



TLC SHOWCASE

Dona Ursu

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Introduction to *Replay/Rewind*

Replay/Rewind is a novella of literary fiction about the relationship between mother and daughter, about loss and grief and the fragile scaffolding of reality.

I came to TLC with the manuscript of a novel and a childhood dream of becoming a writer. The Chapter and Verse mentoring programme became my home for the next year and I had the wonderful privilege of having Rose Billington as my mentor. With patience, kindness and immense skill, she taught me how to look at my prose in a different way. Rose's feedback, like good wine, only got better the longer I sat with it. So profound was its influence on me that, over the span of the programme, I decided to write another book altogether. *Replay/Rewind* is that book.

As part of the amazing Chapter and Verse programme I was so lucky to have Anna South as a second reader who brought a fresh pair of eyes to my work and saw exactly what it needed. Her notes were so valuable that after incorporating her suggestions I booked a second manuscript assessment with her.

These two talented editors with a wealth of experience between them brought my writing to a place I didn't know it could reach and, more importantly, made me realise that this was only the beginning. I can't recommend this programme enough. Everyone at TLC played a part in my journey: Joe who is so generous with his time and manages to be both realistic and encouraging with us doubting writers, Aki Schilz, with whom I've had the pleasure of having coaching, helping me with astute questions to put the finger on what was holding me back; and, of course, Rose Billington and Anna South who are nothing short of magicians.

Extract from *Replay/Rewind*

During those first days alone with my mother, I felt cocooned. We would take our coffee at *Chez Schumann*, the little terrace across the street, even when it rained, which it did almost every day.

My mother relished the flaky croissants, leaving a trail of crumbs on her blouse that I gently brushed away. But she kept dressing for the wrong season — scarf-less and umbrella-free, with little more than a light coat, even in mid-January.

Animated chatter in all manner of languages drifted across the small café tucked beneath a broad awning and my mother tried to guess them all. If she couldn't place the language, she would ask what it was. Most were easy enough to identify — Finnish, Greek, Polish — and for the ones I didn't recognize I gave her rough categories: the Baltic languages or the former Yugoslavia. People ordered strong, tiny coffees and bit into the squares of dark chocolate that came with them.

For a while we did nothing but eat and talk. Just my mother and me. I would run over to hers on my lunch break with a new dish for us to try. Brussels always seemed to have another cuisine waiting to be discovered, so we never ate the same thing twice. Mama's palate was being put to the test. She loved bouillabaisse and said it reminded her of the fish soup my grandmother used to make, only with fewer fish heads and tails. She groaned that the sushi was addictive making me take the rest home to Franz. And although she was ambivalent about oysters, she enjoyed the champagne she washed them down with.

They say you can't handle bad news on an empty stomach, so I kept feeding us, knowing that I could no longer postpone a necessary but painful conversation.

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Soon after I'd started work in Brussels, my mother fell ill. Repeated rounds of treatment kept her illness in check, but the threat of its return hung over our heads. When things became serious between Franz and me I knew his proposal was just a matter of time, but I couldn't shake the fear that my mother might miss the wedding. So I probably nudged Franz along to catch the window of her good health.

The wedding was huge, with family and friends coming to Bucharest from all over Europe.

Booking everyone into a hotel, keeping track of their flights, arranging transportation, all of it – everything I thought would be exhausting – energized me. I was getting married. And my mother, despite the odds, was going to be there. My wedding gown, designed in Paris and dispatched by courier, fell to the floor in pearly silk waves. My hair was gathered in a chignon pinned with Swarovski stones, and the veil, oh the veil, swept down the aisle, almost to the door. It was an apparition. A showstopper, some said.

My mother insisted that we observe some Romanian traditions. On the morning of the wedding,

Franz arrived at our small flat with a band of folk musicians to ask my parents for my hand in marriage. Those jolly, round-bellied men in embroidered garments clashed their cymbals, sawed at their violins and made their accordions wail, and that handsome blond beast, in his impeccable electric blue suit, got down on one knee on our doorstep. Thimble glasses of plum brandy were raised, *cașcaval*, lard and olives were offered on tin platters and there was general merriment. Franz enjoyed it more than I did, because he took it in as something unfamiliar, like a staged performance.

Later that night some friends stole the bride and took me to a club for a few hours. The ritual was to make off with the bride and hide her somewhere until the groom agreed to pay the ransom.

Going clubbing turned out to be the highlight of my wedding except, of course, for the vows and the exchange of rings. I danced with abandon, kicking off my stiletto shoes so I could feel the floor under my feet. I tied my veil around my waist and let my crinoline sway like a church bell. And I was yelling the lyrics to those nineties' songs at the top of my lungs.

When they returned me in exchange for a bottle of Dom Perignon, I learned that my mother had felt out of sorts and gone home. By now my father was drunkenly teaching Franz the steps to the hora, which Franz seemed to have picked up surprisingly fast. He kept going round and round, arms over people's shoulders, cheering whenever the circle of dancers tightened around its center and then opened again like a pumping fist. I hoped someone had driven my mother home and that she hadn't just been put into a taxi alone.

About the Writer

Iuliana-Dona Ursu works as an interpreter in Brussels and speaks five languages. Her favourite publisher is Fitzcarraldo Editions and her bookshelf is mostly blue from the many Fitzcarraldo novels crammed onto it.

Replay/Rewind is Dona's first work of fiction and is currently seeking publication.

