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*"Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality."*

I had the great joy and privilege of knowing Ana-Karina for nearly 25 years, initially as colleagues at the university, where – two years my senior – she was already an assistant lecturer when I graduated. At the time, I was a rookie postgrad eager to lead seminars and share my youthful energies with classes of students roughly the same age as I was, but of course I was also slightly intimidated by having to share company with those who a few months before had been my teachers. Ana-Karina took me 'under her wing' – as she would do with countless generations thereafter – and gently put me at ease. Not only was she inexhaustibly patient and friendly, but she gave me that most important gift a young person can receive at the start of their career: confidence in one's abilities to "do things well"; to excel; to aspire and achieve. Together with Adriana Neagu, she helped me forge my intellectual self – among other things by also bringing me on board the then very young ABC Studies – and helped me nurture my potential. In time, we became collaborators in numerous academic programs, projects organised with the assistance of the British Council, conferences and publications. Her intelligence was demanding and exhilarating to those with whom she worked, and may have caused discomfort, perhaps, in those whose values were not in alignment with hers. But she treated everyone with equanimity, and she would remain effortlessly kind and sympathetic even when she needed to be critical. This may be why I am yet to meet anyone who knew her personally to have anything but appreciative words about her character, and admiration for her professionalism and correctitude.

But, above all, we became friends – and, despite the many years in which we lived in different countries (I had gone on to study in the UK, and eventually settled there), our friendship remained strong, consistent, committed, real. We did not speak often; we did not know every little detail of each other's lives – this wasn't necessary, for our re-encounters, unfailingly, every winter and summer, would be occasions to share our present joys and sorrows over a glass of wine (more me than her) and a slice of cake (both partaking equally). It was more than anything a camaraderie of souls, if I may be allowed a hyperbole, a relationship one cherishes in her innermost chambers without needing constant reinforcement.

Therefore, here I will not be writing about Ana-Karina in a professional context – others who have known her for longer in her academic capacities can do so much better and with more relevant detail than I can. Of course, I know how admired, respected and loved as a teacher she was. Many colleagues can testify about her bright intellect, her love of books, her research achievements, her beautiful, precise, compelling prose. In the efforts she expended forging connections among teachers and researchers across the country and beyond, her dedication to improving the ABC journal, as well as her generosity of spirit and patience in working with students and colleagues, she represented the best of Academia. She will be sorely missed.

But few have really known her well outside her professional environment. Of course, she was an excellent listener and an emphatic soul, as generations of students can surely attest; and she was compassionate and warm and benevolent, with colleagues and with strangers. But she was discreet and kept a close guard over her intimate life, into which only a handful of the select were fully admitted. I am proud and grateful for having been chosen among those few. So, instead of writing about the “teacher” Ana-Karina, and about the “academic” Ana-Karina, I will write about my dear friend Ana-Karina, whose much too early departure has left a huge heart-shaped hole in the lives of all those who have been closest to her.

I remember the twinkle in her eye, half-playful, half-delighted, when she knew she was about to make a special move in our board game of

choice, Ticket to Ride. This was one of our favourite winter pastimes – we would gather in my flat, or hers, or her sister Mary's, and would while the evening away in games and laughter (always with some delicious cookies or one of the lovely cakes she would love to bake for us for the occasion). It is impossible for me to imagine going back in December and not meet her there, with her warm smile and brilliant understated sense of humour.

And she loved the company of kids, too – their youthful presence made her happy, and they would always attach to her with an openness and a celerity that small children in particular do not usually show with strangers. Even though she had no children of her own, her friends' kids would flock to her like bees to a honeycomb. I remember when she first came to visit me in Britain – I was then living in Swansea with my sister's family, which included my 9 months' old niece, Nati – how quickly she made the baby smile and seek to be held. And every winter when we would gather in my parents' flat before Christmas, Ana-Karina would draw with her, and play, and sing songs – her patience and her joy were inexhaustible. I often think this is why she dedicated so much of her time and energy to young people, with such generosity and selflessness, because she, too, was young at heart and full of that inexhaustible curiosity and sense of potential that is the privilege of youth. And why it feels like a deep sense of cosmic injustice to see her gone so soon, with that potential cut when she still had so much to offer to this world.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

At no other time have Dylan Thomas's verses resounded so tragically apt. She did rage inside, I think, because hers was no "old age," and the candle was still burning brightly. And so do we, those who have stayed behind and remain unconsoled. For her passing away is a terrible loss not only for those nearest and dearest, not only for the friends who loved her and the colleagues who held her in high esteem, but for all those young people – increasingly fewer by the day – who appreciate literature, love the English language, and have a passion for the written word. Young people like those who, under her supervision and

encouragement, set up and kept alive the excellent project of the Chocolate House – the reading club where students and members of the public would congregate to share passionate discussions about those apparently most ephemeral of things: books. But that is precisely it: for Ana-Karina, books were not simply objects to be enjoyed – though enjoyed them she fully did –, nor repositories of stories whose relevance to the trials and tribulations of daily life was minimal. On the contrary – they were living things, encasing within their covers a multitude of human experiences, from joy and ecstasy to grief and loss, and passing through every shade of human emotion. She fully believed in the capacity of stories to uncover resources of empathy and creativity that few other activities apart from reading could quite match. Naturally, that made her a lover of bookshops and libraries, which she saw not only as places of intimate connection with oneself, but, above all, as spaces where literature can become a sort of ethnology, something of an ‘intervention’ into the surrounding culture.

But books were not Ana-Karina’s only passion. She had a keen ear for the sounds and silences of nature, where she found refuge and solace when the stress of reconciling her values and ambitions with the inevitable pressures of institutional requirements became simply too exhausting. She was happiest in its midst and surrounded by her closest people. In August, she would routinely “disappear” – and those who knew her, knew that she had gone to her own private “retreat” at the countryside, to her grandfather’s old house that smelled of flowers and a different, quieter time, a place where the soul could rest. There was no internet there, and for many years she resisted the pressure of the smartphone as well, with its incessant white noise. I admired her for this fidelity to herself, her ability to choose, as a matter of principle, to only be connected when and with whom she wished to be. It is a virtue – almost an art in these days of ubiquitous media invasion – to be able to resist the assault of non-stop connectivity and allow oneself to ‘get rewired’ by reconnecting with something deeper, more authentic, more restorative. It is where she read most, and wrote most, and rested, because there was silence, the care of her mother and the companionship of her sister and friends, the low-key availability of the villagers. I only visited once, but I

immediately saw why she needed that space, and why she went back to it, again and again, as a source of wholeness and well-being. I am sure that the house, and the land, and the flowers, and maybe even the birds nesting in the ancient trees in the courtyard will miss her presence.

To go back to the opening quote by one of Ana-Karina's favourite poets, none of us who were shocked and stricken with pain at the news of her passing thought of it as a "kindly" visit. It was cruel, and unfair, and there was no poetry that could alleviate it, nor faith to quite sustain it. Yet in the carriage she went, responding to a law of life that is perhaps the hardest to metabolise and least likely to be accepted with grace. Even so, in those final days of my stay in Sibiu this September of 2024, when I said my goodbyes with the terrible certainty that I was not going to see her again, I remembered some of the lines written by American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, possibly the best known of writers on loss and grief: "The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to." I have been living with the truth of these words ever since.

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