

What We Leave We Carry

Gabriela Raluco Andriesei

'I go to watch rugby just to listen *Flower of Scotland*. I'm paying £78 just to listen. I'm not watching the game. I'll go to listen *Flower of Scotland* because I love the way it sounds.'

— Gabriela Raluco Andriesei

[Music]

Presenter: Gabriela Raluco Andriesei moved to Scotland to find a freedom to be with her partner, freedom which she felt was not possible in her Romanian hometown. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK.

[Music]

Gabriela Raluco Andriesei: Gabriela Raluco Andriesei. I was born in Romania in a small town called Botoşani. So my family lived in Botoşani, and let's say half an hour driving, my grandparents were living there, because my mum and my dad, they're from the same village. Back home, we have this tradition like—because when I was little, it was still communist time, and you weren't allowed to stay home in maternity leave for too long. So I believe I was just few months old when I had to go and sit with granny, and my parents were coming to see us only in the weekend because they were off. So I spent most of my childhood, until I was seven, with the granny. And when I start school, I moved in the town with my parents, and in the summer holiday, I stayed there until September with the granny.

She annoyed us once because we want to go and play in the street. We were that generation that were allowed to go and play in the street. And she would scream at us because we were far away to come back home and do our chores or eat or whatever we had to do. And we weren't happy with the fact that we had to come back and feed the piglets, so we run to our granny, the other granny from my dad's side. And she came with a cane to chase us back home. And we were like, 'That's not fair.' The other cousins, they were just laughing. They were very amused with the situation because like, 'She will never beat us, but she beats you guys.'

Back home, to be a decent family or healthy family, you always have piglets, chickens, a cow, a horse. You will have animals around because if you have a cow, you know that you have milk and some cheese. If you have a piglet, you know you'll have what to sacrifice for Christmas time and you'll have meat all the year. The chickens, you will have like 10, 20 chickens around the house. That was the custom.

[Music]

I'd had some issues with my teeth, so that summer, I spent it going all the time to the dentist. And I decide that I want to be a dentist. Yes, so I started studying for medicine. I passed my exams, and I went and I said like, 'Oh, I will go to two unis to prove—two or three.' I went to be a vet, a dentist and an engineer. I applied for all three, and I got to all three of them. And I decide to give up on vet because granny say you can't look after animals. If someone comes with her cow, you give the wrong treatment, and because of you, they can't feed the family anymore because the cow dies. So I'm like, *that's a fair point*. So I give up being a vet. And I said I will stay with it being a dentist and an engineer.

[Music]

I remember in my first few weeks being a student, my dad was made redundant. And my mum said, 'I don't know if we can afford to keep you at uni.' And give me the option, say, 'We can send you food, but we don't have money to pay for accommodation or stuff like that.' So I had to find a job. It was an interesting period of my life as I was doing night shifts and finish at six, get to the hostel at seven, have a shower, and be at uni for eight o'clock. I was sleeping in my breaks. I had to give up on my being a dentist because it was big corruption there and to pass the exam was more important to give them money rather than have knowledge. I managed to finish engineering.

[Music]

As students, we were living in a small room, and we were six girls in that room. We had bunker beds; three in one side, three in one side. They were such a, I don't know, good banter. Because you'll go there and have shower, and someone will steal your towel, and you'll end up going out rolled out in the shower cover or, I don't know, cover yourself with the shampoo and go out and just run quick to your—it was just mental. It was good laugh. It was good times. I remember one of my colleagues told me that she joined engineering because she knew that you can get contracts to work in UK in agriculture. And because I was struggling with the money, I felt like, *oh, I need to try this*. And I asked my older sister to take a loan so I

can make a passport and pay my contract and came to UK. And I haven't told to my parents until a week before I had to come in UK. I told them, 'Oh, by the way, I apply for a job in UK, and I got it.' And she was like, 'How?' I was like, 'Well, I'm smart enough, apparently, and they want me there.' And she's like, 'You're not going?' I say, 'Yes, I'm going. I've got a ticket, I've got a passport, and I'm going.' So I came in UK when I was 21 years old.

[Music]

Once I finished my first year at uni, I came in UK. I was—like a soft farm somewhere in Perth. Even now, I recall I was with my best friend, Anna, and we were like Terminal 5, and we were asking, 'Where is Edin-burgh?' And everyone was saying, 'No, Edinburgh.' I said, 'No, you don't get me. I need to get to Edin-burgh.' They were like, 'You don't get me, young lady. You need to go to Edinburgh.' And it was an old man, a Romanian guy, and he's like, 'You need to come with me. I'll show you the way to get to Terminal 5 to get your aeroplane to Edin-burgh.'

[Traffic sounds]

And I got here, I went to the bus station, and we were hungry, and we bought a cocktail prawn sandwich. I never had in my life. It was disgusting. And we were

sitting there eating our disgusting sandwich, and we saw our bus to Perth leaving. We wait another hour. And we got in Perth, and it was heavy rain. [Rain sounds] They drop us in a parking ride. There were no buses. We tried to call the farmer, and we thought, *oh, that would be like in American movies when they come with a huge truck and all this hat and all the cowboy look.* And it came an old man, hopping, with a very dirty Astra, covered in hair. And we're like, *great.* And we got in the car, the one they provide. They were providing an accommodation. And we found a tiny jug with milk, some margarine, and some cereals for breakfast. And they say, 'That's for your breakfast. If you need more food, you need to walk on this road, and you find a [inaudible] there, and you get food.'

You make good money if you're going to broccoli farms, flower farms, but for soft, like strawberry, raspberry, you do good money only if you're a good worker. And I haven't done any research. I was just happy that I got a contract.

[Music]

My English wasn't the best because I studied French and Italian, and my English was just the English watching movies. But between my bad English and my friend's bad English, we managed to get to Perth and survive in the first week. And after a week being in the farm, the farmer felt like, *you could do better than this.* And he said, 'Do

you mind if you come in Dobbies car park and sell strawberries and jam for me?' And I was like, 'I will take that rather to pick soft fruits.' And I think that helped me to improve my English because Dobbies.

[Music]

With some of them, we managed to get friends who were visiting them. They were from Aberfeldy, I don't know. It's that place where the right of a Harry Potter has a house somewhere in the mountains. Every Tuesday, they would come to Perth in Dobbies to have their tea. And they were, I don't know, those kind of people that you want to hug them. And we end up call them granddad and granny from UK. They were our grandparents in UK. And we used to go to visit them. Because we were here only for three, four months per year, we always made time to go to visit them. And even when we stopped working in Perth, we still visit them for a while. And after that, they got unwell and passed away. But we did, we did visit them.

[Music]

Was finishing my uni, pass my exams, and once I had my last exam, I would jump in an aeroplane, come in UK. And when I get to Edinburgh, here in Scotland, I love the Scottish accent. And I think that's the reason I stay in Scotland because I had the

chance—I worked like a few months in Kent. But I feel like it sounds better Scottish. I was in shock when I came here because back home, people are all grumpy and, I don't know, in a rush. When here, everyone was smiling. If you ask them, everyone is okay, which I found strange that you ask them, 'How are you?' 'I'm fine, thank you.' And like, wow, everyone it's 'thank you', 'good' here. And didn't bother me, the bad weather. I enjoyed it—was green. Because back home, it's so hot. Even now, they're 34 degrees, was so hot home. In the summer it's more yellow-ish than green. And here it's green and fresh air and tidy-ish [laughs]. And I remember I was—I could see people with disabilities, which I found, I don't know, unusual because back home, you don't see them. They're sitting—they're all in the houses. They're not coming out. And here I saw people in wheelchairs, people with Down syndrome being in restaurants and having a normal life. And that was like, wow, I was like, *where are our disabled people? Why I don't see them?* That was something I was always wondering: how come that people in this country managed to integrate them, and back home, we keep them in a room or, I don't know, I don't know where they are.

[Music]

I came in UK because I need money to pay for my uni. I never thought I would stay in UK because I want to be an engineer. The things changed in my life, I think when I

was 21, because I realised that I like a girl. So from my good friend end up being my girlfriend. And for us, it was much easier to be together in the UK rather than back home because she was from a different town, I was from a different town. And everyone was wondering why—if it was summer holiday, why I'm going to her hometown or why she's coming to my hometown. So for us, from this purpose of saving money, and that being a good way to be together in the UK, and no one questioned us. And once we finished uni, we were caught in two worlds. So we decided to move to in UK, as far as possible from our families.

[Music]

Back home, they adopted a law that a family is made from a male and a female. Actually, people went to vote for that, and it was a huge debate. Even I unfriend some people on my Facebook because of the comments they made towards the gay community. They were like so anti-gay that I asked one of them, I said, 'Okay, let's say you are in traffic with your family, someone hits you, and your daughter has a cardiac, I don't know, something bad. And in that place, comes a doctor that is gay. What do you do? You tell him, don't touch my daughter because you're gay or you let him do his job, even if he's gay.' And he was like, 'Rather than a gay person to save my daughter, I would rather have her dead.' I'm like, wow. Last week was the parade in Iași, which is a university town. And there were still people booing them

and still people walking with crosses and throwing holy water over them. I'm like, *they apply to have the street for two hours, to walk from uptown, and that's it. They don't want anything. They just want you to acknowledge that they exist and they are there.* I think even here, people have problems. I think it's a shock for everyone. I've got daughters, I live in a lesbian relationship, and I think if my daughter would come and say, 'Look, I think I want to be a boy', to be honest, I think I would struggle because I don't know if I'm able to give her the right support. I don't know. It's easy to say, 'Yeah, I will support her 100%. I will be there for her', but I think until you're not put in that situation, you don't know. You don't know.

The time when we were working in UK, you need work permit. So to be able to get a work permit, you had to be in UK for a year. You had to have 12 payslips. So I spoke with the farmer, and I said, 'Look, we love being here. I love working for your farm. I can't do anymore six months in, six months out. I feel like I can't find a place. I don't know where is home anymore for me.' And we say, 'Look, we are signing to do a course here, a one-year course, but I need your endorsement. You don't need to pay anything. You just need to sign that you're okay for us to work in your farm for 12 months. And if you're happy with that, we will be able to sign in this agriculture management course, and that will give us the right to work unlimited in UK.' And the farmer was decent, and he was like, 'Yeah, I can take that.' He said like, 'I can promise you that you'll make lots of money because it's a farm; in the wintertime it's

dead. I can provide you minimum wage.' And we're like, 'We don't care about the money. We just want our documents.'

[Cricket sounds]

We were working in January, and it was cold, cold, and we were cursing our days. We were just me and Anna in the field, the crows, and the seagulls. But it was cold. And we used to live in a caravan. And we get up in the morning. It was so cold in the caravan that we had to take our clothes under the duvet to warm them up before we get up to put them on us. It was cold. So I spent five, six summers in caravans. But in January, when we decided to move, in January 2011, when we moved in the UK, we lived in a caravan from January till October. And after that, we said, 'I'm too old to live in a caravan. I can't stay during the winter in the caravan.' So we rent a flat, and we moved in a flat, all four of us, because my sister was with us and her boyfriend at the time. So all four of us, we find a flat. And it was so difficult because no one wants to rent flats to foreigners. But we found a lovely woman that she was happy to give her mum house to us to look after it. And we stayed there for five years. And she never came to check on us. She always said, 'If you have a problem, stop by,' because her house was a few houses away from us, 'or just give me a call.' And she was happy to let us there.

[Music]

When we were working in a farm, the farm staff, we were all foreigners apart from the farmer. But the farmer had a coffee shop, and there he had Scottish people. And because I was a manager in the farm, I was interacting quite often with the staff from the coffee shop. And if was a party, they would invite us: me, Anna, my sister, and her boyfriend. All four of us were invited to their homes parties. And with some of them, we keep in touch. Like Sue and Alan, they are grandma Sue and granddad Alan for my girls. And we're still seeing it. They live in South Queensferry. And she's a lollipop now—lollipop lady. And yeah, we're visiting each other, and we got very close with them. But I think when you move in a new country, you try to make friends. And the way to make friends, I feel like in this country, if you just go to do basketball groups, football groups, I don't know, rowing groups, and that's the way you get in the UK community. And I always found strange that UK people, they're different than my people, Romanian people. Because for me, if you say you are my friend, I will invite you in my house and I will feed you. When here, I had people that I knew them for five, six years, and they never invite me in their homes. I never been in their homes. They were happy to meet out in the town, but I never been invited in their homes.

[Music]

In 2010, we were working there, it was all good, brilliant, and my boss decide to bring a new manager from England that had great experience, blah, blah, blah, all that. He had a different approach. And me and my partner that we are both managers in the farm, we weren't happy with his approach. Because I'm that kind of person: I'm happy to help you. I will go as much as I can to help you if you are fair to me and you listen to me. I don't know, I won't ask you to jump over the bridge. I'm asking things that I know that you can do them and things that I've done them and I know they are reachable. But he was expecting us to keep people in the rain to pick fruits or to reach a target that was impossible. You can't pick 20 punnets of strawberries in an hour when there are no strawberries in the field. We quit, all of us, all four. We found accommodation. We said, 'We don't need you guys.' I went to the job centre, and I tried to ask for help, and they kindly offered me to apply for benefits. And because I knew that I want to, at some point, I will apply to be a British citizen, I thought, *that won't look good in my application if I apply for benefits*, which was a big mistake because I should take the benefits when they offer me. We had our savings. So for three months, we stayed on our savings until we got—I got a job at Tesco. My sister found to work as a barista somewhere. Anna found to work in a chip shop. And [inaudible] end up working for IKEA as a delivery boy. So we all got jobs. We took it from there, start from zero. And in the meantime, to be able to get my mortgage, I was doing all these odd jobs: gardening, cleaning, babysitting,

random things, going with old people to the cinema or movies just to keep them company as a carer.

I joke, I say home it's here now because here is my family. But when I speak about Romania, I don't say Romania, I say home. If I speak with someone, I say back home. I don't say back to Romania. But I still think home is here for me. And I don't go often back home. Last time I went seven years ago when my dad died, and I had to go home. In that year, I went twice in a month.

When I go there, I get disappointed because people were grumpy. They look at you just because you say 'thank you'. When you cross the street, and you know how here you put your hands up and you smile, 'thank you', back home, they get the looks. It's a different vibe. So I worked for Tesco for five years. I got my mortgage. And I got in a relationship with someone else. I managed to shake off the trauma of breaking up with my first girlfriend. And I found this girl that she told me in our first date, 'I don't do drama, I want kids, and don't bring—don't come with a ring because you can get out with your ring and your luggage.' And I say, 'Okay, let's work on that. Let's take baby steps.' So I was seeing her, working in Tesco, and she has that kind of job that she was getting up at six o'clock just to work because she loved it where she was. And I was so miserable in my Tesco job. I was so fed up with my customers. And she told me that, 'You need to do something. You need to get

another job.' And I applied and ended up working for Sainsbury's Bank for a few years, which was good. It was a nice change. I wasn't as miserable anymore because it was something new for me. But at this time, we had two kids, two lovely girls, and I thought, *I want my girls to be proud of me. I can't tell them that I'm working in a bank. I need something to be cool.* And I think in that time when in my head came this window of change was when was the George Floyd incident in America. And I always thought that police is not about boots and killing people. I thought police is about catching baddies. And I went home, and I say to V, 'I think I want to join police. I need you to help me with my application.' And I apply, I pass my exams, and now I'm a constable for almost four years. Four years? Four years. Wow, four years.

I have this harsh accent. And it's strange because my sister doesn't have this. She speaks like posh English. And maybe because she spend more time with the bank people. But I have this accent, and I don't know if I can be bothered getting rid of my harsh accent. And the kids are mocking me sometimes. They do. If you watch that *Hotel Transylvania*, they will do like, 'Blah, blah, blah, blah.' Yeah, they will do that to me because I sound like Dracula.

I'm an asset for Police Scotland because there are so many beggars, shoplifters from Romania. And most of the time, I don't tell them that I'm Romanian. I just let

them speak and pretend that I don't understand them. And once they speak between them and say, 'I did this', I just go, 'You forgot I'm Romanian, guys.'

So my partner, she's born in UK, but her parents emigrate here like 45 years ago, so she sees herself as British with Indian roots. Our girls are mixed race because my partner thought that would be nice if the girls look a little bit like me. So we chose a white father for them, so they look more like me than V. And if I'm in the town, people think that I'm the mother of the girls, not V. We are stricter with our girls than people in UK. I don't know, maybe we have different expectation or maybe because I've been brought up in a communist culture or maybe because we've been brought up to do homework and you need to work hard because of your colour skin, no one will give you a job, you need to be smart, you need to be good at what you do so you can get the job, you need to work harder than white people. And I feel like I can see us putting pressure on our girls. But I don't want my girls to go through what I went.

I go to watch rugby just to listen *Flower of Scotland*. I'm paying £78 just to listen *Flower of Scotland*. I'm not watching the game. I go to listen *Flower of Scotland* because I love the way it sounds. But when was Euros and Romania play and they were singing the Romania hymn, you know when you feel like emotional, you just try not crying because you feel like, *oh, that sounds lovely*. Even now, I kind of feel like—

[Music]

I become citizen in January. And when people ask me, I know sounds bad, I say that I'm Scottish, not English, or if it's something official, I would say British. But because I lived for so many years here, I see myself more Scottish. People here have a good heart, but sometimes they get in this day-to-day drama, alcohol, drugs, and mess up with their head. But 99% of UK people have a good heart, and I think they're happy to embrace foreigners.

[Music]

Presenter: Gabriela Raluco Andriesei was talking to Marjorie Lotfi.

[Music]

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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