



Found in Translation 2024

Tights on a Traveler

Moving for Love, Still Searching for Me

Oana Dumbrava

Romanians have a saying: “ești izmană pe călător”, which translates to something like: “You’re tights on a traveler.” You possess little and are always on the move; no roots anywhere. That’s what my mother used to call me to express how eager I was to be out and about. I would try to win radio contests, to have an excuse, and be allowed to go out and pick up the prize. From the outskirts of our neighborhood, in the small city of Brăila, it would take me about half an hour by bus to cross the city and reach the radio. 30 minutes of pure joy, taking in the most unspectacular views from the window as if they were the Swiss Alps.

It seemed rather clear that I would leave my hometown immediately when I had the chance. But things could have gone even differently had it not been for my high school love. He was 100% sure Bucharest was the right destination, and I gradually became equally certain. Love has this magical hidden power of convincing people they are doing the right thing. It starts blind and slowly regains sight. My high school love and I grew up together, up and apart. I was the same “tights on a traveler”, and in my last university year, I went to Rome as an Erasmus student.

The colorful world I had seen on Italian television just after Romanian communism fell, Bella here, Bella there – La Dolce Erasmus Vita passed so quickly that I had a hard time accepting it was almost over, and above all that I was falling in love with someone. We spent a lifetime in a month and then embarked on what turned out to be a five-year-long distance relationship. Time flew by and I convinced myself that distance was the truest test of a relationship. Was I lying to myself? I suppose so... The ringing of Skype still gives me the chills. When we finally agreed it was time to move together, I quit my job in Bucharest and there I was, back in Rome.

The feeling of stepping off a plane without needing to take another in just a few days, and spending endless time with my loved one, was so precious. But Rome was no longer my Erasmus Dolce Vita. It was Rome where I had to earn a living, borrow his friends, his routine, and almost everything else. Nobody cared about what I did for a living as long as I laughed, had an espresso and a drink. But me, I would stay paralyzed in front of my computer, searching for jobs all day long, until he finished work and we would meet somewhere out. It felt like every day, after 6 pm, I was learning to walk again. Happiness and bitterness were one and by the time I had found a job, I must have become rather dull and unattractive. At least that’s what I thought when he told me he didn’t love me anymore.

I came back to Romania promising myself I would never leave my country again. At least not for love. Did I keep my promise? Yes! For five years. Until I met this smart funny guy whom I never thought I would see again, let alone fall in love with. I couldn’t believe it when he told me he had to leave in a month for Switzerland. There I was again. Using the previously acquired



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relationship skills, I managed to shorten the distance relationship from 5 years to only 2 instead. Quite a progress, right?

It's funny but even though it seemed like going around in circles, it all felt so new, different, and mature. When I finally moved to Zürich, instead of diving headfirst into the roller coaster job search, my partner encouraged me to take a sabbatical. I accepted the challenge and I call it a challenge because I wasn't used to slowing down so much anymore. Slowing down meant, of course, happily waking up and having all the time in the world for myself, but also feeling the pain in my body I had long dismissed, listening to thoughts I had repressed, and answering questions I had been avoiding. I felt lucky until I began questioning my luck. You can give yourself as much time as you want to try and figure things out, but still, answers won't come on the deadline you set. My small bubble would suddenly feel suffocating. Yet, I didn't make the same mistake as in Rome. Apart from creating tons of CV layouts, cover letters, and so on, I would write a lot, read, play guitar, microart, go out, walk, and walk, and walk.

For the first couple of years with the Pandemics and everything, it seemed ok to say I was learning German, I was applying, I volunteered, I walked dogs. Observed the quirky people of early-morning Zurich, and wrote about them. But then, I felt so much pressure. There's this thing in Switzerland that, at some point, during a dinner or even an unpretentious meeting or walk, you get to be bluntly asked "And what do you do? What do you do for a living?" It seemed the most natural question to ask and get to know a person, but I became so sensitive to it, that I sometimes had nausea before meeting people I didn't know. After a while, even with those I did know quite well. I couldn't help but feel embarrassed. How do I explain that I can't manage to find a proper job, but otherwise that I really do a lot? Most of the people were nice to me. Knowing my partner is a researcher, they were trying to link that to me and instead ask "And are you also in the academic field?" Which made things even more awkward.

No, I am not in the academic field. I don't even stay home to take care of my non-existing children. I am not a refugee who fled because of war and was forced to leave family and friends. I was not persecuted, I am not in exile. I am not. I am only... I am only a straight white woman, who followed her partner in a new country and struggled to find her way. I don't have any solid "excuse" for the void, shame, uncertainty, and vulnerability I feel. Yet, I do feel all of it.

When my partner told me he had an academic opportunity in Berlin, I felt sad but, ultimately, the taste for a new start became tempting, "Tights on a Traveler" got activated and we moved to Berlin. I had never been there. I wanted to be surprised and start fresh, but it went so wrong. The city swallowed me, swallowed us. The "fein" became "lecker", the "Velo" was "Fahrrad", and I was facing the same old issues. Maybe I should do this. But how about that? I went from high hopes to deep holes. If it wasn't the city, then surely I was the problem. "Das Problem ist nicht das Problem; das Problem ist, ich bin das Problem".

I didn't have to think twice when my partner and I discussed coming back to Zürich. Zürich had given me at least a balanced energy, a sense of belonging. The fresh air, the mountains, the lake, that blue. Feeling blessed and welcomed though no one welcomes you; I loved that. When we came back I gave myself a year to find a job. I have only a few months left. I am active, I meet people, I feel confident. I used to feel confident, I am a bit scared.



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