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A Little Short of Perfect

Inside the party tent, the mayor and his minions in flapping homemade togas, florid with drink, laurel wreaths askew, bobbed to the blare of canned accordions. *Zilele Romane,* the Roman Days festival, was coming to a raucous close. *Mititei,* finger-sized pork sausages, sputtered over a fire pit outside. Helmets from the gladiators littered the grass. Home-brewed *ţuică,* the local plum brandy, spilled from Fanta and Coke bottles. The nearby Transylvanian city, once a far-flung outpost of imperial Rome, milked its ancient connection every year. This time, the city fathers were winding up the celebration at the site of the archaeological dig that had brought Chuck and me to Romania for the summer. The tent was bulging with "Romans," villagers from down the road, staff from the archaeology museum, and the dig crew. The American students sat by themselves and drank beer. "Kiss the bottle," the museum director wheedled in English for their benefit, lunging over to them with two Fanta bottles of *ţuică* in hand.

Chuck and I were mingling. Glowing. After our last visit four years ago, the language was coming back. We had never met these people, but when we told them we had been Peace Corps volunteers next door in the Republic of Moldova —once part of eastern Romania—for more than two years, that we had traveled around Romania three times since then, that this time we were here for the dig, it was "*bine aţi venit acasă,*" welcome home, from the mayor.

We could never have analyzed the sense of connection we had felt from the very beginning, eight years ago, to this part of the world. Moldova was our home base, but its ethnic roots had been diluted by fifty years of Soviet rule. Crossing the border into Romania for weekends and vacations during our Peace Corps service always felt like a trip back to Europe. It was a rough country but at least culturally intact. Its gritty history and wanna-be-Italian pretensions intrigued us. People in the cities acted as though they had woken up from a bad dream and wanted to catch up with the West fast. Looked down upon by the Euro countries, Romanians melted when met with unexpected foreign appreciation for their language, culture, and music. The country's great nineteenth-century romantic poem about immortality and betrayal, "*Luceafărul,*" always got to us. Chance encounters with artists in the park or travelers on the train turned into invitations

not only to tea and conversation but extended visits to unexplored corners. I taught my grandchildren to call me *bunică,* the Romanian for *grandmother.*

Of course, because of our age, the "Romans" assumed we had come as retired professionals, in some kind of supervisory role. But they were happy we liked their country and giddy because the *ţuică* was numbing their cares until morning. My husband was more than happy to kiss the bottle. At some point I decided he was kissing it entirely too often, and I steered him away from the party, down the hill to our room.

That night I slept uneasily. Chuck kept getting up, but I was too groggy to pay much attention. In the morning I woke to find him already dressed for the day's work, sitting on the bed, his face grim. "I can't pee," he said. What? This must be some hangover! But he had no success the rest of the day. Uncertain about what to do next, we said nothing to anyone. The following night neither of us slept at all. The next morning we got a ride into the city, to the public hospital.

"Have you been drinking *ţuică?*" the urologist asked Chuck in Romanian. He was only half joking. "*Da,*" Chuck winced at the catheter's probe and then felt instant relief after thirty-six hours. A young, bloodied boy lay on a table three feet away, screaming as a nurse swabbed his knife wounds. Privacy was an unavailable luxury in the hospital's bare-bones emergency room. Stark tiled walls and ceiling bulbs highlighted the meager supplies inside glass cabinets—a few towels, syringes, a stash of latex gloves, bottles of what looked like antiseptic. A sliver of brown soap lay on the rim of the nearby bathroom-size sink.

"*Prostat mare,*" Dr. S. murmured. Large prostrate. Plum brandy might have made the problem worse, he told us, but it wasn't the cause. My husband was seventy-nine, fully absorbed in an active life. In the past year his trips to the bathroom had become more frequent and lengthy. Inconvenient, but he had adjusted. Now, overnight and thousands of miles from home, the swelling had drastically increased. While I had been sleeping fitfully that night, he had been tracing a fruitless path to an unfamiliar toilet down the hall every fifteen minutes.

On the way to the hospital, I had relived images from that night, certain we would have to bail out and leave. And as we stood outside the hospital's emergency department—*URGENŢĂ*—the huge, block-letter sign read—we hadn't known what to expect of this damaged country's health-care system. Dr. S. happened to be on duty that morning. Lucky for us, he was also the hospital's senior urologist.

Some men might have taken the next flight home, regardless. Not Chuck. He had always had his own way of dealing with age and illness. His Santa Claus face

and conciliatory smile disguised an obstinacy that never failed to surprise me. On a previous three-month trip, he had treated a case of near pneumonia in Emilia Romagna as a passing nuisance and hopped the train for the French Alps once the fever was down. The year he had been an English teacher in a small-town Czech gymnasium, he battled a recurrence of diverticulitis in a local hospital, writing lesson plans from his bed. This was the way we explored the world, despite such occasional bad luck. And here we were, exploring and testing luck again.

We had signed up for this archaeological dig the previous winter. The chance to come back to Romania not as tourists but to do real work for the summer sounded irresistible. The words *field school* on the internet registration form made us feel like acolytes. The price was a steal. We would be working in the foothills of the Carpathians with a team of twenty archaeology and anthropology majors, PhD candidates, and instructors at a second-century AD Roman site. An ancient Forum might lie underneath the farmer's field we would be excavating. There would be evening lectures, discussions, journals handed in and returned with comments, just like a real course. I had always loved Roman history. Chuck would get a chance to make drawings of the artifacts we recovered. We couldn't wait to begin. That was four days ago.

"Perhaps the block is only temporary," Dr. S. suggested. He explained the mechanics of a temporary fix. The flexible rubber *sondă*—the word for catheter an unwelcome addition to my rusty vocabulary—with its tiny, water-filled rubber balloon holding it in place and its removable end cap, would allow the bladder to empty conveniently, anywhere. If we planned to complete our summer here, he would see Chuck in exactly two weeks. The *sondă* would be removed and with any luck stay out. That was all Chuck needed to hear. He told Dr. S. he wasn't about to give up.

I liked the way this doctor listened, the skillful hands he used to examine Chuck's body, his sense of humor, and the respect he showed his nurse, Maria, as they conferred. Tall and almost spectrally thin, Dr. S. had a certain kind of Romanian face: narrow, jutting cheekbones, hooded eyes. He had the look of a man who had survived the Ceaușescu years more or less intact but had witnessed plenty.

"No more *țuică,* no beer," the doctor ordered sternly as he wrote prescriptions for an antibiotic and a medication he hoped would help shrink the troublesome gland. "Maybe just a little wine," he added with a hint of a smile, holding his finger a third of the way up the side of an imaginary glass. "American men must be healthier," he observed, dryly. "Most of my prostate patients come to me when they are fifty or fifty-five."

He touched our arms as he spoke, and some of my tension dissipated. Dr. S. sounded hopeful. My husband was in good hands, and I wanted to believe he was going to be okay for now.

Gingerly, Chuck pulled up his pants. Following instructions, we walked over to the private polyclinic for urinalysis and antibody tests, then to the pharmacy, marked, typically, by the green cross above the door, and by a hospital-white interior. Clerks courteously dispensed Chuck's medications, totaling up charges we knew would have been three times higher in America, on a hand-cranked adding machine.

Our taxi let us off downtown at the *piaţă*. It had taken only two days to discover that our dig was, in fact, a rag-tag operation, sponsored not by an academic institution but by a couple of independent archaeologists—George, the slyly unflappable American who lived in Rome, and Valeriu, his bumptious Romanian counterpart—and shored up with shaky funding. Based in a few cement-block structures outside a tiny village, the camp offered basic plumbing. Even in the private homes down the hill where some of us were housed, it was clear there would be mostly cold water and definitely no washing machines.

"Just like Peace Corps, only more so," Chuck observed. We were headed for the laundry-tub seller's booth when the catheter's little interior balloon quietly burst. Catheter and rubber tubing slithered down one pant leg onto the cracked pavement. Outwardly calm, Chuck's mouth tightened. My skin prickled. We both dove to snatch up the pieces, appalled at the thought of witnesses to male impairment in this macho culture. But Romanians know very well how not to see. If anyone noticed, no one reacted. I looked at Chuck to see the tight mouth dissolve into a grin. "Can you see this as a *New Yorker* cartoon?" We hurried back to the hospital.

Life in the *urgenţă*'s dingy entry hallway—you could hardly call it a waiting room—had quickened in the two hours since we had left. Ambulances came and went, discharging patient-laden stretchers anywhere there was room. We took the last empty places on one of two cracked plastic benches. The sole wall decoration, a photograph of mountains, sheep, and a smiling shepherd outlined against a brilliant blue sky, provided an unintended reminder of fading traditions. A weeping couple, most of their teeth gone or replaced by gold, held on to each other beside the reception booth. Two bored young mothers jiggled infants. A cleaning woman in black, probably no older than sixty-five, pushed a long handle attached to a rag-wrapped piece of wood across the worn green tiled floor, mopping cigarette butts and sunflower-seed hulls into piles. Doctors on the run consulted

with patients in corners, anywhere. The smell of disinfectant and cigarettes permeated the air.

Finally, Dr. S. was free to see us. "*Extraordinar!*" he exclaimed, as he and Maria examined the split catheter. "*De necrezut,*" unbelievable, added a perplexed Maria, checking the expiration date. Two years away! "Let's test the next one," Chuck suggested. Dr. S. and Maria obligingly took turns puffing up the balloon, Maria lapsing into giggles. The new catheter promptly inserted, Dr. S.'s firm handshake, Maria's hug, and we were on our way downtown again. Enough adventure for the day; dirty clothes would soon accumulate, and we needed that laundry tub before the market closed.

As we climbed out of the second taxi, Chuck gripped my arm; he needed a restroom immediately. This time we found ourselves in front of a stuccoed building whose discreet sign, Club Luxe, suggested there would be facilities inside. I knocked at the oddly locked door and begged the implacable woman in black who opened it a crack to allow my husband to use the club's *veceu.* "It's only for our clients," she began frostily, but I pressed on, choosing my words and tone carefully. "Please, *Doamnă,* it's urgent, my husband is old and ill. We would appreciate your kindness greatly." Chuck, no stranger to amateur theater, went slack jawed on cue, rolling his eyes just believably enough. At the words *urgent, batrân, bolnav*—urgent, old, ill—she softened reluctantly and let us in. I was glad I had spent the plane trip reviewing my Romanian.

While *Doamnă* hurriedly led Chuck down a hallway, my nose and peripheral vision took in the scene. Yes, I too could keep my face blank. We were in what was clearly a brothel. Four or five male clients lounged on plush black sofas in the dim room, enveloped by a thick haze and the reek of cheap tobacco, perfume, and sex. Two youngish bottle blondes, mostly topless and entirely bottomless, sat impassively astride the unbuttoned laps of a couple of younger clients while the older men looked on with intent, strained smiles. Their faces, all of them, registered undisguised surprise at our bizarre intrusion. I read annoyance and perhaps a little fear in their glances. Glasses of something clearly not mineral water littered the low table in front of them. The infamous *ţuică?* Lurid purple flowers on a mad, Victorian yellow background danced on the walls, which were interrupted by suggestive, closely spaced doors.

Barely a minute later, my observations stopped. *Doamnă* had clicked her way back from her restroom escort task with hurried dignity. Quickly she took my arm, led me to an inner salon, and ushered me into one of a pair of overstuffed ombre velvet armchairs. Anyone might have taken us for new acquaintances

meeting at a café, this beady-eyed, coiffed, fiftyish madam and her unlikely American companion in patched, L.L. Bean tropic-weight olive pants, Clarks sandals, and a sixth-grade headband holding back a straight mousy blonde bob. The Red Queen and over-age Alice. Yes, she offered me tea. Exquisitely polite, her voice rasped hardened prurience. What were we doing in Romania? What sort of illness did my husband have? I knew I owed her. I gave the story the drama and pathos it deserved, and as much Romanian body language as I could muster. The Roman site we were digging at? She knew it well and, like the mayor at the party, assumed we were archaeologists. Why dissuade her? Academic credentials might confer a further patina of legitimacy on the request she had grudgingly granted. Her red nails flicked. "They all have it here in this miserable country," she said flatly, referring to Chuck's condition. "All of them, by the time they're in their fifties." Dr. S.'s very words. Cedax? Yes, *Doamnă* even identified Chuck's antibiotic. Her voice softened, curiosity shifting into bitter concern. Over who—a father, a brother? Maybe even one of her own hard-drinking clients?

By the time Chuck emerged, bending in gratitude to kiss her hand in traditional Romanian fashion, *Doamnă* was recommending a restaurant where we could get authentic *mamaligă,* the tasty Romanian version of polenta, at a good price. The shocked stares of her clients followed us as *Doamnă* showed us to the door.

"How many places like this can we count on next time?" I asked skeptically once we were back on the street.

"I'll ask the cops," Chuck joked.

For the next two weeks, we dug and troweled, layer after layer, in ever deepening trenches from early morning until late afternoon, with an hour off for lunch. Valeriu, red baseball cap jammed over a dish towel that hung down, Lawrence-of-Arabia-style, over his neck and fleshy bare back, set the pace in self-taught English. "Beginning to march," he would bark at a minute past eight, stopwatch in hand, as he shepherded us in a line down the steep path lined with daisies and chamomile, all of us shouldering heavy shovels and spades. Most days it was 103 degrees. Except for those shovels and the sturdy Italian trowels that George had brought with him from Rome, our tools were a joke. Kids' red plastic pails cracked under the weight of stones we unearthed and had to be duct taped weekly. Tiny dust pan and brush sets didn't last much longer. Valeriu shrugged his shoulders. Money. Fingers rubbed against thumb. "You must to understand," he would begin and end in frustration, while George, always immaculate in Italian

silk shirts and white shorts, rolled his eyes in mock sympathy. For Valeriu? For us? I was never quite sure. The sixteen Romanian construction workers who were supposed to be doing the heaviest labor turned out to be local secondary-school students from the city who had never held a shovel in their lives and were too young legally to work a full day.

The rest of us worked like dogs, eventually unearthing walls and pedestals. We exulted at sudden finds, both foreseen and unanticipated. A knife, tiles marked "Hispania," indicating labor brought from the provinces, a nail, a coin stamped with the likeness of the Emperor Getta, a Roman lady's eyebrow tweezers.

Packed into a seatbeltless rusty van on weekend field trips, we were shown the extent of the Roman *limes,* the boundaries—detectable only to archaeologists—between the empire and the "barbarian" Dacians, the ancient tribes whose land and ancestry Romania claimed and whose cultural artifacts we studied in the local museum.

Except for George, who served as go-to man for the group, we had been vague about the exact nature of Chuck's trip to the hospital. But somehow everyone had found out within twenty-four hours. If the women students remained distanced, the males exhibited subtle discomfort, as though Chuck's ailment might be contagious. This wasn't Elderhostel. The students hadn't paid to come halfway around the world only to encounter their grandparents. Already complaining about "third world" conditions, cabbage they left untouched, soup they didn't like (a stiff "sorry for you" was Valeriu's usual response), and no night life, they could only wonder why we had come. Initial acceptance slow, their awkward sympathy for Chuck turned protective as day after day they saw him bent alongside them with his shovel and trowel, asking no favors. When any of the young men wondered how he was managing to pee, Chuck would cheerfully explain, as he went off into the bushes, that it was simply a matter of "whipping it out and pulling the plug."

"Are you really feeling okay?" I asked him uncertainly as we gulped cool spring water under a walnut tree on morning break.

Chuck specializes in understatement. "A little short of perfect." A smile of rueful lust.

Trudging up the hill from our room every morning on ever stronger legs, Chuck and I paused. We set down the plastic liters of warm breakfast milk from the next-door neighbor's cow and breathed in the beauty of the steeply rolling landscape: the pure greens, golds, and browns of alternating farm, pasture, and woods, the conical haystacks, everything still in cool half shadow. In the evenings

(the organizers seemed to have forgotten the lectures and journal reviews), we left the group. Chuck had brought his portable watercolor set, and with a few brush strokes, he captured some of the ambient light. We sought out village families for conversation, admiring lush vegetable gardens. I, at least, could drink the wine they made, and once I told them about Chuck's condition, they stopped pressuring him, impressed by his stamina. No one could believe he was close to eighty. I realized again that it was for this that we had come back: the land, the people, the wine and food, as much as for the dig. This was the country of our hearts. I even loved being told by the Transylvanians that I had a "peasanty" Moldovan accent.

Both of us, however, were counting the days until we could celebrate. The morning finally came. Chuck was given his instructions by the *urgență* nurse assigned to remove the catheter: drink two liters of water, then try to void on his own. Chuck jabbed my arm. "Piece of cake."

The little café across the street sold Borsec *apă minerală,* a popular brand of sparkling water, in half-liter bottles. It was pleasant to sit there under the terrace awning, like tourists, while I watched my husband down bottle after bottle, confident at last he would be functioning normally very soon: less so when the first trip to the café's *veceu* resulted in a grim smile and a thumbs down. Soon we were back across the street waiting for Dr. S. Chuck found the visitor's toilet and tried again. Again, a mere trickle, weak promise of later improvement. It would be easy to blame the bladder-curling grime and crud in the untended facility, but Chuck wouldn't have cared. He had seen worse in Moldova.

The *urgență* hallway was rapidly filling up. It was getting on toward noon. We had both expected success. Now Chuck was in agony, and I was in agony for him. We had been waiting an hour, and there was no telling when Dr. S. would be free. My left arm tightly around Chuck's shoulders, my right hand holding his, I tried to divert his attention. Together we studied the *babăs* tottering in on the arms of pants-suited middle-aged daughters; the French-braided five-year-old in an arm cast, clinging to her father; a young man embarrassed to be hobbling on crutches, supported by his buddies. Faces blank, we watched people clutch their bags a little closer when a family of *Romă* women entered. In blazing tribal stripes and clanking gold, the gypsy group clung to a wall, haughtily ignoring the resentful stares directed at them. We picked out the Hungarians; the city wasn't far from the border, and there was no mistaking the inflections and rhythm of Magyar for Romanian. We heard an unseen, fussy male British voice complain about "non-Western sanitation conditions here." I wanted to hit him, whoever he was. It was

the doctors who counted, and Chuck had lucked out. Then I looked up and saw Dr. S. down the hall, beckoning us into a smaller examining room.

In went the catheter again, producing the same instant relief as it had the first time. Dr. S. stood, frowning, scanning test results he said showed an alarming PSA level of twenty rather then a normal four. His fingers probed and palpitated. "No more *ţuică?*" he asked suspiciously. "Not even a drop of wine," Chuck assured him. "I hoped for better results," the doctor said. "Drink more, only clear liquids. We will try once more without the *sondă,*" he agreed reluctantly, in deference to Chuck's stated determination to leave without the catheter that had just rescued him from pain. "But come back early tomorrow morning. And here is my home phone number if you need me at midnight." He sounded worried. If he was worried, I was frantic—and furious at Chuck's obstinacy. "No cell phone? Everyone asleep—or occupied? How in hell do you think we're going to call a taxi at 3:00 AM to drive ten kilometers out, bring us here, and drive us back?" Chuck ignored my pleas.

Again the taxi downtown. First to the Internet café where we would write to our family and friends about ancient Roman heating systems and Swiss-style mountain tourist chalets but carefully omit any reference to medical issues. Chuck's son was a doctor, skeptical of any health-care system east of the Atlantic coastal plain. He had been appalled earlier at our acceptance of a Peace Corps assignment to Moldova, the poorest country in Europe. Then to the *piaţă* to replace socks and T-shirts no amount of scrubbing in desultory bursts of orangey cold water could rid of second-century grime. Finally to our favorite restaurant. It was past 9:00 PM. We ate our *colţunasi*—little potato-filled pasta pillows topped with sour cream—and the ubiquitous cucumber and tomato salad. Chuck had drunk fruit tea, lemonade, and more *apă minerală,* and again he was hurting. Four trips to the toilet had been futile. I rushed out to the taxi stand on the street. "We'll take our chances with anyone, even if it's the receptionist." I was going to be the decider now. Chuck was silent. It hurt too much to talk.

No need. We saw for ourselves what overtime at the *urgenţă* looked like. Dr. S. was still there after twelve hours, visibly tired—and alarmed at our sudden arrival. We wouldn't be back in America for another six weeks. "No more experiments," he said flatly as he put Chuck through the procedure once more. This time the *sondă* would have to stay in until we returned and Chuck could consult his own doctor. This time Chuck, my field-school teammate, agreed. "I will keep the *sondă* in, *cu plăcere,*" with pleasure, he put it, with a certain irony. They were

counting on him to continue sketching artifacts back at the site, he added with modest pride. Dr. S. looked at him with a mixture of concern and amusement.

We had already paid for laboratory tests at the polyclinic and for prescriptions at the pharmacy. What did we owe Dr. S.? He looked puzzled. Owe? Our look of incomprehension mirrored his own surprise. Life had been hard enough under the previous regime, he told us, instinctively looking behind him for a second. It was still "*foarte rău,*" very bad. "We do what we can, the equipment could be better, but no one who comes here to this public hospital pays." His voice was trailing. "I am going home now to sleep," he said.

His final words, just before we left the hospital, grabbed us. Those words held everything we loved about Romania. As he wrapped his arms protectively around us, Dr. S. said gently, "But if you need me between now and when you leave, '*eu mai sîmt,*' I'm still here."