

"[L]aughter came from the American Bar": *Brighton Rock*, p. 80.

"There wasn't a point [...] at which their worlds touched": *Brighton Rock*, p. 82.

"a loose shoe-lace tapped all the way down the passage": *Brighton Rock*, p. 84.

Chapter 16

Epigraph. "You've got everything upside down.": *The Third Man* (film; screenplay, p. 57).

Chapter 17

Epigraph. "[T]horn bushes grew up round the To Let boards": *Brighton Rock*, p. 307.

Chapter 18

Epigraph. "I couldn't work that evening. I lay on the floor with the books": *The End of the Affair*, pp. 210–11.

"Before the second dive I felt fear": "A Memory of Indo-China", in *Reflections*, p. 215.

"When he was young, he had thought love had something to do with understanding": *The Heart of the Matter*, p. 253.

"At the word 'books' Wilson saw her mouth tighten": *The Heart of the Matter*, p. 81.

"In a way I was glad that my wife had struck out at me again": *The Quiet American*, p. 119.

"it was as though somebody I hated spoke from my mouth": *The Comedians*, p. 279.

"A week ago I had only to say to her": *The End of the Affair*, p. 168.

"It takes a long time before we cease to feel": *The Quiet American*, p. 102.

Chapter 19

Epigraph. "'You'd be all right,' the Boy said—nervous and shaken": *Brighton Rock*, p. 283.

Chapter 20

Epigraph. "[Harris] felt the loyalty we feel to unhappiness": *The Heart of the Matter*, p. 166.

"[A]ny life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats": George Orwell, "Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dalí", in *Essays*, p. 248.

"Pyle looked at me as though I were another Granger": *The Quiet American*, p. 40.

"[H]er face look[ed] as it would look in twenty years' time": *Brighton Rock*, p. 113.

Chapter 21

Epigraph. "The dark alien executive tipping his cigar ash": review of *The Marriage of Corbal*, *The Spectator*, 5 June 1936; in *The Pleasure-Dome*, p. 80.

"The trouble with literary biographies, perhaps": John Updike, "The Man Within", *The New Yorker*, 26 June & 3 July 1995.

"had the quick movements of a monkey": *The Comedians*, p. 47.

"sat beside him wearing a fixed grin": *The Comedians*, p. 272.

"Semitic forehead": *The Confidential Agent*, unrevised text, in *Three*, p. 158.

"Semitic expression [...] of being open to the commercial chance": *Journey Without Maps*, p. 177.

"How the financial crisis has improved English films!": review of *Inspector Hornleigh*, *The Spectator*, 7 April 1939; in *The Pleasure Dome*, p. 211.

"Forty years in the wilderness": *Stamboul Train*, p. 28.

"[I]t was a superficial calm carried unconsciously": *Stamboul Train*, p. 209.

"[A] dark cup of the earth": *Stamboul Train*, p. 209.

"a hint of the seraglio": *Brighton Rock*, p. 83.
 "[T]he thing [antisemitism] was in the air, between the wars, an infection":
 Shirley Hazzard, *Greene on Capri*, p. 77.

Chapter 22

Epigraph. "I have always dreamed of an evening just like this": *The Heart of the Matter*, pp. 244-45.
 "a mechanism to extract money [...] without doing anything": Daniel Morar, *Putea să fie altcumva*, p. 134.

Chapter 23

Epigraph. "We'd forgive most things if we knew the facts.": *The Heart of the Matter*, p. 81.
 "The lights were showing in the temporary hospital": *The Heart of the Matter*, p. 122.
 "[T]he possibility of damnation is so immense a relief": T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire", in *Selected Essays*, pp. 378-80.
 "So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good": T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire", in *Selected Essays*, p. 380.
 "Scobie is incredible because the two halves of him": George Orwell, "The Sanctified Sinner", *The New Yorker*, 17 July 1948.

Chapter 24

Epigraph. "The priest said: 'You are so right.'": *The Power and the Glory*, p. 250.
 "God dangled from the gibbet": *The Power and the Glory*, pp. 129, 169-70.
 "It was love of a kind, music of a kind": *Brighton Rock*, p. 64.
 "full of beer and good fellowship and no regrets": *Brighton Rock*, p. 148.
 "nothing more than the divided mind, the uneasy conscience": "The Last Pope", in *Reflections*, p. 132.
 "their sterilized world": *The Quiet American*, p. 160.
 "as it dries the spit in your mouth": *The Quiet American*, p. 147.
 "[t]he small patch of marble floor": *The Honorary Consul*, p. 220.
 "Thank God that on so many occasions [Graham] Greene has shown that he can write like an atheist": Christopher Hitchens, "Greene: Where the Shadow Falls", in *For the Sake of Argument*, p. 320.

"He began: 'Pater noster qui es in coelis'": *The Power and the Glory*, p. 115.
 "[t]he beetles were flocking out and covering the pavements": *The Power and the Glory*, p. 135.
 "[t]he beetles had disappeared: the rain had apparently washed": *The Power and the Glory*, p. 148.
 "blew windily in the dark as the sins came whimpering out": *The Power and the Glory*, p. 221.
 "How often, he thought, lack of faith helps one": *The Heart of the Matter*, p. 210.
 "only I just don't believe in all the things": *Travels with My Aunt*, p. 151.

Chapter 25

"Your father was walking along a street in Naples": "A Shocking Accident", in *Collected Short Stories*, p. 332.