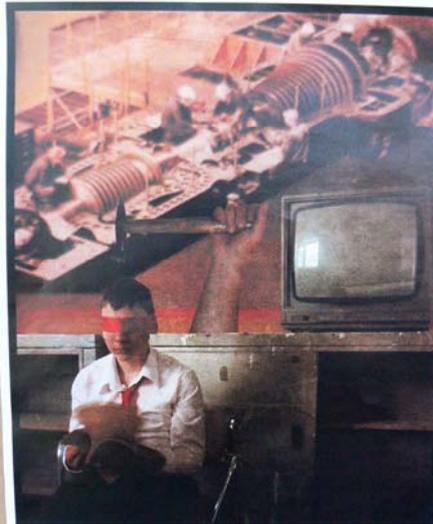




The Day the Past Came Back

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The snow drops have bloomed, so spring must have arrived.

I'm starting like this because I'm enjoying the end of winter, which is no longer what it used to be, or at least that's what my grandparents say. Oh! I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Denis, and I am a pupil in the 10th grade at a "European" highschool!

Today is Friday, and every Friday when I finish school I must remember to buy my mother the local weekly paper.

Well, school's done for the day! Actually, we all skipped the sports class. On my way home, I open the newspaper and I read something about some "Being a pupil during communism" competition, and it's got really nice awards, and I start thinking that I do have something to say about that, what with all the stories my parents have been telling me. That evening, I go and ask them:

"So what else went wrong in your day?"

"Please be civil, don't mock "our day"! my mother admonishes me and continues. "I used to be a pioneer group commander, and if I happened to forget my pioneer scarf ring at home, I'd get very worried. But I can see that your generation doesn't worry about anything."

"Oh, come on, it can't have been that bad, didn't you guys use to have discos and parties?" I fire up.

"Yes, we did, but we were always home by 8, read ourselves to sleep, and didn't spend all that *long*¹ time on the computer like you guys!," she says, raising an eyebrow.

I can see there's no argument there, since my sister's already *spelling* the *noobs*, because Fridays are part of the week-end, and so we're allowed on the *comp*.

I'm seriously considering doing an all night *long*, I talk to my messenger buddies about it. We like having fun and getting in trouble at school. Today, in our biology class, the teacher told us about the

¹ All the words in italic in this text were in English in the original.

endocardium, the miocardium, and we completed the list: Mastercardium! Picture that! We're really nice, I don't know why not all the teachers love us, especially now, when we make a lot of effort to pack our nicely folded standard-issue compulsory jackets into our schoolbags. It feels like the old days!

Here comes my father, who can't sleep and ventures an opinion:

"What the hell are you doing? Turn off that stupid computer, can't you see it's 1am, do you want my company to send my entire paycheck to the power company?"

"Just a sec! There's an *event* on the *server*, I'll just get some *items* and turn it off."

I ask him nicely, and then my mother steps in as well.

"Well, if this was 1975 you wouldn't even see your games in the dark at this hour!"

"Bla, bla, bla!" I conclude.

"You know what?" my mother says. "I'm going to make a wish: that you wake up in the morning in the past, during communism. I can't imagine how you'd survive..."

Tired after all this nagging, I go to bed. And anyway it's Sunday tomorrow and I can sleep until 12-1am. I don't know how long I've been sleeping for, when I suddenly feel my mother shaking me awake.

"It's time for school, Den, go to the bathroom, or your sister's going to go in first and be in there for hours! Can you hear me? It's getting crowded in here!"

"School, what school??? Isn't it a Saturday? Mmmm, maybe not! I stall a bit, I stretch myself under the comforter. I hear my sister's sweet voice:

"Come on, lazy bones, we're gonna be late! Bro!"

I'm thinking to myself: "It's her voice, but it doesn't sound like her. Because I know exactly what she would have said: "Get the hell up, you filthy animal! If I'm late because of you I'll break your face in!"

I pull gently at a corner of the comforter, crack one eye open and I see an apocalyptic image. Luiza, my sister, is pulling up some tights under a long pleated blue skirt. I look up at her over the skirt, against gravity. It's her! But she is wearing a white shirt, pierced by badges like an insectarium, a red tie with a tricolor margin, a red braided cord with a sailor's knot adorns her chest, and, to make the picture complete, she's got braids over her shoulders.

I feel I'm going to burst out laughing, but I hold it in and I ask her ironically but seriously:

"Where are you going? Do you have a striptease class today? Or a fancy-dress ball?"

She looks at me seriously, grabs my cheeks and scolds me:

"Come on, little bear, we've got general assembly today, I don't want to be late!"

I can see she's not kidding, I jump right out of bed, God it's cold, I brush my teeth with some

horrible toothpaste, tastes like soap, cold water, don't know what's wrong with this tap, why is there no hot water? I jump right into my loose jeans with ten different pockets, pull on my Undertaker T-shirt, get my John Cena schoolbag, see, I'm a wrestling fan, I'm even thinking right now how poor Umaga is in hospital and I start laughing.

My mother likes Ray Misterio and my sister, Randy Orton. In my schoolbag I've got my school jacket as well, of course, nicely folded, just as the nice man from the tailor shop showed me. Well, for one million lei, he might as well have shown me how to do origami out of that fabric. Am I wrong? I don't think so!

I'm headed for school, I've got my sandwiches, they seem a little thick, I'm thinking my mom must've run out of sliced bread (must have sesame seeds!) because I don't generally have anything else.

On my way over there, I peek at my sister in wonderment: she's wearing black buckled low-heeled shoes, skin-colored tights, that plaited skirt from the knees up, a belt with the Romanian national coat of arms, up to her neck that panoply I've just mentioned, and on her head, the straw that broke the camel's back, just guess! A white elastic headband. And her hair, oh my God! Her hair was tied up in two measly braids. She can see me looking her up and down and she smiles sweetly: "Do you think my shoes are too tall? The heel's a bit over 3 centimeters, it's about 3 centimeters and a half..."

When we finally get to school I get a shock: everybody in highschool is lined up in a U-shaped assembly, divided into groups, dressed the same as my sister. I gaze dumbstruck at the whole thing and I can't get it. God help me, look, there's Chisavu! He's not wearing a tie and a white shirt, but he knows me and rushes towards me, wringing his hands.

"What am I gonna do? I don't have my tie!!!"

"What do you mean, man, so what? I don't have *items* on me either, it's like I'm living in a different age, I wish I woke up in Lorencia..."

"What do you mean items? What's Lorencia?"

"Guns, clothes, wings, the other country, what the hell's the matter with you, have you lost it? Don't you play MU anymore?"

"I don't know what it is, man, doe it have anything to do with cows? Come on, man, the anthem's about to start."

And I suddenly hear a girl wearing a blue braided cord.

“Trei culori cunosc pe lumeeeee... one-two-three” [*Only Three Colors I Know, the national anthem before 1989*].

What can I tell you? Nice! They were all singing! There’s Alex, braying his lungs out, there’s Benskić as well, what the e-rater, yes, aaaa, ha, ha aka Afro, he’s wearing a weird cap with the coat of arms on, his curly hair must be underneath.

After they all sang, my form teacher, Mrs Silvia, Silvia Dulea, comes to talk to me.

”Denis darling, where’s your uniform?”

“Ma’am, I forgot it at home...”

The colleagues look at me, dumbfounded. They whisper: “He said...ma’am, not comrade...”

I don’t even look at them, what, is the form room teacher my comrade, my mate? She’s a lady, especially since she’s a Romanian teacher and my mom always says we should kiss her feet every day for those grades she gives us, when we don’t even touch a book of fiction with a pair of tongs!

But all in all, we’re intelligent, I saw this recent study on the Discovery Channel, how our generation is more precocious than the one before us. And let me tell you what else happened to me that day; I finally realized my mother’s wish had come true, like in a sort of a SciFi movie, and I woke up during communism, not capitalism.

“Why couldn’t I wake up in America, driving a Hummer...” I start thinking out loud and I cross myself.

“Denis, comrade, don’t you know you’re not allowed to pronounce forbidden words and cross yourself? What, you want to be excluded from the young communists’ union?”

I turn around in a stupor and I gaze at Cristina, the class nerd, she’s also got two braids, short nails, and of course a braided cord, but hers is not red, it’s yellow.

“God, girl, what are you running here? What, are you some *admin* or something? I ask her, surprised.

“Maybe you mean admission, comrade pioneer, I can see you’re dressed just like a defector! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

Who does she think she is? I go to class, I can’t even begin to describe what I’m feeling today, it’s a nightmare, nothing more or less!

I’m just going to ignore everyone and focus, and since I’m dealing with SciFi stuff here, then it means I must have some powers, some telekinetic powers and I can move everyone to the Moon or Mars or maybe Pluto, because it’s smaller and they’d be more crowded! Takka-takka-takka!

It’s break time, the bell is ringing. I make to get up and leave, when fortysomething eyes nail me back to my desk. One of them shouts: “Gather up!” Dazed, I see them all lining up next to the desks in three groups of two, three odd ones with red cords who were allegedly group commanders stand in front of

the pioneers and salute the union commander, the one with the yellow cord. So, their hands to their forehead, they salute and each say something like this, in turn:

"Comrade unit commander, I report that group one, 8 pioneers strong, is ready to perform."

And I hear the other groups as well: "Group, stand up, at ease," and then I seem to be dreaming and hearing that we met our quota a.s.o etc...

I feverishly pick up my sandwich and unwrap it fast, afraid that some "pioneer" might come and take it from me and God knows how long I might have to be hungry for, and when I'm going to eat next, since they probably haven't invented hamburgers yet, not to mention hot dogs!

So I gulp down some black bread with something slimy inside and some salami, let me open it, yes, it's salami, but this one has pieces of white lard inside, which I never touch, my mother knows, what did she put in here? It's like biscuit salami, this one is!

Engulfed as I am in my grub, I start when Chisavu says over my shoulder:

"Denis, you want to come to the library with me and get *The Marten Brothers* out?"

"Sure, what, are they 10th graders?"

"What are you talking about, man?"

"The Marten Brothers, you said."

He looks at me, checks my temperature and explains:

"Aren't we supposed to read and analyze *The Marten Brothers* by Sadoveanu by next Monday? What, you forgot?" He's very suprised.

"Do you also happen to know when he wrote the novel?" I ask him, ironically.

"But of course! Between 1935-1942, three volumes," he retorts, seriously.

Yeah, now I get it. I'm in another decade of the past, that's for sure, because otherwise, how would Chisavu ever know those years? When he's mad about the internet? About compuer games? No waaaay!

I leave school alone, deep in thought. Out of the corner of my eye I notice the passers-by and catch glimpses of their conversations. Listen to this:

"Good day, comrade Gherasim!"

"Hey, comrade, why are you jumping the line, stand in line, who does she think she is?"

"Good day, mister, can I please have a coin for a bagel?"

"Go to work, don't just stand here begging, child, get it? If you won't work, they can always ship you to the Canal!"

And I keep hearing more and more weird stuff until I get home. I open my door with the key I've got tied to a cord around my neck, I forgot to tell you, my mom had hung it around my neck that

morning, I enter the kitchen, have a drink of water and choke on it, terrified, when my eyes slide to a note my mother left me:

“Sweetie, please go next to the market, I marked my place in the gas tank line with a stone. Maybe the car’s going to show up today, we’ve been standing there day and night for three days. Kisses, Mother. PS. Your sister should get the raffia bag and buy some macaroni and shrimps. They’re bringing soy oil and sugar at the store. Dad had to go to the party meeting and maybe he can get a 75 bottle of gas. We’ve got some tetraethyl and can push its octane number to 90. Do your homework, ok?”

I was petrified. I dragged myself to bed. To sleep. To die. And it was only one day. I went to bed with tears in my eyes, whispering:

”Brother, how horrible!”

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I open my eyes, it’s dark. I pull down the comforter, my sister’s walking up and down the room in her jammies. I whisper:

”Are you looking for something?”

She turns towards me and smiles, alas, I think for a second it’s going to be that pioneer smile! And she screams:

”Where the hell did you put the antivirus CD, your desk’s like a pigsty!”

Thank God! I could jump out of bed and kiss her, but I wouldn’t be caught dead doing that. Maybe out of gratitude, once she’s asleep, I will pierce her nose.

Well, this is my essay, it’s real you know, and I learned something from it too: Murphy’s Laws exist! For one of them says: ”If something goes bad, be grateful, tomorrow it’s gonna get worse!”

That being said, I got to live one day of communism as a pupil, and it’s a good thing I wasn’t an adult when I dreamed of this day of horror.