



LIFE ON A HIGH BEAM

AT JUST 14 YEARS OLD, GYMNAST NADIA COMANECI SCORED THE FIRST PERFECT 10 EVER AWARDED IN THE OLYMPICS — AN HONOUR THAT PROVED BOTH A BLESSING AND A CURSE. NEARLY 40 TURBULENT YEARS ON, **CHRIS WRIGHT** SPOKE TO HER ABOUT HER INCREDIBLE JOURNEY FROM A SMALL-TOWN ROMANIAN SCHOOLGIRL TO A RECORD-BREAKER ON THE OLYMPIC STAGE — AND ASKED WHETHER THE COMPETITIVE WORLD OF GYMNASTICS STILL HOLDS ITS SHINE

NADIA COMANECI LEFT THE 1976 MONTREAL OLYMPICS (SYMBOL PICTURED OPPOSITE) WITH THE THREE GOLD MEDALS, IN ADDITION TO A SILVER AND A BRONZE



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

NORMAN, OKLAHOMA AND ONESTI, ROMANIA HAVE LITTLE IN COMMON. ONE IS A SMALL TOWN OFF THE I-35 INTERSTATE HIGHWAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLAT, WIND-SWEPT US STATE OF OKLAHOMA. THE OTHER NESTLES IN THE FOOTHILLS OF ROMANIA'S CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS. THEY ARE CONNECTED BY AN UNLIKELY MEDIUM, AND THAT IS THE MOST FAMOUS GYMNAST IN HISTORY: NADIA COMANECI.

they've even entered puberty, there's a natural assumption that they must have missed out on childhood, particularly when you hear Comaneci was recruited into a gymnastics academy at the age of six.

But she paints a very different picture. "I had a childhood," she tells *DCM*, sitting in an office surrounded by the plunder of a lifetime of recognition: pictures of her with presidents of various countries, a trophy with a Canadian flag built into it, Orthodox religious imagery and photos of her wedding. "I experienced my own grandmother's backyard. I used to climb the trees, swing from bridges, fun stuff. I did a lot of things that a lot of kids today don't do," she says.

"Being a child was for many years simple, but beautiful and rich, I think." It was basic but ample, in a way Romania would not always be: there was enough food, warm clothing, and a tiny black and white TV set receiving three state-approved stations, not enough to stop her from wanting to play outdoors.

Comaneci was a tomboy, playing football with the boys on the rare occasions when she wasn't swinging off something. This perhaps was what led her mother not only to allow her to go into gymnastics, but to actively encourage her to do so, in order to save the furniture. "I used to jump on the couches and the beds. I would do things in the house, destroying the pictures on the wall. And I don't think my mum was very happy about that," she recalls.

One day when she was six years old, a man came to her school and asked a question that probably didn't sound like a life-changing interrogation at the time: "Who can do a cartwheel?" This was Bela Karolyi, who would go on to become perhaps the most famous ever gymnastics coach, first in Romania and then in the US, revered and reviled in roughly equal measure, depending upon whom one talks to. He and his wife, Marta, were creating an experimental gymnastics school in Onesti, and he spotted Comaneci doing a cartwheel in the playground. "A big, tall guy, massive," she remembers today. "Bushy moustache."

A

t the 1976 Montreal Olympics, Comaneci scored the first perfect 10 ever awarded in Olympic competition. Then she got the second. Then the third. Over the course of the next few days, she would log seven unbeatable scores, a feat considered so inconceivable that the scoreboards had not been designed to accommodate it and at first, lacking sufficient digits, flashed up 1.00. She won three gold medals along the way, plus a silver and a bronze. And she did it all at the age of 14.

Onesti is where her journey began, where she was born

on November 12, 1961, the daughter of a car mechanic who never owned a car. Then Norman is where one finds her today, working in modern gymnastics alongside her husband, another Olympic gold medalist, Bart Conner.

But how she got from one to the other is a remarkable story, and one involving considerably more than gymnastics.

SANDPIT TO STADIUM

When someone achieves the absolute high point of their career at the age of 14, before



PHOTO: AFP

OPPOSITE: NADIA COMANECI, AGED 14, DURING THE 1976 OLYMPIC GAMES IN MONTREAL

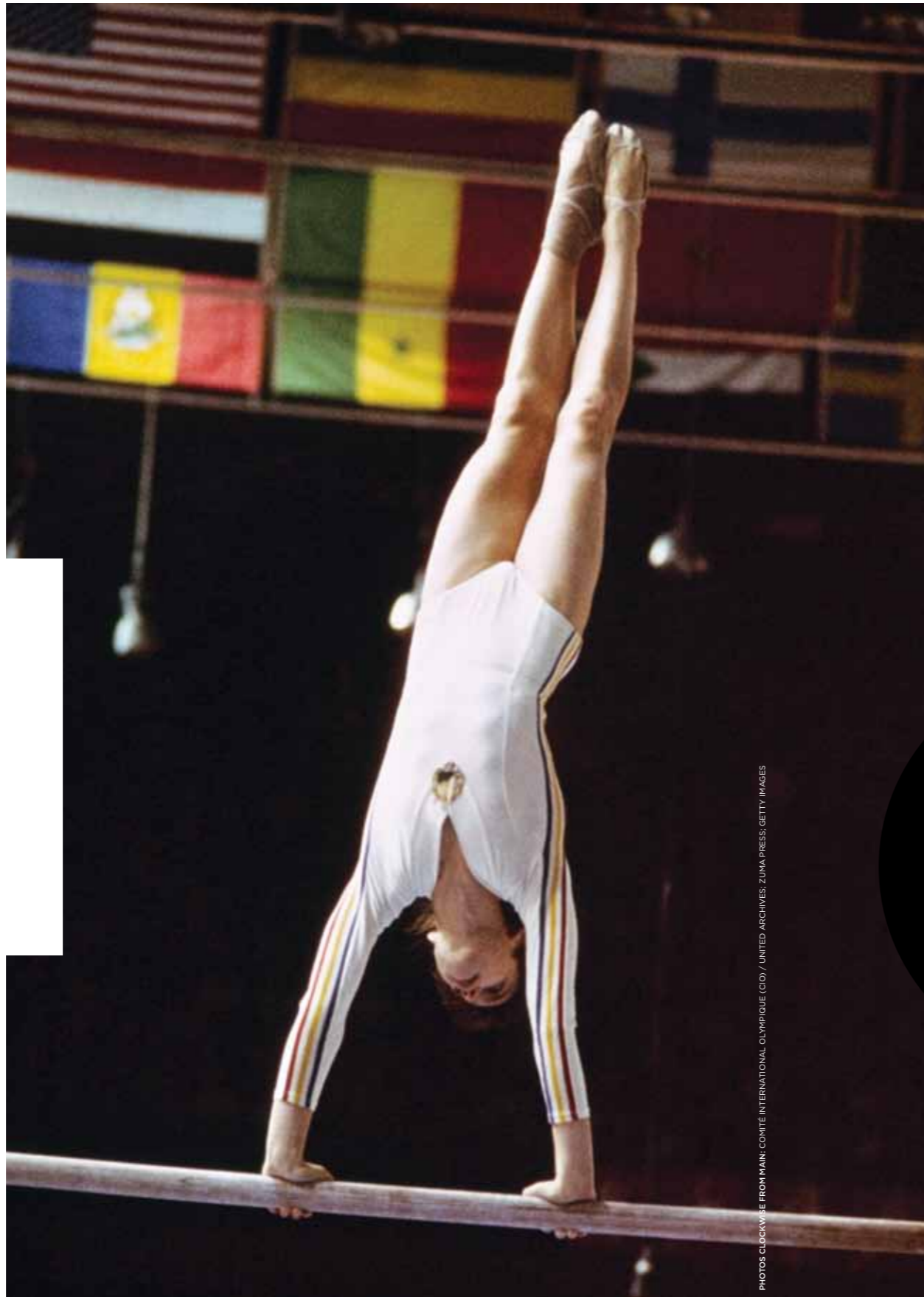
The school provided focus for a useful confluence of her attributes: a clear innate ability, of course, but also an intensely strong work ethic and sense of competition. If she was asked to do 25 push-ups, she would do 50. Karolyi, who has developed a reputation for sometimes unnecessary toughness and even alleged cruelty towards his gymnasts (something Comaneci herself has never said about him), pushed her hard — and the result of it all was that she was deemed ready for the National Championships in 1969. She was eight.

Most of us tend to picture her as arriving, fully formed, as if from nowhere at the 1976 Olympics, a flawless and miraculous ascent to perfection. Naturally the truth was nothing like that, and the most valuable lesson that she learned in her first championships was failure. She fell off the beam. Then she fell off it again.

THE SCHOOL PROVIDED FOCUS FOR A USEFUL CONFLUENCE OF HER ATTRIBUTES: CLEAR INNATE ABILITY, AN INTENSELY STRONG WORK ETHIC AND A SENSE OF COMPETITION

"I made mistakes," she said. "I fell from the beams three times. I got 7s. I tell kids, I wasn't 10, 10, 10 all the time." But she wasn't deterred. "I liked the competition. I like to challenge myself. I like to learn new things. It was a discovery for me, the sport, and I wanted to be better at it."

Karolyi, among his other skills, was considered an outstanding spotter — the person entrusted with catching a gymnast if something goes wrong, as it inevitably will when learning a new routine — and this helped her gain confidence



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: COMITE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIQUE (C/O) / UNITED ARCHIVES; ZUMA PRESS; GETTY IMAGES



STAND AND DELIVER

When George Eyser won several Olympic medals while representing the United States at the 1904 Summer Games, judges and audience members alike may have been unduly surprised. Why so? The bookkeeper and German immigrant had only one leg, having lost the other in his youth in a train accident. Yet despite competing with one wooden leg, Eyser went on to win six medals — three of them gold — in a single day. He won gold on the 25-foot (7.6-metre) rope-climb, parallel bars and long horse vault events.

LEFT: COMANECI ON THE UNEVEN BARS. THIS IS THE ROUTINE THAT WOULD RESULT IN HER FIRST PERFECT 10 **TOP:** DISCOVERED WHEN SHE WAS ONLY SIX, COMANECI POURED HER ENERGY AND DRIVE INTO GYMNASTICS, WITH THE FULL SUPPORT OF HER FAMILY AND COACH. SHE WAS DEEMED READY FOR THE OLYMPICS AT ONLY 14 (ABOVE)

to steadily try more challenging moves. She refers to it as "filling up your bag with knowledge, so when you need it, it is there".

Comaneci won her first Romanian Nationals competition in 1970, her first international all-around title in a meet between Romania and Yugoslavia in 1971, and won the all-around gold, vault and uneven bars titles at the Junior Friendship Tournament in 1973, aged 11. In the Eastern bloc, her name was made a year before Montreal, at the 1975 European Championships in Skien, Norway, winning gold in every event except the floor. In gymnastics, this was every bit as important as the Olympics, since at that time every serious competitor in the sport was from Eastern Europe anyway.

From the start, she was known for her ability to tune everything out, and to calm her nerves by pretending she was in training, with nobody around. In short, to focus. "Yeah," she agrees. "But I've been criticised for that too — because people say I didn't smile."

She is right. As much as people remember her as an extraordinary gymnast, they also seem to recall her as someone cold, who didn't project much happiness when she performed. But surely that didn't bother her?

"No. I didn't quite care. I tell people: why don't you go on that four-inch (10-centimetre) beam, and you laugh and smile. See how it is." She laughs. "You have to concentrate, and this is how I grew up. This was me."

Was a child's lack of fear part of the reason for her success? "Oh, I was going for things I wouldn't go for now," she says. "Daring things that kids like to do. And also your coach says: I dare you, you can't do that. I'm like: oh yeah? I can do that! You don't think about it when you're a kid. Now," she adds, "I think three times before I do anything. I don't want to do extreme things now, like bungee."

This was the Nadia Comaneci that prepared to go to Montreal in 1976: confident and focused, already a success in her discipline but without media intrusion. And still a girl, with a view of the world necessarily limited in its scope. Yet neither

she, nor the Olympics, had any idea what was coming.

ASTOUNDING EXPERTS

On July 18, 1976, a little girl with stern eyebrows and a brown ponytail walked to the uneven bars in a snow-white leotard with red, yellow and blue piping down the side. About 30 seconds later, she was world-famous.

Not everyone understands the technical minutiae of success in gymnastics. But what anyone can see, looking at the slightly faded 1976 footage with its mustard block-capital captions, is the extraordinary combination of youth, confidence, beauty, poise and flat-out audacious talent. It was a brilliant athlete, arriving without fear at exactly the right moment. And it was just the sort of achievement and performance that the Olympics exist to celebrate. Small wonder, looking back, that she became the face of the Games, of the whole modern history of gymnastics. She was simply remarkable, and the ponytailed guileless innocence of it all only added to the popular appeal.

What a moment. That scoreboard, her competition number 073 in clunking great 1970s LED lights, and the 1.00 beneath it. Olympic history so brazen it was beyond the capacity of the screen. Comaneci, on her way to the next apparatus, gave a rare smile, a girl's smile, an incongruous rictus grin. Then she went off and did it again.

And so the routines went on over three days, with impossible grace and technique, on the beam (the commentator exclaiming, "free cartwheel into flic-flac!"), then the uneven bars again, with that signature move, a somersault with legs almost in the splits to grasp the same bar. Three 10s by now.

"It makes one wonder," the British commentator said, "where do the judges go from here?" Then the uneven bars once more, and the beam again. "Have you ever seen anyone so confident on a four-inch beam?"

Uneven bars, a fourth time, and the beam, a third, the cameras clicking in symphony with every backward somersault. Seven perfect 10s in one

competition. History made, sevenfold. The commentators, having cleaned out their store of adulatory adjectives, were stricken. "The score that we said made history only days ago, now becoming commonplace for Nadia Comaneci."

The world didn't stop watching when she dismounted, in an effortless stomach-launched spring, from the uneven bars. From that moment, everyone wanted to know her.

That intense attention came at an age at which, today, she wouldn't even be allowed to compete in the Olympics. To her annoyance, 16 is now the minimum age. Should a child be protected from such exposure?

She is authoritative on this. "I think it's better to be thrown

into that when you are 14. If you put a nine-year-old in to sing on *American Idol*, they are going to go for it, they don't have that nervous thing you have when you're 19 or 20. Kids do what they like! They just go in there. They don't have that understanding of what people are expecting from them."

Besides, as she patiently tries to stress several times throughout the interview, the whole point is not the number of people watching, but competition with yourself and your own standards. "You belong to yourself. You perform. Everyone else can compete on their own. It's not like I prepare a routine for the Olympics and then I see someone from the Russian team and think: oh, I'll try that instead.

You can't try it, because you need three years to learn it."

The Karolyis, sensing the importance of focus, had kept the Romanian team largely sheltered from the rigmarole of the Olympics. The gymnasts were not allowed to walk in the opening ceremony, because Bela didn't want them standing for six hours before the competition. No matter what else was available in the Olympic village — and she saw pizza, cottage cheese, peanut butter and breakfast cereal for the first time in her life — the team doctors would only let them eat things they were already familiar with. Her lasting impression of the Olympic village was that everything seemed to be free-

badges, movies, soft drinks, clothing, bags, hats and pins.

BACK TO NORMALITY

When she landed back in Bucharest, thousands of people were waiting. Nicolae Ceausescu, the despot leader of Romania, ordered a national celebration for the team's arrival, and personally presented her with a government award. She was a hero, but still just a girl. She would later recall that she had been crying before disembarking the aircraft, because she had been carrying a doll but had lost it after somebody pulled on its leg.

But once the celebrations had passed, life returned to

BOYCOTTS GALORE



This *TIME* cover reads, "She's Perfect, But the Olympics are in Trouble." Days before the 1976 opening ceremony, over 20 African countries announced they were boycotting the event in response to New Zealand's participation. As an article in *The Atlantic* stated, New Zealand's national

rugby team had "embarked on a controversial tour of apartheid South Africa that summer, in defiance of an informal but widely observed international athletics embargo on the country." Egypt and some other countries withdrew too.

FIG CODE OF POINTS

Competing by the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique's (FIG) rules means everyone is graded by its scoring criteria too, to keep things fair. Below are some of the main elements of the FIG's Code of Points. The D- and E-scores are determined by the D- and E-juries respectively, and the final score is calculated by adding them.

THE D-SCORE (OR DIFFICULTY SCORE)

Evaluates the content of the exercise on three criteria: the Difficulty Value (DV), Composition Requirements (CR) and Connection Value (CV).

DV: The difficulty value of the eight highest value elements of the routine, including the dismount, are added together to get this score. Elements are ranked depending on their difficulty from A to H, with A being the easiest, worth 0.1 points, and H being the most difficult (0.8 points).

CR: Gymnasts must demonstrate skills from five element groups on each apparatus. A gymnast may use skills to fulfil the DV and the CR simultaneously. For each CR presented, 0.5 points are awarded. A maximum score of 2.50 points may be earned here.

CV: Additional points are given for connections of two or more elements of specific value, with 0.1 or 0.2 points apiece.

THE E-SCORE (OR EXECUTION SCORE)

Evaluates the performance: the execution, artistry and choreography of the routine.

The base score is 10.0. Judges do not add to this score, but rather take away points for errors in form, artistry, execution, technique and routine composition. There is a 1.0 mark deduction for falling off an apparatus. Errors are judged to be small, medium or large, and respective 0.1, 0.3 and 0.5 deductions are applied.

a crushing normality. No Romanian got rich from the Olympics; there were no TV chat show appearances, no agents, and no endorsements. She came back and went back to school in Onesti. Her father still didn't own a car.

What was it like to go back to that normality, so young, after achieving all of that? "Waking up, having breakfast, going to school, going to gym. That's how I saw it," she says. There was no suggestion of changing anything or forging in any new direction. "I couldn't see anything else I could do that would be meaningful. Plus, the career doesn't end with an Olympics. I wasn't 21." She says the number as if it represents venerable old age: such is the deeply compressed lifespan of a female gymnast.

Still, she was growing up, and after 1976 she began to struggle under the strict routines of Karolyi and the school. Where once she found guidance and discipline, she began to feel overbearing intrusion. As she saw girls her age dating, she began to want the same things for herself as other teenagers, and started to clash with her coach. Her love for gymnastics began to fade, and in 1977 she parted company with her mentor. She moved to Bucharest to take classes and consider what to do next — she was, after all,

AS SHE STRESSES, THE WHOLE POINT WAS BEATING HER OWN STANDARDS. "YOU BELONG TO YOURSELF. YOU PERFORM. EVERYONE ELSE CAN COMPETE ON THEIR OWN"

still too young to work — while the Karolyis moved to build a new training centre in the village of Deva. She remained active in gymnastics, but with a far more mellow coach, who would let her do what she wanted to do. So she watched TV, slept and ate ice cream. She

gained weight and changed shape, as her body entered puberty. Her parents divorced, something she took badly.

"I don't know exactly what I was thinking. Or maybe I wasn't thinking," she recalls. "I was growing up. I thought probably I wanted to do something else in 1978 but I wasn't sure exactly what." It was a dark time. One of the prevailing rumours about Comaneci — and there are many — is that in 1978 she attempted to commit suicide by drinking bleach, though her own version of events is that she was so sick and tired of being monitored by female officials outside the door of her apartment that, on one occasion when they showed an absurd level of interest in her doing her laundry, she simply threatened to drink the bleach she was holding in her hand.

In any event, her separation from gymnastics didn't last. "After a while," she remembers, "just a few months after that, I actually wanted to go back. That's what I knew. I felt bad watching the competition and sitting on a bench."

Needless to say, Bela Karolyi was the engine of her return. When he first saw her after her spell in Bucharest, he was horrified at the shape she was in, relating his impressions of her weight gain in characteristically abrupt terms, and telling her that coming back would be the hardest thing she would ever do. This description appeared to be exactly the sort of challenge that appealed to her, and galvanised her into a return.

Was it as hard as he had said? "It was, but if you want to do something so bad, then you get over it." It wasn't just a question of getting fit again. She was dramatically taller, so a lot of older routines had to be not just relearned, but reinvented.

"We had to change some moves, to adapt some skills. But if you can go this way," she demonstrates by twisting her body, "you adapt. That's how tall gymnasts do it: you twist more, you go flipping backwards, you take the Code of Points and see what are the tricks that can still give you points." She was entered for the 1978 World Championships before her recovery was complete, and hated the



+0.20 (CV SCORE)

FRONT SIDE AERIAL
A stunt in which the gymnast turns completely over in the air without touching the apparatus with his or her hands.

FLIC FLAC
Also known as a flip-flop or back handspring. Take off on one or two feet, jump backwards onto hands and land on feet. This element is used in a majority of tumbling passes on the floor exercise. It's also used often on the balance beam.

experience of failing; but as others said that she was over the hill at just 16, she was once again using a setback as a spur to improve. By the 1979 European Championships, she was tall, lean, powerful — and back. She set her sights on one more competition: the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, Russia. It is tempting to picture a cosseted star at this time, with everything she needed. But her salary at the time was worth

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about US\$100 a month. She had used the money she had won to make a down payment on a house in Bucharest, where she lived with her mother and brother — but couldn't afford to heat it, even with her mother having taken a job as a cashier. In the winter, they lived and slept in the kitchen.

DEFEAT AND ANONYMITY

And so to 1980. This was the Games that the US boycotted because of the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, not that it made much difference to Comaneci, since all her competitors were Russian or East German. It was, as she said, walking into the lion's den, the Russian home turf. But she considered that irrelevant, since her main concern was competing against her own standards and expectations.

It has become commonplace to present the 1980 Olympics as a corrupt institution, in which Comaneci was cheated of a gold medal in the all-around category. By the time it came

to the final exercises, the competition had come down to her and the brilliant Russian Yelena Davydova. Comaneci was due to compete on the beam, then Davydova on the bars. Contrary to the planned order of competition, Comaneci's turn on the beam was repeatedly delayed until after Davydova had completed her bar routine, upon which she scored 9.95. This meant Comaneci needed to score 9.925 to tie, or more to win gold outright.

After Comaneci completed her routine — good, but not, by her own standards, great — no score appeared on the scoreboard. Half an hour passed without the score appearing. When it eventually came, it was 9.85, giving Davydova gold and Comaneci silver. Karolyi, furious, immediately accused the Soviets of cheating.

To her considerable credit, the person who has never believed there was foul play at work here was Comaneci herself. She has repeatedly reminded people that the single biggest reason she never won gold was because in an earlier round, she fell down on the bars, a score then carried through to the final day of competition. Reminded of this now, she says, "I did! I know!"

So does she think she was cheated? "I didn't get cheated, I made a mistake, and I ended up where I was supposed to." People tend to forget too, she still came away from Moscow with two golds and two silvers.

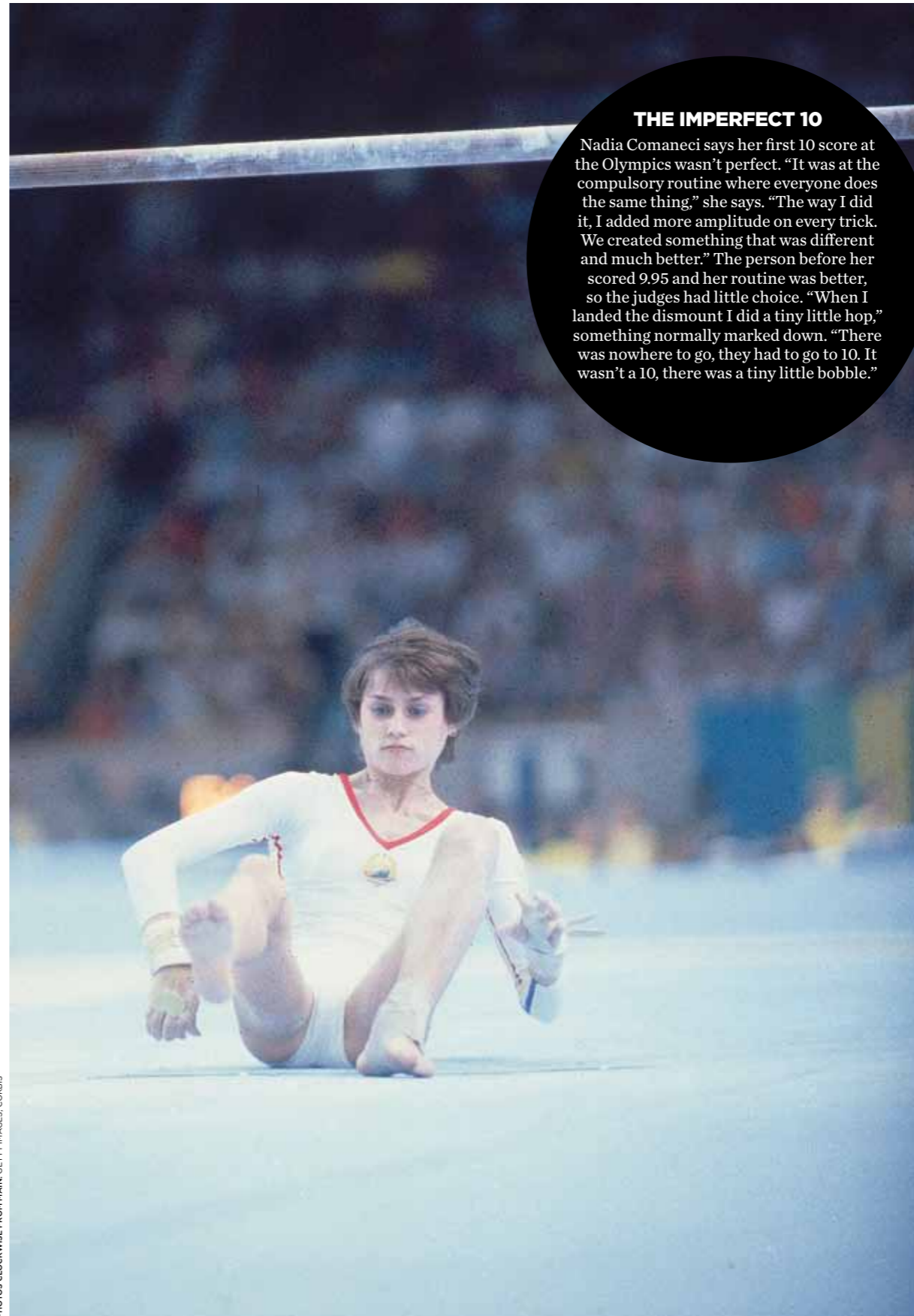
It was over. Her last competition was in 1981, and though she continued to take part in gymnastics shows for some time afterwards, her time at the top had come to an end. "I retired when I was 20," she says. Afterwards, things started to go wrong.

It's not as if she had expected to be a top gymnast forever. "I was prepared that this was going to end at some time," she says. Not that, in Romania, life had been all that different because of her success anyway. "Today, if you are an athlete, you are also a celebrity. When I was growing up, I was an athlete and that's it. You need a job. Nobody is going to give you a job because you are an Olympic champion. This is how



TOP: DURING CEAUSESCU'S RULE, RATIONING OF FOOD, ELECTRICITY, GAS AND WATER WAS ENFORCED. EVEN AFTER HE WAS OVERTHROWN, TIMES WERE STILL HARD — NOT LONG AFTER HIS EXECUTION, NEWS ABOUT MORE THAN 10,000 ORPHANS WHO WERE FOUND TO BE HIV-POSITIVE (ABOVE) HORRIFIED THE WORLD
OPPOSITE: IN THE 1980 OLYMPICS, COMANECCI LOST HER GRIP ON THE UNEVEN BARS DURING ONE ROUND — AND EVENTUALLY LOST TO YELENA DAVYDOVA

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: GETTY IMAGES; CORBIS



THE IMPERFECT 10

Nadia Comaneci says her first 10 score at the Olympics wasn't perfect. "It was at the compulsory routine where everyone does the same thing," she says. "The way I did it, I added more amplitude on every trick. We created something that was different and much better." The person before her scored 9.95 and her routine was better, so the judges had little choice. "When I landed the dismount I did a tiny little hop," something normally marked down. "There was nowhere to go, they had to go to 10. It wasn't a 10, there was a tiny little bobble."

we lived at that time. Celebrities were only in Hollywood."

After 1980, she struggled with two simultaneous challenges: anonymity — with its attendant impact on income — and the growing poverty of a Romania that was under profound and cruel mismanagement by Ceausescu. While studying, she was also trying to support her brother and mother. The medals, awards and achievements on the world stage meant nothing.

Like everyone else in Romania, she slipped back into an ancient model of barter. A friend who worked in a clothing factory would bring her clothes; another friend in a bakery would supply bread. She would trade fruit and vegetables with other people, then decide what the family would eat that day based on what she had. She is apparently still a great improvisational cook today, a consequence of that time, ignoring recipes and just using what is to hand.

During the interview, she talks little about this time in Romania, presenting its challenges as opportunities for growth. "It's a place to improve. Everyone was trying to get by their own way, by their friends, by whatever they could do. Then you just adapt to that too. You live with what you have, because what are you going to do? Not too much."

Her book, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, covers the period in more detail and with utter bleakness. "I was 20 and felt the weight of my life as well as my family's, and at times it was overwhelming." In winter, her 70-year-old neighbour rose at 4am to stand in line at the grocery store, in case there was anything on the shelves; usually finding just mayonnaise, mustard and beans.

All the good food was being exported, to pay off Ceausescu's debts. Comaneci came to realise how lucky she had been during her gymnastics career, where her diet was considered an important matter of national pride. "I was so much better off than almost everyone else. But when my gymnastics days were over, I was left in the same unhappy position as the rest of the people of my country."

A CROWD OF CIVILIANS HIDE BEHIND AN ARMY TANK IN REPUBLIC SQUARE AFTER THE OVERTHROW OF CEAUSESCU



trips. She wrote, "When my gymnastics career was over, there was no longer any need to keep me happy. I was to do as I was instructed, just as I'd done my entire life. I was expected to keep sacrificing." Of Karolyi: "His defection

SHE WROTE OF SEEING EDVARD MUNCH'S *THE SCREAM*: "THE FIRST TIME I SAW THAT PAINTING, I REALLY KNEW IT. THE MAN IS A PRISONER, HE WILL NEVER BE FREE"

brought a spotlight on my life, and it was blinding. I started to feel like a prisoner. In reality, I had always been one."

Like it or not, she was still somewhat part of the orbit of the Ceausescu family, because in her choreography job she found herself working in the same building as the family's youngest son, Nicu. This is one of several oblique areas of Comaneci's life. Some rumours say she had an affair with him; others that she was dreadfully abused by him. Her book states the matter carefully: "I have never talked in detail about Nicu, because there isn't much to say. I'm not interested in the speculations about our so-called relationship... So, let me make this very clear — Nicu and I were never boyfriend and girlfriend." These are clearly carefully chosen words.

When DCM tentatively raises the three rumour-filled areas of her life — the supposed bleach suicide attempt, Nicu Ceausescu, and her relationship with the man who helped her to defect in 1989, which we'll return to, she says the book is her final word on it. "Every time people ask me, I'm like: why do you all ask about the same things? Because

I don't have something to tell you that's going to shock anybody, it's already out." She laughs. "It is what it is."

Meanwhile, years passed in struggling mundanity. She graduated with her diploma, got a job in the gymnastics federation, and survived.

But the petty torments continued. On her 25th birthday the government started taking a large portion of her meagre salary, because she had no children. This was because of a new Ceausescu policy that a foetus was the property of society, and anyone who failed to create one was nothing less than a deserter. Abortion was banned, and anyone who didn't have children by 25 was fined for their lack of patriotism. The enforcers came to be known as the menstrual police.

By the early 1980s, food rations were one to two pounds (450 grams to 900 grams) of meat per month for an entire family. The country was starving, and worked to death. Factories moved to seven-day weeks, pay was cut, religion banned. Electricity became increasingly rare in the cities.

Comaneci considered defection more seriously. "There was a frustration: I want to know, and let me make the decision where I want to live and what I want to do." She realised that where she was in life, was where she was going to die. She would later write, "I realised that I could either be like all of those people silently screaming around me or give myself permission to have a voice, to decide how my life should go." The conclusion: "I finally heard myself scream, and I listened."

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Defection in 1989 was not a simple matter of wandering into an embassy and asking to become an American. The truth was immeasurably more difficult and dangerous.

As she wrote in her book, one day in the late 1980s she went to a birthday party attended by several Romanians who had defected and become US citizens. With American passports they could now come and go as they pleased. One

Things did appear to improve when she got a job as a choreographer in a dance team. This gave her a little money and made her feel like an adult for the first time in her life. She could invite people over for a drink, a small but intense moment of independence. In 1981 the Gymnastics Federation offered her US\$1,000 to take part in an exhibition tour of the United States with a group of gymnasts. Considering she was earning US\$3 a day in her job, this was a lot of money, so she agreed. Bela and Marta Karolyi went with her, along with the director of the federation and several undercover policemen, who would be introduced to people as journalists. They called the tour Nadia 81.

She would have no idea just how this trip would come

to change her life. During the trip, Bela, Marta and a choreographer called Geza Pozsar had decided to defect. They were never going home.

"I never asked him or got into the details," she says now. "But he was maybe prepared to do this move. He wasn't sure that it was going to happen. But he just decided to not come back."

This too is something she expands upon in the book, marvelling at the bravery and sacrifice that was involved: Bela and Marta left a daughter in Romania, without being sure if they would ever see her again. "To decide the course of your life and that of your family in one night, with no assurance of success, is unfathomable. I sometimes wonder, to this day, if courage is just another word for desperation."

She wrote of the famous Edvard Munch painting, *The Scream*: "The first time I saw that painting, I knew it. Really knew it. The man is a prisoner, and he will never escape the cell Munch painted him in; he will never be free. I imagine that is how Bela, Marta and Geza felt when they realised that they were trapped by a lie, when they accepted that they had no choice but to defect from their country." They had a couple of suitcases and their clothes, and barely spoke English. They didn't know anybody in the United States. But this still felt like their only choice.

Although she didn't immediately take it seriously, or even understand what she was being asked, Karolyi did ask her if she wanted to remain in America. "I wasn't prepared to do any of

these things," she says today. Because she wasn't ready? "No. I was still too young, I have a family. What am I going to do, where am I going to stay? I wasn't mentally prepared. The glass wasn't full enough for me [to justify defection]. It was hard for everybody, but not like: I've gotta get out of here."

Had she known how life was going to deteriorate from that point on, she might have thought differently.

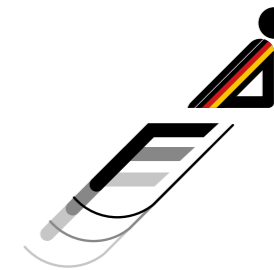
Upon her return, she was no longer allowed to travel outside Romania, even to friendly Eastern bloc nations like Russia. She felt as if she was being treated as a traitor, an unjust situation for someone who had devoted her youth to bringing pride to her country. This had a financial impact too: no extra money from foreign

OLYMPIC DEFECTORS

The Olympics are a time of international celebration, of awe at the feats near-superhuman athletes can achieve. But sometimes it is about freedom in its most basic sense, offering competitors the chance to unshackle themselves from their home country forever. Although political defections might be more rare today than they were during the height of the Cold War, many people, and athletes, still defect for economic reasons. At the 2012 London Games, seven of Cameroon's competitors (five boxers, a footballer and a swimmer) fled, possibly for that very reason.

1956 MELBOURNE

The Hungarian Uprising against Soviet brutality coincided with the 1956 Games, leading to a mass defection of **over 200 Hungarian, Czech and Yugoslavian athletes**. A Hungarian who had accompanied the team was also found dead near a railway line. While the official verdict was suicide, the chief security officer at the Melbourne Olympics said he believed the man was pushed to his death.



1964 INNSBRUCK

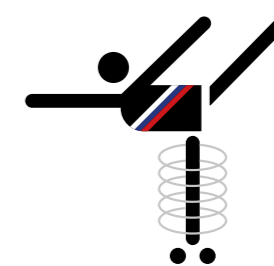
At the Austrian Winter Games, it wasn't just athletes who sprinted for freedom, but fans. Ute Gaehler, **a tobogganer on the East German team**, fled to West Germany while her team was at a reception. Meanwhile 13 other fans from the Iron Curtain also escaped.

1972 MUNICH

These Olympics became infamous for the massacre of 11 members of the **Israeli team, who were taken hostage by a Palestinian terrorist group**. Perhaps the chaos of the Games led to the number of would-be defectors taking the chance to escape: 117 in all.

1976 MONTREAL

Aged just 17, **Russian sports diver Sergey Nemtsanov** defected during the Montreal Games. Perhaps his youth gave him cold feet — he quickly changed his mind and returned home.



1979 SWITZERLAND

Husband-wife figure skating team Oleg Protopopov and Ludmila Belousova became the **fourth and fifth prominent Soviets to defect in a month** (hot on the heels of some Bolshoi ballerinas). The two-time Olympic champions defected whilst on an exhibition tour of Western Europe.

told stories of living in Florida, of palm trees and endless sunshine and water one could swim in all year round. He had helped a cousin get out by swimming across the Danube. This was Constantin Panait, who would become the latest in a long sequence of questionable male influences in her life.

An idea had been planted in her head. She talked about it with her brother, also her closest friend, and he advised her to go. But it was not straightforward: she was monitored constantly by the security services.

To get around this, she was told to make regular visits to a home near the Hungarian border, so that the government and security staff who tailed her would be used to seeing her go there to socialise. During these visits she met six other people with whom she would defect. Every time she went to the house near the border, she would have to sign in and out at a security gate. And then, one day in November 1989, she signed in, but never out.

The seven of them walked for miles across frozen woodland towards Hungary. They could use no light, in case they alerted border guards, and no communication, with each simply putting their hand on the shoulders of the person in front. They slipped frequently in cold and ice. At one point they walked across a frozen lake; the ice cracked, and they all fell into knee-deep water.

She estimates they spent six hours in temperatures well below freezing, scrambling about in the dark, and never did make it to the place where Panait was meant to be waiting. The first indication they got that they had made it into Hungary was when they saw a sign with a place name on it, and found it full of the letters "Z" and "S" — a sure-fire sign of a Hungarian, not a Romanian place. Eventually they ran into two guards, and said the only word of Hungarian they knew: hello. They were taken to the police station.

The experience sounds terrifying. "It's like that kid thing that I talked about. I bet you can't do that, I bet I can," she says. "My intuition was pretty good all the time. If you build

up to something, if you want to accomplish it, and this is the only thing you are thinking about, and your intuition tells you 'you have to do that' — it's like testing a skill in gymnastics. I'm ready to do it now, and then you just go for it."

When they got to the police station, all seven were questioned individually. The Hungarians were thrilled to find Nadia Comaneci in their country and immediately offered her

THEY WALKED FOR MILES ACROSS FROZEN WOODLAND TOWARDS HUNGARY, USING NO LIGHT AND NO COMMUNICATION, IN CASE THEY ALERTED THE GUARDS

asylum, along with two others, but the other four were told they would be returned to Romania.

Is it true she declined asylum unless all seven were allowed to remain? "I did, yeah. Because I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to be with my friends." It seems an amazingly brave thing to do: the consequences for her, if returned to Romania, are almost unimaginable. "Yeah." There is a long pause. Nothing else to say.

The police agreed to her request. Panait, having tracked them down, took them all to a hotel, where they slept fitfully in a single room. Getting up the next day, she saw her picture on the front page of a newspaper: the news was out. But Hungary was not the final destination they had in mind, and so they split into two carloads and drove for six hours to the Austrian border, and then spent another night out in the cold risking their lives. Again, Panait drove across to wait at the other side while the defectors fended for themselves. Comaneci believes they scaled seven barbed wire fences, a far more tightly controlled border



END OF A REGIME

In December 1989, near Christmas, Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu was overthrown in a violent uprising. As demonstrations spread to Bucharest, scenes like these (*above*) became common. When troops began to side with demonstrators, Ceausescu and his wife Elena fled via helicopter, though they were soon captured, tried, convicted and charged with the mass murder of 60,000 people. The Ceausescus were executed by firing squad on December 25, 1989. Today, only one of the couple's three children remains alive.

LEFT: COMANECI IS MET BY A CRUSH OF PRESS UPON HER ARRIVAL AT JFK AIRPORT, IN THE UNITED STATES, AFTER HER DEFECTION



PHOTOS: CORBIS



1980 MOSCOW

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 understandably made many **Afghani athletes anxious about visiting the land of their oppressors.** Seven of their basketball players, and seven of their wrestlers, fled to Pakistan before the Olympics alone. Five more Afghans defected during the Games themselves.

1984 LOS ANGELES

A group dubbed the **"Ban the Soviets Coalition"** reported that it had established 500 safe houses in an effort to aid any athletes who wanted to defect. A spokesman for the group reminded press at the time that "there have been Eastern bloc defectors at every Olympics since 1945." It's likely he was referring instead to the 1948 Olympics, when Marie Provaznikova became the first to refuse to return to her home country, **communist Czechoslovakia.**

1996 ATLANTA



Raed Ahmed, an **Iraqi weightlifter** who carried his country's flag at the opening ceremony, was told by his delegation to turn

his head away from US President Bill Clinton while marching, because he "wanted to destroy Iraq". Ahmed was the only one in his group who disobeyed the order, telling press, "I could not believe my eyes. **He was standing and applauding for us.**" Several days later, he defected.

2008 BEIJING

North Korea wasn't given the nickname "a hermit kingdom" for no reason. Even up to today, it continues to be arguably one of the most locked-down nations, helmed by one of the most brutal regimes on the planet. Yet despite the fact that North Koreans have attended nearly every Summer Olympics since the '70s, defections have been few. The 2008 Olympics provides a possible reason — **North Korean athletes were reportedly not allowed out of their compound** except for events, and mingling and sightseeing was strictly banned.

2012 LONDON

The London Paralympics were the first time in history that **North Korea** sent a disabled athlete to compete, **a swimmer and double amputee.** In 2006, Korean defectors reported to the UN that there are collective camps for midgets, who are not allowed to reproduce.



than that of Romania and Hungary. Hungary to Austria was the crossing point from the Eastern bloc to the West. This was the edge of the Iron Curtain.

They emerged, covered in blood, and hid by a road. Panait had said he would knock out one of the headlights on each car, so they would know when to run out and make themselves known. And they did. Once more they slept in a single hotel room, but this time they were celebrating. They had made it.

The next day the defectors went their separate ways, while she and Panait went to the American embassy in Vienna. It created quite a reaction. She was told there was a Pan Am flight to New York leaving in two hours, and that she would be on it.

She wrote, "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Everything was going to be

SHE RETURNS HERE TO A FAVOURITE THEME. "HARD WORK, VOCATION AND A PASSION FOR WHAT YOU DO. THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN ANYTHING IS THE SAME"

easy now, a veritable piece of cake. I'd fly to the United States and get a great job and make tonnes of money. The public would admire me for my past accomplishments and I'd be rewarded in terms of my shining future goals. But if you believe that is how it happened, I have a bridge in Romania to sell you."

ALL OUT OF LOVE

Here is a profile of Nadia Comaneci from *People* magazine, in November 1990. "There are precious few who think of Nadia Comaneci with fondness these days. And she knows it." Those are the opening lines. And this was supposed to be a supportive, her-side-of-the-story piece.

The story of America's falling out of love with Comaneci starts with her landing at JFK International Airport in New York in November 1989. Straight off the plane, she was ushered into a news conference. She did not come across well. She gave short answers and appeared indifferent, even arrogant. She was asked about what Romania's response to her defection: "It's not my business," she said, according to an *Associated Press* account from December 1, 1989. "I know it will be different. I was nine times in the States, I know the life here."

Over the next few days, as it emerged Panait was married with four children, she appeared to confirm that she was in a relationship with him. When asked about his family, she said, "So what?" Regularly dressing in miniskirts and fishnets, and plastered in make-up, it took no time at all for America to forget the refreshing 14-year-old they had remembered from Montreal, and to see her instead as a shameless home-wrecker.

Yet it's surely impossible not to have sympathy with the way Comaneci presented herself when she arrived in New York, and in the hurried days following. Imagine the pace of it: leaving home and family forever, spending a night trudging through frozen fields and water, with the constant threat of death. Arrest by Hungarian police, a few hours in a hotel, a drive across Hungary, another night spent scaling barbed wire fences, little sleep then an arrival at an embassy, followed by a 10-hour flight. Then straight into a press conference, all shouted questions and flashing camera bulbs. How could anyone keep it together after that?

She smiles. "Bela used to say that I am a scorpion," she says. "And I *am* a scorpion. He said if you throw a scorpion in with all those bugs, a scorpion figures out a way to..." she raises her hands in a gesture of fighting, of resilience or defiance. "I've been trying to do that, all the time."

In that *People* profile, a year on from her arrival, she claimed that she was effectively a hostage to Panait who, having organised her defection, then took it upon himself to be her manager, controlling her every

move, and her money. Is it fair to say that when she went to the United States, she was being controlled once again?

"I think I was unprepared," she reflects. "With everything, with language. I was shocked. I thought I was just going to immigrate like Joe Nobody. I didn't know what to do. You just try to exist, to survive in some way, until you've figured it out."

She points at *DCM's* tape recorder. "I didn't know if even this was going to be the right thing. You just, like..." and she starts to move her hands in a waving, darting motion, as if demonstrating a snake's motion through grass, or a fish navigating its way upstream. "You just go from one place to get to another place, and you figure out which is the person you feel more comfortable with,

and lean towards those people. From here to there to here." She makes the motion with her hands again: finding a way.

Several people who had known Comaneci before were becoming worried by what they were seeing, and one, a rugby coach called Alexandru Stefu, who lived with his wife in Montreal, Canada, invited her and Panait to see him under the pretext of a lucrative endorsement contract. In the *People* account, Comaneci asked Stefu for help, and Panait was gone the following morning, taking US\$150,000 of her money and leaving just US\$1,000. Her book mentions nothing of her asking for help, instead saying she woke to find him gone. Either way, she was finally free.

And so was Romania, which overthrew Ceausescu



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (MAIN); CORBIS



TOP: TODAY, COMANEICI IS STILL INVOLVED IN GYMNASTICS. HERE, SHE IS SHOWN ATTENDING AN EVENT IN SPAIN TO PROMOTE THE PRACTISE OF SPORTS AND A HEALTHY LIFE

ABOVE: COMANEICI, HER HUSBAND BART CONNER, AND SEVERAL OTHER FORMER OLYMPIANS SPEAK TO FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA IN 2009, BEFORE THE CHICAGO 2016 OLYMPICS DINNER IN COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

in December 1989. He and his wife were tried and convicted on Christmas Day, then executed. Ironically, Comaneci almost needn't have fled the country when she did, as it was about three weeks short of revolution. Romania, like Comaneci, found the change difficult, and was in a chaotic power vacuum, cruelly illustrated when CNN announced they'd managed to contact her family, and arranged a live conversation with them.

Her mother had no idea what CNN was, believing the journalists and producers were from the Securitate, Romania's department of state security. When they were taken to a hotel room and given snacks and champagne, she believed it was their last meal — and when they were taken to the hotel roof to secure a signal for the satellite, she was certain they were to be thrown off the edge of the building. When they finally spoke, her mother cried — she had been told that her daughter had been shot.

RENEWED SUCCESS

Comaneci stayed with the Stefus for a while, becoming a resident of Canada, later moving again following his accidental death in a diving accident. By now she had become close to former Olympic gymnast Bart Conner, whom she had first met in 1976, and at various times since. He invited her to Oklahoma to train, and eventually to move there. She and Conner were not immediately a couple, but the move brought her peace and direction: she learned to value gymnastics as a recreational pursuit rather than just a competitive one, and she began working with Conner's agent, Paul Ziert, in gymnastics tours.

She was delighted to find that gymnastics could still provide her a life, so long after she'd ceased to compete. "Before, we used to say: you spent so many years in learning something that not too many people can do and has a value of zero," she recalls. "What are you going to do? Tricks at a party? Somebody is going to hire you to do handstands on a bar? What are you going to do?"

She returns here to a favourite theme. "Hard work,

and a passion for what you do. The key to success in anything is the same." Her work ethic guided her again. Along the way, she and Conner got engaged, then married; today they have a seven-year-old boy.

She is 52 now, and could pass for much younger; partly, she freely admits, because of her plentiful use of Botox. She is still glamorous, but with nothing like the heavy make-up of earlier years. She wears towering heels, but otherwise a sober if smart look: black jacket, white top, earrings, two gold crosses around her neck.

Comaneci is back in Romania every two or three months, and has never forgotten her first return five years after her defection, with Conner. She was welcomed by thousands of people tossing flowers, was met by the new prime minister, and took nine hours to complete a normally four-hour drive to Onesti, through villages filled with crowds. They decided, on that trip, to hold their wedding in Romania, in the Orthodox two-day style. The wedding virtually shut down the country: people stayed off work, half of Bucharest closed, and 10,000 people waited outside the hotel plaza before the couple went to the church.

So how does she like Oklahoma? It is the biggest smile of the interview. "I like it! Because it's a quiet place, and people are very nice." She gives an example of going to the store and forgetting her wallet. They don't mind: pay next time, they say. "A lot of people ask me why Oklahoma. They think I would live in Monaco. I can go to the grocery store, do things like regular normal people."

She has become much more accepted by Americans, particularly in light of her work for charities in America and Romania, including the Special Olympics and muscular dystrophy. One imagines the Comaneci determination being an asset for those facing their own steep hurdles in life.

"There were others who had more talent than I did," she recalls of her early gymnastics years. "But my success had a lot to do with always doing more than I was asked to — and in time that built up." ●