

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

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Qismat

RUSTLING LEAVES. Faded urban buzz. Random chirping. Conversations in a language unknown.

Surrounded by the mix of nature sounds and the city noise, I close my eyes. I let the breeze gently comb the hair off my face, let the strands tickle my cheeks. On a hot summer day in Bucharest, even the weakest wind can be a blessing. Instant gust sends a shiver down my spine. The leftover sensation from the wind now follows with a drop slowly descending on my back.

I look up to see a net of boughs and twigs stretching toward the sky as if they are trying to hug it. Waving branches, swishing leaves seem to inhale and exhale the hot air around them. While this happens, I hide under the crown in an attempt to save myself from the burning sun. I have difficulty breathing in and out the air, but the tree does it smoothly as if chanting. How beautiful it looks in its magnificence, resilience and strength. Once my eyes move toward its trunk, I cannot help but see the solid wrinkly pockmarks and scars - some fresh, some old, some deep and others shallow.

I am standing under the tree I cannot name, yet the unfamiliarity does not interfere with the connection we have. I tune my breath to its movements and while its branches waltz from one side to another, my chest lifts and drops in response. At moments like this, I feel so at peace and connected to nature that I detach from everything that bothers me.

Sudden fluttering sounds distract me from the thoughts I have. I direct my gaze at the source of the distraction to see a piece of green paper right in front of my feet, stuck in the grass but still faintly fluttering. In mint condition but with almost no value, 1 Leu could have been a pleasant surprise for many, but not for me.

Every time I come across a lost banknote or a coin, I experience a sudden blast from the past, sending me back in time to my childhood. I remember the first discoveries of money. Shyness and strict upbringing dictated that one should not take something that does not belong to them. Thus, I did not dare to take any of them, no matter how small the amount was. I also remember how my strict and traditional mother, the one who instilled transparency in me, helped me overcome this reluctance by preaching something else. Something that would defy all the religious and societal values cherished in my family.

"Take it," she would tell me. She would insist that it is destined for me. If it was not enough to persuade me, she would share a personal memory which shaped a lifelong habit of hers, "My mother, your *nana* used to say if you find money on the street, take it. It is your *qismat*."

It took me years to comprehend what *qismat* is. It is twice as hard to explain it to someone else. Especially in English. I have spoken this language long enough to understand that some words are not meant to be translated or understood to the fullest. The English language has 170,000 words in use. Yet none of them can convey the real meaning of *qismat*. Maybe

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because everyone has their own understanding of *qismat*. To some, *qismat* is an unchanging journey of a human's existence on earth. To others, it is a journey that shapes one's life. Everyone is born with one. It shapes our lives and contains more than a predetermined course of life, teaching us gratitude and hope.

I never met *nana*. But I spent a big chunk of my life hearing the stories and memories about her. She was a part of all sad and sentimental conversations. Over the years, people described so many positive things about her that I worried about not living up to being like her. I came across many names addressed to her. *Nana* was an angel, a well-respected person in her community and the epitome of what a woman should be. Everyone praised her, even those who had met her once. Everyone had a warm memory of her. Her generosity, dedication to her loved ones, strong will and patience were legendary. Every single story about her would end with tears or a broken voice.

Although I never met her, I painted a vivid picture of her in my mind. My thoughts and feelings about *nana* were based on all the good things I heard from her family, relatives and strangers. I considered her to be a symbol of womanhood, an idol I needed to cherish and be like. Of course, when my mother used to remind me about *nana's* wisdom, I could not help but obey. I would accept my *qismat*. But not only that, I would also walk around with pride as I would follow my *nana's* steps. If *nana* believed something, we all should have done so too.

I never questioned the stories about my grandmother or the way people described her. During my childhood, all the kids grew up with a grandmother who would spoil them. My solace was all the nice memories everyone had about *nana*. It was easier to accept it and live like that.

Years passed, and like in every fairy tale where sparkling dust covers a little girl's eyes, the story about *nana* began to reveal its red flags and wrongs in her life. What many would miss from her life story was the fact that her childhood ended suddenly at the age of 15, when she was forced to marry a man twice her age. This fact was left out of her life story for obvious reasons. I was the same age when I learned about the details of her marrying my grandfather and my disgust with the fact was immense. I tried to understand what was going on in the head of a 15-year-old girl growing up in a rural town. Being so young, she did not see anything outside of the place she lived. What did she feel upon seeing my grandfather the first time? Did she cry? Did she rebel? Did she try to run away? Did she even try to reason with her parents? No, she did not. She did not want to marry, but being a devoted and obedient daughter, she could not oppose them. One of her sisters once said that upon the announcement of the news, she ran to her safe place - underneath the large mulberry tree in their garden. She found shelter there the same way I found mine under this mighty tree.

Learning this horrifying part of her story felt like observing a tree in autumn, shedding its leaves, exposing the core. Behind the solid image of a mother, wife, daughter and sister was a tragedy that would unfold over the years. I knew nothing about her, neither did anyone else - none of the things I heard was enough to understand who she was - her desires, sufferings. It seems as if no one cared about what she wanted.

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Nana, who never left the rural town she was born in, left it for the first time after a modest wedding ceremony. One rural town replaced another one, thus expanding her small world. Living in the same house as her parents-in-law and her brothers-in-law, she quickly took over the responsibilities of the household that was home to eight people. At the age of 15, she took care of the newly acquired family by cooking, cleaning, ironing and washing after all the residents. Her fragile body started accumulating the burden that early. While completing her duties around the house, she probably thought about "what-ifs". Maybe she didn't. Again, no one knows what was happening inside her mind.

Soon pregnant, never leaving the house and still relentlessly doing the long list of chores, she was left alone to herself. My grandfather was not around. I am not sure if it would change anything in her life in case he were around. To this day, I have not heard about him being caring and loving towards her. But I know one thing for sure and that is while *nana* was pregnant and taking care of the household at the age of 15, my grandfather frequented the big city, the capital, for work. Together with the city, he frequented other women too.

Nana was 25 when she moved to Baku with four children, my mother being one of them. I can only imagine the overwhelm she felt with the size and chaos of the city. Fatigued by frequent pregnancies, miscarriages and what seems from the told symptoms as postpartum, she already had shaky health. Yet she still kept to herself. No one ever heard a complaint or mention about her health issues. Maybe if she had friends, she could share something. But she did not have friends. How could she? With four children - changing one kommunalka apartment to another, taking care of her family, and hosting the distant relatives visiting the city and staying with them in a 1-room apartment, in other words, living the essence of Soviet life, she did not have time or space to herself.

Nana was the most gracious toward her relatives. Yet when I asked my mother, she said nothing had been left after her death - there was no jewellery but 1 engagement ring and all her clothes were already old and patched up. She shared everything she had with others. No one bothered to do the same. Yet, *nana* never complained.

When asked about her character, my mother used to say that *nana* was the most silent and observant person ever. After giving birth the fifth time, her already shaken health started declining. Her voice started fading away in the midst of echoing voices and loud environments. Sentences and words she used to voice were getting fewer and fewer, replaced by tired gazes, forced smiles. My mother's description of her distinctive sad smile and stare at one distant point felt to me as if *nana* was mentally checked out. Still, no one ever asked if she was alright. No one cared enough to know what was happening inside this still young but tired woman. Everyone played along with her silence.

When I started reflecting on these moments now, I realised it was the time when she had already resigned from her life and hopes for a better one. She was ready. Ready to leave. And she did. Silently, unexpectedly, in a manner similar to the rest of her life, while doing her regular chores on a warm August day. Right after the sound of something or someone, as we know it now, collapsing, her still young children discovered the lifeless

body of a 40-year-old on the kitchen floor. There was nothing preceding this. Maybe there was. Yet how would anyone know? She would never say anything but carry on with life and chores.

A woman who married at the age of 15, never made a choice in her life nor left the borders of her country, *nana* would probably be shocked by the life I have today: unmarried with a successful career and traveling a lot. I am not sure if she would have approved. I am not sure if she would object. But I know for sure it would be wild for her. Today, being far away from Baku, thinking about the woman whom I never saw in my life, I can't help but visualise her reaching out for every kopeek or a ruble she would find in the streets. I can imagine the happiness, the surprise, the small pleasure of getting something from life - so insignificant, but still, something. Amidst all the hardship of her life that would suffocate her, she would be patient, silent for the next present of her *qismat*.

By the time I heard the complete story and made my own conclusions about *nana's* life, I was angry and disappointed by my inability to change her life. I could not alter the outcome of her story. Thus, I directed the annoyance at my mother. How dare she manipulate me into taking the scraps from the ground or make me believe they would be my *qismat*. I did not want to have a *qismat* like that. But my mother did not know better. She followed in the footsteps of her mother, never ignoring a change found on her route. With anger, I watched her many times smiling while picking up coins despite the sorrow and hardships of our lives.

I abandoned the generational illusions of my family. I did not want to be like my *nana* anymore. Over the years, I deliberately ignored the money found on the streets. I promised myself that I will always do whatever I put my head to. I will achieve what my *nana* could not even imagine. I would be my own architect and author, paving my path, building my story and not letting it be dictated by *qismat*. Instead of relying on what life has to give me, I embarked on a journey to see what I can take from life. I moved abroad at a young age to study at university and since then moving from one country to another, working hard, falling in love, making friends and building my financial stability. I felt like I dictated my own *qismat*.

Yet, somehow again, life has given me a reminder to recall my story, the story of women before me and how I ended up here. No matter how hard I try to escape, I still find myself in front of a dilemma - to accept or not. My eyes are still on the motionless Leu stuck among the grass clumps, quivering with the help of another breeze. It has almost no value. It won't be a salve to heal any wounds. Though it carries an enormous value for my family.

Slowly descending, I pick the Leu. With a shaking hand, I look at the clean-looking banknote, observing the shades of green and a bold man with a beard directing his eyes away from me. I fold it and put it inside my bag.