PAPER RINGS

It was the year 1968. I was twenty-two. My world, the only one I knew – rigid, pitiless and inward-looking – was at war with the free world. Historians and politicians called it the Cold War. It was indeed a war – a very cold-blooded one conducted against my people who were cut off from the rest of the world. Contact between us and foreign citizens was not allowed. That year I was lucky to meet a girl named Ariella, from the free world. I opened my heart to her and she opened her heart to me. For us, suddenly, there was no war and the world was one. In our minds it was that simple.

This is our story of those times.

The Italian Girl

Orthodox Easter Eve, 1968, Bucharest.

I had seen her on Monday that week, mainly in profile. She looked to be in a hurry as she darted through the Law Faculty hall, her smiling face turning towards me for a brief moment, just enough to etch itself indelibly in my memory. Then she disappeared from my sight as quickly as a gazelle vanishes into the landscape, leaving me in wonderment.

For the following days I looked for her with some angst, scrutinising the faces coming in and going out through the main door. She had vanished. The thought that she might have been only a day guest at the congress crossed my mind. But, then, that couldn't be. Everything about her told me she was a foreigner. And that realisation both excited and scared me.

Then Saturday came, the last day of the 12th International Romance Linguistics and Philology Congress. I went to work early with some hopeful trepidation in my heart, almost refusing to believe this was my last chance to look for the young woman that had mesmerised me with her fleeting appearance. I loved the little I had seen of her; her thick raven-black plait swinging from shoulder to shoulder, those round sensual lips and her olive skin which reminded me of the gypsies of Lupoaia. I didn't want the Congress and the magic created by the sound of foreign languages in the Law Faculty hall to ever fade away, or at least not until I had seen the foreign girl again. It made me think a lot that week about the paradox I lived. I was in my third year of university, studying languages, and yet this was the first time I had rubbed shoulders with foreigners, well, in a literal sense, as

they were passing me by and some even talking to me. Many of my fellow students did not have this opportunity. Contact between us and foreigners, particularly Westerners, was not allowed, unless expressly authorised. Therefore, I felt privileged and lucky and I was smiling on the inside at the thought that I was one of the dozen students with language skills lent by the Dean to the Organising Committee of the congress to help the participants find their way to lecture rooms and to answer their questions. Our brief was to avoid talking politics but, if we had to, we were to keep in mind the supremacy of our political system over theirs, by reminding them that there was no exploitation of man over man in our country; that we did not have unemployment as everybody was given a job; and that there was no disruption in our society due to strikes and endless bargaining between workers and factories. Our system was fair to all. We had, therefore, all the freedom we wanted to concentrate on the main task of building a luminous future for everybody, as promised by our leaders so often. Many of us knew that our leaders' words were empty rhetoric and did not believe them. Such being the situation, it seemed that we had come to a sort of unwritten covenant, where they lied to us and we lied to them. We said yes to their face and no in our hearts. This way everybody gained another day – they continued leading and we continued living.

I was stationed at the main door that Saturday morning. The first group of participants to arrive was speaking German, a language I did not know but had learned to identify. They were well disposed and laughing loudly. When they approached me, a middle-aged balding teacher from East Germany with a smattering of Romanian, motioned the others to stop and turned towards me, "What number is this in Romanian?" he asked, showing me six fingers. I was a bit taken aback, but I said "*Şase*," and all of them laughed heartily. "Guter Mann, wunderbar!" he said, giving me a strong pat on the back. Later, I found out that our *şase* sounded like *Scheiße*, or "shit" in German. The comrade teacher from East Germany was funny. He had a sense of humour, and I liked that. He seemed a bit more relaxed than me and my compatriots.

After two hours I was shifted from the door. I resented that as I

could not see the girl with the raven plait come in if she, as I still hoped, decided to do so. After a while I arranged to change places with another companion and firmly planted myself beside the main door again, scrutinising faces in the foyer and keeping an eye on the path leading from the Bulevardul 6 Martie to the Law Faculty entrance.

Around midday one of my young Spanish lecturers rushed in.

"*Buenos días, Señora Profesora*," I greeted comrade Panduru with a smile. We had an agreement to speak as much Spanish as we could outside classes and I was glad that Spanish allowed me to get rid of the hated term "comrade".

"*¡Hola Flonta! ¿Como estás?*" she asked, her eyes darting between me and the few people in the foyer.

She told me she had an appointment with an Italian girl which she could not keep as a more important commitment came up. Then she asked me if I had made any friends.

"We are not allowed," I said.

"I know!" She rolled her eyes and with an air of defiance told me she had made a couple of Spanish friends and was very pleased with herself. Next year she was going to apply for a passport and hoped to get it and travel to Spain.

I knew she couldn't exchange any Romanian money and I asked her how she was going to solve that problem.

"My friends have promised to help me. One day I'll repay them in some way, of course," she said very sure of herself; her eyes strayed from me towards the lecture rooms doors while she talked.

"*Perdona*," she said, leaving me in the lurch, and waved to a young girl coming out of a lecture room. Suddenly my heart started pounding as if wanting to break through the wall of my chest. It was the girl with the raven plait, smiling and waving back at *Señora* Panduru. They met a few metres from my station and exchanged a few words. Then together they made their way towards me.

"I would like you to meet *Signorina* Ariella Dal Seno," said *Señora* Panduru. "Flonta is my best student," she lied.

I kissed Ariella's hand, as we used to do with ladies. She blushed, almost withdrawing it, not being accustomed to such gallantry.

"Look after her, Flonta. She is your chance to talk Italian," *Señora* Panduru said, this time in Romanian, and smiled. Then she left.

My heart was pumping as fast as if I was running the last hundred metres of a marathon. My wish to meet this girl, longed for all week, was granted and yet I was speechless. I knew I had to say something. I was the boy after all and that was expected of me. Ariella made it easier, though, by moving her gaze from me in the direction of Comrade Panduru who was now outside the building, descending the steps of the Law Faculty.

"*Signorina* Dal Seno, you are the first young Westerner I have ever talked to," I said, hoping to impress her. Impress I did, judging by the wonder in her voice.

"Really?" she almost chanted, seemingly amazed and delighted. "But listen," she continued half laughing and half serious, "let's start on the right foot. Call me Ariella. I'd be pleased if you did so."

"All right," I said a bit embarrassed.

Ariella with her long plait, looking for all the world like a diligent schoolgirl, appeared much younger than her age; when she smiled, her well-shaped lips revealed pearly white teeth which glistened against her olive complexion. Looking in awe at this enchanting capitalist girl, all the teachings our regime had imparted – that capitalist countries and, implicitly, their citizens, were our enemies – went out of the window. All the laws forbidding personal relationships between *us* and *them* became instantly irrelevant, despite the rules.

At the time, there were two types of crimes you could commit: propaganda against the socialist system and treason – various types of treason – against the State. The legislation was sketchily written but broad in its scope to allow the Securitate (the Romanian Secret Police) to act against a suspect at their discretion. Anyone could become a suspect at any time. The punishment ranged from five to twenty years jail and the confiscation of property, to death.

"What lectures have you listened to so far?" she asked.

I told her I did not listen to any as we students were there as guides for the participants only. She seemed a bit disappointed, but told me she was extremely pleased to have come to the congress as she

was interested in structural linguistics and was already working as a researcher in the field. She was a few years older than me and had graduated three years ago from the State University of Milan. Then, as if we were already good friends, she asked:

"What are you doing this afternoon?"

"I don't know... nothing special," I said quickly. Her question took me by surprise as it came so unexpectedly.

"Perhaps you'll come on the trip to the *Muzeul Satului* – the Village Museum. I've heard that it overlooks a marvellous lake. Have you been there?"

I loved her question. Could I say no? That was what I was supposed to do, if I followed the rules. But how could I refuse this charming girl? Who knew if I would have had the courage to invite her? Perhaps not, given the restrictions our laws tried to impose on us. The rule, not to accept invitations or gifts from foreigners, was ringing in my ears.

"Yes, I've been there a few times."

"Shall we meet here after the next lecture?" Ariella asked me.

"Of course," I replied eagerly.

"See you soon," she said, her tender gaze enveloping my soul.

"See you."

Ariella went off and, after a few steps, she turned, pointing her finger at me jokingly, "Mind you, don't be late for our first date."

"Don't worry, I won't be leaving this spot," I said, laughing. I couldn't believe this was happening.

I was not leaving. I had to stay at my post to see if any of these capitalists left the conference rooms, where they were going, what they were up to, and to alert the authorities into timely action to prevent such foreigners plotting against us. Or… from wanting to befriend us!

Certainly, Ariella was very direct, in spite of projecting a first impression of being a timid person. I was more and more intrigued, drawn to her. And I ardently hoped that she did not change her mind about the trip.

The door of the lecture room closed behind her. The thought that I could have followed her on some pretext, asking one of my companions to stand in for me, crossed my mind. Instead I went into the

nearby cubicle installed temporarily for us student guides. There was not much room left as it was crowded with people. Clouds of smoke were floating everywhere, small ones merged into big ones, then they were dispersed by expert hands, only to be inhaled again by coughing young chests. My companions had crammed into the cubicle and were feverishly devouring one cigarette after the other. The cigarettes were foreign, but above all Kent. Foreign cigarettes were available either in the special shops for hard currency and accessible only to visitors from abroad and high-ranking Party members, or on the black market. You could find many types of foreign cigarettes on the black market, but for some reason the Kent brand had become a fixation for the Romanians. The Kents could help you buy a colour television set or a much sought-after video recorder as well as other contraband goods imported from the West; a carton of Kent could also help you buy a set of dentures or put you at the front of the line for an appointment with a famous specialist, while a single packet would open all sorts of small doors which would otherwise have stayed closed to you. Kent cigarettes were the illegal currency accepted tacitly by the regime and as long as you were not caught into the act of buying them, you were safe.

I sat down beside Iulia, who offered me a cigarette. In the spirals of smoke which rose from my mouth it was easy to visualise Ariella's face, her charming smile, her raven hair, and suddenly I was seized with trepidation: what if she changed her mind? I didn't even want to think of it and, to ward off that doubt, I stretched out my hand to disperse the smoke rings. But I was mistaken in believing that I could erase that thought from my mind with a simple gesture. I longed for her. Her spontaneity, the ease with which she had spoken to me, her manner; all this had made a profound impression on me in such a little time. Meanwhile, in the cubicle no one uttered a word, the Kent cigarettes becoming ever smaller until eventually, scorching the fingers of the chain-smokers, they were squashed under the heels of shoes.

Suddenly, through the clouds of smoke, I thought I saw Ariella. I rushed outside and there she was, seated on the bench along the foyer

wall, with her legs crossed, displaying her dazzling smile.

"You are here already?" I asked, pleasantly surprised.

"I was bored with the lecture. I'd like to get out of here."

"Give me a minute," I offered. I went straight to Marin, a French student, and asked him to stand in for me. I whispered the request and he immediately accepted, but not before telling me to avoid being seen by our supervisor. He added that he wanted a share of the presents the Italian girl was going to give me for my services and winked while pushing me out of the cubicle. Western contacts were coveted as they were not only a source of learning about a world we aspired to, but also a source of material goods we were constantly lacking.

Ariella and I set off together. Her uncertain steps down the stairs made me offer her my arm and she accepted with grace. A vision of Ariella as some dashing princess dressed in a white dress with a long train and I as her Prince Charming in white tie and tails, leading her by the hand as I had seen in films, came to me. I realised that my mind was galloping at full speed. The recurrent thought that relationships between us and foreigners were not allowed by our laws made me angry and my dream more intense.

The coaches hired by the congress were lined up for departure to the Village Museum. We boarded the last one and waited for it to leave. I studied the people coming in, all foreigners, conspicuous by the cut and colour of their clothes, by their exuberance and the ease with which they spoke to one another. I wasn't able to spot a single one of my fellow countrymen.

Ariella told me about her coming to Romania. She talked quickly. At the beginning I struggled to keep up with her as my mind was slow in processing that amount of conversational Italian unleashed on me all of a sudden, although I did not have many problems with the Italian I heard in the lectures and tutorials. Nonetheless, I enjoyed enormously my total immersion in Italian and the opportunity to contemplate the young capitalist lady sitting so comfortably next to me, to absorb every gesture; her smile; the slanted eyes; the movement of her lips; her white teeth; the dance of the thick, dark plait from one shoulder

to another. And gradually I became more and more comfortable in her presence. But somehow I felt that I was being observed – I often had that impression – and the need to temper her exuberance overcame me. I whispered, asking her to lower her voice. She seemed to understand and looked over her shoulder, just as I had already done several times.

She told me she had been invited to Romania by a girlfriend she had met at a summer philological course in Malaga, with luminaries of the field present like Baldinger, Coşeriu, Pottier, who were now lecturing at this congress. She asked me if I knew that Coşeriu was a Romanian. Although famous in the West, I had never heard of him before; he was not even mentioned in our linguistics courses. I found out later that when the communists took over he was in Italy, and never came back to partake in our workers' paradise.

There were only two girls from Romania at the course, she said, and she noticed they never went to the students' canteen like everybody else. After she befriended Cristina, Ariella visited their room one day and saw their suitcases full of tinned fish, meat and cocoa and then she understood they did not have money. Later she learned the reason why they couldn't have it. They could not get out of Romania with dollars, and our currency was not accepted by the international exchange.

A few days earlier, when Ariella arrived in Bucharest, Cristina and her husband took her to a one-room apartment in the city centre, and on the bed there was a gift for her, an LP record of folk music. She was told she was going to sleep there. She did not know that Cristina and her husband were sleeping on the floor at Cristina's parents' home. Now she was very embarrassed and was looking for a way to repay them, as they would not accept anything from her.

We were the last ones off the coach. The Herăstrău Park extended over a vast area along the shore of Herăstrău Lake, and the park benches were host to people of all ages. The lake, an immense, glistening expanse, was crammed with little rowing boats. The group proceeded quickly towards the museum but the two of us remained behind.

"How do you pass the time?" Ariella asked me.

"Oh, I work, I study and... I sleep."

"And you don't do anything else?" asked Ariella with an inquiring

frown.

"Not much. What else can I do?"

"Don't you go out with friends?"

"I don't have many friends." I felt I had to explain by telling her how busy I was, but that seemed ridiculous.

"Strange! I have lots of friends, we help each another, do many things together. Sometimes we might not see one another for months, at times even for years, but we still remain friends."

Her concept of extensive friendships was too outlandish for me. I could count my friends on the fingers of one hand. The fact that my father had been for many years labelled a *chiabur* – enemy of the people – might have had something to do with it. This was what I was used to. Ariella talked about friends in Spain, Portugal, Romania and so on. *What a luxury*, I thought. It seemed that study was an auxiliary thing for her, by the way she talked. I envied her for being able to be so easy-going about friendship and I loved her almost carefree attitude to life; I suddenly yearned so much to be in her skin and out of my grey, limiting environment. Study and work seemed to be my whole world.

"Too good to be true," was the only silly thing which came out of my mouth.

"For us it is the pleasure of meeting, of talking things over, exchanging ideas. We don't have to have identical opinions, philosophies."

It was evident that she did not know much about my world, where exchanging ideas could be dangerous. We knew that criticising the government was an offence, but also buying and discussing foreign books was not tolerated. Many books in our libraries could be consulted only with a special permission. Corresponding with foreigners was also not advisable. Ariella was lucky. My world was so different from hers. Many things were upside down, nothing squared properly. How could it be when in our self-proclaimed materialistic society it was the material things we lacked most. It was evident to everybody that the Western world was materially richer than ours. We were all needy, poor by comparison. Thus friendship was often limited to an exchange of goods which created a chain of obligations towards each other.

We needed each other to survive as the regime cared mostly about what we could not do and could not have. “I have an obligation to do this for him or for her” was what you heard often and that was the cement which bonded people in my world. A life full of obligations and often devoid of sentiment was no fun at all, but it kept us busy. As for exchanging ideas, well, we could take the risk to do that in private, testing the trust of family members and friends.

“Lucky you!” I said, and felt guilty for my lack of imagination. Then I felt the need to explain quietly that we always had to pay attention to what we said and what we thought, because in our society even our walls had the Securitate’s ears and eyes.

The Securitate was formed in 1948 and by 1960 it had put in place a formidable surveillance and repression system characterised by arrests in the middle of the night, beatings, torture, and rape of female detainees. Their purpose was to implement Party objectives, but unofficially they administered fear. It has been estimated that Securitate collaborators numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Everybody was a potential enemy and for that reason we felt under constant watch.

Ariella said she was trying to understand, but she found it difficult.

For a moment her uncertainty made a crazy idea flash through my mind. What if she, with that dashing smile of hers, was working for *them*? Anything was possible. After all, it did not take long for her, with her forward attitude and right amount of charm, to make me talk. Looking perplexed at my expert Mata Hari and realising that my remarks had gone too far, I felt the sudden urge to remedy in some way what I had said, perhaps to play down my words, but something paralysed me; I did nothing. I glanced around and I looked at her again. And yet, that smile did not look like the smile of a traitor. But how did a traitor’s smile look? I could not let the panic of the moment ruin everything. Too many times in the past I had been guided by rules embodied in the simple phrase *nu se poate* – “it’s not allowed” – and I’d adjusted my actions accordingly. And too many times I’d regretted my decisions.

“Shall we sit down?” Ariella asked, pointing to an empty park

bench.

"Yes, you must be tired," I remarked.

She headed along the path towards the bench. I followed her, happy that our group was not anywhere to be seen and the guide could not recall us into the ranks. We sat down. Above our heads, soaring like a magnificent dome, was the crown of a huge tree. Its low, widespread boughs were laden with beautiful flowers of a sheer delicate white. Warm sunrays flickered through the branches and danced on the grass. A gentle breeze carried the faint sound of water from the lake. Subdued perfumes rose from the multi-coloured flowerbeds spread around us.

"What superb flowers!" exclaimed Ariella. "It's like paradise here."

I was tempted to say, with sarcasm "workers' paradise," the over-abused phrase forced upon our ears by the official propaganda, but I decided I had already talked too much politics.

"I wish you were right," I replied instead.

I stood up, broke off a little flowering twig and offered it to her. She thanked me, with surprised eyes and blushing cheeks, then detached a cluster of flowers and coyly fixed it at the top of her raven plait. Those flowers gave her a festive air, and they seemed to be in their natural place. I wanted to hug her. I didn't, but I could hardly restrain myself from doing so. I felt lighter, and decided that my temporary paranoia should not stand in my way of having a good time with my charming companion. Her eyes which stared at me as if wanting to pierce my soul, the shy blushes on her cheeks, the coquettish way she tilted her head when she smiled and the soft and caring tone of voice when asking questions she considered indiscreet were genuine, surely, and inspired trust. Now everything about her contradicted my earlier fears that she might be an agent working against me. I should not have doubted my first instincts about her and now I was regretting that moment of weakness.

I wished with all my heart I could freeze those moments spent together and frame them all like pictures, with the two of us at the centre as inseparable figures.

The rowdy procession of delegates, having adhered to the itinerary imposed by the official guide, approached our bench. We fell into

line with them and shortly after veered off towards the lake. Ariella squealed at the sight of the little rowing boats sliding across the calm waters. Seeing her enthusiasm, I decided to hire one. Once well away from the shore, I let go of the oars, immersed my hand in the clear, transparent water and watched the undulating wake. Ariella seemed to amuse herself by watching me.

"Will you let me row, please?" Ariella asked, tilting her head and smiling.

"Of course."

Intent on exchanging places, Ariella slipped and the boat tilted sharply to her side. She clutched hold of me and, in coming to her aid, I noticed the softness and the alluring perfume of her hair as my lips brushed against it. Then the fragile craft steadied itself, and she moved her face from my chest and fixed her big eyes upon me, frightened.

"What a scare!" she exclaimed, releasing herself from my embrace.

She sat down. My gaze followed her as I remained standing, my heart pounding. I felt elated that, somehow, I had been able to protect her, even if only from the calm waters of the lake. I had never felt like that for a woman before.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked.

I didn't answer. I sat down too.

On our return to the city, I wanted to give Ariella a parting gift to remind her of her stay in Romania and, hopefully, of me. As we strolled along Calea Victoriei, she wanted to know what the most imposing buildings housed. I told her that the building on our left was the Central Army House and she frowned, as if I were saying something blasphemous.

"What's that?" she asked.

I did not know how to explain, but I said it was like a club for officers.

"Right in the middle of the city?" she asked.

"Well, yes," I said. And then I added, "And just a hundred meters behind us is the Police Headquarters."

She looked at me and her face fell, but did not say anything. Then she asked me what the building was on our right.

"It's a toy shop," I said. She headed towards it. The window was as bare as many others in the city were.

"Where are the toys?" she asked.

"Inside."

She wanted to see and we entered. There was a very poor display of a few little wooden blocks and some plastic tools. The few better items were under the counters. The two ladies sellers, too busy chatting, did not pay any attention to us, so we left.

"There is not much in there," Ariella said. "If you could only see the toy shops in Milan!" she continued, looking at me with bright eyes.

I could not answer and walked besides her, thinking of the present I wanted to give her. We passed two palaces, the Central Post and the Telephones, and when I pronounced the word "palace" she opened her eyes wide. Seeing the effect that word had on her, I pointed ahead in the distance and said that in the square, on the left hand side of the street, there was the Royal Palace. She had a curious expression on her face.

"There is no king anymore," I explained.

"Was he killed?" she asked.

"No, he abdicated and now lives somewhere in Switzerland."

"Ah! In exile, like our king."

She said that she was pleased to have me as a guide. She'd learned something about Bucharest where everywhere we had palaces, but no toys for children. Her light laugh made me smile. I liked her irony and I liked even more her laughter.

"I go often to the University Central Library, which is in that square in front of the Royal Palace," I said, pointing again.

"Libraries are nice places. Do they have a good selection of Italian books?"

"I think so, but not all of them are available to the public."

"No!" A mixture of wonder and indignation spread about her face. "Why?"

"They are carriers of reactionary ideologies."

"How do you prepare for your Italian exams then?"

"We use manuals published by our lecturers, take notes and read

what is made available through our Faculty library."

"Are you allowed to express opinions which are not those of your lecturers, let's say from older books?" she wondered.

"You need a special permission to consult old books published before communism took over."

"That's unbelievable." She barely could restrain herself. "I was aware that people could not have Bibles in Russia, but I thought it was because the regime's professed atheism. This is news to me," she continued.

We walked for a while, shoulder to shoulder, without talking. Suddenly, she stopped and, looking somewhat askew at me, pronounced a sentence which would stay with me for a long time. "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past," she said with a pensively frowned look. "It was written by an English writer a few years ago," she added.

Then she told me she had just joined an organisation created by Catholic priests that aimed to educate people about Russian orthodoxy, to inform about the lack of religious freedom and to contribute in whatever way they could to maintaining a Christian presence in Russia. They organised seminaries with exiled Russian writers and artists and printed books and articles reaching them through *samizdat*, copies written by hand or cyclostyled.

I listened to her in awe. From time to time she turned her face towards me and her eyes shined with intelligence, while her voice seemed to strive for the right tone to convince me that what she said was true and that she was very serious about it. I noticed that after each gaze she directed at me, she would lower her voice conspiratorially and I liked the intimacy those moments created between us.

We arrived in front of the big music store close to the Cretzulescu Church, and I remembered the LP record Cristina gave her. I asked if she liked folk music. She said she liked listening to it when she felt melancholy. Under the word "Electrecord" in big letters, the window showed real LP discs, a guitar, a drum, a saxophone.

"Let's go in," I said.

"You want to buy something?" she asked.

"Something for you," I said.

She blushed and smiled.

"No, you shouldn't," she protested mildly.

"Why not? You have to remember Romania for something," I said.

I asked the young salesman to bring us a few LP records. Ariella sat and pulled down her dress to cover her knees. Seeing me looking at her she smiled, a little embarrassed. I found that adorable. She chose a Maria Tănase record. She listened to *Cine iubeşte şi lasă* – He Who Loves and then Leaves You – and wanted to know the words. I did my best to translate the first verse, but then she wanted to know it all. She lent me the headphones and I translated it. And when I finished, she looked a bit puzzled.

"What is it? You don't like it?" I asked.

"I like it, I like it very much," she said. "It's so haunting, revengeful, sad" She seemed to look past me, when she said that, which made me worry a bit. But then, after she saw the little Cretzulescu Church, she became herself again. We went to the door where she watched people inside, and I watched her.

We walked back in silence towards the University Square. I didn't have the courage to allude to our imminent, inevitable parting. I felt uneasy that after spending the afternoon together like two old friends we had to separate like this, abruptly, especially since our separation would leave a big question mark for me: was this the last time I would see her?

We arrived at the bus station. She pulled a beautifully printed visiting card with her address and phone number on it out of her bag and gave it to me. I was thrilled that she'd done this spontaneously as I had been struggling to know how to ask for it.

"Well, then?" I asked.

"I'm leaving tonight."

"So soon! I'm sorry. I would have at least wanted to see you off."

"It doesn't matter, Teodor, you've been very kind to me, you've wasted enough time already," she said.

"It's been an afternoon very well spent for me, one of the best,

believe me," I said.

"As you wish," she smiled, but her eyes looked at me as if from a long distance, betraying melancholy.

"You must be tired, go and have some rest," she said.

"Tonight I go to work."

"But isn't it your Easter vigil today?"

"It is, but I have to celebrate it by working," I said with a faint smile.

"What work do you do at night?"

"I'm a radio announcer."

"Radio announcer? Wow!"

"In Italian," I said.

"Then I'll be able to listen to you?" Her eyes lit up with enthusiasm.

"Certainly, if you'd like to. But you won't like some of the things you'll hear," I replied in a subdued tone.

She dismissed that with a movement of her hand. "Will you write to me?" she asked.

"For sure." I was extremely pleased by her request.

"Thank you for everything," she said and held out her hand to me. I kissed it gently, and she blushed again like she did in the morning, but did not attempt to withdraw it this time.

Then she suddenly swung around and got onto the bus.

As the bus moved away, she waved me goodbye from the window. Her plait was swinging from shoulder to shoulder and her smile showed her white teeth. She disappeared from my sight that evening just as suddenly as she had appeared to me at the beginning of the week.

I remained there for a while, struggling to understand why I had to hold back tears. She was a stranger I had only talked to for one afternoon. Then, still dazed by that experience, it was my turn to get on a bus, the one directed to Radio Bucharest, to read the news for Ariella's compatriots who believed that my world was better than theirs.