



An Interview

She called me on my mobile while I was at work. I answered, hoping. “Come at six, Darina,” she said, “and wait outside. There’ll be others too.”

A whole bunch of people were there. All women. Nobody talked and there was no sense of organisation. I was worried somebody else who’d come after me would go in first and everyone shared my worry.

We waited outside a polished metal door near a dirty, unkempt, staircase and other people, people who probably lived close by, would pass and I tried not to look at them. I don’t mind standing, though, especially when it’s standing for what I want.

I looked at the other girls. Some looked a bit too old but no matter. Some were incredibly pretty and natural and some were overdressed and over-ready, perfumed, with coiffures, one of them had deep blue eye shadow as if to hypnotise. She’ll do well.

The longer I waited the more concerned I became. I had come straight from work and I was starting to feel tired. Waiting. I was thinking that it’s only Wednesday and I had to get through to the end of the week. And I also felt unprofessional and ridiculous. What was I doing there at close to seven in the evening outside a stranger’s door? I felt small in my suit. The girls who went in seemed to spend a great deal of time in there. They were retelling their life stories in great detail.

“Yes, of course,” one of them would say, “I’ve had private English lessons from Mr X.”

And the girl with the eye shadow would smile for the first time, her smile timed to perfection, showing her pearly whites.

I was definitely tired, leaning against the wall and hoping it would embrace me and protect me from the uncertainty in my mind. On the phone, she had the voice of a strong woman. She had a to-the-point voice, someone who knew what she wanted and how to get it. From what I knew, the agency was run by a husband and wife, the wife with considerable experience, and it sounded like she was in charge of communications. She got things moving. And when she

opened the door to call me in I immediately saw that she looked the same way she talked. She had curly hair, from a perm no doubt, and a light shirt with a jacket on top which made her appear professional. But as I walked inside, and she shut the door behind me, I was not really taken aback by the place. I had expected something a bit, well, richer! I hadn't expected an everyday place, with pictures of boats in the corridor and a shoe-rack! And her husband, or the man waiting in the living room, sitting at a small table, had no smile for me.

"Take your shoes off, Darina, and sit down," she said, right behind me, slightly abrupt and I was starting to worry.

I slipped them off and sat in front of him while she came up in front and sat down opposite. He started it all off.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions in English. They will ask you something similar at the Embassy."

The Embassy was this frightening place and the officers in there would mercilessly question me, trying to find out if I was worthy of entering their country, working there and taking care of their children.

"That's fine," I said, feeling anxious about my standard of English, although I had practiced at home.

"Why do you want to work with children?"

It took a minute for my mind to adjust to the sound of English coming from his mouth.

"I love children. You can learn so much from them. Their behaviour. I have also learnt a lot about them at university."

"Good. Good." His English was probably limited to the questions or saying yes, no or good.

"What experience have you got?"

"I have worked in voluntary organisations looking after disabled or disadvantaged children." I had rehearsed this line and I was very happy to use it.

"Good."

"What guarantee do we have that you will come back?"

"I want to come back and start a Masters and learning English will help me do that. I also have no family there," and a Romanian without family is like a fish without water.

"Are you planning to get married there?"

I started laughing in a stupid, almost uncontrolled manner. "No!"

He raised his eyebrows as if telling me 'Don't do that at the Embassy.'

"Are you going there for money?"

“No.” This was probably the most ridiculous question. Everybody goes abroad for money and everybody knows.

“Good,” and again he had no smile for me, nothing to tell me whether I’d done well or whether I had failed completely.

“Now, what do you know about working as an au pair?”

“You help out the family with their children.”

“Yes, but it’s an easy job. Very easy. All you do is help out the mother, like you do at home I hope, you do a bit of cooking and cleaning and guess how long you work for?”

“Hmm?”

“About twenty-five hours a week! Can you believe that? Where would you find such an easy job here?”

“I’m more set on America-”

“America! Look, America is overrated. You don’t want to go there. The English pound is twice as powerful as the dollar. They have no holidays there and work like slaves. Be smart. Go to England.”

“I don’t know...two friends of mine went to America and, from what I’ve heard, they’re doing very well there.” They’ve moved on from being au pairs to working in their domains. In fact they’re doing so well they haven’t bothered to come back home.

“You need to be smart. Think. The pound is twice as powerful. Twice! Look it up in the exchange rates.” The man didn’t even bother to sound enthusiastic. He’d probably said the same thing a hundred times already. A thousand times.

“And in England if you work more you get more. Look...” and she bent over and as well as showing me half her tits she also showed me a gold chain.

“You see this chain?”

“Yes.”

“This eighteen carat gold chain was given to me as a present when I worked as an au pair in England.”

“Really?”

“Have a look at it. Eighteen carat gold. Beautiful!” She let me touch it and although it looked like any other gold chain seeing her smiley face somehow made it special.

“That’s very nice,” I said, smiling in response to it all.

“This is a great opportunity for you,” said her rather bored husband.

“You will never have an opportunity like this.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know when the next opportunity will be.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“Right, and let me tell you, you won’t find an easier, better paid job than this one. We guarantee you three hundred English pounds a week! How does that sound? Fantastic, no? And you’ve never been to England but to me it was a wonderful experience. Everything’s clockwork there. Everybody’s polite, helpful, decent and people always have so much in the house you’ll never go hungry. Do you understand me? You can’t because you’ve never seen anything like it. A fridge, ceiling high, bursting full of anything you’ve ever dreamt of. You like ice cream? They’ve got every type imaginable and any time you want something you just go and help yourself. You don’t even have to ask them. Their home will be your home. And they take you on holiday with them. I went everywhere. Greece, Italy, New York. You will be like them and they will treat you like a member of their family. You probably won’t even miss your family will you?” she asked, that near-psychotic grin on her face.

“No, I probably won’t.”

“And, if you want more money, I mean how much money are you looking to earn anyway, you can easily put an advert in a local shop window and get easy babysitter or cleaning jobs in the evening. So easy you won’t believe they’re actually paying you, what ten, twelve pounds an hour for it. All you do is watch the child and make sure they don’t do anything stupid. That’s it. Or clean the kitchen table, like you do at home. That’s it.” I see her now, how she must’ve been licking her lips.

“You said you want to learn English. You can learn English there for free,” said the man.

“Your family will tell you what to do. You go to the nearest college and sign up. They’re very welcoming.” She was completing his words. His words and hers were automated responses. A persuasive jazz.

“You’ll love England. It’s perfect for you.” I didn’t believe the man. Not at all, but all this while I was thinking no matter what the truth is, no matter what happens, I need to do it, I need a proper paid job, I want to come back and buy a house, I need to learn English, it has to be done. I’d sold my car already.

“What if I don’t like it? What if something goes wrong?” Oh, what if? What if the world will end?

“Nothing can go wrong. Your English family have strong links with the agency in England. We are only a small representative branch. As you know, the large agency is based in London. You will have their phone number and address.

If things don't go to plan, touch wood, phone them and they'll give you another family straight away." Where are they? Where are you?

"Darina, don't think too much. Go for it. You can't lose. You will never have a chance like this one."

"I know. Yes, I know." And I did know. But I also knew that I was thirsty and sweaty and couldn't make my thoughts connect.

"Have a look," he said, pushing a paper in my direction. The paper had on it pretty much the same stuff they had told me. The opportunities. The reassurance that I wouldn't be stuck with my family forever.

"Read it and sign. We've got a lot more to see today." The lot were outside their door, waiting to sign like I had been. I turned the paper over. There was the usual on there, name, address, references, but apparently I was to sign for fifty pounds a week! I pointed this out to them.

"That's for the Embassy. If they knew you were going for three hundred they wouldn't let you go."

"Don't worry so much." How could I not worry?

"Ok, I get it." Using the pen that was conveniently placed near me, I began filling out the form.

"By the way," she said while I was bent over tying my shoelaces, "it's a good idea to buy your family traditional presents. They love hand-made traditional stuff. Dolls. Embroidery. Anything traditional. Maybe even musical...you know?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, almost stumbling over, hot and realising that I'd given everything and had signed away my future. I had also given them half my money, what I'd worked for, what my brand new car had been worth. I only had enough money for a plane ticket back. And I couldn't really see anything as I left, not even the girl who was putting on fresh lipstick as I walked towards the stairs.



The Verdict

You get gut sick.
From the moment everything hits you there's nothing in the world that can
save you.
It happens when you think the past is gone and forgotten.
Gut sickness.

“God!”

Suddenly you want God on your side.
You go to church.
You went last in '90.
But it's worse.
The incense, the holy words, these make it far worse.
Surely you can't cry, not you with the big balls and big belly.
No way, not even this horrifying sickness can get to you.
You put a strong wall up a long time ago.
It's one o'clock.
One more minute.
She will come.
Moaning.
Bitching.
This is definitely not what you imagined would happen.
She's changed for the worse.
Power scrunched up her mind.
And she's better than you.
In every way.
She is more.
But she looks terrible this late with her hair sticking up and her wrinkles
clearly showing in feeble light.
She's looked terrible for years no matter how much make-up she's used.

“What are you doing?”

You can't answer.

Not now.

“Have you lost it? What do you think you're doing sitting there so late drinking țuică?”

Her voice is an echo far away, possibly in another room lost by the time it gets to you.

“You have to be ready at five. And you can't hold down your alcohol. Don't be stupid...”

She knows exactly how it is.

There is no problem.

You're just feeling a little sad.

Maybe it's the dark skies of winter.

Be careful.

These roads are yours and you know them well.

How well?

Your name in capitals.

Precisely painted in red.

Park right there and walk out proud.

It's early and nobody cares if you stumble.

Night time.

Sleep.

You can't see very well but you know which way to go.

Use your instinct.

You've done this so long, so many hours, six, seven days a week, thirty years.

Retirement's not a bad idea.

Retirement?

You feel sick at the thought and much too sick.

You go in to your office, determined.

You lock your door and open the drawer in your desk taking out the bottle of țuică.

You find some old cigarettes and light one.

Everything's swimming.
Gut sickness but you can't vomit.
Nothing comes out.
You need the alcohol.
You rub your face trying to get some blood working.
What is this?
Cancer?
It's not like you to worry.
You're a happy-go-lucky character.
Your smile is heavenly.
People admire you, look up to you.
Only your children don't.
The two boys.
The two alcoholics.
They haven't learned anything.
Use and use and abuse.
Idiots.
Simply one of life's many disappointments.
This is not like you, you, you, who the hell are you?
Sitting in this office like a king.
Your cigarette's finished.
Light up another.
Stretch over and open the window. More țuică.
How dare you?
How dare you cry?
Someone's knocking and you don't panic.
You don't worry.
You can stand and you can walk and you manage to slowly
unlock the door.
It's the sister in charge.
She's usually very pleasant.

"Hello, Doctor."

"Hello, Ana."

"How are you?"

She can smell your breath.
“Same as usual. And you?”

“Tired. Need more sleep.”

“We all need more.”

“Like lions.”
You try to chuckle.
It comes out rough.
Your spittle clings to her.

“You have seven operations today.”

“Is that all?”

“Seven would kill me.”
And she walks around the office looking for something.

“I don’t know.”
Today you feel like one operation will kill you.

“When is the board review?”

“In two weeks.”

“Tell them we need more syringes.”

“I will.”

She has a nasty side.
It comes out when she needs something.

The anaesthetic can leave you suffering from hallucinations for the rest of your
life.

White circles and red circles and elephants sucking in and out of perspective.
They don’t tell you that.

They only tell you what is necessary.
It is a dark room, a morgue, a sanctuary.
It is extremely dark where you are standing.
It has never been darker, pulling you down into the earth.
There are no sounds, nothing that is reminiscent of breathing.

Rats.

In a cold cellar.

Morning, night, afternoon.

Your hands are lost in the mist, plunging on instinct.

“What is he doing? That incision is wrong!”

“He knows best.”

“Not any more.

Not recently.

He knows about the bottle.”

“Shut your mouth before he hears you.”

“He’s heard me.

I’ve told him.

He doesn’t care.

You can tell him anything and he doesn’t care, isn’t that RIGHT Doctor?”

“Right.”

•

You feel hot.

Your uniform is strangling you.

Your desk is a barrier keeping you away from reality.

And yet you’re on the other side looking at this fat, trembling, burning wreck.

They’re knocking.

They’re all knocking.

The whole town wants to see you.

You are theirs.

One hundred percent.

To the last molecule.
“Come in. Come in!”

He comes in,
wearing peasant clothes,
unshaven,
most probably unwashed.
Just look at that.
The times haven’t changed anything.
Oh God no.
“I need some medicine, Doctor.”

“Sit down.”

He sits down.
He’s got sad green eyes.
Most of the peasants have these sad green eyes.

“What do you need?”

“Insulin, Doctor.”

“Who’s got diabetes?”

“My daughter, Doctor.
She’s dying.”

Rewind.
Thirty or so years ago this would’ve broken your heart.
But you sold off pity, heart and care.
You had to.
99% of people had to.
No choice.
You had to.
There was choice.
There was choice!
As you stare through, past him, you see he left the door open and you see

mothers and old women and a child with one eye shut.

“Here, Doctor.”
You grab the bag.
What’s inside is irrelevant.

“Go two doors right and tell Ana to give you some.”

“Thank you.”

He tries to smile and so do you and you know there is no insulin left to give.
You can only take, no time for anything as the next peasant enters looking
worse than the previous.

It feels ridiculous from where you are because you should be feeling powerful,
a mighty man, a man with a valuable reputation.

People stop their cars to talk to you.

People stop what they’re doing to ask you what you need and the years have
felt extraordinary until last month.

That’s when reality pulled its clear mirror out and stuck it to your face.

It’s quiet.

He’s waiting for you.

“And what do you want?”

“Well, Doctor...I’m supposed to be having my heart operated on this week.”

“So?”

“I’d really like...to know...what my chances are.”

You look through your papers but you can’t see.

“Your chances are good.”

He doesn’t believe you.

He sees through you.

“Your chances are very good.

Don’t torment yourself.

Stay off the wine.”

Still no answer.

“Listen...do you have a cigarette?”

He takes out his pack and hands you one.

“Close the door.”

He gets up, plenty of years older than you, or at least he looks that way but he could be younger.

The door clicks.

You hear mumbles of disagreement on the other side.

“I want you to answer me honestly.”

He nods.

“What do you think my chances are?”

You light your cigarette.

You take out your bottle and offer it.

He takes plenty.

“I don’t understand, Doctor.”

“I feel like I’m going.

I feel like the end is coming.

I feel like there is no exit to rely on.

Do you understand?”

He takes more.

He lights his cigarette.

“I think I understand. And you...you want me to be honest?”

“Yes. Don’t worry. Your operation is covered.”

“I can’t, Doctor. I can’t...”

“Please.

I’m begging you.

Tell me the truth.

I know you can do that.”

“I can’t. I don’t know much...”

“I know you don’t want to risk anything but look...” and you take a piece of paper that your hand falls on and you write on it that you guarantee him professional treatment no matter what he says and you sign your name on it, stamp it and give it to him.

He looks at it and continues to smoke.

The ash goes on the floor.

“I don’t know...”

It feels like you have two heads – one head is moving up, the other dead fruit.

Yet, you feel for your wallet and slide out the notes from in there.

You put it on the desk.

“Just a few honest words and you get this cash.”

Someone knocks.

“Wait!”

The knocking stops.

Temporarily.

“Right.

Tell me.

Now.”

He looks you straight in the eyes.

“Alright, Doctor.

The truth is you don’t deserve to live.

You deserve to be flogged, worked to death.

You deserve to be shot.

The diseases and pains in this hospital should affect only you.

The truth is that alcohol you’ve been using won’t help you.

Nothing will help.

God won’t help you.

It’s much too late for help, Doctor.

You're going to hell soon where the Devil will grind his teeth on your bones."

"Ok."

You take the cash and put it back in your wallet.

You are not red in the face.

You are not nervous.

You are not drunk.

"Now I'll tell you something, my dear little peasant.

Your chances are zero.

And I'll make it my priority to keep your chances at zero."

He's finished his cigarette and his hands are clenched together.

"That's what I thought would happen."

He's up, sweaty, unwashed, grey, overworked.

"Stay true to your instincts."

With his back to you he says "Thank you, Doctor," then the door clicks shut.

"Thank you."

You feel much better now.

Ready and content.

HOME

Home's like, home's like this
Walking down streets gypsies on
Street corners chasing me
Wanting a lock of hair for good luck.

Home's like, home's like you see it,
Driven round in the pick of stolen cars
Hey there's my villa, fifteen levels,
Fifteen gold rings on one finger, gangsters?
All my relatives small-time hustlers.

Home's like, home's a dreamland
And I can't leave it
In the spring when the flowers are in bloom
I'm thinking the flowers just aren't mine
And when I'm home these flowers just don't
Want
Me.

Home's like, home's an empty restaurant
Where we eat the very best
And we drink only five star wine, flashing
Western cash, they're waiting for me outside
For an autograph – sign it in dollars.

Oh, it's beautiful, it is
Being here so carefree, beautiful to reminisce,
Make up fantasies which suit.
Home, after all, is a cement zone, a hit and run,
An escape pod, an alternative mindset and
A reason to feel better
Or worse.