

Image Descriptions in Chişinău

by Ine Lamers

It began in a car, a taxi that took us to the capital Chişinău. It was a November evening and it was drizzling. Along the road we saw trees with white 'socks', headlights appearing and disappearing, a line of red tail lights in the distance. We were driving fast. The incredibly long, dark four-lane road took us to the Ryskani quarter, or was it Botanica, where the 'Gate to the City' gave us a somewhat melancholy welcome. I had come here to make a photo and video series, to tell a story and give an impression of a forgotten city in a forgotten land: Moldavia. I myself knew little more than that it was wedged between the Ukraine and Romania. Moldavia, a small independent republic, reportedly with a history of misfortune.

Where am I? My driver was telling me things about the surroundings, the city and about an evening a long time ago when he had witnessed a bizarre accident on this very road, near McDonald's.

He explained how the accident had occurred. A young woman was hit by a car because she suddenly crossed the road. It was almost as if she had jumped in front of it on purpose. Screeching brakes, a dull thump and the usual onrush of people. The woman lay against the kerb, moaning, her head half lifted up, a painful expression on her face. What happened next had been the most surprising element.

The driver, who had had a terrible fright, had stepped out of his car, approached the woman, whispered something to her and then, mumbling excuses, had awkwardly but carefully put a small parcel in her hand. This was witnessed by all the bystanders. It was a thick parcel. Maybe a pile of dollar bills. It was not quite clear. The bystanders, who were naturally foremost concerned about the woman's condition, responded first with curiosity, then with indignation and puzzlement. The woman, however, told them in no uncertain terms not to interfere and to not even think about calling an ambulance or the police. She had got up, put the pile of bills in her handbag and thanked the driver. Both had then hastily departed the scene, leaving the bystanders in bewilderment. Nobody had managed to write down the dark blue Volvo's license plate.

We continued on our way towards the city centre. There were a surprising number of people standing alongside the road, mostly alone, waiting, talking to themselves, right at the edge of the kerb and dangerously close to the traffic speeding by.

Had the woman escaped totally unscathed? Didn't she have any serious injuries or broken bones as a result of the collision? My host said that she had scrambled to her feet, rubbed her knee a little and had then disappeared into the night, walking with some difficulty. It had all happened very fast. So fast, in fact, that it seemed as if nothing had happened at all.

The photographs that I didn't take in Chişinău are suggestive, tempting and open to various interpretations but they are also compelling, forming the links in this story of Roxana. Roxana, the woman who has a curious relationship with cars. She shows her game: an exciting game with cars. Circumstances that you cannot control may prevent you from taking one or more photographs you intended to take. That sort of untaken photograph is not an after-image but rather an image that was already there and still lingers inside your head. The question of whether it would have been a valuable image remains unanswered.

The untaken photograph 1 - Chişinău by night

On this untaken photograph we see Roxana, a woman in her late twenties, early thirties. She is standing at the side of a road, noticeably close to the kerb, with her back to the camera. She has turned slightly sideways, looking over her shoulder at something that is not in the shot. She is on the left and the image is cropped at her hips. Above her and to her right are the sky and the city by night, darkness surrounding her. The four-lane

road in front of her is shiny. Roxana likes that, she likes reflecting surfaces. 'Romantique', she admits.

She is alone. There are no people in the direct vicinity, maybe a single individual in the distance and across the road; shadows, silhouettes. Behind her we see red and yellow ribbons of light, these ugly ribbons that you get with long exposures, and trees. Trees with white socks, spaced at regular intervals. There is a car, no, two cars parked a few metres away from her, with their headlights on. Across the road we see a couple of parked cars as well, those trees again and behind that a green-lit shop window. The bright green light is reflected brokenly in the wet surface of the road. It has rained after all. In the distance we can make out some brightly lit billboards on high poles, austere surfaces that have become almost white because of the long exposure. The road is long, it could be any road in any city. What stands out is the darkness, and the trees of course. There has not been much street lighting in Chişinău for years, and there was always plenty of greenery.

In her half turn Roxana is peeking rather than looking. She has been caught by the camera. She frowns as if something has startled her or someone has just called her name. Her right shoulder is on the left hand side of the image, her left shoulder is hidden by her body. Her gloved hand clenches the strap of a handbag she holds tightly against her body. The shot has been taken either from close up or with a zoom lens. A warm yellowish light coming from the right hand side lights her face. A strong jaw, high cheekbones and a delicate chin. A pretty face with a narrow mouth, catlike eyes and a slightly tilted-up nose. She resembles Juliette Binoche with her hairstyle and dark eyes with directly above almost straight narrow eyebrows that stretch further than her eyelids. We see modern clothes, not a designer outfit but West European in style, the style of an independent young woman, expressing self-reliance and a certain toughness. A casual jacket, dark blue with red sleeves. A hood lying casually at the back of her head, a woolly scarf sticking up cheekily. The jacket reaches to her waist, then there is a purple skirt that looks synthetic. It all looks rather cheap.

The photograph seems to feel the cold, but no, it is Roxana who is cold. She had, in fact, pulled the hood over her head and her nose is actually red from blowing it often. The shot has been made over the space of a few minutes with a small aperture. Roxana has moved slightly, so she is a little out of focus, perhaps a little too dramatic. She gazes down, focusing on something that is taking place on her right, out of shot. Beside the camera. Her gaze seems to want to hold on to what she sees. A car is parked further down the road. Her left hand is behind her body, while at her waist her right hand is holding the strap of what turns out to be a purple handbag with tiger print. Tiger print refers to sensuality, someone once told me.

Something is about to happen. She isn't holding the strap loosely but is clenching it tightly and her gaze is not relaxed, either, she is stony-faced; there is even some irony in her expression and something definite, inevitable. Her face is lit from the side. Her head is inclined a little to the left, a mesmerised expression on her face, she bites her lower lip in the right-hand corner of her mouth, lips slightly parted. She even seems to look with her nose, she doesn't frown although she would like to but that would be 'overacting'. 'Pas trop, Roxana', I tell her. She nods - she understands. She tries again. How will the observer know that it is November and that she is looking at a car with the gaze of a vulture?

The untaken photograph 2 - Chişinău by night

A brightly lit billboard on poles in the wide shoulder of a sloping road. The surroundings are dark, probably a city. The billboard almost fills the entire image.

Against a dark grey, indeterminable background we see two coarse arms of a man. Huge hands with too many signet rings sticking out of brown sleeves

with white cuffs. One hand is on the left side of the image, the other one on the right. The hands are held a little apart.

The hand on the left is holding something, a small Barbie doll of sorts, a fragile female figure with long hair, wearing a summer dress and no shoes. Her arms are stretched alongside her body and she is firmly held by the fat fingers clasping her body and her arms. She is so small that she could easily disappear in the hand altogether. Her legs are dangling in the void, feet outstretched.

The hand on the right is half open, loosely offering bank notes, a bundle of Moldavian lei, or are those dollar bills? The text covering the full width of the poster at the bottom says in Romanian (Moldavian): 'You are not a commodity'. In the right-hand corner is a logo from the Ministry. The city in the background is dark. On the left we see a segment of a blind wall, a high-rise building and in the distance on the right there are trees, cars, shop windows and the occasional shadow passing by, silhouettes of human figures. Still further away there is a small splash of light on a building, a brand-new white building it seems, though it is hard to tell where this light comes from.

The untaken photograph 3 - Chişinău by night

Roxana as seen from the back. No face. There are few lights on this street. A tiny bundle of light falls on her shoulder and hair. Nothing is out of focus here. Apparently she has effortlessly stood still during the minutes long exposure. In the distance we see a billboard depicting a half-naked woman, her head resting on one arm while her other arm lies graciously on top of her head. She holds a bottle of perfume under her nose and there is a text in Romanian. The billboard lights up, raising itself from the darkness. Roxana poses 'looking at cars'. The photo seems to want to start telling a story but then decides not to. The night is pitch-black and in the distance there are probably other people roaming the streets as well. The sky is not studded with stars.