

THE UNDYING

by Dana Grigorcea

Sample Translation by Imogen Taylor

When they become such, there comes with the change the curse of immortality. They cannot die, but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world. For all that die from the preying of the Undead become themselves Undead, and prey on their kind. And so the circle goes on ever widening, like as the ripples from a stone thrown in the water.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

I

Johnny and his Death

I have no choice but to tell this story, especially as I witnessed everything at first hand and know all the reports to be false. The reasons for this—overhasty research, journalistic incompetence, sensation-mongering and, of course, private interests—are not something I shall dwell on; the very thought of them plunges me into a resigned stupor that would be detrimental to my narrative. As for the place where everything happened, I shall just call it B, partly because I have no desire to add to its dubious fame, and partly because the story is emblematic of our Walachian morals—though it could, to be sure, have happened all over the world.

By way of orientation for those of you who are not familiar with the affair, I should mention that B is a small place in Walachia, south of Transylvania, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains. The people from Bucharest and Bra ov who had second homes here referred to it simply as a village, while the locals spoke defiantly of a town, because of the big weaving mill

that had once stood on the river and made workers of a great many farmers. For my family, ever conciliatory, B was a charming health resort. On one thing, however, everyone was agreed: until the events of which I shall relate, B was associated neither with Dracula nor with any other vampire stories.

Before the political turnaround in 1989, you could rent entire villas for the holidays here in B and we always chose the same one, on the edge of the forest. Villa Diana, named after the famous hunting goddess, was a house like a castle, though years of botched additions had left it misshapen. A balcony with a balustrade ran the length of the first floor, but the plain, whitewashed walls gave an overall impression of sobriety. Shadows loomed on these walls when the surrounding trees stirred in the wind—and, in the shifting light of sun and moon, they folded themselves bizarrely around the corners of the house.

We travelled there from Bucharest with our extended family and friends in a convoy of cars laden with all Great-aunt Margot's goods and chattels: bedding, pillows, silver candlesticks, the big Persian carpet for the sitting room, hundreds of icons, a large, silver-framed mirror and all kinds of Turkish sabres and Arabian plates to hang on the high walls.

Within a day, the villa was cleared of what Margot referred to as 'dreadful Communist kitsch'. She took great delight in holding up pieces of macramé for our delectation. 'Just look at this,' she would say, and with one voice we would cry, 'Oh, don't!'

'But look at this little fisherman with a glass fish on a string,' she would insist.

'Oh, don't!' we would say again.

My mother warned us to take care—we wouldn't be allowed back if we broke anything, she would say, packing everything carefully into wooden boxes: the rolled-up tapestry with the pictures from *Il Seraglio*, the stuffed squirrel, even the lamps.

'Do you really want to sit in candlelight?'

'Well, we certainly don't want to sit in the light of *those* lamps!'

She carried everything down to the cellar.

Any furniture that Margot took a dislike to had to be covered in white dust sheets. We would laugh as the things vanished under their covers, pretending that we had magicked them away.

Finally, cheered on by all her friends and relations, Margot would tour the house with a soup spoon full of smouldering incense, to smoke out the ghosts of the ‘basse classe’, at least for the duration of our stay.

Liberated from its cornucopia of elaborate glass ornaments, the Ibach grand could now be opened. Anyone who could play the piano was allowed to bang out the Radetzky March or a droll bit of the Romanian Rhapsody, while the rest of us shouted and cheered, fired up by the strident sounds of the out-of-tune instrument.

Then we sat around the big table on chairs and stools, leaning against one another in exhaustion, frozen in thought—a picture in chiaroscuro. Thinking back to the scene, I am inevitably reminded of Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*: a solemn-looking gathering dressed for the anatomical theatre, all looking pensively in different directions—only that on our table, instead of a corpse awaiting post-mortem, there was a plate heaped with biscuits, chiefly the sponge fingers I was so fond of. I used to dunk them in red raspberry lemonade, while the shadow of death lurked behind the brass plates on the high walls, just out of sight.

‘Have a look around, darling,’ Margot would say, deeply moved. ‘It’s almost like old times.’

‘Wonderful!’ I said fervently, to please her—or perhaps just to give myself courage, because, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw some of the shrouded furniture shift ever so slightly.

What startled me most was the groan of the parquet: a dull creak beneath the carpet and the preposterous absence of that creak when we moved on.

I remember, too, the chill of the house, the musty smell, the sweet incense mingled with ladies' perfumes, and I remember that the candles were always going out—blown out by a draught, or by a mischievously inclined guest. Our guests were comfortingly loud; they spoke and laughed a great deal, traipsed all over the house, made tea late at night, played cards, and then set off on midnight walks, returning soon afterwards amid riotous laughter and exaggerated cries of, 'Sh! We're making too much noise.'

Then one of them would start to sing, 'Zitti, zitti,' and the others would fall about laughing.

This 'zitti, zitti' came from a guest's anecdote. Geo, a baritone at Bucharest Opera House, had told us about a performance of *Rigoletto* in which the choir had to carry such a heavy ladder across the stage in the abduction scene that they were out of breath even before they began to sing—and when they tried to intone the gentle aria, 'Zitti, zitti, moviamo a vendetta', the intense effort required to make any sound at all sent the words bursting out of them in a roar: 'Zitti, zitti—hush, hush, it is time for revenge.' This raucous 'hush, hush' was so startling that the audience broke into peals of laughter.

And so it became a favourite game of Margot and the guests—along with blowing out candles—to creep up on each other and sing, 'Hush, hush, it is time for revenge,' at the tops of their voices.

Then, of course, there was the river that ran through the forest behind the villa and was sometimes dyed red because of the nearby mill. When this happened, one guest or other could always be relied upon to appear on the balcony and cry with outstretched hand and quivering voice, 'And all the waters that were in the river turned to blood.'

Looking back, I must say that we had excellent fun in those days; our guests were fond of a good joke and forever trying out new ways of making each other laugh. Laughter seemed to be de rigueur for guests and hosts alike.

A small path led from the courtyard to a tennis court where we often played; in my memory, the sun is always shining on the red sand. I played with local friends of the family and we were sometimes joined by others from B. We practised doubles. Margot, who always wore full whites and dressed me to match, didn't miss a single game. In those days we had wooden tennis racquets, and the top of my black lacquered racquet was stuck with sticking plaster to stop the wood from splintering when the frame touched the ground. I can still hear the satisfying *plop* of the ball on the racquet, the syncopated rhythm of stroke and counterstroke.

All summer and sometimes even in winter, I stayed in B with Margot. Although a great-aunt, she was no older than my mother, but she had the old-fashioned, queenly manner of my grandmother, her sister from Great-grandfather's first marriage. I sometimes called her Mamargot.

In my head I have an overexposed picture of us, sitting on the garden bench outside the villa: Mamargot is holding her head high, so that the sharp line of her chin marks a clear divide between light and shade. Her white hands encircle my waist and I—perhaps seven at the time, a skinny, almost scrawny thing, squinting and frowning at the sun—am hung with Mamargot's necklaces, rings and earrings.

'You can do what you like when you're with me,' she had told me, adding, as an example of audacity, 'You could even shave off an eyebrow, if you wanted.' Legend has it that I really did shave off an eyebrow, but I have no recollection of it; I recall only the keyed-up sensationalism of our more regular guests: 'Remember the time you shaved off your eyebrow?'

The greatest acts of daring I recall were my exploits in the gleaming azure-blue telephone box at the garden gate. Whenever I had a coin to hand, I would push it into the slot, grind out a number—any number—on the stiff dial and listen for a few breathless moments to the strange voice asking who was speaking. Then I would hang up, without having said a word. At other times, I overcame my shyness and began to talk frantically: did they also have trouble with flooding? When were they going to return their library books? Was it their cooking that

smelt so delicious? What were they having for lunch? I was always amazed at the willingness of these unsuspecting strangers to let me engage them in conversation.

On one occasion, an elderly lady gave me her own version of the traditional cozonac recipe; she told me that she had spent decades perfecting the sweet bun loaf. ‘Have you got that?’ she kept asking, as she dictated.

‘Yes,’ I lied.

In all that I tell you, you will see sinister hints, signs of what was to come. You will look for precursors—to the shock, the unimaginable atrocities, the death of all deaths.

Some of you will be inclined to associate the events with Romania’s barbaric communist regime—to see them as a result of the forty-year dictatorship that is said to have bred a new race of humans. You will stress the need to look at things in their historical and geographical context. And I agree with you—albeit from a rather dubious position. After all, I am no different from the rest of my kind and when you judge them, you judge me. There were, to be sure, points in my favour, such as education and family standing, which would have allowed me to do practically anything with my life. But I stayed; I went abroad only briefly and I came back. Yes, I watched everything happen, like a rabbit staring at a snake.

And I am going to tell you all about it, candidly and without embellishment, inching my way towards the ghastly truth.

I didn’t see it coming—and here, as if in proof of my unconcern, I am reminded of the white chalk marks that I made so dutifully on the tennis court each morning, the mild sunlight on my arms and the heady mountain air in my nose—narrow lines, drawn neatly on the red sand with the one-wheel marking rod, a squeaky affair in green-painted tin.

The hours that followed were given over to drawing and painting—and what long hours they were! Sometimes, too, I would spend time with my friends, Tina and Arina; we made fake

nails out of petals—yellow from the coneflowers, and pink and white from the cosmos—or we lay on the grass looking up at the sky and watched the clouds clotting into shapes: horses rearing up on their hind legs, knights with drawn swords, castles with citadels, fluttering pennants, princesses with conical headdresses trailing veils, waterfalls and rushing torrents carrying mighty tree trunks. No other sky, we were sure, contained such a wealth of heroic images. This was partly, of course, the influence of our national-communist history lessons, which took years to get past the heroes of the Middle Ages—but it was also a symptom of our childlike megalomania, our unshakeable belief that we were in the right place and destined for great things.

When I was on my own, I read a great deal, especially the adventure novels of Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas and Karl May. In between times, I would stroll through B with Mamargot and her friends, the heroes teeming in my head.

I mention these joyful walks as evidence against myself, because, though I looked about me as attentively as any of my heroes, I noticed nothing. I examined the drooping branches of the spruces that lined the way to our house; I studied the patterns in the rough, friable bark. Yes, I subjected everything to minute scrutiny in those days, sensing that the world was full of mysterious signs—that I had only to study the spruce bark for long enough and something great would be revealed to me: the secret of life, or at least the secret of an immense treasure.

Some way up the hill, just past the first fork in the path where an enormous beech tree had been felled, I gathered bunches of blue and yellow flowers: chicory, scabious and meadow sage; dandelions, kidney vetch and cowslips. Dear Mamargot, who called me an ‘artistic soul’ even then, teased me for this, but always kept vases ready for me, which in winter I filled with armfuls of spruce. There was a book of flower paintings by Stefan Luchian that we often looked at together, and, every time, Mamargot would tell me the life story of this artist who had been struck by paralysis in 1900, at the age of only thirty-one, but had had his paintbrush tied to his

hand, so that he could go on painting. He didn't let his illness break him, Mamargot said, just as we would let nothing break us.

And I lay in her arms, looking at the pictures of vibrant red poppies, carnations, cornflowers, wild flowers, chrysanthemums, roses, marigolds and Luchian's famous anemones. He sold only one picture during his lifetime, to his teacher, but even failure could not deter him.

One of my favourite paintings was the *Two Muses* with their coronets of flowers, who reminded me of my friends Tina and Arina; another was the landscape *After Rain*. I approved of Luchian's determination to paint, and felt, too, that there was something right and noble in the years of his illness, which he spent surrounded by flowers, and in his early death. But perhaps that was just the way Mamargot told things.

It is said that the door to Stefan Luchian's house was always open, like a church door. The little oil lamp under the icons allowed him to see the outlines of things, even after dark. One night, towards the end of his life, when he was already almost entirely paralysed, a sombre figure came to him and took something from its long, black cloak—a musical instrument, a fiddle. For hours, this figure fiddled away without a word, and Stefan Luchian wept because he recognised all the songs.

'Wait,' he is said to have called out, as the figure turned to leave. 'Please tell me who you are!'

The dark figure came back and bent over the dying painter. 'Forgive me for bursting in on you like this. Think of me as a fellow-artist who loves you.'

In the light of the little oil lamp, Luchian recognised the composer George Enescu.

'George Enescu!' Mamargot cried with shining eyes. 'It was the great Enescu!'

'Where are the ladies of the house?' Someone was calling us. There was always a good deal of coming and going in the house: a steady flow of friends, holidaymakers from Bucharest and Bra ov who rented the other villas here, and a great many locals—sometimes even from

the outlying villages. And they all brought wild flowers and roses and enormous bunches of lilac and fir.

‘Look how magnificent!’ Mamargot called to me from between the hall and the drawing room. ‘What shall I do with them?’

It was a well-kept secret of our house that we had someone who lived down in the valley in the next village, where the goats were. The goat sheds were in what was once a very grand house belonging to Mamargot’s godparents—a long house with white Doric columns, broad windows and big marble steps up to the front door. Here, at the foot of these steps, the coaches used to wait, and the cook welcomed Mamargot’s godmother, because, of course, the lady of the house had to know the day’s menu as soon as she arrived. There were still photographs of this house and Mamargot liked to tell us all about it, and about the surrounding acacia wood, where she had ridden as a girl, before it was cleared by the Communists.

Now the white stately home was a goat farm, but, as I say, we knew someone who lived there. We called him Johnny, though I believe he was actually called something quite different. I can’t remember—if, indeed, I ever knew—how we were informed of Johnny’s prospective visits. But I do remember that on the day in question it was still quite early in the morning when our friends began to sing that Edith Piaf song:

*Johnny, tu n’es pas un ange,
Ne crois pas que ça m’dérange...*

Everyone was bustling about excitedly, when suddenly, unexpectedly, someone sighed and burst into song:

Johnny! Johnny!

Johnny! Johnny!

Si tu étais plus galant,

Johnny! Johnny!

Johnny! Johnny!

Je t'aimerais tout autant.

And everyone laughed, even more uproariously than usual.

Once, when a guest asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I caused great amusement by saying, 'Johnny's wife.' I must have been about eight or nine at the time.

'Good luck to you!' our guests cried. 'Good luck to you!' And they laughed.

'Never,' Mamargot shouted and I remember her anger, because she didn't often get cross. 'Not poor Johnny's wife. Stop this nonsense, all of you!'

But I continued to sing the chorus of the Johnny song to myself, especially when I was playing tennis. A groaned 'Johnny!'—serve—'Johnny!'—second serve—'Johnny!'—diagonal forehand and up to the net—a long-drawn-out 'Oh, Johnny!'—topspin volley! One day I would marry this Johnny, I was sure of it. And Mamargot would end up admiring me for it, just like everyone else.

I thought more and more about this Johnny from the white house; I had a clear picture of him. He was tall and thin with combed-back hair, a long nose and an elegant squint. He raised ladies' hands to his lips and bowed gallantly. I thought of him as I dashed about the tennis court in the first dew; I thought of him when I ran my damp fingers over the strips of sticking plaster on my black racquet or got a fleeting glance of a bird; I thought of him when the water pump in the courtyard squeaked or when I stuck colourful petals on my fingernails, all alone, without Tina and Arina.

And I was struck again and again by the feeling that the world was full of messages to me and that everything was pushing me in one direction, towards a great future—a future with Johnny from the grand white house.

One day I decided that when Johnny next came to visit, I would observe him very closely. This meant staying awake late, because Mamargot said he always came in the middle of the night. I didn't dare ask anyone to wake me when he arrived, and so I waited at the window for a long time.

I remember that night: it was dark, but filled with stars, the Milky Way a white wisp, just like our garden path of white gravel glinting in the moonlight. It smelt of fir resin and the chill of night. The river roared dimly in the forest; close by, an owl called.

Outside my open window I saw Johnny silhouetted against the light of the streetlamp, a figure in a hat and a dark coat—a powerfully built figure, to judge by his outline.

Margot went out to meet him. She opened the gate and led him through the garden.

'We've missed you,' she said, almost in a whisper. 'I thought you'd forgotten us.'

I heard her turn the heavy key in the lock, and a moment later Johnny's hoarse voice rang out on the stairs, cracking as he spoke. 'No, of course not! How could I forget you? How could you think such a thing of me?' He kissed her hand.

I crept out of my room, past the gleaming midnight blue of the grand piano and a bulky piece of furniture covered in a shimmering white dust sheet. I saw our friends gathering around Johnny and push him towards the kitchen. He still had his hat on; it towered over everyone's heads.

'You'd forgotten us, admit it!'

'But no'—another kiss of a hand—'I just haven't had a chance.'

'Oh, come on, you'd forgotten us.'

'How could I forget you?'

'A glass of water?'

‘Let him take off his coat first.’

I walked barefoot towards the kitchen, moving slowly, ever so slowly, over the creaky places in the parquet. Outside the kitchen I felt a stream of colder air.

Someone, a woman, gave a cry of delight, and the others hissed, ‘Sh! Not so loud!’

‘Zitti, zitti.’

I heard muted laughter.

I remember the light: towards the ceiling it was almost red, and it seemed to flicker up, casting leaping shadows. I soon noticed, too, the steam from breath and warm bodies—and, peeping into the kitchen, I saw our friends’ arms, their flailing sinewy arms, their groping hands that clawed at the flesh.

‘Faster, faster,’ they whispered with one voice, and a vast column of steam rose above them.

Their hands tore feverishly at the flesh.

‘This is a lovely piece—look at this!’

‘You haven’t seen this one!’

‘Ah!’

And in the middle of them and their flailing arms, I saw Johnny, stark naked and gleaming with blood, his powerful body stripped of its skin.

Chunk after chunk they tore from his body—from his chest, his belly, his legs. They heaped all the pieces onto big plates.

I remained in the doorway, staring at the man who lay there in mute endurance, growing gradually smaller and slighter. Beneath every layer of flesh, a new sheet of cling film was waiting to be ripped off, until our friends had stripped him right down to his pale body, revealing dark, damp hair on his chest and belly.

Before them lay a tall, skinny boy with drooping shoulders, dressed in bloody underpants.

Somebody brought him plastic sandals so that he could go to the bathroom and have a shower.

‘Are you sure we can’t heat up some water for you?’

‘No, merci, I can’t stay long.’ Johnny laughed. ‘I always have cold showers anyway; it’s healthy.’

Despite his thinness, he had a child’s chubby face. Was it my imagination, or did he have dimples, too?

‘Wonderful fellow!’ I heard our friends say. ‘You have to admire him!’

The following summer, Johnny, our man from the goat farm, stayed away even longer than usual—and then I heard our friends saying that he had been caught in the forest one night by the wolves. I didn’t know if they meant real wolves or Securitate agents, and I didn’t ask. But I felt sorry for Johnny.

I continued to think of him for a while—when I played tennis, for example. I would see the branches stir in the wind, and felt it not unlikely that he should come out of the forest and watch me play.

‘No, of course not! How could I forget you?’

Sometimes, a sound from the forest reminded me of a long-drawn-out note from an accordion: ‘Johnny, tu n’es pas un ange...’

But as time went on, I more or less stopped thinking about him.