



# AUTHORING JUSTICE

Capstone Project  
Geanina Turcanu

# Post-Revolution ghosts. A Christmas Carol

Geanina Turcanu

## Ghost 1: Christmas Past

“The Dictator is Dead!” It (no longer) was the silent word electrifying everyone’s lips, the only word in the wide world that would make it whole out of a cordless phone chain of whispers, starting on Radio Free Europe, all the way up in Prague, and ending with my grandparents’ village in North East Romania, bordering the next level frontier: Ukraine and Moldova.

Article 30, Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Freedom from State or Personal Interference in the above Rights

The morning of December 26, 1989, I heard it spelled out loud for the first time in my 5 years of life. Freed at last by my tiny grandmother’s grave voice, from all the by now unchained chests, instantly filling up with the beginning of a new era’s vibration. My granny was the sunniest human being ever, most resilient and least political, but then again, merely breathing was political back then. Tucked under my thick blanket, and without comprehending the historic significance of her statement, I was still struck by the sudden shift in the trend of private news delivery: never before had it been initiated by her and even less so, loudly. This time around, her sentence fled from the wood fuelled red brick stove, where she was multitasking breakfast, all the way down to the hall, filling in for the arrested greeting that would usually welcome our most omniscient and omnipotent neighbor, who now stormed in with the frozen expression of Munch’s Angst. Her face was as always contained between her palms, yet this time the function of her gesture was not to preserve secrecy, but to admit defeat. The village’s Rumor Mill herself was speechless.

The scratchy harsh sound of torn paper is still ringing in my ears, like it happened yesterday. My granny proceeded to rip off the first page from my older cousin's ABC schoolbook, aka the Dictator's portrait. She then removed his framed picture from the wall.

"What if it's not true? What if he's coming back? Trouble is written all over your family, if that's the case!", the Rumour Mill summoned cautiously. "Better wait and see that it gets confirmed!"

My granny pointed at the Radio and with the power of her mind amplified its sound, or perhaps with her luminous smile, that could invariably melt down even the coldest winter, as it just did. It was in the news and that's as real as it'd ever get. Truth be told, some people had more to lose than others, when communism fell. The state apparatus had as many eyes as citizens who were willing to skip the queue for daily groceries, or save their skin if need be, at the price of spying on their neighbors. Mistrust was the first value instilled in me. You never knew who had signed the Pact with the D, so to protect yourself was to act as though everybody else but you did, for fear, or for need.

But that was the Ghost of Christmas past, or so we most thought. For me, and to a certain extent for every other middle class child during the 90's, we were free. Which meant the Dictator's portrait was replaced with golden Orthodox icons (forbidden under the previous regime, a sudden counterintuitive freedom hit, following five decades of religious oppression), porcelain figures and most spectacularly... cable TV superheroes. They made three distinct symbolic dishes served on the transition menu, which one felt truly free to re-combine in an a la carte choice, to best suit their personality styles. The region you were coming from would determine the languages that you were already able to speak, and inform the ones that you were willing to learn. Kids in the capital and other bigger cities had access to LEGO bricks, debate clubs and alternative lifestyles, based not so much on economic differences, as much as on proximity to the West.

By the time I was fifteen, I was studying in the bilingual English class. Because that was my and everyone else's ticket to building the dream life that we were fed for the subsequent decade to the Revolution - or at least a version of it portrayed on our holy Cable TV.

## Ghost 2: Christmas Present

“Dear Student: We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Central European University's Political Science MA. This year, CEU received over 3000 applications from more than a hundred countries around the world, making the selection process extremely competitive. We congratulate you on your success.” My graduation year coincidentally marked 20 years since the Revolution.

Art. 30, UDHR: Freedom from State or Personal Interference in the above Rights

You know how in the news, in the aftermath of horrific crimes, journalists coalesce across the spectrum, from conservative to progressive, towards the very opposite strategy of that they would normally adopt, and decide not to disclose any distinctive traits of the criminal? They do it to prevent adding the critical drop to a boiling pot. To avoid bearing the guilt for blowing up the ideological powder keg on which we are all sitting, in the worst case scenario, or stirring into that illogical mixture and risk perpetuating the very same stereotypes that we are trying to fight, in the best case scenario! For the sake of preserving social harmony, or for lack of critical thinking skills, we never questioned what has become of the perpetrators in Romania. And who should have done it? It took a couple of years before the decimated state-controlled media regrouped itself. Private TVs excelled at importing what was sold abroad. The State Party shattered in a myriad different names, while still running on the same old electoral platforms. The price of dissent, even if legal, was to not resonate with the masses... To be sanctioned by the popular vote.

I didn't leave because of a lack of food. I didn't leave because of the lack of a roof. I left for lack of justice. I left for a rights based life. According to pre-Ukraine war UN statistics, 4 million Romanians had left the country since 1990, making up for a diaspora second largest only to Syria, a war torn state. But that's a narrative that landed flat with most of my newly found companions, who grew up in the heydays of democracy, and for whom my childhood equaled the Dark Middle Ages. Roughly, their parents were unable to relate to me were it not for either the iconic horror images from Romanian orphanages that circled the West on Christmas '89, followed by regular notorious news of robbery and human trafficking, or most random examples of co-nationals who made it to top positions in their circles. My friends and partners would travel home with me in my and my country's Renaissance phase, chasing fading urban legends, only to experience a rampantly widening social gap between the rich and the poor, pushing Romania closer to infamous soap operas than to social Europe. They'd take pride in progressive views by befriending someone exotic enough to stand out and yet similar enough to fit in...

Except... fitting in was never my dream. They were power and I was speaking truth to power. And the last thing I wished for was to reinforce the flawed imagery of what a dream life as portrayed on our by now unholy cable TV looked like. Rather, by shining light on the unacknowledged and the unseen, I wished to expose the dying myth of "a savior" or "a match made in heaven" powered by a "Prince Charming on a white horse", in its plain planned obsolescence, all of which belongs to a uniform world that no longer holds or rings true. Assuming it ever did, beyond the propaganda trumpets cutting all across gender equality from socialism to liberalism. My dream friends and partners, from my twenties to my thirties, were all that and beyond, and yet I watched my relationships fail like domino pieces, pushed against my limits by the same currents that pulled them in, to begin with: my deepest wounds, stemming from the Revolution within. My unprocessed collective trauma, in its economic, social and human complexities, made and broke my life script as I was writing it.

- "What do you wanna do when you grow old?" Asked my dream partner with a sense of urgency. An emergency like no other. At stake was our future. Our thirties were about to end and our dreams had not yet begun. We were well past asking ourselves what we wanted to do when we grew up, or even when we grew young. But... we still had a go, one final shot at happiness. Growing old. Together. We melted together across the East-West divide and it was the only thing that mattered. The rest was history. In the making. We sighed and sided, with our shared story, and golden cable TV dream!

- "You go first!" I giggled with a sense of electric expectation, half pleasure delaying and half people pleasing. Except... I'm no people pleaser. I read the rules before I break them, or so my Facebook cover photo states, and I have worked for an iconic NGO for about a decade - the equivalent of the Big Five in the world of world-savers. And yet, every time I must go first, I back down. As if the first move could potentially turn into a last piece of information, that might as well prove pivotal in turning the tables, and eventually flip my whole strategy on its head. I do that in my private life as well as in my work.

- "What did you get for Christmas... when you were my age?" His 5 year old nephew popped. Boom! A match made in Heaven - I can help the little one understand how freedom is born. That would clearly be news to him, inheritor of thousand years of stability, as impactful as the adversities plaguing my own country for generations.

- "When I was your age, you see, I got democracy, following... the Romanian Revolution! " I couldn't be any prouder of myself! Here's something we can bond over, my formative story, a Christmas present to remember... the blond little boy sank into his pillow, his big blue eyes widening to the point of overtaking his whole face, like in those Japanese anime I watched when I was 5.

- "What? Can you still buy that thing nowadays?"

My Cable TV like dream partner pulled my sleeve in a slight gesture of panic, his gorgeous features as composed as ever, in a Ken type of grin, for whom it has just hit home that... he might be next to the wrong Barbie or even worse, next to no doll of sorts at all.

- "Have you lost your mind? You're gonna traumatize this child! You're a lost case, no matter how happy we are, you keep spoiling it! Why can't you just drop the drama and live mindfully in the here and the now? You're living in the past. You should seriously consider therapy!"

### Ghost 3: Christmas Yet to Come

We are doomed to repeat the behaviors that make us sick, until we sit down with our feelings for long enough to become conscious of their roots. And then, boom! Change creeps in! When I will have added my Christmas story to the world children's encyclopedia, as a legitimate piece of history, and not as a transitory nuisance in the world of yesterday, then my dear, will be my "Christmas yet to come!"



*This year, the Global Campus of Human Rights debuted an exciting new online course called "Authoring Justice." The course focuses on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about issues of human rights and social justice – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers, affecting change around the world. This first iteration included lessons from award-winning authors and human rights leaders, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Justice Albie Sachs, Casey Gerald, Kao Kalia Yang, Jemma Neville, and Joel Rickett.*

*The inaugural cohort of students are human rights advocates, lawyers, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from peace mediation in Ukraine to equitable access to technology in Nepal and beyond. The previous pages feature one selected example of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.*



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