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On Coincidences, Creative Writing Courses,
Maramureş and Magic

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I am on a plane bound for Bucharest. I am nervous. I hate flying. Also, I have been invited to a conference in Sibiu, entitled “Infinite Londons.” I have no idea what to expect. The invitation was tempting: to travel from Paris, where I live, all the way to Sibiu, in the middle of Romania, just to read a five-page short story that happened to get published in an anthology? Alongside writing, I work as a voice-over artist - what could be simpler than reading my story aloud? So why am I nervous? Some inkling, already, high up in the clouds, to expect the unexpected?

It happens soon enough.

“So, what is your workshop about?” a professor asks me, in a corridor of the university building.

“Workshop? What workshop?” Somehow, I have missed an important communiqué. *I thought I was just here to read my short story*, I didn’t say aloud. Shock has closed up my vocal cords. I always rush through life too quickly. Read the documents. Clearly, I’d missed something. Terror sets in. Teachers, academics, visiting guests stride down corridors clutching reams of photocopied documents. I have brought nothing with me but an anthology of poetry I love, which comes with me everywhere.

Back in my hotel room, I panic. I phone my mother – Irish, poetic, red-haired, mystical – who seems to have a gift for finding solutions for desperate cases. “They want me to run a workshop,” I say. “I’ve prepared nothing, I’ve brought nothing with me except a book of poetry. What do I do?” A pause. “Why don’t you just sit quietly with your eyes shut, then open the book at random, point your finger on the page, see what it says –

you might get inspiration.” Well, it’s better than nothing. I do. I land on the lines from the poem by D. H. Lawrence, *Song of a Man Who Has Come Through*:

Not I, but the wind that blows through me. . .
. . .What is the knocking?
What is the knocking of the door at night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm
No, no, it is the three strange angels
Admit them, admit them

Who, or what, are the three strange angels? I ask myself. What is the knocking at the door? It’s threatening, it’s unknown, it’s a blessing. It’s the mystery from which a short story is calling out to be written. Then the idea comes: of course! My workshop will be on creative writing. That way, the students will do most of the work, and I have no need of the papers I haven’t brought, the theories I haven’t thought out, the lecture I haven’t prepared. I call the course “Mind the Gap” – we are, after all, in “Infinite Londons,” and that is the message that infinitely resounds on the London underground. (Coincidentally, years later, I am the voice that warns passengers to “mind the gap” on the Paris metro.) The gap, in my mind, inspired by Lawrence’s beautifully enigmatic lines, is between the unconscious – the land of images, the muffled echoes from childhood, depths and dreams – and the conscious that can formulate words, structure, character, plot – the whole writing caboodle. So here I am, now set up with my Creative Writing course.

There is irony in this. I have done many creative writing courses in my life. They have helped me a lot. But of late, in Paris, I’d had enough of critiquing of pages and pages of others’ writing, and of being critiqued. In the short story for which I’d been invited, *The Spaces in Houses*, a couple lie in bed and hear the rustling of something between the ceiling and the rafters. He thinks it is a bird or a mouse. She thinks it is something bigger. It turns out to be a rat. “Why don’t you make it a squirrel?,” one of the critiquers had said. “It has to be a RAT,” I say through clenched teeth. I’d had enough of writing being mauled by misguided criticism. No more creative writing courses for me, I’d decided. And here I am giving one.

It turned out to be an extraordinary experience – for me, and, I hope, for the students. My exercises were somewhat bizarre: lying on the floor doing guided visualizations, wandering around the cobbled streets of the town in silence and writing about . . . anything: an abandoned shoe, a puddle, the way the roofs curved over windows to give the look of hooded eyelids. The language level of the students was excellent, their imagination boundless, the enthusiasm palpable. This was a time before mobile phones, before the Internet, before social media. There was a yearning for contact – between individuals, countries, cultures.

On the plane back to Paris, I decanted my experience. It had been powerful. A frenzied few days of intense contact – with the students, with the resident and visiting academics – Adriana Neagu, Eric Gilder, Ana-Karina Schneider, Dana Radler, Jeremy Jacobson, Sean Matthews, Professor Eugen Gergely. It had been an exchange on a deep level – of words, of language, ideas, imagination, friendship.

More than that. Like Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole, had I fallen into some kind of gap myself? It was something to do with . . . magic.

The symbol of magic is, for me, the spiral. Some places, some people, spiral back into your life again and again. And so it has been for me and Romania.

My invitation to Sibiu came at a strange time.

Rewind. Two years earlier, I had booked a trip to ride a camel across the Gobi Desert in Outer Mongolia. Why not? As the departure date approached, I got increasingly apprehensive. *What was I thinking of? A trek, really? On a camel – do they bite? Do they spit? Exactly how big is the Gobi Desert?* I needn't have worried. There was an outbreak of bubonic plague, and the trip was cancelled. *Oooph*. I go to the travel agency to get a refund. Oh no, they say, we don't give refunds. We'll offer you another trip instead. OK, I say. To Transylvania, they say.

It turns out to be serendipity, pure and simple. Our guide is an unusual Frenchman who has made Romania his home. Bernard Houliat, author, bon vivant, earth wanderer, is just as much at ease meeting ambassadors and academics as he is the farmers up in remote hills and the Roma who live on the fringes of society. He has a mercurial mind and a

very big heart. At every village we pass through, he is greeted with warmth and the inevitable țuica.

We hike, not only through storms and thick forests and bogs; we travel back in time. This is 1998. Up in Maramureș, time has stood still. It is as if we are back in the nineteenth century, or earlier. Cars are few and far between. Horses pull carts along muddy rutted roads. The beautiful old wooden houses are graced with massive sculpted portals. This is a land of enchantment.

Up in the mountains, as night falls in the Valley of Wolves, I lag behind the group, savouring the quiet of twilight. When I arrive at the farm we are staying in, an old woman with gnarled hands is standing under a wooden portal. Above her, the stars shine though the stencilled shape of bats' wings. She has been waiting for me, worried. She gives me a big hug of welcome. We stay up late and talk in broken German, improved by glasses of the fire water, țuica, that burns your mouth and loosens your tongue.

In Botiza, my favourite place of all, our hiking group, muddy and bedraggled after a long trek through a storm in the mountains, sit under a hayloft to dry out. Our host, Ioan Trifoi, is a carpenter and talented folk dancer. A car arrives with the windscreen wipers swiping to and fro, but no windscreen. Out tumble a group of musicians with their violins. The night will be one of frenetic foot-stamping and swirling and the ubiquitous palinka. The next day, an almighty hangover. Ioan Trifoi fills our gourds with cold clear water drawn up in an old wooden bucket from a deep well in his field. In her little wooden house in the village, Joanna, midwife and healer, gives me a potion to drive out impurities. She corks a Schweppes bottle with a piece of maize. To this day I haven't opened it.

Magic. One has to hang onto it. Back in Paris, the characters I met won't leave me be. They require a story. So I start to write. About the old woman under the bats' wings, Paraschiva. About Joanna the wise woman. About Ioan Trifoi, dancing with joy and passion to the raw strains of the violin. It is my own version of magic. Sometimes I feel guilty about transforming an existing place into a creation of my imagination. Well, Bram Stoker did it, why can't I? (And mine doesn't have even the whisper of a vampire.)

The story turns into a novel. About a small community and how it deals with the outsider. The village becomes a microcosm of the world, and how we treat The Other. In fact, how we treat the Unknown – whether it be the mystery of another person, religion, ethnic or social group – or the mystery of life itself. Magic.

The novel stumbles mid-track. I don't have enough texture. The place I am writing about is too distant. I have to get back to Romania – not so easy as I don't want to brave the uncertain travel conditions alone. I do some creative visualization. If I'm writing about magic, why not try it? If I'm honest, I only half believe, but half is enough to give it a go. I visualize myself back there – and soon.

In Paris, ten of us sit around the big table in my flat in Montparnasse. Having abandoned formal creative writing courses, I've come up with the Quick Writers' Formula: gather with your writer friends, eat, drink, make merry, each person sticks an idea into a hat, we draw one at random, write about it for seventeen-and-a-half minutes (because we can't decide between fifteen and twenty) and read it out loud. The formula really does work. Some amazing pieces are written: the speed eliminates the inner censor/editor and the pressure for perfection. And reading aloud to the group your "less-than-perfect" pieces and realizing one is still alive at the end of it is good for the soul - you get used to failure. It's not the end of the world.

On this evening, I announce that I have been "creatively visualizing" a return trip to Romania, to research my novel. There are groans from the sceptics. Then, on cue, the fax machine (yes, this is in the days of fax) starts churning. When I tear the page off the machine and read it, I wave it triumphantly in the air. It is my invitation to the "Infinite Londons" conference in Sibiu.

The group stares at me in disbelief. I think they thought I'd engineered it.

The novel takes a long time in the writing. It seems to have a life of its own. Every time I have to get back to Romania to fill in some missing piece, enter synchronicity: I return to Sibiu, to teach a creative writing course with Adrian Mathews, a gifted writer whom I'd met at the "Infinite

Londons” conference and – another coincidence – lived around the corner from me in Paris. I go back again, this time to Braşov, to teach a course in theatre improvisation. And again, with the Paris Writers’ group, to run a workshop. And again, to perform Alan Bennett’s *Talking Heads* at a theatre festival of monologues in Bacău.

As the novel reaches its end, as I prepare to say goodbye to my beloved creations – to Paraschiva and the other villagers, I figure that the chain of “coincidences” that keeps pulling me back, will finally be broken.

I focus on the final chapter. The author Joanne Harris likened the writing of a novel to “crossing the Atlantic alone on a raft.” It is long-haul, solitary - one can get swept away by currents. And living with imaginary characters can lead to a certain detachment from reality. To ward off a degree of insanity, I’d kept a balance: meeting with the “Seventeen-and-a-half minutes” group and writing pieces of flash fiction. One of them was *The Taste of Dark Blue*. From the short piece I wrote came the title of a book of poetry and art with Israeli painter Tali Neeman Sabo. From that came invitations to do readings at the iconic Red Wheelbarrow bookshop in Paris, at the Tel Aviv Artists’ House in Israel and at the glorious Coronet Theatre in London, with moderator, South African-born international creative arts facilitator and transpersonal growth trainer, Hazel Carey. From that came a bad, blurry two-minute video that I posted on Facebook. From that came an invitation from my dear friend, Dr Dana Radler, to give a presentation in Bucharest. From that came an invitation from my other dear friend, Dr Adriana Neagu, to come to Cluj. Both events were memorable, with a powerful emotional connection with the students, discussing how art can transform trauma, releasing suppressed pain through communication and sharing.

In Cluj, I consult the maps and the travel guides I have stuffed into my bag. When I see that Cluj is not that far from Maramureş, I plan a return to the village that inspired my novel.

I have come full circle. More than twenty-six years since my first visit, and here I am, back in Botiza. The wooden houses have been replaced by concrete structures. The roads are now smooth tarmac. Fast cars roar down them, where once there were horses and carts. The red-and-black striped wide skirts of the women have been replaced by

leggings and trousers. Paraschiva died long ago. Joanna the Wise Woman has likewise passed onto another plane. At seventy, Ioan Trifoi, the carpenter and dancer, has had success doing skilled construction work in France. He now has an atelier and an imposing concrete house. The well on his land is now blocked up, covered with a cement slab.

Time has wrought its transformation.

But the țuica is still as strong and . . . what is it about the place? For all that it has time-travelled from the nineteenth century into the twenty-first in the space of a couple of decades, there is still something timeless in the air. Magic?

Back in Paris, in June 2024, I come down to earth with a bang. All the troubles of our modern world crowd in at once. Climate change, Donald Trump, Putin, Marine Le Pen . . . the dreaded French elections that might see the *extrême droite* in power.

When the state of the world frazzles the brain, do some housework. I decide to do some ironing. I can't find the iron. Where did I put it? Somewhere on the shelves, crowded with books and files? While I'm scrabbling around, a slim book falls out on the floor. It is small and white, and vaguely familiar. As I read the title, I smile: *Maramureș, Terra Incognita* by Gil Jouanard. I haven't seen this book in years. Why does it suddenly reappear now? I flick through the opening pages. It is apparent that the author, like me, fell under the spell. I scan the lines quickly. Then I stop, mid track. This is what he writes (my translation from the French): *The world has a precise centre, situated in the heart of each of us, equidistant between the limits of our individual consciousness and stretching to infinity. . . . The centre of my world is located, precisely, in Botiza . . . in this Transylvania, with the cult of the dead and the religion of life, as was celebrated in times gone by, by the shamans and the Druids . . . it's the kingdom where Nature is sovereign. The name says it all: the forest is the matrix; Transylvania. It's the land of primordial elements and obscure intuitions. The origin. The Omphalos. The Omphalos of the world is here, in Botiza. . . .*

I am amazed that this book, shelved some twenty years ago, forgotten, has resurfaced to remind me that, even though the noise of the modern world has encroached on the sacred quiet where magic can take place, that magic is still there – hidden, perhaps, but present, and timeless . . .

Where I begin matters not, for there I shall return. (Parmenides)

It's hard to know where the beginning is, and where the end. It is like Ouroboros, the snake that in an infinite circle eternally bites its tail.

Some places draw us back, and back, and back. Across days, months, decades - with messages, whispers, shadows holding shadow hands, time, people, faces, hearts, paths crossing and recrossing, called back, time and time again.

It's just about listening to the call.

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Two of the pieces I wrote that were written as "Flash Fiction" in our "17-and-a-half minutes" Paris group.

A Good Book

It was a good book. Not good, actually – brilliant. Not just brilliant, actually. The most brilliant of all books ever written. The writer, long since dead, a goatherd, buried it under a tree. No one ever found it. No one, of course, ever read it.

It is one of those books that would have changed the history of the world. The writer, if he were still alive, would have described the book thus:

It was dictated by the leaves. On a still day, the words that came were about spaces in the air, and what happens when no wind blows. In a storm, the words came with the rain. Then the rain effaced them. The next morning, the words that remained made more sense because of the ones that had been washed away.

No one knows how a goatherd, illiterate, up in the mountains, found the gift of writing.

The words have gone underground, have lain there for years, whispering through the spaces in the soil. The words, the thoughts, dictated by the leaves, have rotted and turned into something else, as have the bones of the people on the hillside, as has the hair of a dark woman who kissed her beloved under a tree, as have the tiny insects that roamed under its bark, as has the village down in the valley, as have the goats who ate the sparse grass burnt yellow by the sun.

The book, if it had ever been found, would have told all the secrets of loss, and change, and longing, and greed, and of the molecules that shift into new places like the sudden change in the direction of the wind.

When the goatherd had finished writing, he went back to herding his goats, and looked after them, one by one, with love, until they and he died, and returned to the hillside, and to the earth.

The Taste of Dark Blue

As she lay dying – and she knew she was dying – if she closed her eyes, she saw white. Good, she thought, to go into the white square of ending. This was the way it was supposed to be. Whiteness and nothingness. Nothingness and whiteness.

Her mouth was dry. Now all that mattered was water.

Water. When she tasted it, she had her first sip of colour. This surprised her: water – colourless water?

No. She tasted the dark blue of the deep. In one mouthful, the red of a crushed crab shell, the fluorescent purple of a chameleon fish, the broken rippling orange of the gentle swell at sunset, the smooth grey of the shark's back, the astonishing piercing green of a tiny clutch of algae decorating a rock, making it magnificent.

She did not want to die, then, to go into an absence of colour.

As her breathing failed, thoughts surged like waves: desire - desire for the colour of water, even for a day of it, even for an hour; regret, for the pastels in which she had painted her life, so full of obligations – daughter, wife, mother, sister.

They thought she would die that night. They came to surround her, hold hands, say prayers, cry tears.

“Water,” she said, unaware of them, casting them into insignificance for the first time in her life.

“More water.”

She did not die that night, nor the next, nor the next. As the days went by, they grew tired of their vigil, and came to see her less and less.

The doctors were astonished. She ate no solids. All she asked for was water.

By the seventh day, her eyes were flecked with amber and silver.

“I want to go to the sea,” she said.

They took her to the coast: arranged cars, lifts, drivers – for her dying wish, perhaps?

She sits tonight on a balcony overlooking the sea, on the edge of a continent.

She knows that she can go now, or tomorrow, the way a wave breaks, now or tomorrow.

And there, as the sun goes down on the maybe last night of her life, she raises her glass, and sips again the taste of dark blue.