

Give  
Me  
Courage

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While some names are fictional all the characters are real.

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*I dedicate this book to the European lady  
I saw lying in the gutter at Makola Market, Accra, in 1982  
I never knew your name  
But you could have been me  
When I saw your plight, my pain turned to strength  
and my tears changed to courage*

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## Prologue

# The Monk

**M**y father, a truck driver, is called Gheorghe. ‘You know, Lenuta,’ he tells me, ‘I once picked up a hitch-hiker on this road who told me about a Catholic monk who lives in those mountains over there.’ He points through the window. ‘He tells fortunes. Shall we go and see him? I’d like to know if you’ll get into university or not.’

My father believes that some people can foretell the future. Long ago a gypsy told him that he would marry a poor woman—and he did.

The track to the top of the mountain where the monk lives is narrow and rocky, not built for trucks. When they hear the roar of the engine, people come out of their houses and gardens to watch us struggle up the road. They use only horses and carts. We keep stopping and asking them for directions.

Everyone knows this Transylvanian monk.

My father’s face is set in concentration. He does not speak. I realise that he is conquering this road and I see what an excellent driver he is. For once in my life I feel proud of him.

We climb for a long time and finally reach a ramshackle building right at the top of the mountain. Lush green valleys fall away below us and the air is fresh and clean. I feel I can almost reach out and touch the sky that shines pearl white and the palest blue.

The monk's house is a heap of scrap metal and wooden boards tacked together. In front of it a young boy is stacking hay with a pitchfork. He doesn't look surprised to see our truck pull up. Without pausing in his work, he calls over to ask what we want and we tell him that we have come to see the monk.

The boy rests the handle of his fork on the ground and leans his arm across the prongs. I wonder why they don't hurt him. 'Do you have two candles?' he says. 'I can light them for you.' We didn't know that we needed candles.

He asks us to follow him around to the back of the house and into a tumbledown shed. Inside, people are sitting on a wooden bench holding lighted candles. I hesitate, but my father squeezes my hand and we enter. The boy hands each of us a candle and asks us to sit down and wait. I perch on the hard wooden bench and look around at the others. I am the only young person, seventeen.

My father turns to the man next to him. 'Where have you come from?'

'Brasov.'

Brasov is a long way off. We are travelling from Bucharest, also far away. This monk is very famous.

'Have you been here before?'

'Many times. He only ever asks for a lighted candle. The Militia used to arrest him and accuse him of exploiting people. But they couldn't make the charge stick. He never asks for money.'

'We have to help him,' says a woman at the far end of the bench. 'We give him something in return for what he tells us.'

'When he was held in the cells he told the Militia men's

fortunes,' the man continues. 'That scared them so badly they stopped arresting him. Now they leave him in peace up here on his mountaintop.'

After a while the boy reappears and asks us to follow him. We enter a one-room shack with a rough-hewn table in the middle and a bed in the corner. A black habit hangs on the wall. The bed is just a wooden box and its mattress is a big sack stuffed with straw.

The monk is tall with a long grey beard and wears a threadbare robe. He seems different from the monks I have seen in the monastery. They have an air of remoteness separating them from ordinary people. This one looks as if he is his own man. Without his robe you would never know he was a monk.

'Gheorghe, sit down.'

My father turns pale. How does the monk know his name?

My father sits down on the bed and, because he is a big man, his weight makes him sink into the straw mattress with his legs dangling as though he were sitting inside a giant tea-cup. He looks small and scared.

The monk tells him, 'You have three children. One will be lucky in marriage: your son.' Pointing to me, he says, 'She will be the one to disappoint you most.'

He pauses and I feel my heart thump in my chest.

'You have two houses on the same land, one old and one new.' True: my father built another house next door to the one in which we live. 'In front of the window of the new one there's a cherry tree. Soon it will die.'

He looks at me with eyes that seem to see right into me. ‘You, young woman, are going to deeply disappoint your parents. You will marry a man in uniform. Your first child will be a girl. I see she is very dark.’

If he knows about the cherry tree, can he also predict what will happen to me? No, surely not. I know exactly the type of man with whom I will fall in love. My own skin is olive but I am attracted to boys with blue or green eyes and fair skin.

The monk is talking nonsense.

He turns to my father and says, ‘She will get into the school where she wants to go but she will drop out. At work she will be dressed in white. She will sit down and do something with her hands to earn her daily bread. She will be lucky with money. She will never lack that.’

He looks at me again and says, ‘You will travel a long way, over the seas. Before you are twenty-nine years old you will be left alone with many children. Afterwards you will travel even further over the seas, to the end of the world.’

With that he is finished. How ridiculous, I think. My father struggles to get up out of the mattress. He puts some money on the table, the monk blows out the candles and we leave. Outside, we thank the boy who is still forking the hay.

On the way down the mountain track my father is silent. He concentrates on the road, his face still pale. He does not want to look at me.

The monk’s words resonate in my head. How could I possibly disappoint my parents? I always try to be so good, to make them happy. I believe that one day I can bring happiness to our entire family. Now this unknown monk tells me that I will disappoint them.

None of this can be true. What's more, the cherry tree looks set to flourish for many seasons.

Afterwards, my father and I never speak about the monk's words. We would not even consider telling my mother. She thinks all fortune telling is rubbish.

After Christmas, as the snow melts and the new year starts, I watch the cherry tree closely. I'm sure buds will appear as usual. Every morning I look up at the leaves, seeking the first signs of blossoms. I keep telling myself that the monk knows nothing about us.