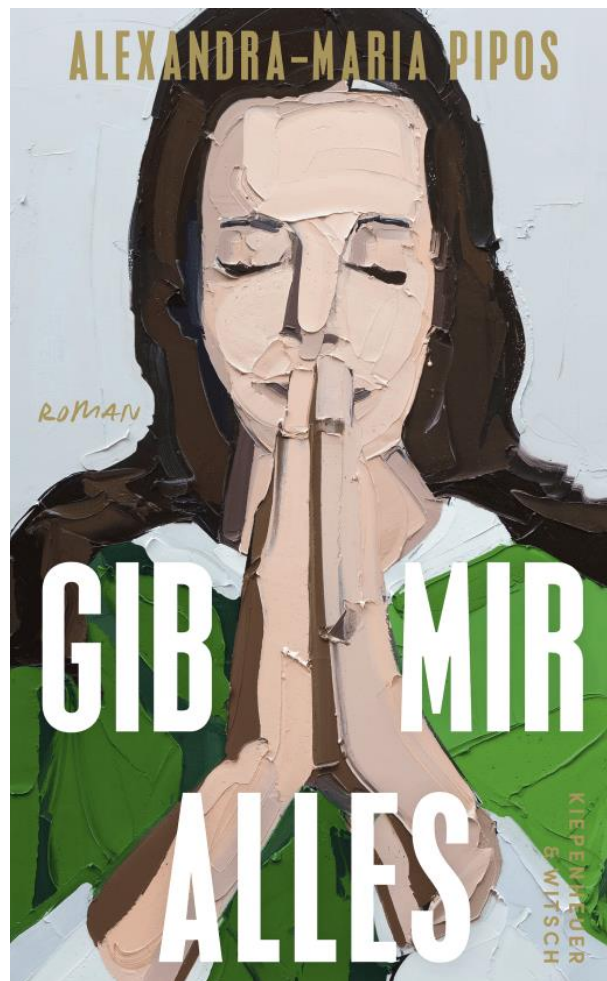


GIVE ME EVERYTHING

by Alexandra-Maria Pipos

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch



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CHAPTER 1

Let's go, guys, says the voice. Ten more seconds, come on. I press my back against the bedroom wall and look down at my bent legs. My thighs are burning. Five more seconds of wall-sit. Four, three, two, one. *Good job, everyone,* the tanned woman on the screen says approvingly. She wants one last round of core work from me, so I lie down on the towel beside the mattress. But before she even begins the first crunches, my phone pings. It's the latest episode of the *Buziness Buzz* podcast. I press play. Her *don't stop* mingles now with news about lean dividends and Chinese acquisition strategies. *You can do it.* Bicycle crunches, sit-ups, Russian twists. We roll onto our stomachs for the grand finale: forearm plank. Everything burns and burns, time stands perfectly still. Thirty, thirty, thirty seconds. I look around the bedroom, but there is hardly anything to look at. A few cardboard boxes, a clothes rail, an icon propped up on the floor. My eyes repeat their circuit, see that there's nothing new, and eventually begin to wander. And that is when I spot it, at the join between the wall and the ceiling. Skin cancer, I think. That patch looks like skin cancer, irregularly discoloured, with a strange, uneven edge. Firework emojis suddenly explode across the screen. The woman claps her hands: day ten of the twenty-eight-day challenge is done. *Done. That was so amazing. Right, guys?*

Panting, I go and stand beneath the patch. It reminds me of the melanoma they cut from my father's back a few years ago. It probably came from all those springs, summers and autumns he had spent out in the fields. Always bent over, first sowing, then harvesting, the sun merciless above him the whole time. It had been a close call, the doctors said at the time, and they had cut a piece of flesh from beneath his shoulder blade. Goosebumps

spread across my upper body as I think of the angry scar. I rub my arms several times, then rewind the last few minutes of the podcast.

My alarm goes off just as I am putting the coffee on in the kitchen. Today I was already awake before it sounded, as I so often am. I often lie there, staring at the ceiling, with that hollow, unmoored feeling that sits in my stomach and between my eyebrows, going over the concepts and analyses I will need to discuss with Sarah later. Sometimes I also imagine caving in Christian's face. First his eyes, then the rest of it, piece by piece, until I am kneading nothing but an unrecognisable mass. My heart pounds so hard then that I cannot get back to sleep.

I switch off the alarm and mentally run through the first to-dos of the day: exercise, podcast, make the bed, shower, pick an outfit. All that remains is checking the news. So I scroll through my news apps — *Handelsblatt*, *Wirtschaftswoche*, *Capital* — and skim the headlines. In between, my phone vibrates. It is a message from my mother. Today is the feast of Saint Paraskevi, she writes, a great holiday for us.

"*Ioana, să nu-ți tai azi unghiile sau părul.*" Ioana, don't cut your nails or your hair today.

I look at my fingernails. Bitten down, there is not much left to cut anyway. Instead of replying to my mother, I open my emails. Tom wants to know when he will get back his comments, which he sent me yesterday just before midnight, with my revisions incorporated.

"You'll have them by nine," I reply.

While I rummage through the boxes in the bedroom looking for my transitional coat, my eyes keep drifting back to the patch. I should let the

landlord know, a WhatsApp message, perhaps, rather than a call, or preferably neither. I have only been there a few months, after all. The hollow feeling in my stomach tightens and pulls at its ends. Perhaps the patch will have disappeared by the time I come home this evening. Surely it will. As I leave the room, my gaze lands on the icon. It shakes its head.

I am the first one in the office and I relish the quietness, the compact cone of light from the desk lamp, and the head start. Arriving this early, I can secure the best seat by the window and even upload Tom's revised comments to the cloud before eight. When Christian arrives and walks past me, he merely raises his eyebrows — the sole acknowledgement that my existence has registered with him. And that an unspoken battle over the window seat is ongoing between us. Today I have won. He knows it, I know it. He walks on without a single word.

"Jojo, what are you doing?" asks Sarah. She comes in just after Christian and stares at my screen.

"Looking into contents insurance," I say. I just can't stop thinking about the patch.

"You don't have any yet?" she asks, surprised.

I ignore her question. "What's the landlord actually like?" I ask instead.

Sarah sits down in the empty seat beside me and opens her laptop. "Like all of them." She shrugs and types in her password. "Only interested in the next rent increase." I took on the flat from her when she moved in with her boyfriend, Lukas. "Why do you ask?"

I tell her about the patch.

"But that's hardly your fault?" She sounds irritated, she sounds German. I smooth my expression. "If anything, it's the people above you. They'd be the ones who'd need to deal with it."

I put on my headset. "I've got to get on a call."

I run into Tom at the coffee machine. He is wearing Prada today, or perhaps Brioni. I never ask, but every time he takes off his jacket I study the label. Watching closely and learning by imitation, that's how I learn best.

We stare at each other's empty cups and exchange a nod.

"My second," says Tom.

"My third," I reply.

We grin at each other. It is a running joke from my early days here. I begin to grind the coffee.

"Where are you with Brunner?" he asks.

"I presented Frau Gerling and her team with the three options earlier. They're leaning towards the third."

"That was the one you worked up additionally, wasn't it?" I nod. "Good."

Good. Something eases behind my sternum. Because in the call, the options had suddenly stopped making sense. The way words begin to dissolve when you think about them for too long. *Water, water, water* — and all at once it is nothing but an agreement, a coincidence; it might just as well be called *Retaw*. I had cleared my throat and expected them to push back. But the many small faces on the screen had only nodded, and then asked questions.

Tom taps his smartwatch. "Shall we meet by the lift later?" he asks. "I just need to sort something with Andreas — I might be five minutes late."

Tom now sits with the senior partners, those who never have to move desks.

"Let's combine our catch-up with lunch, shall we?" he says.

I have little choice but to say, "Yes, of course."

"Perfect."

He takes his phone from his pocket and carries on scrolling.

I lock the filter basket in and wait for water to become coffee.

It's often Tom who reads through the documents after everyone else has done so, from junior to partner, and still finds a mistake — a transposed digit here, a wrong plural there, a full stop too many. Were he to look up now, he could read the disappointment in my face. But he carries on scrolling.

The cups fill slowly. I breathe in the smell of coffee, which I like better than the taste itself.

"Here." I hold out his cup to Tom.

"Thanks. See you later." He barely glances up from his phone.

I have been waiting weeks for this conversation. All in the hope that Tom would make proper time for it — sitting down, phone set aside. Instead, two hours later, I am waiting for him opposite the lift. Colleagues walk past and greet me as though nothing is happening. Because nothing is. Five minutes pass, then ten. The lift doors open, eyes inside staring out at me expectantly. I shake my head. Today it takes longer than usual for the doors to close again. Mercifully my phone vibrates in the meantime. Sarah wants to know where the portfolio analysis for one of our clients is saved. But before I can reply, a voice behind me says, "Shall we?" It is Tom, who sounds as though he has been waiting for me. I nod all the same. When the lift stops this time, we get in.

In the staff restaurant we help ourselves to a "Vitality" salad with lean chicken and a light tahini dressing. The queue is long; most people eat here. Tom carries his tray over to the till, the very one I would have avoided today.

Adriana Ciobanu, reads the faded name badge of the woman behind the counter. She must have overheard me once, when my mother called and I could not end the conversation in time. Since then I have had the sense that Adriana is waiting for something — a flicker of recognition, a nod. I have withheld both so far. She greets us, but Tom ignores her and turns to me. He pushes away the hand holding my purse.

"This is on me."

He places his staff card on the reader; the discount blinks up on the display.

Adriana says nothing as we leave.

"Enjoy your meal."

Tom peers over the rims of his black, heavy-set frames, hand-polished, buffalo horn, for a timeless yet modern look. That, at least, is what the website said. What it did not mention was the price. That is available on request in selected stores only. Tom nods at me and lays his napkin across his right thigh. I looked that up too. Apparently it is correct etiquette. I place mine across both thighs, as the paragraph below specified.

Over lunch, Tom tells me about a potential new client. A cosmetics brand struggling with falling market share.

"Down thirty-five per cent over the past three years," says Tom. His eyes light up.

"Wow," I murmur.

Tom smiles. That is good business for us. We begin to brainstorm first ideas. More direct-to-consumer or perhaps a purely online model.

"What do you think about rebranding?" I throw in at one point.

"Good idea, Johanna, that could be something," Tom says, more than once. Every mouthful tastes better after that.

"With a law degree, you can do anything," my father had said.

Semester after semester I sat hunched in the library over books and course notes. At night I dreamt of legal facts and their application but, most of all, of too few marks in the exam. *Ce slabă ești!* my mother would say each time I came home for the holidays. How thin you are. She would send me back with food that I threw away before I had even set foot in my shared flat. The hearty smell drifting from the bags was too mortifying. She also wanted to know when my exams were, so that she could let the relatives and priests back home know. Entire congregations would light candles and pray for me during the exam period. But it only helped so much. The week before my first state exam I woke with such acute back pain that I could barely get up. I did not see a doctor until afterwards. He diagnosed a slipped disc.

During one set of holidays, I stopped at one of the many stands at a careers fair. Cadris Consulting. The recruiter spoke of rapid advancement and competitive salaries.

At home, I looked further into it. *We drive your business forward*, the website declared. I liked that. I applied. For the interview I worked my way through case studies, memorised formulas and learned what constituted market attractiveness. The preparation was like a puzzle, like an elaborate game. If I made the right assumptions, the next level would unlock.

Despite having prepared well, my lower back seized up before the interview. I covered it in heat patches and sweated my way through the rounds, one of them with Tom, Senior Project Manager at the time.

Tom interpreted my flushed face as nerves. He smiled at me and praised me for my structured approach. I joined as one of three interns and was in his team from the start.

"We need to talk," he announced at my final review after three months. He added a quick "nothing bad" when he saw my expression. Even so, I walked into the conference room with a knot in my stomach.

"You can come on board directly, if you'd like," he said. "I've already spoken to Andreas."

I slept on it for one night, then a second. Joining Cadris would mean no legal traineeship, no second state exam.

For once, I asked my parents for advice.

"Roagă-te la Dumnezeu" — Pray to God, was my mother's recommendation.

"Go where you'll earn the most," said my father.

I hung up, deflated. Though in truth I did not know what I had wanted them to say. Their jobs were work, hard work. They did not look for meaning in it, they did not have a passion for it. So why should I?

On the third day I rang Tom and said yes.

As we eat and talk, Tom takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. He only does that when he thinks no one is watching. His hair has grown greyer, his face more gaunt, and beneath his tan he looks drawn. Seventy-hour weeks leave their mark, no matter how many miles he logs training outdoors for his marathons.

When he puts his glasses back on, he glances past me with increasing frequency, as though the rest of the staff restaurant were the more interesting prospect. I wipe my hands on my trousers.

"How did the move go?" he asks suddenly, changing the subject.

"Fine." I don't mention that it was three months ago. "How's Sabine?"

Tom begins telling me about some short break or other. He and Sabine are DINK — double income, no kids. The places he mentions I know only from films and television series. At first, with Tom and Sabine, it was like looking in through someone's window. I marvelled at everything I saw. But as he talks now, I would gladly lay my head down on the table. The woman whose name badge reads *Adriana Ciobanu* could carry me home, perhaps even whisper a "*Somn ușor*" — sleep well — into my ear before turning out the light, the way my mother used to.

Tom laughs suddenly; I laugh along, even though I do not know what is so funny. Then he pushes his tray away. "Right — coffees three and four for us?"

We take our drinks outside into the sunshine. Tom's photochromic lenses darken — three hundred to seven hundred euros for the pair — while I squint into the sun for free.

"Johanna." Tom's tone is suddenly businesslike; he speaks now as he would to a client. "About the question of the new job title." I hold myself still, though I cannot control the pounding in my chest. "I've spoken to Andreas." He sips his espresso, drawing out the pause — I have been present at enough of his negotiations to know the move. "I won't beat about the bush." Behind pressed lips, I quickly make the sign of the cross with my

tongue. God is always with you, my mother had explained; you can ask for his help at any moment, even discreetly. We were sitting in an aeroplane for the first time and she was frightened of crashing. Here, look, she said, and opened her mouth wide to make a cross with her tongue: the palate, the floor of the mouth, the right cheek, the left. I copied her.

"This year has not gone as well as expected," says Tom.

"And you are not the only one. Christian is also due for the next step." His lenses have darkened now to the point where I can barely make out his eyes. The pounding travels further, pressing now against my throat. "Andreas and I have had the following idea: you and Christian will each present your proposals for the new client to us next week. Which strategy you consider the strongest. Andreas and I will then decide." He pauses, and looks at me. Only when I nod does he continue. "Whoever convinces us gets the title and presents their approach to the client. And then takes on the account as well, if we win the pitch." The pounding intensifies; I want nothing more than to clear my throat. Instead I take a large sip of cappuccino and burn my tongue. "Including the acquisition bonus." Tom pushes his glasses up his nose. "To the other one we can only offer something in six months' time. Perhaps a year. Depending on how the workload looks. What do you think? Fair enough, isn't it?"

I take another sip, this time accepting the burn, perhaps even savouring it a little.

"Absolutely fair."

The afternoon is packed with calls and virtual meetings, no time to think, no time to feel. The new client is simply another puzzle, I tell myself in the few minutes of breathing space in between. Just the next level.

As I am about to close my laptop — Sarah and the other colleagues have already left — I suddenly hear a "Jojo?" from behind me. It is Tom. "Have you got a minute?"

I follow him into his office. "I've only just now seen what Jan has prepared for tomorrow." He gestures at a stack of printed slides. "It's completely useless. And the meeting is extremely important." He leans back against the desk and folds his arms. "It's about the supplementary budget for the project." This year has not gone as well as expected, he said at lunch.

"When?" I ask simply.

"Tomorrow morning."

"What exactly?"

"About five slides and another pass over the cost calculations. An hour at most," says Tom. It is never just an hour; we both know that. I hesitate. "I can always ring Christian instead."

"No, no," I say quickly. "Just send me the link to the document."

Tom unfolds his arms and smiles.

As he walks me back to my desk, his bag over his shoulder and coat in hand, he says: "Thank you. Sabine would have had my head this evening otherwise." Tom has cancelled more engagements than he has attended. "Drop me a message if anything comes up."

I shake my head. "Don't worry."

After Tom has gone, I open the link he has sent me. The last person in the office, I relish the clatter of the keyboard, the click of the mouse, the compact cone of lamplight. It is only a game; it is all perfectly manageable. If Tom comes to you first, you are on the home straight. It has to be that way.

CHAPTER 2

Despite the "No Junk Mail" sticker, a garish leaflet has found its way into my letterbox. Rather than tossing it in the bin, I take it up to the third floor. While the water for the pasta comes to the boil, I leaf through the pages. I love the lurid colours, the "unbeatable prices" and "special offers," the minus sign before the percentages. Just from flicking through, I have the feeling of having saved something. My eye snags on a number. Forty-three per cent off Jacobs Café Crema.

"Not bad," I murmur.

My mother will certainly have spotted that offer already. My parents have no "No Junk Mail" sticker on their letterbox. In the concrete tower block, very few people do.

I sit down at the kitchen table with my pasta and continue leafing through the leaflet when the phone rings. It is my mother. At this hour, it cannot be anyone else but her or Tom.

She wants to know what I am eating. That is usually the first thing she cares about.

"Ramen," I answer.

She sighs; she does not seem satisfied with my choice, but holds her tongue and tells me instead about her day. I try to shovel as many noodles as quietly as possible into my mouth and carry on flicking through the leaflet at the same time. It is only when she clears her throat and whispers a thin "So..." that I pause. I know that tone. "What is it?" I ask.

"Your grandmother rang today," she says. The two of them normally only speak on their birthdays and at Christmas. "Grandpa Vasile is in hospital."

"What happened? What's wrong with him?" I ask.

"I don't know exactly what it is. But it doesn't look good, Ioana. I haven't told your father yet. I don't want to upset him." Her voice trembles suddenly. It trembles with fear and worry, with the helplessness that has haunted her since the time when they still called us asylum seekers here. When we were not allowed to leave, and she would wake drenched in sweat, paralysed by dreams in which her parents and siblings died. When we would walk hand in hand to the telephone box at the end of the street that very same morning, and she would drop in the few coins to make sure each and every one of them was still alive. The relief lasted only until the next dream. For five years we made that walk regularly; only then did they stick a residence permit into our passports, only then did we travel home and my mother could see for herself.

"What will we do if he dies?" she whispers. "Your father can't... What are we to do...?"

She weeps, soundlessly as always. I stare at the bare wall. I really ought to start unpacking those boxes.

"Everything will be all right, Mama, yes?"

"And then your father has to go back to the hospital next week," she sobs. "It just doesn't stop."

For years he had punished that knee — in warehouses, on building sites — until it finally gave way. The operation had gone well at first. But then my mother rang to say the wound had become infected. That they would have to operate again. And then again, and again. At one point the doctors even spoke of amputation. Each time her name appeared on my phone screen, breathing became that little bit harder.

"We should pray for your father," my mother urged me at one point.

My response was an "Mmm," followed by a silence that stretched until she changed the subject. And yet my gaze would now occasionally stray

to the icon that stood on my desk. My mother's prayers and my glances seemed to help. Perhaps it was also the priest my mother brought to the hospital. The doctors did not amputate. But once spoken, the threat could not be unspoken. My mother first used up all her holiday. Then she reduced her hours at work until almost nothing was left of her wages. We have never spoken about my having increased the amount I transfer to them, months ago. At first it was only for the flat where our life here began, which they bought some time ago. "What else would we leave you?" my mother had asked. I had no answer to that. Now I am paying off my own inheritance in advance: a three-room flat in concrete.

"Why does he have to go back?" I ask.

"They want to discuss the next operation."

Since the talk of amputation, they have both dreaded those consultations. They no longer trust their own ears. They lose the thread, ask the doctor to repeat things — and ask me too, even when I was not there for the conversation. As though it were their first weeks in this country again.

"I could drive up to you," I offer. I will sit in the hospital waiting room then, laptop on my knees, trying not to bother the other visitors with my calls.

"Yes, that would be good. Thank you." She yawns.

"Shouldn't you go to bed?" I ask.

"No, no." The shadows under her eyes have grown darker and more deeply lined since she gave my father the bedroom and took to sleeping on my narrow childhood mattress.

To distract her, I tell her about the patch on the wall.

"*Asta nu e bine,*" she says. That is not good. She will be placing her hand on her chest now, reaching for the cross that hangs from her gold chain. She always does that when she does not know what else to do.

"Shouldn't I let the landlord know?" I ask.

"What if he says something?"

She sounds worried, and the tightness gripping her chest seeps suddenly through the receiver and draws itself around mine too.

"What would he say?" I ask.

"What if he gives you notice? That is what happened to Maria, when she complained — don't you remember? Suddenly all five of them were out on the street. He was only looking for an excuse." I push the bowl away; my appetite has gone. "I'm only saying, Ioana. *Ai grijă*," she says. Be careful.

The thread of our conversation has snapped; we have each pulled too hard from our own end. I could pass it back to her and tell her about my talk with Tom. But then she would only say "*vai*" every few sentences without really understanding. She keeps track of my job title solely for the benefit of friends and family who might ask.

"Mama, I need to go now," I say at last. I am too tired to pass the thread back to her. "I was going to put a wash on."

"Today is a holiday, Ioana! I wrote and told you," she says. "No washing today."

"All right, all right." I am still undecided whether to do whites or colours.

"Did you cut your nails today? Or your hair?"

"What? No."

"Good."

"So..." She hesitates; she does not want to hang up yet. Because then she will be alone again. "Maybe you could give Grandpa a ring one of these days?" she asks. "You know how much it means to him. How long has it been since you saw him? How long since you last came with us? How long since

you held your grandparents and stood at the graves of those who came before you, without whom you would not be here?"

"Six or seven years?" I answer.

"You haven't been back in that long?" Her surprise is feigned. She knows perfectly well.

"I really must go, Mama."

"I understand, Ioana. Good night. And don't put that wash on. God sees everything."

While I stuff the white laundry into the drum, I think of Saint Paraskevi. In churches they all look the same — narrow, solemn holy faces in long robes. I do not know what makes her a saint, or whether I even believe in any of it. All the same, just to be safe, I murmur a "*Doamne iartă-mă*" — God, forgive me — before pressing Start for the short cycle at thirty degrees.

With my laptop and cold pasta, I lie down in the bedroom and bring up the Isaer website for what must be the hundredth time. *Living Scandinavian design rooted in elegance and traditional craftsmanship*. So the website explains why the sofas cost upwards of ten thousand euros. I configure my own models: sofas with a chaise longue and without, three-seaters, four-seaters, in leather or wool upholstery. One of them will be going in the sitting room before long. I will lie there in the evenings, reading or having guests over, everything tasteful and refined. Not tacky, not second-hand, not scratched or stained, however hard my mother scrubs with scouring cream. Tonight I settle on the Veneda model with chaise longue and wool upholstery in Arezzo Green, a mere seven thousand euros, deliverable in four weeks. I open a new tab and click through the potential client's website.

Somewhere after midnight, the beeping of the washing machine wakes me. Paraskevi's special day is over. With some relief I hang the laundry up in the sitting room. Back in bed, I check my work emails one last time, only Christian has written, a message I skim, and my gaze falls once more on the patch. It is still there. But in the glow of the bedside lamp it no longer seems so threatening. Just a harmless mole, I think, not skin cancer. Probably nothing dramatic after all; perhaps not even worth a call to the landlord. I turn off the light.

SAINT JOHANNA, MYRRH-BEARER

The child sleeps badly, tossing and turning, murmuring words in its sleep that I cannot make out, and yet I hear it — the worry in its voice. The child has long since ceased to be a child; only in the mornings, in that place between sleeping and waking, does it rub its eyes with the innocence of before. It was the first thing I noticed when the woman set me up in its room all those years ago — its almond eyes, which had seen too much.

"Ioana," said the woman, who wore a headscarf and thick lenses, stroking the child's head with a calloused hand, "look what I've brought you. This saint has the same name as you."

The child looked me over. "Did she also slay a dragon, Grandma?"

"No. She was one of the first to see Jesus after the Resurrection and to bring word of it to the disciples."

"Pity," said the child.

The old woman's eyes met mine. She knew there was more to it than that. She knew that I had been the courageous one who had gone down on her knees and dug, in the night while the traitors slept, until I found it — the head of John the Baptist, who had visited me in my dreams, who had chosen me to find him; and when I did, his face was as unblemished and his eyes as wise as on the day that Salome had demanded it. I buried him on the Mount of Olives; I brought him peace and a church. But all of this the grandmother kept to herself, perhaps not wishing to tell the child of a severed head.

Instead she said only: "She is the one you must pray to when you are troubled or do not know which way to turn. She will help you."

The child did not believe her. It prayed only in its mother's presence, its voice thin and every word a withholding — it had no wish

to entrust itself to me. And yet I saw and heard everything, for when they painted me, they painted my eyes without lids and my ears pricked sharp. I watched it sit alone in its room day after day, playing for hours on end, telling itself quiet stories. I watched it get up in between, press its small face against the window pane and look out at the children whose laughter carried all the way up to the fourth floor. Even I felt its longing; only the mother did not, filled to the brim as she was with fear and worry. "You are all I have, Ioana," she would say. "What if something happened to you? Just imagine." But the child could not imagine it. It could only imagine the fun those children below were having, and it imagined that with great precision. One day, however, it climbed the stairs of the tower block with a girl, and showed her its room with trembling limbs. Their giggling was tentative at first and grew steadily louder; they began to plait each other's hair and sing along to the music blaring from the stereo. But not for long. Before long the girl wrinkled her nose. "What's that smell?" she asked, and the child, cheeks burning, murmured that its mother was cooking — something with meat and cabbage and bacon. The girl pulled a face and did not stay for supper; she never came back after that. "Why can't you just make frozen pizza for once? Like everyone else's mothers do," the child screamed at its mother that evening, face contorted with fury. It suffered — not only that day but every other day too — and did everything it could to fit in, to be unremarkable, to belong. It saved its meagre pocket money to buy clothes with the right labels; it leafed through old magazines and tore out pages showing clothes and furniture it would own one day; it even went so far as to sin. I forgave the child the sin, though the parents barely did. "Why did you steal a mascara of all things? You already have one," the mother wanted to know; she did not understand the child. Had she not raised it well, in faith in God and more besides? "Because I wanted one from

Maybelline for ONCE. EVERYONE in my class has one," the child screamed. Mother and child looked at each other and did not recognise what they saw, and the gulf between them widened every time the child refused its mother entry to its room or corrected her grammar and slammed the door in her face. I watched the mother sometimes lie down in the child's bed while it was at school, weeping herself to sleep over the child and over herself, then waking to look through its drawers and leaf through its notebooks, before going down on her knees before me in penance. The father, by contrast, would merely sigh "Ioana" and shake his head whenever they faced each other in an argument. And he also shook his head on the night he waited in the child's room for its return. He wanted to know where it had been so late; he raised his open hand and let it fall only at the very last moment.

"You're such a hypocrite — you smoke and drink too," the child screamed, barely a child any longer. Its lipstick was smeared, the colour on its eyelids too. It smelled sour, of vomit and cigarettes.

"What's his name?" the father wanted to know, while the mother stood in the doorway, hand on her chest, whispering: "Mihai, calm down."

"What do you mean, calm down?" the father replied, as the child cried: "You just don't get it."

"Don't get what? That one respects one's parents?" said the father, his neck flushed red.

"No," the child shouted, "that's how things are done here." It allowed itself no tears, wiping them away before they could run down its cheeks.

"Is that how you speak to your father, Ioana?" the mother whispered, shrinking with every exchange until she was barely the height of the door handle. But the child did not hear her.

"Why did you even come here? All you do is work or sit in front of the telly!" Its voice broke; it wiped its face faster now, and I knew it was thinking of all the times the mother had come into the room seeking comfort and an embrace that the child had barely been willing to give. "This is no life!" it cried. The mother had by now shrunk so small she could have slipped beneath the door.

"No life?" said the father, gesturing at the full shelves and wardrobes. "Would you rather muck out the stalls every day and look after your five children?" He gave a short laugh. "Do you know what? Perhaps you won't go on the school trip after all. Then you'll know what it was like for us. We had nothing and we were allowed nothing. Your mother and I can have a nice weekend away with that money instead. And not 'sit in front of the telly' for once."

"Mihai," came the voice from the doorway again, while the child cried "No!" I heard its sobbing after the parents had left the room, and its whisper: "Let me go to Paris, Saint Ioana, please. I've never been anywhere else."

After its return, it began to look at me more often — uncertain whether I had truly heard its prayers, plainly wrestling with what could and could not be — but it began to pray to me. At first no more than a whisper, mostly in passing, but a prayer nonetheless. One for better marks, one for larger breasts, and one that the parents would argue less. For I saw the blankness that came over its face when they did, again and again; it looked lost when their furious words came through the walls and grew louder rather than quieter; it sat there and absorbed them until it was full of them, then dragged itself heavily to the desk, its homework the only escape it knew.

When the time finally came for it to leave, it almost left me behind.

"You are taking Saint Ioana with you," the mother instructed, her voice firmer than it had ever been.

Reluctantly the child packed me away and moved into a flat it shared with strangers. For years I lay in drawers or behind books; from there I heard it say for the first time, "This is my room"; heard the man who stayed the night and then kept coming back for a time, though never for long enough; I heard others come and go, heard music, heard them stumbling drunkenly about the room and laughing in the haze of it. But as time went on, the short nights grew fewer, the visitors likewise, and the laughter most of all. Instead the child would sit down at the desk almost the moment it came home, reading and typing and studying; it drank only coffee and never water; it recited legal clauses in its sleep and learned of rights and felt itself filled with obligations. Its despair grew in step with its fear of the examinations, so acutely that one day it took me out and set me on the desk with a conflicted look. From there I watched it grow ever more hunched, more exhausted, more hollow; watched it swallow pills instead of food, with such anguished greed, as though receiving holy communion.

And when it was not at the desk, it lay in bed — even after it had passed its examinations. It would come home in the evenings and crawl onto its island; it would stare for hours at that rectangle inside which people laughed and fought and loved; it ate there, closed its eyes without sleeping, let the telephone ring, ignored knocking at the door, going under as though the island were the water surrounding it. So the time passed, and the child with it. It left early in the morning and came back late at night; sometimes it even fell asleep still dressed; it worked and worked at that blinking device, and before long almost the only person who called was the one it called Tom, to whom it could refuse nothing, to whom it did not wish to refuse anything.

When it moved a few weeks ago, I disappeared again into a box for days, buried under pillowcases and sheets, but not for long this time. It took me out and stood me beside the mattress. Since the move I see the child only at weekends and late in the evenings; it lies here then and builds itself a sofa — a different one each evening, and each evening I dread the moment it will be finished. When it falls asleep with worry on its face, I ask myself whether it too must be saved, as I too had to be saved by the Lord and his Son; whether it too will be visited in its dreams by the images and will follow them, because only it can, as only I could. I ask myself what it will have to dig for — because even if this is not everyone's fate, it is surely the fate of this child.

[END OF SAMPLE]