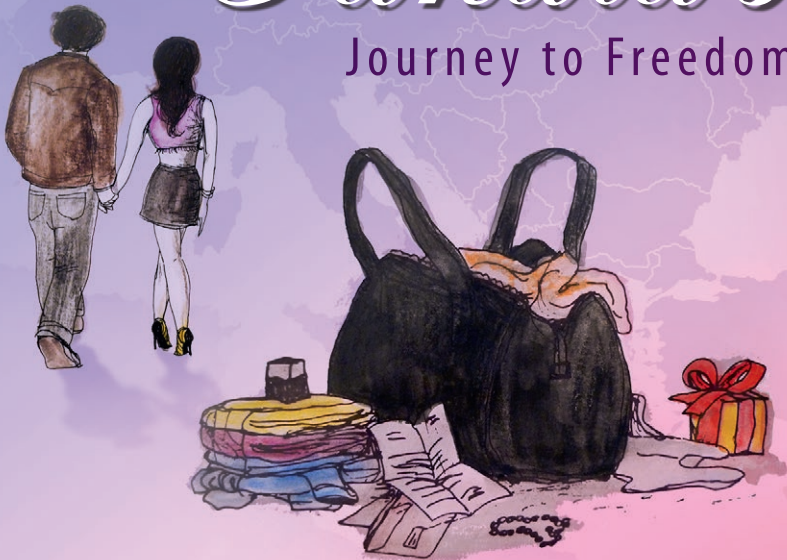


Pandra's Journey to Freedom



Sandra's

Journey to Freedom

Sandra grew up in Eastern Romania in a town like any other. They had two small bedrooms, and a kitchen–living room area where family life took place. She had two younger sisters and a brother. The little house was pretty crowded when all were at home. Mum cooked on the little gas burner in the corner. They were not starving but they did not have anything extra. Dad worked in the local textile factory. As a 17 year old Sandra loved watching movies and admired the fancy clothes of Hollywood stars. When she had a little bit of money she bought herself fashion magazines and was dreaming about becoming a model one day. She went to the local school, was an average student and enjoyed drawing the most. Secretly she kept a scrap book where she designed pretty dresses, blouses, shoes and accessories. She hoped to wear such



nice clothes one day or marry a rich man to be able to buy lovely outfits, necklaces, earrings, handbags, shoes, hats and gloves.

One summer weekend her cousin Marius came back from Holland and there was to be a family gathering. What should she wear? She did not have much choice but as she was artistic she placed a flower in her long dark hair and borrowed her friend's necklace and earrings that matched her yellow blouse. A little make-up and her only pair of nice sandals completed the preparations. She did not know that



her cousin had brought a friend, a young Romanian man from the neighboring village, who had also moved to Holland. He looked very handsome with his modern haircut, leather jacket, nice watch and polished shoes. Sandra could not take her eyes off him, and lo and behold, the attraction seemed mutual. He looked at her from head to toe and seemed to approve of what he saw. “My name is Mihail,” he said. “I am Sandra. Pleased to meet you, Mihail.” she replied. Wow, this cool guy singled her out and came to talk to her, amazing! Her heart started beating like never before. They chatted for a little while and then it was time to go home.

On Monday after school he was waiting at the entrance for her. Her heart fluttered and skipped a beat. “I like you and I missed you, so I decided to pick you up,” he mentioned with the most winning smile. They went the longest way home, and he told her all about Holland and what a great country it was. Her eyes became as big as saucers: “Wow, it would be great to go there one day!” “What about you, what are your



plans?” he asked and shyly she told him that she would like to become a fashion designer or a model. “I keep drawing dresses and other clothes,” she mentioned. “Maybe one day I could do that internationally and get out of here. There are no possibilities in Romania to make a decent living.” His eyes lit up. “I’ll meet you after school tomorrow; I would like to see your pictures.” Then he took a small gift out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her, said ‘good-bye’ and left. She was elated, surprised and confused at the same time. Why would this handsome young man even notice her? At home she opened the nicely wrapped parcel. It contained a little bottle of perfume and some pretty hairclips from abroad.

The friendship developed. Mihail paid Sandra compliments for her drawings and told her that there would be a place in Holland to learn and practice fashion design. Every time they met he had a little gift for her: a blouse, a new hair color, high-heeled shoes, a fashion magazine and much more. He gave her a cell phone and called her often. She neglected



her friends and family and only thought about him. When is he going to call her again? Will he be waiting in front of the school today? What gift is he bringing her next? These were questions that were continuously on her mind. When she did her homework she could not concentrate and in her final exams the results were not as good as expected. “No worry,” Mihail said, “in a month you will be 18 years old and of age, then you can make your own de-



cisions. I have to go back to Holland now, and I will look if there is a job vacancy in the fashion industry.” His eyes had a strange glimmer she could not figure out. Maybe because of her tears due to the coming separation she had this funny impression. Was he grinning? But she put this feeling of unease aside and they hugged and kissed for a long time.

A week later an official-looking letter came. “We are delighted to inform you that we have a place for you in our fashion boutique. You will be trained to draw patterns and sew clothes; then you can work in our firm. Please come to our job agency in the nearby city on July 15th, where you will get all the papers, travel documents and instructions needed. Please be packed and ready to go. The car to take you to the airport leaves in the evening.” Mum was not excited when she heard about it and saw the letter. What if it was a scam? She had read about Romanian girls being lured to Western Europe and ending up as prostitutes. She warned and begged Sandra not to accept the offer, but they had drifted apart and



she had been much too busy with her job and looking after the family to really spend much time with her eldest. She had no idea that Mihail had such an influence on Sandra's life and that she was now so dependent on him.

On July 15th Sandra secretly sneaked out of the house before anybody was up. Earlier she had packed a bag and hidden it in the bushes behind the house. The first bus was leaving soon. She took the letter with the address of the agency so that nobody could follow her to bring her back. She got there early and had to wait. Finally the office opened. It was a small place in a courtyard. A muscular man with dark sunglasses stood outside. Four more girls arrived, all



around Sandra's age. She recognized Flavia and Silvia from neighboring villages. All of them had gotten similar letters with promises of training and a job. Full of excitement they got into the car, a BMW, and were driven to the airport. The man in the sunglasses was their guide all the way to Holland.

On arrival they heard a familiar voice: "Hi, my chicks." Marius and Mihail were waiting at the airport. What was happening? Two tough men were also standing nearby watching every move. The young girls were herded into a minibus with their bags, brought to a lonely house outside the city and locked into a room with bars on the window. It was too late, an escape was impossible. One by one they were brutally raped again and again. Two days later Flavia and Sandra were brought to a brothel. Mihail was not the nice boyfriend any more but had become their pimp demanding their earnings. Sandra found out that Mihail had not only befriended her with his tactics, but Flavia and Silvia as well, while her cousin Marius had brought the other two girls. "Mum had





been right, she had sensed the danger. I should have listened and now it is too late!” Night and day she had to serve the customers who came. She was not allowed to refuse anybody



or she got a beating from Mihail who watched over her all the time. He was mean and greedy. Despair and hopelessness seeped into her soul. “I will never get out of here, I will never feel clean again; this is the end. How stupid I have been, how easy I have made it for them to get me here! I deserve to be punished like this!” Sandra started to hate Mihail, but could not show it and had to appear friendly to avoid more cruelty from him.

When she looked into the mirror, she saw a sad, skinny, young woman with skin like porcelain, dark circles around her eyes and blank hatred in them. Again and again she thought about killing him, pouring acid on him or cutting him into small pieces. In one moment she felt terrible shame and in the next moment just anger. How easy she had made it for him.

There was one highlight in the week: every Wednesday a couple of women came to the brothel, talked kindly to the ladies there, gave them little gifts and literature in their own



language. Annie was particularly nice. She even spoke Romanian and could communicate well. It seemed that she understood her plight and knew that she was suffering. She was aware that they were watched closely, so she pointed to a particular gift item in the transparent bag. Then she hugged Sandra closely and held her for a while and went to the next girl. When Sandra was alone she opened the gift and found a phone number hidden in with the goodies. Then she read the pretty leaflet they had brought.

Shattered glass is full of different angles; each one picks up a ray of light and shoots it off in a thousand directions. The same can happen with a shattered life, broken dreams, hopes that are splintered. A life in pieces seems to be ruined. But given time and prayer, one day such a life can shine more brightly than if the brokenness had never happened. Our great God can reach down and produce something beautiful out of dark situations. Every broken dream and heart that hurts can be redeemed by his loving touch. God can trans-



form your sorrow, pain and sin into a kaleidoscope through which his light can shine more brightly.

The Bible says:
He gives them beauty for ashes,
the oil of joy for mourning and
a garment of praise
for a spirit of heaviness...

I s a i a h 6 1 : 3

Sandra cried and cried. “I am too far gone for anything good to come out of my life,” she thought, but a little flame of hope started burning deep down in her heart. She asked God to open up a way that she could escape this hell.



Outwardly she went through the motions not to alert Mihail, played the role of a submissive sweetheart, but inwardly she was ready to bolt like a cat. She carried the emergency number on her at all times, not daring to put it into the cell phone as Mihail always checked all the numbers. Then the day came when he had the flu. She talked kindly to him and offered to get medicine at the drugstore around the corner. He was desperate and as Marius was back in Romania sweet-talking new girls to come, he saw no other choice than to send her to get aspirin, cough drops and other things. The shop was close by. She put on her flat shoes, secretly retrieved the money she had hidden from him in the bag with her work clothes, kissed him good-bye, stroked his forehead, closed the door and went downstairs. She walked towards the chemist because she knew he would be watching, but as soon as she was out of sight, she ran and ran and ran until she had to stop as her heart was pumping so hard. She pulled out the paper and called the number. “I am at the railway station, platform 6, please come and get



me. I am hiding from my pimp. I can't go back, I am in big danger.”

To make a long story short, Sandra ended up in a government shelter. She testified against her ex-boyfriend and cousin and was kept there until both were arrested.

She never forgot the story of the shattered glass and that God could use her experiences for something good. For half a year she was in a safe place in her own country where she could rest and work through her trauma.

With her dad's help she learned to sew in the textile factory. As she was in fact a gifted designer, one day she opened up her own small boutique.





WWW.JEWELSINTHEDARKNESS.COM

jewels
IN THE DARKNESS