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**Of Autumn Apples and Dying Boys:
A Collection of Essays**

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Senior Project
Preformed for the University Honors Department
of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Jack E. Reese, Mentor
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Preface

As with all stories, these tales are greatly shaped by the perspectives of the narrators. In some cases, this may mean that the author approaches the subject with a political agenda or some sort of life lesson moral. I cannot claim that I write without some political shading of my own. Additionally, I quite readily admit that I wish the words to be instructional to the audience. The difference is that these things are not the primary focus of this work. The driving motivation behind this work are the images that visit me frequently both in waking and in sleep. They are memories, dreams, and nightmares that dislodge me from the comfort of my daily life and bring back the vivid experiences from August 1995 through March 1996. They come from a place called St. Laurence's, in town known as Cernavoda, out of a country called Romania.

For the words that I put down, I can say that they are truth. As for the words of others that I report, especially on topics such as history and politics, I can only say that I record them as they were given me. Whether their words are true with regard to history books and newspapers is made insignificant by the fact they speak of the reality within which they live. In the social and economic strain of post-communist, post-Ceasescu Romania, reality varies greatly from the monied, elite urbanite to the indigent, starving tenant farmers of the Danube River Valley. It is at such a point that fact and truth become a moot point, and experience becomes central to judgement of the information.

So it with this said that I begin to relate to you the story of Daniela. The story of Christi. The story of Florentina. The story of Luminita. The story of Ionut. It is with this said that I begin to tell a story of living and dying and abandonment and love. It centers around the small St. Laurence Children's Hospice in the Danube River Valley town of Cernavoda. It is a tale of

the children who live there, the people who work there, and the country they all call home:

Romania.

Of Autumn Apples and Dying Boys

When the wind blows it dances. That bitter wind from across the water. Ukranian blasts that freeze the ground and the waters of the Dunarea. And it makes it dance. No. It makes it wind like some ethereal snake upon the hardened ground: the wind-driven, serpentine twists of that dry powdered snow. In this darkness it undulates its way everywhere. It's like that fine beach sand back home: it infiltrates every crevice that it discovers. Back in the room it has gotten through the double glaze and piled in the sill. It is an icy dust that continues to permeate every pore in the surrounding creation.

My hands are stinging, but I can't move just now. I'm transfixed by the weaving current of snow at my feet. My hands are in painful numbness, but my mind is riding the icy band below. The dance and the darkness have taken away the present. The pain is singing up through the freezing nerves, but their call is drowned beneath the pounding, pulsing rhythms of memory. I am not in this cold night. The frozen Russian gusts are months from me. It is a close night in early autumn, damp with humidity and perspiration. The air, the light, the sounds - all of it is thick. They are all sodden with the heavy wetness of that dark and sultry September evening. The only thing in my consciousness is the deep, warm smells of apple and the straining sounds that play behind the crisp crunching of apple.

I hear the belabored breaths of the tiny boy astride my chest. He struggles to draw air into his thick lungs. He struggles to feed his body oxygen. I am not here. I am on my back with little Danny straddling my chest. I cut green skinned apple wedges for him, and the juice falls on my shirt. The juices brown and stain the light, white cotton as Danny attempts to coordinate his swallows and his rapid breaths. It is a different time than this wintery night of lacerating winds.

It is a time filled with the warm mellowness of autumn apples. A time of autumn apples and of dying boys.

Casa Speranta

As you approach the hospice from down in the town, all you can make out is the very top of the central building. Atop this block of concrete you can see, in all its well-meaning gaudiness, a cross fashioned from green spray-painted, steel support beams. The cross was a last minute addition, free of charge, by the Romanian builders. With the artistic instinct associated with men who spend their lives erecting masonry and plaster, this was an inspiration of beauty. They even attached cheap spot lights at the top, base, and two extremities of the arms so that it could be illuminated as a beacon in the night. Luckily, with time, the eyesore becomes ignored by the mind. The mind can grow accustomed to just about anything. Anything, that is, except for what is happening in this little compound that sits atop a hill in the unremarkable town of Cernavoda, Romania. This is St. Laurence Children's Hospice. This is a home for sixty children that have at least one thing in common. They are all living with, and dying from, AIDS.

The hospice is a small collection of buildings. The main building is a four story building where the children live. In the winter, dark, oily smoke pours from the chimney, staining the snow black. In the summer, the children play on the second story balcony, soaking up the sun which adds a look of health to their skin. The British staff members live in the modest houses not fifty yards from the hospice building. The little homes hold the bedrooms containing the few memories of home that the volunteers bring with them. In the arctic chill of winter, the winds whistle through the drafty structures prompting the wearing of thermals and the hoarding of blankets to combat the cold. A high fence surrounds the place and a sheet metal sign at the front gate proclaims this to be St. Laurence Children's Hospice. The Romanians call it *Casa Speranta*. House of Hope.

Romania, in the early and mid 1990's, was able to make the dubious claim of containing fifty percent of the pediatric AIDS cases in Europe. Thousands of children, most of them in the overfilled, filthy conditions of the state orphanages, carried the HIV virus. How did this happen? Government officials claim that was an event far beyond their control. They say that a shipment of infected blood and plasma from Africa was sold to them in the early 1980's, before they knew of the threat of AIDS. No records exist to either verify or discount this claim. Still, a UNICEF assessment blames the questionable health practices established in the late 1970's and executed throughout the 1980's.

Romanian health policy was set by the Secretary of Health under the Ceausescu regime, Mrs. Nicolae Ceausescu. She had no knowledge of the topic except for the advice of her personal physicians. The health codes were simply bad medicine. Physicians were ordered to administer worthless micro-transfusion to those infants and children that appeared anemic. Common practice on nursery wards was to sedate an entire room when the babies were upset, using one syringe for the entire ward. This was also true for the intravenous administration of vitamins and vaccines. Again, needles were never changed from patient to patient. Very few of these children were HIV positive upon birth. The infection developed while they were in the care of the hospital nurseries. What the Romanian people saw was one of the worst problems their nation had ever been faced with and no money to solve the problem. The impoverished country was even more unable to address this trial as the Revolution of 1989 plunged the nation into a destabilizing bankruptcy. The government couldn't find money to feed the living, let alone provide special care for the terminally ill. This is when St. Laurence's began.

The hospice is a modest, non-denominational venture that has been in place since 1992. It

was opened with the intent to provide peace, love, and dignity to those children in the end stages of the disease. Sixty children call the hospice home. They range from ages three to nine, all with varying mental and physical capacity. They are housed in the five different wards: St. John's, St. Phillip's, St. Andrew's, St. Luke's, and St. Peter's. Each ward has its own personality, some housing the more severely mentally and physically disabled, such as St. Andrew's, while St. Peter's ward is home to the children who are more able in both body and mind. No matter the ward, each of the children is one of the living prisoners of the HIV virus. Every week holds the potential for a new opportunistic illness, any of which could claim their lives.

How can a child come to terms with death? For the children on St. Peter's and St. John's wards which house unimpaired children, this is an issue. They are all intelligent and very aware of what is happening around them, and a child of seven may watch the daily decline of one of their companions. What thoughts can be running through their minds? In the year I arrived at St. Laurence's, they witnessed five of the children die, and most had themselves come close to entering end-stage illnesses.

The week that Luminita died, I was working on St. John's. As I changed a bandage on Adi's arm, he asked me why Julie, one of the nurses, had been so sad. I responded that she was still saddened by the death of Luminita. He was quiet as he thought about how he had viewed Luminita's body earlier in the week. As was practice, we laid Luminita's body in her bed during the day after her death and had the children come see and touch her. It is amazing to watch a child approach a body of another child. They seem to possess a natural reverence. Little Christi had stroked the dead girl's cheek with a very solemn face. Late that night he asked if he could go down to the chapel, where Luminita lay in repose. He stood beside the crib we had laid her in and said goodnight to her, touching her pallid cheek.

During Adi's brooding silence, Marin asked me where Luminita was, now? Before I could answer, Ionut spoke. With a very mature reverence, he told the other children, "She is with God and Jesus. She has wings and has flown up to the sky. She is happy and feels no pain." He then turned to me and said, "One day I will not hurt anymore and I will fly with Luminita," a seeming smile of joy covered his face.

Those words are indelible in my mind. The rest of the children nodded their heads in the affirmative, ratifying Ionut's explanation. I couldn't speak. Is it age that brings ambiguity to death? Where do we lose this simplicity of comprehension? Ionut could so easily speak of the portal that death would be for him. He knew it was an end to pain. He knew pain all too well with heart palpitations that would sometimes reach 170 beats per minute. Some mornings he would awake in cold sweats and vomited with such force as to double his body over. He also suffered from mollusca, fleshy growths of the chest and face, that had become infected. The open sores would cause a constant burning sensation and the bacterial toxins that formed would bring on a dull ache in his body. Ionut may have spoken of God and angels, but his words captured the true boon that death was for these children. It was a release from all the pain.

Though death was ever a presence, the spirit of the hospice was far from grave. Instead it was a place of joy. Almost because of death, in spite of death, there was happiness. Instead of worrying about the many manifestations that death assumed in this place, the staff responded by engaging in all sorts of activities that would cause laughter and smiles to run infectiously through the children. Sometimes it was finger painting. In the hot summers it was water fights. In the middle of the night, when bad dreams had come, or a persistent fever burned, it was a simple hug. This was the strongest treatment any of the children received aside from the drugs to combat their opportunistic infections. Unconditional love and affection was all that we could

offer them. Incredibly, they responded well to it and actually returned it to us.

I think maybe these children gave me much more than I could give them. Young spiritualists like Ionut instructed me in the simplicity of faith of which maturity had robbed me. The times that these children had run and laughed even though they never knew how their health may be tomorrow reminded me to enjoy what I had now. Most of all, their easiness at approaching me and asking for a hug, a kiss, or just a large hand to hold made me realize how much we need others. St. Laurence's is not a place of death. It is a place hope and joy. Though I was blind to this at first, sixty incredible children guided me to this truth.

Sanctuary

Here the Danube is called the Dunarea. It is the Romanian reference for the supposed origin of the river in Germany's Black Forest. In Vienna, Bratislava, and Budapest it races past capitals and cathedrals. Its waters have coursed along with the time of the centuries, racing past history. Here in Cernavoda it is wide brown thing that bears no resemblance to the poems, paintings, and pantheons that sing of its beauty. It is a fast moving, watery beast that silently passes the little town by, seeming to rush away before this ugly little village can steal any of its glory. It desperately runs toward Tulcea, where it will deposit its rich loam and then be lost in the deep waters of the Black Sea. Though it never really is the beautiful azure band praised by artists of a more romantic age, in Cernavoda there is no chance of even being imagined blue. The current runs a muddy brown next to the dull grey of this place. Cernavoda. "Dark Water." The Russian is so appropriate.

From the grounds of the compound the river serves as a break before the thin ribbon of forest that precedes the farmlands that run over the horizon. That is the way we go to Bucharest. We go north across the Saligny Bridge. The bridge is one of Cernavoda's claims to notoriety. It was the greatest creation of the nation's most celebrated engineer. The gigantic steel behemoth throws itself across the width of the river. On one side, there is a huge bronze statue of a soldier in full regalia of those early days of the 1900's. In contrast, his modern day successor stands sentinel over the structure. Beneath the 20 foot metallic menace plays a boy dressed in cadet blue, standing erect with his rifle resting against his shoulder

The other distinction that rests upon this fruitless town is also related to the Danube. Cernavoda stands at the beginning of the Danube-Black Sea waterway. With no hope of ever

dredging the deep-silted neck of the deltas. Ceasescu ordered the construction of the canal, starting at Cernavoda and bursting free not far from Constanta. The populations of prisons were dumped out into the trench and driven to work toward its quick completion. The labor was both used to create economic hope for the nation and eliminate politicians that needed discrete burying. This was Romanian's moment of glory. This was their investment in the Inter-European Waterway that would run from the North Sea to Black Sea. This was the chance for economic revival when the freighters of the world sail through this nation, bringing wealth and goods. Balkan unrest would foil this scheme. Today, only 15% of the envisioned traffic ever enters the waterway because the Yugoslavian contribution was never fully realized. Also, the unrest of the area has scared away shipping they may have actually ventured through the course.

When I take the train to Constanta, I can see the entire expanse of that conduit. It stands empty. The only thing slipping down its passage is the water diverted from the Danube. Halfway to Constanta there is a vestige of communist propaganda. A mural of the noble comrades that built the canal stands on hill above the bank. They are not unlike the Bolshevik posters of those brawny, gray-shirted workers of the proletariat. It mocks and disguises the harsh reality of the construction. There are no portraits of the Greek Catholic bishops and their priests that were set to work here. There is no panel showing how their beaten and starved bodies fell in exhaustion or how their bodies were loaded out of the pits in the carts of dirt and rock. And what of the gypsies? They fled here during the World War II to escape the same fate as the Jews. Did their lot improve, becoming slaves under a totalitarian regime? There were prison camps in Cernavoda during those times. The world did not care.

The prison camps may be gone, but people still live in hovels near the river. Long barracks for temporary workers and tall, crumbling concrete block towers of flats lie along the banks.

This is called Colombia. It lies at the base of the hill and is the remnant of the failed efficiency and economy of the communist regime. Colombia is a place of squalor. The road down the hill is occupied by breaks in the concrete that span five feet across and drop some six feet in the ground. The shallower potholes become pits of mud during rainstorms. The loose pigs that range the roads can occasionally be found in residence in one the holes. The people in the barracks tend small gardens outside their drafty homes. Those in the flats raise pigs that they keep tied up outside. Everyone keeps pigs because they are cheap to raise. All that is required is that someone root through the garbage heaps and skim the waste from the sewage in the gutters. The pigs, the great omnivores they are, consume it with the same enthusiasm, no matter what the offering may be.

Sometimes I walk down through Colombia. I walk past the flats where Dan and his family live. I walk past the schoolhouse and the medical clinic where Dr. Georgescu works. Next comes the kiosk where that old wrinkled woman works, with a kerchief around her head and the amorphous layers of clothing covering her body. She sells the rough, bitter Hungarian Tiba chocolate and the sickly sweet Skip soft drinks. Some children are trying to get enough coins together to buy something. In a few years they will scrounge for coins to buy a few cigarettes that woman sells loose, stacked in little mounds on the counter. I'm well into the center of the work camp now and a few bean plants grow up the stakes and the side of the building. The pepper plants are already fruiting and the ardele ouite are green. Their shining bodies contain fiery, delectable juices that will be eaten on bread with thick slabs of pork fat for breakfast before these workers head off into the early morning light.

Past this point, the road is a viscous stew of mud left from yesterday's rain. The sludge reeks with the decaying detritus and the sewage that runs out of the broken pipes and along the ditches

lining the road. Adding to the putrescence are the penned pigs that occupy claptrap enclosure along the roadside. The deep grunts of the hogs are genteel compared to the horrible stench of their feces and urine mixed with the ankle deep mud. I will come here closer to Christmas and then these roads will carry the squeals of dying swine and their steaming blood will melt the frost covered mud.

I enter into the small forest. The trees are 30 to 40 feet high and their green leaves seem to have a silt of dust upon them. Why were they planted here? They fall in neat rows with each tree being about 30 feet apart. My boots crunch through the long accumulated litter as I pass beneath their regular shade. Then I break out into my objective. I am on the banks of the Danube. The water has receded a bit and the flood plain is nearly revealed. By summer it will be dry, cracked earth with soft tufts of grass exploiting the newly recovered land. Here the water seems to almost slide by, only the motion of the surface is noticed. If I stare long enough it appears to be just a thin meniscus of water slipping across a hard, cloudy surface. It is so flat that it doesn't make a noise. That is the way with these old rivers. Their courses are worn so smoothly that the water is not delayed by any projection of midstream rock or jutting isthmus.

There is no indicator of the crumbling little town, and the place seems free of time, oblivious to the impending millennium. The only remnant of time is the rusted, hulking barge that is eternally anchored near the bank. Though the water is racing forward, the river is a thing that always looks back. Maybe that is why I come here. The immediacy of the hospice is washed away for a moment. Instead I can let my mind become retrograde and follow the river to its origin. I can reach past the frenzied oppression and warfare of the last century, past the time of division that befell this country through the Middle Ages, back, back, back to conquering Romans and the defiant Dacians. It is a respite from the weight of the present. That is the thing

of it. No matter the enormity of history, all events of the present overwhelm them. Is this because we are observers of the past while in the present we are actors? The present is our story and seems to carry a greater weight. For me the weight is located in a particular property. History is a tale of what has been. The end of each action is known and the weight of decisions seems some how lighter when the result is already apparent. The present, and we who live in it, do not have this luxury. Each move we make carries potential of an unknown value. Each event around us could disrupt life as we know it or slip harmlessly by with no consequence. The problem is the uncertainty. This is the thought that yanks my mind back to the present.

Maybe while I stand here, relieving my mind, a child is dying back on that hill. My decision took me away from a traumatic happening. Maybe it is Maria. Sofia. Ferencz. or even Christi that is slipping away like the water of this river. That is when this place grows heavy. The events of each day are usually a distraction for the minds of our workers. We must be distracted so that we do not recall the morbid nature of our minds. The nature of our minds unavoidably draws us to the deathwatch. What is further from our mission? At the hospice we seek to celebrate the life around us and brighten the day with laughter and play. Yet every note that we make in the logs is an observation of declining health. Charts of fevers, histories of weight loss, the development of lesions: this is the stuff that covers the pages of those logs. Detail after detail of the encroachment of death. At night it is worse. Working the top floor wards alone for twelve hours. Every hour you make the walk past the beds, listening for the whisper of breathing. It is almost a fear, to be alone on the shift and find the one child whose chest no longer rises. It is the loneliest of duties.

That is why I am here at the banks of the Danube.

Suffering

I was looking back at my pictures today. I came across one that was taken of me holding Gerry as he toasted glasses with Sofia atop the patio of the Sus Bar. The sun was brilliant that day, and the colors were sharp. Gerry's Fanta is glowing orange in the summer light. Their skin is still brown with the semblance of health that a little sunlight always produced. They loved the trips to town because it was a respite from their home of sanitized wards and the fenced in compound. A large smile paints Gerry's face, but Sophia seems a bit disinterested with the event. She just wanted to drink her bubbling Coke.

Some days, though, it wasn't about smiles. It wasn't at all about that the day I walked hand in hand with Ionela and person after person crossed to the other side of the street instead of walking near us. An old woman made a foul remark that threw Ionela into a crying rage. "You are a dirty animal. You should not be allowed near people!" Ionela suffered mentally for the physical infirmity that she had: Molluscum Contagiosum.

Ionela suffered beneath a horrendous burden of festering growths upon her face, the manifestation of the molluscum. Usually the virus just caused small lesions to rise up on the face. In Ionela they were much worse. They grew and fused into large masses that hid her face. The masses grew infected between the convolutions and wells of pus and huge abscesses would form. An eight year old little girl was subjected to the psychic trauma of disfigurement. At night she would stare into the mirror for minutes, searching for the pretty little girl that used to stare back. Sometimes she would rub my face and scowl at the smoothness. How she would delight at the slightest pimple! If she found one she would make me wash my face as I washed hers nightly. She wouldn't relent until I finished it off with a dab of yellow betadine.

Washing that pained face took a focus of the heart: debrising dead skin and scabs and coaxing pustules as Ionela sat as still as possible, reigning her yelps and tears. The infection was so deep. Swollen carbuncles would surface among the soft growths. Sometimes they would inflate her brow and close her eye. The ones on her scalp would rise from her hair like small horns.

Did she resent all of us? She could never be kissed because the virus laden exudate threatened our safety. Only a few of us could tolerate the scent. You could smell the infection from ten feet away. The wretch-provoking odor would permeate a closed room in minutes. Her bedclothes, especially the pillow, would reek with the weepage of the lesions. She was an image of Old Testament punishment. Did Job's body take on this appearance when God visited boils upon him? Surely he suffered less than this little girl.

On Losing a Little Light

Osman. Luminita. Age: 7. Tested HIV-pos: 1994. Prone to herpes and herpes zoster.
Potential Shigella carrier. Severe brain damage and developmental defects. Circulatory complications, especially in extremities (digits). PPD positive, compromised lung function. Chronic Wasting Syndrome . . .

The little girl sat before me, her blond hair still in the disarray of awakening. Her eyes shone a radiant blue against the pallor of her skin. One frail hand rested on an emaciated thigh while the other touched its finger tips gently to lips and nose. The minute rib cage labored in an erratic rhythm, seeming to lift the slight body up off the ground. Her spindle legs were splayed in front of her, the thigh not three inches thick. They had not supported her weight in over eight months. Luminita's face was expressionless and her eyes stared off through walls and around people. Luminita was absent from our world many times, and emotions were even more distant from her mind. Aside from her brain damage, she was most probably autistic as exemplified by her dissociated state and unfocused eyes that connected her to this world.

"And here is my little darling," cooed Julie as she lifted Luminita onto her hip and laid her head to her chest. "No one thinks she knows what is going on around her, but we know better than that, don't we, my sweet." Julie had taken on the absorption of a mother. Among the staff, she was the most closely bound to this little girl. She visited Luminita everyday, whether she had a shift on St. Phillip's ward or not. She slipped a piece of chocolate to the hand that grasped at her breast. Without acknowledging the act, Luminita raised the chocolate to her mouth and began her weak chewing.

"She just loves chocolate and biscuits. Encourage her to eat anytime. She really needs the

bulk, as you can see. Not only that, she has chronic diarrhea. I doubt she even gets half the substance out of anything she eats. She is the most squiddy little girl we have.”

The body of this child had the look that I had so often associated with the malnourished children of Africa. Her stomach was distended like a taut balloon, and the arms and legs seemed as though they were half-finished afterthoughts. The distention was not so much from malnourishment as it was from her swollen spleen and liver, a condition common with these immune suppressed children as their compromised systems fought off systemic infections. It was also the effect of the powerful antibiotics used to fight the illnesses. The tissues often associated with immune response swelled with the daily trauma of their overtaxed function. Her face had the characteristic nodules of molluscum contagiosum. The horrible infection of the skin caused the formation of smooth lesions that rose up mainly on the face, chest, and back. It was an ominous sign as its presence was known to have a direct correlation with low CD4 count. It was a manifestation of the beginning of end stage disease syndrome. The skin around her nose and mouth was a bit cracked, yet another sign of the enormous stress upon her body. When so much of one's energy is being spent supplying energy to a failing immune system and being pirated by HIV for proliferation, general maintenance systems suffer, especially epidermal replacement. Not only that, the important proteins, such as collagen, were being superceded in production by viral capsids and the like. If anyone doubted the dire state of this child, they needed only to look at her chart that showed a steady drop in weight over the last 4 months. Luminita weighed about 8.5kg, under 20 lbs.

Her fingers and toes were swollen, bulbous, and blue. It was typical with a child that suffered from impeded circulation and poor body nutrition. The nails threatened to lift off and a multitude of fungal infections were exploiting this area that had little immune defense. The blue

color was the pooling blood that collected at the ends of these digits. The anoxic circulatory fluid showed a pale, purple-blue through the thin tissue of the nail bed. Her heart just did not beat with enough force to propel the blood back toward the lungs for an infusion of oxygen. This was why her hands could be cool and clammy even on the hottest of summer days. Luminita was part of St. Phillip's ward, a collection of ten children with varying levels of mental, physical, and developmental impediments. They ranged from the overactive, playful Ferencz, who was slow to learn speech and develop coordination, to severe cases such as Luminita and Florin Balan, both of whom exhibited severe neurological damage and wasting syndromes. It was a place of never ending playtime and diaper changes. Six of the children suffered chronic diarrhea which kept our staff jumping and the diaper and clothes reserves low. They could be a handful as at least four of the children needed intensive attention including feeding assistance. This was a ward that had a consistent run of sickness. The health profiles on these children varied not just from day to day, but sometimes hour to hour. Thrush, herpes, bronchitis, strep throat, and a myriad of fevers of unknown origins plagued this group. Strict rehydration regimens had to be kept for the children with severe diarrhea, and full listings of food intake by the low weight children had to be made. The balance allowing many of them to live was very fragile and needed constant observance.

"Well, Michael, I have to distribute the meds to the rest of the floor. Do you think you can manage with Phillip's on your own?" Julie collected her packet of drug charts and started for the door. She was such a nurturing type, even with the staff. Julie exuded that maternal quality that both reassured and drove you crazy. I had dealt with Phillip's alone many times before, and it was even easier with most of the kids at school. Ionut Trofin was busy doing a stiff legged walk around the room, picking up and inspecting the many toys that had been left scattered in the early

morning, before school riot. He was quite happy on his own. His brain damage had left him without the capacity for speech and very little comprehension. He had a collection of physical tics that may have been linked to the damage of the years spent in the institutional orphanages.

Florin Balan sat quietly, as always, entertaining himself with a bit of crinkly foil wrap. He too suffered terrible brain and developmental damage. Though he seemed to comprehend much of the world around him, he could not speak. His little legs had been wasting lately, leaving him permanently in a sitting position. Years of neglect in institutions had left him with behaviors very typical of these children. He would retract his arms inside his shirt in a defensive sort of posture. Any anxiety would manifest as a rapid rocking back and forth a beating of his ears. Self abuse was common in such children. For his nine years of age, he had the body of a three year old and weighed no more than 9 kilos. Still, he was fairly healthy on a relative scale. The two boys were content.

I turned my attention toward Luminita, who still needed her morning grooming and dressing. She was never out of her pajamas until the others had gone to school because she took near to an hour to finish eating her morning porridge and bread. Her slow, methodical way pervaded all that she did. Though it took her an hour, she most always finished her starchy meal. Not only did she chew slowly, she would have to stop to catch her breath. She didn't use utensils, instead she dunked her bread or her fingers in the glop of porridge and allowed the crusts to soften before trying to eat it. I don't think she had eaten an entirely hot meal in her life.

I pulled her night shirt over her head and worked her leggings off. I then laid her fragile body back very gently. Upon opening her diaper, I had found she had once again been prolific in her production of diarrhea. It was amazing to see how much her little body could produce. This is not a scatological wonderment, but a reason for true concern. She produced near on to 3 or 5

liters of diarrhea a day. With her body weight this left her extremely weak and dehydrated. Much of this current amount was possibly her breakfast. This bespoke also of severe nutrient depletion. This is why she was on a fairly regular routine of rehydrates and dietary supplements to provide her with electrolytes, nutrients, and much needed fats and carbohydrates. This was generously supplemented by Julie's gifts of biscuits, chocolate, and sugary drinks.

Her naked body resembled that of a miniature old woman. Her limbs displayed the same atrophy that ancient, bedridden limbs do. The skin of her buttocks hung a bit slack from the weight loss and her vertebra and coccyx stood out prominently along her back. You could even see the attachment of the ribs to the vertebra, but along her front, the ribs were lost in the swollen abdomen. It was a wonder that the small band of her neck could hold up her head. Essentially, the wasting syndrome accomplished the same things that aging did. It was the progressive break down of tissues and their structure. The body just couldn't find the energy to continue to renew itself. Still, it was working in frenzy. Luminita's resting heart rate was about 120 beats per minute, and her respirations were quite high. Each breath seemed a strain, and her chest heaved up. Much of Luminita's day was spent laying on a pad in an exhausted state when arms were not available to hold her.

Though this day was fairly mild, I still dressed Luminita in layer upon layer of clothing. The only time she was not stone cold was when she smoldered with fever. Even then, her feet and hands would be cool to the touch. When I finished she was fortified with tights, pants, undershirt, long-sleeved shirt, sweatshirt, and socks. If she had been heavy, dressing her would have been challenging, but with her slip of body, it was easy to maneuver her. She could provide little help in the process. After sitting her upright, I took her in my arms. Anytime this was done she clung like a monkey, her legs wrapping around my middle and her hands gripping at my

chest. Her frail frame seemed to exert all of itself to the task of securing her body to mine. I set her gently on the mat that occupies one side of the room. This is how most of her waking hours were spent, sitting silently on the mat focusing her energy on the simple task of breathing. She was kept from sitting on the floor because the hard floor could easily bruise her delicate skin and her protruding bones. Not only that, the cold tile robbed her body of the little heat that it generated.

It would seem that such child would be of little interest. On the exterior she was void of emotion, that was if you did not look just a little more intently. Luminita was very aware of the world around her. She had a way of seeing without focusing her eyes. The first time I noticed this was when the afternoon snacks were brought in one day. When the other children rushed forward to get their cups of milk and cookies, Luminita's hand shot out. Only the arm seemed to acknowledge the presence of the food. Her head remained turned to the wall and her eyes were unfixed, seeming to stare away into the cinder block wall. Still, that arm reached out and the fingers played a little in the air. I would see this again and again, especially when Julie came with her special treats.

Luminita would be perched on Julie's lap, held tilted slightly back with her eyes half closed. As soon as Julie would produce a chocolate bar or cookies, the arm would shoot out, and a small grunt would emanate from the usually silent throat. The unskilled mouth would softly work the chocolate until it began to melt and her tongue could transport this liquid to her throat. The chocolatey stream would also manifest on lips, mouth, fingers, and various items of Julie's clothing. Vastly more entertaining were the biscuits. Luminita would not eat even one until she possessed all the one's in Julie's hand. Again, the outstretched hand would work the air until the cookie was given to her. She then placed this between her fore and middle fingers of her other

hand. This would continue with up to two more biscuits until the ancillary hand was filled, then she would take one more in her operating hand and begin the slow process of salivating on the sweet until it became palatable mush.

Other times, strange emotional reactions would overcome Luminita. Unprompted smiles and moments of laughter would sweep across her, altering her face and allowing a short chortle to rise from her throat. These moments would recede as quickly as they came. Whether it was true or not, the staff swore that these outbursts testified to a dark sense of humor possessed by Luminita. Most seemed to occur following crying fits or injury experienced by other children or staff members. I can remember a day when one of the older children had mouthed off to me and I had punished him. As he threw a tantrum, I placed him under my arm, making my way to his ward. Luminita witnessed the whole event from her position on a nearby couch and as I swept the other child beneath my arm, I heard a diminutive chuckle issue from Luminita. From such half-founded information, we erected a pseudo-personality around Luminita. It was a comfort for us to think of this tiny girl as some kind of child elitist that laughed at the misfortune of her lessers. It made Luminita a fictitious social high brow whose passivity was actually an aloofness she demonstrated to her subordinates. Sometimes it is the healthcare worker that needs the illusion of hope and not the patient.

Though she enjoyed her repose on the soft mat on the floor, a few times a day Luminita had to be transferred to the rocking chair in the corner of the room. These were the times when all the children returned from school for snack time or free time in the afternoon. The move was an evacuation of sorts as the running children and flailing limbs would often make contact with the prone Luminita. If this occurred, a weak wailing would rise up, and one of us would sweep into action to rescue the tiny form. That is why she was placed in the high seat of that white rocking

chair. She would sit far to one side of the seat and rest one little arm on the arm of the chair.

Doing this placed that miniature limb almost at the level of her head. She would silently observe the room, her labored breathing causing her to release periodic sighs that sounded like expressions of exasperation or maybe boredom. This imperious roost above the milieu of hyperkinetic bodies further aided to the legend of her superiority and separatism.

There were times when Lumi would be struck with bouts of sickness that would challenge her already over taxed body to the limits. Her cheeks would turn rosy with the fevers that would her elevate her temperature to 102-103 degrees Fahrenheit.. During these rounds of sickness, her appetite would fall away, and the diarrhea would leave her dehydrated. The skin about her mouth would crack and the skin grow slack with the loss of fluid. The little girl would lay fatigued in her bed for most of the day, disdaining the touch of anyone or anything. Her already rapid breathing would increase to a near frantic pace, and every few minutes she would issue a weak mewling that would express the misery with which her body was racked. The fevers would break early each morning, leaving her exhausted and shivering, but would return by mid-morning. This cycle could continue for a week at a time. Such times would see her weight decline by as much as two kilograms reducing her already gaunt body to a virtual skeleton. Her plight was always able to cut through any illusions of health that any of us may have formed about the children. She was the testament to the eventual end that this disease would visit upon each and every one of them.

Still, there were moments of brightness that trickled into her life. Her constant mother, Julie, bathed her in love that occasionally seemed to penetrate the expressionless child. Lumi would ride Julie's hip, wrapped in a blanket, and be taken on tours of the wards or on special trips to the staff communal house. Copious amounts of chocolates, biscuits, and other fatty sweets were

supplied to her when no other children looked on. Preferential candy distributions could cause near riotous action by the rest of the children. When the weather permitted, Julie took Lumi out on the second floor balcony to feel the breeze and collect sunshine. Even once, on a snowy day, she took her out to feel the snow fall upon her face. As a snowflake touched her cheek, her face seemed to flinch, and a slow hand placed a finger to the point of the flake's contact. The incident provoked one of her mysterious chuckles that brought happiness to Julie for the rest of the day.

In an orphanage in near third world conditions, the children carry a multitude of infectious diseases. Among these, herpes exists as an ever present threat. Among the immune suppressed children, herpes would erupt in a quick spreading blaze. It required only one infected child to infect an entire ward. The lesions would manifest anywhere, but especially around the soft, often cracked skin around the mouth and genitals. Luminita had the dubious distinction as the "Herpes Queen." She was constantly on ointments and oral suspension in an attempt to eradicate the disease. She was strictly segregated from the other children at bath time, and the bathtub was thoroughly bleached down after she bathed. The more affectionate, older children had to be told not to kiss Luminita anywhere on her face or hands. She was a threat to the other children.

In our modern western culture, the seriousness of herpes is not appreciated. Though it is a major sexually transmitted disease, rarely do we see the disease as anything more than a nuisance. Under the conditions of the hospice, herpes was a life threatening illness. Many of the children, including Luminita and Ionut Trofin displayed the signature scars of rampant herpes lesions. Ionut had a huge swath of skin across his chest that covered from one shoulder to mid chest that marked a massive infection that had almost killed him when he was in an orphanage. The scars look like ones left by burns. The skin is uneven, and the coloration is patchy. For an immune suppressed child, herpes was life threatening unless kept in check.

Luminita's genital and pelvic region was almost always inflamed with the tell-tale lesions of herpes. Her skin would flake and peel off as the infection ravaged the skin. She was constantly monitored because her usually inactive hands would seek the intense itching that the herpes caused, thus giving the potential of her inoculating countless children just by the brush of her hand.

While most of us blocked the reality, our work with Luminita was more deathwatch than anything else. With so many things plaguing her, it was just a question of time until her challenged body gave up. The time for this arrived in late February, when the winter was still ever present. The steam of the children's breath would condense on the double panes of the windows and form crystalline lacework. The daylight, when it could find its way through the gun metal grey firmament, was short lived. It seemed we went from night, to a brief respite of weakened sunlight, back to the chilling darkness in a space of only a few hours. Ice filled every watery depression, and the ground was as hard as stone. It was during this time when Luminita's luck, and life, ran out.

"Pneumonia," Lynda, the nurse manager, announced. "Dr. Georgescu says that it is very severe and believes that she has several other systemic illnesses, as well. We need to move her to St. Andrew's Ward so that she can be watched more closely and will be away from the noise of Phillip's."

This announcement told us all that the worst was about to come. The move to St. Andrew's carried great foreboding. The ward was devoted to the high-care children of the hospice. All of them had severe mental and physical disabilities that required constant attention. It was home to Oana, a beautiful girl that had the brain of a one-year-old locked inside her eight-year-old body. To compound this, she suffered from a muscular spasticity that rendered her body rigid as a

board, legs and arms forever in bent positions, her stomach as hard as a rock. The same ailments were true for most of the children here. They needed constant nursing and watching, as almost all were prone to seizure. The only sounds that came from the room were the almost animal howls emitted by Sebastian or the strange snorting of Seigen. Luminita's condition was so deteriorated that Lynda felt that it warranted the intensive care and attention that could be afforded by the staff on Andrew's.

Word of Luminita's illness came to me on the last day of my long break, before I began a long string of twelve hour night shifts. I was sure that this illness was going to be as so many of the other children's had been. They had all seemed to have recovered well from periodic bouts of respiratory infections. The certainty that Luminita was experiencing a passing phase of sickness put my mind at ease. That afternoon, after waking up and showering, I decided to tour the wards to get a illness report from each ward so that I would know what kind of work faced the nurse and me for our series of nights. Other than a few cases of bronchitis and Gerry's case of herpes on his lip, St. Peter's ward was all right. Big Maria on St. Luke's ward had us all worried with a week long run of spiking fevers and terrible congestion in both her lungs. St. Andrew's was quiet with the exception of a nasty molluscum outbreak around Valentin's eye that kept him crying for "medicina" at all times of the day and night. St. John's was healthy, but had been plagued by an epidemic of misbehavior that was sure to keep me busy. Finally I entered St. Andrew's and saw what had become of Luminita.

The little body lay semi-reclined, her two hands grasping at the rungs on the side of the crib. Her eyes were half closed, and her face was nearly scarlet. The tiny body had shrunk even more, and the bones stood out through the thin covering of the skin. The abdomen looked even more swollen than usual and seemed exert a horrible pressure against the white skin of the stomach.

Julie had one hand behind the girl's back to support the failing frame while she tried to hold a mask over the child's face. She was attempting to administer a bronchial dilator to open the constricted airways. This suggested that the situation was worse than anyone had mentioned to me. Luminita took daily doses of digitoxin to slow her rapid heart and avoid cardiac arrest. The dilator worked counter to this, as it was a stimulant. Usually such aerosols are avoided because of the potential threat of heart attack. This meant she was nearing a very critical point with this chest infection where such risks were justified.

"Julie, let me help you." I offered. I slipped both my hands down Luminita's back and held the body up in a sitting position. I could feel the heat of the fever blaze through her thin shift. The fever drove a rouge from her face, down her neck, and onto her shoulders. The most incredible thing, though, was her breathing. Luminita drew air, short pants that sounded as though the air gurgled through some thick plasma to and from her lungs. How can a body sustain such a strain? Her body was screaming for the oxygen that her infirmed lungs could not provide. In retribution, they made the non-compliant organs expand and contract at an extraordinary rate. The problem was that the fluid filled tissue could not absorb the life giving oxygen.

"Thanks, Michael. I am afraid she is a handful at the moment. With me spending my time on her, everyone else has to take care of the other children. Now, if we can just get my little dear to take her medicine!" With this, Julie pressed the plastic mask over Luminita's nose and mouth. Almost immediately her small hand moved up to the mask and pushed at it. She drew her head back, swiveling it to the side to avoid the hissing mist that came from the tube. The repulsion must have been quite great for her to sequester such energy to divert the green plastic mask.

"Oh, she just won't take it," said Julie with frustration. "I can't blame her, I guess. The mist

is so heavy, and her lungs are so tired. I took a sounding and they are so full. Michael! Nothing seems to be helping her. The fever just won't go down, and she can't hold any food or liquid. When she sleeps, it more like she's passed out, and that doesn't even let her sleep through. She's fished a few times from the fever. I can't even touch her without it hurting her!"

I let Luminita's body rest on the upright pillows, arranged so that she would remain sitting up. Laying her down would only put more pressure on her lungs and let the liquid spread into the little free space left at the top of her lungs. The girl let her limbs splay out, and the gentle contact with the pillows produced a weak cry from her throat. Her respirations were quick, and her inhalation was so desperate that it pulled in the sides of her nostrils. Julie's eyes remained focused on the tortured body before her. This is where she had been for the last thirty-six hours. Lynda had given her permission to stay with Luminita. I could see the exhaustion in Julie's dark ringed eyes and her tousled hair. The tiredness wasn't just from sleep deprivation. She suffered the emotional drain of frustration and encroaching despair. Nothing she did could benefit her small charge. I could see the watery wall of tears that pressed on Julie's eyes. Somehow she held them in. Somehow she fought off the spiritual fatigue and kept her composure. I placed a hand on her shoulder, but in her absorption she seemed not to notice.

"Are you on tonight?" She inquired quite flatly.

"Yes. Rach and I will be running the floors tonight."

"Good. Lynda has ordered me to leave the ward after feeding tonight. To tell you the truth, I don't think my body could have made it much longer, anyway. I am happy that you and Rach are working. I know that you both will care for my little girl for me. And Michael." Julie continued with the same listless voice and distant stare, "you will send for me if there is any problem, won't you?"

“Yeah, Julie. We’ll send somebody for you if anything happens tonight.” I answered without hesitation. “You can trust us to take care of Lumi. We’ll take care of everything.”

I turned and walked out of the ward, leaving Julie in her silent meditation on the deteriorating form of Luminita. The child’s weak struggle for life was the only thing holding Julie together, and as the struggle was lost, Julie became closer to flying into a thousand emotional shards. Though there had been other deaths during my time in Cernavoda, Luminita was the only child that had slipped away so progressively from her wasting syndrome. She was approaching a complete systemic crash and there was little we could do other than watch. Still, emotional attachment clouds reason Julie, and many others refused to acknowledge this point.

In Western society, we are incredibly conditioned to believe that medicine can overcome any illness. Though we know there are terminal illnesses, we still cannot accept that our science and technology is unable to reverse the effects. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the terminal illness of a child. That was the source of the desperation that seized Julie and many of the others on staff. They were young nurses that still had not learned that some matches must be conceded to death. At times, they seemed to forget that St. Laurence’s was a hospice. Lynda had breached the subject with me that very day.

“Michael, I just don’t know how to handle them. They keep demanding that I have Luminita transported to the hospital in Constanta. There is no way I will subject that child to that much prolonged pain. Not only that, they continue to discuss performing a resuscitation if she arrests. I have told them that I forbid it and that I will send them home to England if any of them attempts it! I won’t have that sort of indignity performed on Luminita!”

Lynda was stalwart in this stance, a stance that I agreed with whole heartedly. Though it could not be expressed to the nurses such as Julie, their desire to keep Luminita alive was a

selfish impulse. As a hospice, we existed to offer comfort to the ill and dignity for them in death.

The traumatic action of resuscitation would only bring her back to endure a few more hours of pain. This is when working in a hospice demanded one to suspend the modern Western paradigm of healthcare that drives practitioners to use any means to keep life functions operating.

It requires one to look at the human being before the body and the patient before the illness.

With a disease as horrible as AIDS and the multitude of horrible opportunistic diseases that deliver the final death blow, death needs to be seen as a release from the misery of that end stage of the disease.

"Now, Michael," addressed Lynda. "I've told Julie to stay off the wards tonight. I want only you and Rachel anywhere near Luminita. This entire day she has been practically suffocated by all of the girls coming down and standing around the crib. The child just needs to be left alone and be given peace. I know that you'll keep them away from her. If Julie shows up, come downstairs and get me."

"I will, Lynda," I responded without doubt. Lynda had been at St. Laurence's for three years, and I respected her immensely for all that she dealt with daily. She was fighting the one thing that made her position as nurse manager so hard. The staff members were basically only out at the hospice for three to six months at a time and were given little training in the philosophy of hospice care. She had overcome those impulses to save life and had successfully learned to take death as a bitter-sweet boon for these children. Lynda and I became fast friends when she found that I understood the imperatives of hospice care and I spent many hour listening to her frustrations and reflections concerning her position.

Another aspect that clouded the judgement of many staff members was very sex specific. Many of the women on staff, both nurses and carers, were in their early to mid-twenties, and

none of them were planning marriage in the foreseeable future. The children became surrogates for the maternal impulses of some. While it was hard to distinguish the line between compassion and fixation, this instinct was more pronounced in some. This was a subject that Lynda took up with some of the staff at times, but it usually brought on defensiveness. Julie was one of those women who craved the unconditional affection that these children could provide. Luminita had been the focus of her attentions, and Lumi's illness was tearing at this artificial motherhood.

Emotional distance was a challenge for all of us. We were so completely submerged in the lives of these children, and they in ours, that objectivity was impossible. The first point was physical proximity cultured close bonds as we lived in houses not one hundred yards from the hospice. This was further compounded by the long-term residence of many of the children. They became very individual parts of the hospice community over such long amounts of time. In this respect, we were an unusual hospice. So many of the children's health improved upon their arrival that we were not dealing with just the end stage of the illness. Truly, some of the children had been there since the hospice had opened three years before. Also, these children were mostly orphans. They responded with all of their affection if given even the slightest attention. These factors made objectivity an unreachable goal. Still, there are varying degrees of involvement.

As I went to lie down for a while, the words that Mary had spoken to me earlier played through my mind. Mary was a nurse and Roman Catholic nun who had arrived at the hospice just a few months before. She was strong both emotionally and spiritually, having had fifteen years of experience in nursing ranging from abused women to cancer patients. The two of us often walked into town on Sundays to attend mass at the local parish. She had spoken to from her professional experience that day. "I hope all is quiet for you tonight. It often seems that

wive's tales hold true with the terminally ill. Death usually arrives in the late of night."

The words reinforced the thoughts I had earlier in the day. I think the thoughts had haunted everyone. Meals had been quiet and pensive, and most people had been spending their free time by themselves. It had already been a long winter, punctuated by several severe illnesses and weather that kept us housebound for days at a time. The days had been short and the sunlight almost non-existent. The separation from family at Christmas had been hard, and depression had struck many of the staff. Spirits had just begun to rise when Luminita fell ill. The ominous weight of her impending death wove itself into everyone's soul.

I stood longer than the dictated ten minutes when I took my shower. The one luxury the hospice shower offered was nearly scalding hot water. It fell on me at a nearly intolerable temperature, but it felt good in the cold damp of the evening. The steaming water seemed to dissolve the grime you could feel accumulating on your skin throughout the day. Tonight, it also began to melt some of the thick agglutination of the past few days' emotional tension. The gravity of the time lightened, and I felt more ready to head into this night. I toweled off quickly so that I could trap the heat of my reddened body beneath my thermals. In this windy winter they were essential beneath the thin whisper of scrubs.

I felt I needed a little mothering this evening, so I left my hair soaking wet and then proceeded to the kitchen. Lenut and Marela were working tonight. They had appointed themselves as doting aunts that would scold, praise, or hug me depending on my actions. I enjoyed the warmth of the kitchen and their kind banter. They helped me learn Romanian and commended me on my efforts. Once in a while they would mention that they had very pretty nieces about my age and that I should meet them sometime. This was usually shared when they had held a special plate of food for me.

“Michael! *Tau cap este umezeala si la vreme este foarte frig! La curant se merge a face tu bolnav!*” Marela intoned, warning me that wet hair and cold weather is the cause of great sickness. The *curant*, the stiff, cold winds of winter, were believed by most people to be the leading cause of cancer. Lenut swept over, grabbing my towel off my shoulder and furiously dried my head. At the end of it, she pulled the towel over my head and gave me a great hug from her thick, short arms and laughed.

“*Se prelucra asta noaptea?*” Lenut asked. I responded that I was working tonight. This produced offers of loaves of bread from the pantry stores. I took two of the proffered short loaves and put them in my bag. We traded a few more words before I said goodnight to them, and they returned to cleaning the kitchen for the evening.

I put my things in my room and then went to meet Rachel at the hospice. As I passed the guard house, I saw that Ion was on this evening. Ion was a kind, little, old man that we had found, more than once, with a bottle of tuica and female accompaniment in the guard hut. Still, he was able to make it through the night, even if a little inebriated. We traded salutes, and I went into the hospice. Tonight, for the first time in a long while, I stopped to look at the foyer. In the little entrance way, a rain of color stood on the wall from the paper holding hand prints of the children. Each little pair also had the name of the child next to it. Eighty some pairs reached out from the wall, the little creases of the palms shown in detail. A little poem, that slips from my memory, accompanied the hands. What I do remember of it is one of the final lines. “And when we have gone our way, our hands will be here to remind you of us.” It was a colorful spray of hands that was slowly becoming a memorial with every death. I remember that night’s viewing especially because Luminita little hands pressed against the air to my eyes in bright yellow.

When I made it up to the floor, Rachel was already getting a briefing on the drug charts for all

of our little charges. I made a quick sortie into St. John's and dismissed the new care worker who was looking more than a little ragged after a day with the unruly John's crowd. Upon my entrance, the children froze. Though we loved each other, I was known as their disciplinarian, a post which Lynda had assigned to me as soon as I showed enough skill in language and consistency in punishment. Daniela, a fat little imp that was the gang leader of the ward sprinted back to her bed with all the speed her squat legs could provide her. After exchanging goodnight kisses and an admonishment for good behavior, I left the ward. I then went next door to St. Andrew's.

Upon entering, I saw Julie leaning over Luminita's crib, one hand supporting the upright child, the other directing her stethoscope across Luminita's back and chest. "Oh, Michael. She is sounding quite full in the lungs and her heart is just racing away. You and Rach will have to keep a close eye on her. Her fever just won't come down." Julie was haggard and distraught. The long watch was taking its toll on her.

"Julie. Why don't you go get a good night's sleep? Rach and I can handle it. Lumi will be all right with us. You can't help her if you're exhausted." The words floated around Julie's head, but I doubt they ever impacted the ears that continued to listen to the fretted wheezing and short cries of Luminita.

Julie made her last notes in the log and then stole back over to Lumi for one last kiss. Her large hand caressed the child's flushed cheek, and her lips paused against the burning skin. Then she quickly left the room, before her heart could pull her back in. I looked at Lumi's minute form resting against a bulwark of pillows. She strained with every breath, lifting her entire torso with the inhalation. Her half-closed eyes would bob open a little wider as she drew in the air, and would fall back closed with the release of it. Every few minutes she would release a pained

mewling that may have been triggered by one of the hundreds of points of pain on her body. To start the evening, I took her pulse and temperature for the log. Her heart was galloping at 160-170 beats per minute! Her fever was spiking at 102 degrees. Looking at the chart, the temperature had varied no more than one and a half degrees for the last two days. I left Lumi to lie in the dark of St. Andrew's, hoping that sleep may overcome her.

Rachel and I finished the night's duties quickly. I prepared the ciai and astol, two homeopathic drugs being tested at the hospice, for the morning. Rachel updated all the drug charts with the day's orders from Dr. Popescu. I only had to reprimand John's twice before they settled down to sleep. Apparently they were tired after giving the new girl hell all afternoon. We gave no thought to the upstairs wards because Elena, one of our favorite Romanian workers, controlled the floor tonight. By eleven o'clock, we had eased into the long the night ahead, waiting for eight o'clock to arrive so that we could take to our beds for the fitful slumber of day sleep.

Luminita, during those first few hours, had grown somewhat quiet, and we both privately speculated that maybe her condition was improving. That illusion was broken when Rachel took the girl's temperature at ten o'clock and found that it still stood at 102 degrees. "I think she's just nackeded from her heart racing like that," said Rachel. I liked Rachel because she was one of our better nurses. While she was very attached to the children, she did not let sentiment hinder her decisions. Aside from Lynda, she was the best one to be handling Lumi right now.

Just as we had settled in, Lumi began to cry out. The first few times sent both of us dashing to the crib, but we found nothing had changed in her condition. The girl looked pitiful, her body flushed with fever, showing even more red against the white sheets. Occasionally, one of her tiny hands would reach upward, but then fall back to the bed with spent effort. She was

obviously fighting for consciousness, and her blue eyes jittered in the sockets, unable to focus on anything. We made her take a little water, but only with much effort. We finally left her, resolved not to run in with every yelp. That is why we did not rush to her when we heard a strange little cry right before midnight.

Shortly after, I heard someone making noise on St. Phillip's ward, so I left Rachel to investigate it. I found Ionut Trofin in the process of a crib escape and quickly pitched him back in bed and tucked the sheet tightly around him in a futile attempt at restraint. Occasionally, I would wrap a sheet around his legs loosely to tangle his efforts. I quickly made a pass by each bed, as was customary. Though it may sound morbid, on nights we made it practice to perform a breathing check every two hours or so. With so many of the children sick, it was really quite necessary both to monitor their conditions and allay our fears.

I was just walking back to our station when I saw Rachel emerge from St. Andrew's with Luminita in her arms. I thought she had decided to keep the distressed girl with us on the couch. Then she said, in almost a whisper, "Michael. Oh! She's died!"

It was then that I saw the pallor that had come to the cheeks, though roses of red were still fading from them. Her limbs hung loosely, like a rag doll's, and Rachel's hand supported the head. Lumi's mouth was agape, showing her little milk teeth, and her blue eyes peeked out from beneath half-closed eyes. I walked to Rachel and reached out to touch the dead girl's cheek. In the cool draftiness of the night, she had already lost the frightful heat of the fever. Her thin, white-blond hair was a snarl from where it had rested upon the pillow for days. The blue of her finger tips was pronounced so that it was more than the usual suggestion of the color.

Rachel's face was soft, and her lips were drawn tight together. I could tell that tears were not coming, but the compassion of her heart was already racing from Lumi to the pain that Julie

would endure. "We need tell Lynda," I said. "Why don't you go tell Elena and then go wake Lynda. There's a lot to be done, yet."

Rachel nodded and I reached out to take Lumi's form in my arms. She was heavy with the weight that seems to possess a body stricken with a faint or with death. The joints were still loose, and they flopped in the air as I took the body to my chest. The head lolled back before I could get my hand beneath it which caused her air to rush in her throat in a sound almost like breathing. As I lifted the head and pulled her chest closer to me, the little bit of air rushed back out. It made me think back to the stories my grandmother had mentioned about the last breath of the dead. I had been told it was the last bit of the soul flying from the body. As Rachel left, I walked with the cradled body to the changing table in St. Andrew's.

I laid the death heavy body on the changing mat, gently. I slowly removed her clothes and her diaper and began cleaning her body. I filled a plastic bowl with water and laid the little head back in it in an effort to relax the wild tangle of hair that topped her head. I then dried her carefully just as someone opened the door to the second floor. I saw Lynda's figure pass through the door.

"Aye. There she is. Oh, she was such a beautiful little thing," Lynda brogued in her Belfast way. "Thank God it is over for her. That little body couldn't take that kind of stress." Lynda's hand traced the outline of Lumi's face and then returned to the shawl that she held about herself for warmth. "I'll go get Donna over the house and have her help you with preparing her. I think it best we let Julie sleep. It won't help the poor girl to lose anymore sleep. Auk! No matter how many I see, it is still as hard as the first."

As I finished washing Lumi, Donna came into the ward and stood quietly by. Donna was one of the young nurses on staff who had offered to be on call if we needed more help tonight. She

was only twenty one years old and was given to emotional overreaction. Still, when she was focused on a task, she was a great help.

“Lynda’s given me the key to the clothes store,” she said displaying the blue-fobbed key ring. “I’ll go down and pick out a burial dress and blanket. You and Rach can get back to the rest of the *copii*,” she said. She had an irritating trait of inserting the few Romanian words and phrases she knew into her speech. At this moment, it did not bother me.

In between ward checks and a few other things, I peeked in on Donna. She dressed Lumi in a beautiful, little, flowered dress, complete with matching tights. In Romanian tradition, the body was dressed for the weather and season by placing a burgundy wool cap on Lumi’s head, covering most of her soft, white hair. We laid Lumi back in her crib until morning. The rest of the night passed without event, thankfully for Rachel and me. We were both emotionally drained from the happening. Every hour made it all that much more unbelievable, especially with Luminita lying in seeming repose in just the other room. We were given to silence and unfocused stares until the sun rose and we prepared the floor for the morning shift.

Lynda approached me at seven-thirty, while I was changing the diapers on St. Phillip’s ward. “Michael. If you wouldn’t mind, I need someone to carry the funeral crib up from the basement and set up the chapel. Could you do that for me?”

I assured her that I was far from thinking of sleep and that the activity may help bring my mind to rest. I finished my chores and turned the wards over to the morning shift. I headed down to the basement and got the funeral crib and lugged it up the flight of stairs to the chapel and then got to work. I swept the altar down, ridding it of a weeks accumulation of dust and fallen plaster. I set the wooden crib at the center, just before the altar itself and proceeded to set up chairs for the impending funeral service. Upon inspiration, I opened the resident Bible to the

Book of Psalms and laid it open to Psalm 23. It rested at the foot of the crib, and I placed a jarred candle before it. I lit the memorial candles at the corners of the altar and then stood back. To be completed, the chapel needed only to meet its guest.

I went up to St. Andrews and lifted Luminita from the crib and carried her down. The Romanian staffers approached the body before I went down the stairs and touched the little girl's forehead and then crossed themselves in the triple format of the Romanian Orthodox Rite. She was lighter this morning it seemed. Maybe with the passing of the emotional stress of the time, my sense had returned to a more normal frame of reference.

The sun was shining through the windows of the chapel when I entered to lay her in the crib. The sun revealed Luminita's skin to be a white and yellow motley. Surely the yellow was from kidney and liver disfunction in the last days. The scarlet rush of the fever had covered it from our sight. Though stiff, her limbs did comply with the directions of my hands. I laid her head back on a little pillow and noticed that her eyelids were still peeked open. Try as I might, they would not close. The cold did not help my effort, making her skin so much less pliable. With the passage of night, Lumi's body had given up all of its warmth of life. She was as frigid as the air that numbed my finger tips in the icy chapel.

Lastly, I laid the quilt that Donna had picked out the night before. This was the covering that would protect Lumi from the cold of her grave. By Romanian tradition, we would cover her body with the blanket before sealing her coffin. The quilt was a wonderful pattern of large colorful four point stars. Rich blues and yellows dominated the beautiful article. It seemed to blossom with color in the morning sun and brightened the face of dead child. From beneath the slitted eyelids, the dusky blue of her eyes continued to show. The mouth was slightly agape still, and Lumi appeared as a sleeping child, peace finally falling over the tormented frame.

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was approaching ten o' clock, and I suddenly felt a wash of fatigue challenge my body. I considered a shower, but my slowing mind assured me that hygiene could wait and firmly asserted the impulse to sleep. I walked across the sun flooded land between the hospice and the houses, feeling only minimal warmth from the orange fire in the blue sky. I quickly slipped out of my clothes and into the frigid bedcovers. Within minutes, my body leaked a zone of warmth on my bed, and I began to fall away to sleep, the bright yellow stars of the quilt radiating behind my closed lids.

The next night passed quickly for Rachel and me. I was busy during my free time writing out the liturgy and a eulogy for Luminita's funeral. Lynda had asked if I would preside over the morning's event. Gail, one of the other care workers, and I had been unofficial chaplains over the last few months with Gail arranging music and me running the prayer services. Tomorrow would be no exception. Lynda had contacted the Romanian Orthodox priest in town, but he was more interested in profit than spiritualism. He had demanded a payment for his services! It had been over two years since the man had entered the hospice to give the Easter or Christmas blessing to the children. The only clergy that visited was Fr. Solomon, the Roman Catholic priest of the small town parish, and the new Baptist minister, that helped occasionally with Sunday school.

The next morning began with heavy skies that delivered a torrent of cold rain. I watched out the window as the dirt streets turned to viscous mud. It was an ugly day that would magnify the misery of the upcoming events. With the black and grey of the skies filtering a dull light into the drafty chapel, we entered to say goodbye to Luminita. The British and Romanian staff was assembled in the rows of chairs, all eyes fixed on the focus of the room. The serene form of the girl still occupied the center of the altar, and the candles still danced in their sentinel. Gail

started with a simple hymn I had never heard before that called to God bring his people peace and comfort.

After a few readings that I had asked people to read, some in English, some in Romanian. I stepped to the front of the chapel and stood before my friends.

“We are absorbed in the pain of our grief at this time. We are wrapped up in the pity we feel not just for the children of this hospice, but for ourselves in losing a loved one. Though it is a challenge to do so, we have to move beyond this grief and find the joy in this event. Luminita’s death has brought pain only to us. For her it was a release from a life that had been wrought with pain. She had endured pain each day of her waking and, in this last week, had every fiber of her body attacked by her illness. She has left all of this, now. She has obtained the very thing for which we all work. She has obtained God. Instead of sorrow, then, let us offer thanksgiving for the gift that God has allowed us by sending us here to work for these children.”

“We thank Him for every smile and laugh that we hear ringing in the halls. We thank Him for anxious mouths that devour the food we lay before them. We thank Him for the times in the sun, when the sun makes their skin brown. We thank Him for the days of snow when we are able to carry these children out to sled. For tears, for kisses, for crayoned pictures, for quiet sleep: we thank God.”

“Luminita means “little light.” That is what each of these children is for us: a little light. So let us at last thank God for the light He that allows to enter into our life. We thank him for the children of this hospice.” With that I picked up the little jarred candle and blew out the flame. Lynda then dispersed the English staff, instructing any that wanted to that they should make their way to the cemetery. Nelu, the driver, would bring Luminita over directly as it was just too muddy to consider carrying the coffin through the streets. I remained by Lynda’s side to watch

the final details.

With a priest unavailable, Elena, Ulrica, Manuela, . and Ion had offered to perform the last of the burial rites. Lynda, knowing that the several Reformed Church on staff would object to Romanian Orthodox rites being performed, had wanted English staff to leave. Again, this was an issue of people not understanding the mission of the hospice. This place did not seek to steal the native traditions of the children. Most were Romanian Orthodox by birth if not by baptism. These were not our children. They belonged to Romania. And though many of the girls on staff did not believe it, the Romanian staff were even more deeply invested in these children than we were. Most of them had been here since the hospice opened and had become constant presences that buoyed the lives of the children. The English staff were temporary playthings that they loved, but the Romanian staff were the true parent figures.

Ulrica, the hospice electrician and handyman, carried in the little coffin that he had constructed yesterday. He was the undertaker who fashioned the pine boxes upon Lynda's word. In a country where building supplies are scarce, most men in his position would have used the good, strong planks for other things or even sold it for profit. Not Ulrica. He kept the wood locked in a small closet with his prized power tools. He would use old scrap and the like for the repair jobs he had before he would ever profane these special boards.

The women had lifted Luminita up and placed her on a white sheet on the floor. They carefully folded and wrapped the sheet around Luminita and, then placed her in the coffin. It was too small. Manuela let out a cry that was only topped by Ion's lament. His tears were real, but wreaked of the vodka he had been drinking. Ulrica, quick to thought, removed Luminita's shoes and found that she fit snugly, but still, she fit. His cuts had not been that erred. Elena then placed six flowers around the edges of the coffin that she had purchased at the market. the day

before. The extravagance was easily recognized. To westerners, they were poor, gaudy hothouse carnations with desicated stems topped with the common pinks and whites as well as the unnatural dyed blooms of blue and green. In this impoverished town they were purchased at the well-to-do flower kiosk where these six flowers cost as much as four loaves of bread for Elena's husband and three children.

Next, Ulrica stepped forward with a thin water glass and a hammer. He held the glass to the side of the coffin, over a towel he had laid nearby, and struck the glass. The glass gave a sharp ring as its shards sang their way to the ground. The others made the triple crossed over themselves and then quickly placed the coffin lid over the little girl.

"The broken glass chases away the evil spirits," Lynda shared with me. "It is one of the reasons that I send our staff out. They think that this is very pagan. It is amazing how people that belong to a denomination less than two hundred years old can judge the Orthodox Church and this ancient country's culture." Yet again, I felt the exasperation that Lynda lived with when dealing with the English staff. I was proud of her.

The lid remained unsecured as Ion and Ulrica lifted the coffin and carried it out to Nelu's waiting hatchback. The little, white Dacia was a much abused vehicle that served as our ambulance now that it had a red cross stenciled on the side. When not transporting patients and doctors, it also carried the food supplies for the week including sides of pork and plucked chicken carcasses. Still, Nelu kept it as clean as he could, and today it would serve as our hearse. As Nelu drove off through town to reach the cemetery, the rest of us began the short walk down the street and across the path to the town cemetery which stood behind the local landfill.

The rain continued to fall, and the dirt road was slick with a top layer of mud. We slogged through the stuff and approached our destination. My head and body were becoming numb with

fatigue as my tired thoughts alternated between the finality of the now and the events of the last two days. I had never known death this intimately before. In our society, we keep such strong buffers between ourselves and death. Physicians and nurses are there at the end of illnesses, and morticians discreetly whisk the body away and return it in a facsimile of life. Much of the processes seems to be a cloak to protect us from the mystery of the event. Maybe that is why we struggle so much. That combined with Western paradigm of silent suffering. We are ingrained from so early to approach personal loss with stoicism that we hide our tears and feign smiles. We push away religious and cultural rites that once brought closure to the event. Do we leave grief to rot in our souls? The open tears and comforting folk rites seemed to make sense in this time. The close proximity of death to our own lives seem to offer it more tangibility. Maybe not so much tangibility, but at least an immediate presence that made it less of an antagonistic force. Death loses the evil edge that we often associate with it. Instead, it becomes yet another mystery of this life to be wondered at and respected. I felt very at ease walking in the presence of my Romanian friends. These were a people raised in hardship and familiar with death. They were guides for me along this path.

The cemetery was a strange place. It was built on severe hill that rose up from the more tended terraces below to the bleak bald that housed the paupers' grave. In a small corner adjacent to the communal grave, a little fenced-in territory demarcated the hospice grave. Little wooden crosses reached up from the wet earth with the fading inscriptions of our children. A rough path led through the tiny parcel of land, and the British staff now stood before the earthen maw of the new grave. The contents lay in a great pile to the side, and the gravediggers stood away, hunched over their spades allowing the drizzle to run off their greasy hats and upturned jacket collars. Nelu had arrived and Ion was helping him carry the naked wooden box to the

grave site.

The British staff stood in a tight cluster with many hands steadying the shoulders of the red-eyed Julie. The postures were tensed, and they stood far enough back that they could not truly see into the grave. I stepped forward with the Romanian staff. Again, the presence of death was so much closer, but not unsettling. The alkaline scent of the fresh cut clay fought up through the cold rain and stood rank, but somehow familiar, in my nose. Maybe, like the howl of wolves, this smell is one of the sensations that rests in our instinctive memories. Maybe it is a million years of living by the tilling of the soil and burying our dead that has made this scent a companion to death.

Ion removed the lid of the coffin revealing Luminita, only her stocking capped head emerging from the white swathing of the sheet. Manuela and Elena stepped forward with two small cruets, one of oil and one of red wine. Manuela spilled the oil across the sheet, and Elena followed with the burgundy of the wine, the liquid thirstily drunk by the sheet, its color rising vividly in the grey mist of the day. This was her final anointing, the long traditions of Orthodoxy that reach even further back into its Judaic precursors. Last prayers were whispered and the three crosses were worked over the coffin and their own heads and chests. I joined them in the crossing, as did Lynda, while the rest of the British staff stood stolidly in the rain. Ion stepped forward with Nelu, and they began their hammer work, sealing the perimeter with nails. Though the thick air filled with icy rain muffled the sound, each blow elicited a jump by the members of the British staff. The blows were dull shots in this colorless morning. Grey sky ran down to muddy land without a hint of green to be found. It was lifeless.

The gravediggers walked forward with two heavy lengths of well worn hemp rope and placed them beneath the head and foot of the coffin. They lifted the light load with ease and positioned

the little box over the freshly wounded earth. They let the length out of the ropes until Luminita rested at the soft bottom of the grave. The hemp lengths were drawn out and came up empty, having left their burden behind. Then it happened. Nothing.

Everyone stood frozen, not in reflection, but in apprehension. I broke the stalemate and stepped to the mound of earth that lay beside the grave. My hand lifted a cupped palm of the loose soil, and I let it rain down with a gentle report of its particles on the wooden lid. The Romanians came after me, each taking up the earth and depositing it in the cavity. The British staff still held their distance. The gravediggers worked quickly and soon the hole had become a small rise of earth next to the adjacent graves that were sunken with the settling of winter.

Ion, with tearful eyes, carried the white cross that bore Luminita's name and the days of her birth and death. Lower in the cemetery, where the older graves of the town citizens lay, there were stone crosses whose arms had inset pictures of the loved ones. Some had stood sentry since the early 1900's. Even grander family graves existed, some in the Eastern European tradition. Little rooms were built, complete with windows. The small abodes contained little tables topped with vases of flowers and a menagerie of pictures. The dead lay beneath the foundations or around the perimeter. Luminita lay in a cheap pine box with a little white-washed cross to mark her passing. Not twenty yards away lay the ossuary with its poured concrete structure and corroded iron door, where the bones of the paupers' graves would be interred after their seven years of rest. The hospice's little plot saved the children from joining the jumble of bones that were sometimes found scattered if the door was left ajar and the packs of stray dogs found their way in to the cemetery.

Ion thrust the cross into the head of the mound. The erection of the cross seemed to have the instant effect of dispersing the mourners, though Ion bent on one knee to offer the last of his

prayers. By some combination of age and drink, Ion's anchoring of the cross had left the cross with a slight list. After he rose, I approached and straightened the memorial and reinforced its base with a bit of the mound. Thirty-six hours had passed and now I read the girl's name along the horizontal beam of this marker. Osman Luminita. It was just as it appeared in the medical files that I filled out the night of her death. I had recorded the time and supposed cause of death. That mountain of paper and the disease that had tortured the little girl were now summarized in this icon. I rose and stepped toward the cemetery gate with no attempt to catch up with the cohort in front of me. The cold rain felt good on my face. I removed my hat and let the winter water wash my head, and I hoped that it would slow my searching mind. My legs carried me home, while my thoughts hovered somewhere in the expressionless sky of this day.

A few weeks later, as I made my way through the cemetery on my way to the post office, I paused before the grave. A light snow had arrived earlier in the day, and a pristine blanket covered the raw earth. From my pocket I withdrew a candle and a jar. I struck a match to light the wick and let a bit of the wax cover the jar's bottom and then rooted the burning candle. The little cross was then joined by another little symbol. The eddies of air beat at the flame, but for the time it resisted the offense. Luminita. Little light. I paused only a moment to offer a memory as prayer and then turned on my way. I passed the little houses, the eroding angels, and the stone crosses and thought that maybe the candle made Luminita's grave join their ranks. A final ritual to bring peace to both the living and the dead.

Gancai

There is little that is comfortable on a Romanian train. The CFR, whatever that acronym works out to in Romanian, runs a fleet of trains that I was told were purchased from the former Soviet Union in something near to a communist clearance sale. The engines seem fairly new which, in the relativistic terms that are required to discuss Romanian technology, means they are no more than twenty years old. The passenger cars, on the other hand, bear undeniable engravings and identification plates that reveal some to be remnants of the 1950's. This is verified by many things that just don't work, including, but not limited to, windows, doors, heat, and toilets. All this aside, they at least run on time, again observing the relativity of the situation.

In my carriage, there are four dozing individuals that somehow seem to have overcome the discomfort of the bench seats. The seats are old, lined with old vinyl that, when not cracked or torn away, is smooth from the thousands of posteriors that have polished away the former textures. This presents a problem when one tries to relax because, unless one's posterior is wedged in the trench created by the confluence of bench and bench back, gravity steps in and drags the body across the frictionless surface. This constant slipping makes reclining impossible. The Romanians who are frequent travelers have evolved a kind of straight backed sleeping that defies all known comforting postures. Sometimes this is a group effort when a well trained family is able to wedge and prop against each other to reach a fine equilibrium between balance and relaxation.

Having only been in country for a month and a half, I had yet to master such skill and was relegated to staring out the window at the passing countryside. Unfortunately, the atmosphere and the motion of a CFR train makes one crave sleep. The regular bum-bump, bum-bump of the

train on the track is like the rocking one may have received if one's mother used an up down motion as opposed to a side to side swing. It is just as sleep-invoking, all the same. This soothing motion is paired with overly warm carriages, a condition created by the passengers. At the first suggestion of cold, Romanians begin to wear layer upon layer of clothing. Having not yet experienced the coming winter, I have no idea of what they know. The greatest problem of the Romanian winter is not the degree of the cold, although that in itself can be impressive. It is the fact that once it becomes cold there is no achieving warmth for the rest of the day. Heat is a precious and usually expensive commodity. The one thing that a train produces is an incredible surplus of heat. The heat in the carriage is introduced by throwing a lever from the off to the on position. An old graphic usually appears next to this lever showing how the amount of heat can be regulated by adjusting the position of the handle. I think that the accompanying Russian must have said "this is a joke." The whole thing is a lie with the reality being that the heat is either off or on. When on, the carriage becomes sweltering. Still, the Romanians, and by January 1, would rather suffer the searing heat of the full on lever position than risk the chilling effect of the outside environment. Heat plus regular motion produces drowsiness within a few minutes of the journey's progression.

So, on one mid-October day, I was fighting sleep that was further craved by my body for the simple reason that I had just come off a series of four night shifts. The morning was a beautiful event, and the early sun did rejuvenate my tired being to an extent. I was excited to be on my first trip. It was to be a great adventure. Armed only with a smattering of Romanian and a train schedule, I sought to arrive in the far north of Romania by night fall in a distant city called Piatra Neamt. This meant a nine hour train trip with no companion to bolster my courage. I had been told that I would see the landscape change from the flat plains of Dobrogea and open into the

valleys and mountains that lay past the ring of the Transylvanian mountains that circumsected Romania into a distinct north and south.

Leaving Dobrogea, I sat near the window and enjoyed the spray of sunshine after my nocturnal existence of the last few days. I sat with my back to our destination, watching the land fall away from us. We flew along the track through the farmlands, all of which lay brown and reaped. A litter of stocks covered some areas, and the wandering pigs tested them and then trampled the desiccated hulls under foot.

The dirt paths that traversed the fields ran parallel with the track, and a parade of rural inhabitants passed below me. The old men dressed as always: coarse, heavy pants of brown or black, gray sweaters, and hats that may vary in style, but are always black. They sat atop shambling wooden wagons on planked buckboards. The wagons rode on any wheels that could be procured. The older wagons went along at a limping roll because of the their abused iron wheels, which had become more polygonal than circular over the years. The more well-to-do had wheels appropriated from old cars and trucks.

Tired asses or glue factory horses supplied the locomotion with loping steps. The slow motion transport reflected the usual pace of the Romanian people. The heads of both driver and animal seemed to have equal angles, both appearing to fight a persistent drowsiness. This fatigue threatened to bring chin to chest and bring their progress from crawl to full stop.

The "*gancai*" also traveled the road. The gypsies, just as it is told, were ubiquitous. So many tales of the gypsies were in my head. Anthropologists tell us they came originally from India, but they now span the world. Yet, Eastern Europe, especially Romania, seems a haven to them. As the Romanians tell it, they are children of Cain and wander creation with the same curse suffered upon the fratricide. The gypsies have another Biblically linked precedent for their

nomadic sojourns. They are a people blessed by God with the freedom to call the entire world home. They are the only people that arrives in their homeland every time they reign in their horses and start their evening fires.

Their dark skin sets them apart from the Romanians, who possess anywhere from the fairness of the Teutonic invaders of the north to the dark haired, alabaster features of the Cossacks, to the Mediterranean olive of their Greek and Roman ancestors. No matter how dark a Romanian may be, they will never have the jet black hair and deep brown skin of the gypsies. The gypsy eyes, long blamed for hexes and plagues, are a deep black with a glint coming from just off the center of the consuming iris. The men have a dangerous look, accentuated by thick mustaches and long eye teeth that show anytime their lips part. The young women have gleaming white teeth that decay into the rotten crumbling yellow mouths of the old women.

That morning a walking caravan of women headed to the market in the next town. Each trudged beneath a bagged burden carried upon a shoulder and bent back. The young ones walked ahead, their brightly arrayed bodies laboring in the early light. Sharp reds, yellows, and oranges danced through the air from their skirts and shawls. Trailing ever further behind were the "*bunicai*," the grandmothers. Their forms were shrunken, compacted from years of carrying and walking. The gay colors of their youth had faded to the muted browns and patchwork maudlin that covered their formless bodies.

In that weak autumnal sun, straining to produce the wash of morning light, they continued the perpetual motion that seems as programmed as their raven hair. At that moment they passed in front of a field of dead sunflowers. The hunched bodies of the old women were bent counter to the fall of the dried heads of the towering plants. The desiccated faces of the blooms still faced the morning sun that once ignited the yellow petals as it rose over the low eastern ridge. Their

wizened heads hung as deeply as those of the women, and their brown stalks were as dull as the clothing on their human counterparts' backs. As the train pulled away, it seemed as though the two groups were passing each other on the road. The old gypsy hags trudged westward as the motionless sunflowers, in an illusion, seemed to move to the morning horizon. Both were the faded memories of brilliant youth, but now they helped color the receding summer's landscape with the retiring browns and greys of the coming autumn.

The trip to Piatra Neamt was beautiful, but it was the experience with the gypsies that I remember more. My Romanian friends warned me that gypsies were trouble and that I should keep my distance. I heeded this advice after noticing the professional pickpocketing activities of the gypsy children in the Bucharest train station. Still, I watched them anytime I saw them appear. To me they were mesmerizing. They were living anachronisms, even in the lagging world of Eastern Europe. Back in Cernavoda, I learned about gypsies from a little boy named Victor.

Victor was one of the town children who ran the streets at all times of the day. He would spot us and come running, usually looking for a handout. I never gave him money after seeing him buy, and then smoke, cigarettes. It was not that I thought it would stop him, just that I didn't want to contribute to his habit. After all, he was only ten! He played the clown at all times, grinning, laughing, and leering at our group until we would grant him gifts. He knew how to play the girls. With some, he acted as a young child, hugging them and laying his head against them. Maternal instincts in these girls brought them to buy Victor food, sweets, and Coca-Colas at the smallest hungry-eyed pout he produced. Others, he would bend to his will by playing the part of a miniature Don Juan. He would take their hands in his and kiss the backs of their hands. He would offer to dance with them in the bars or in the streets. The end result was the same.

With me, Victor had to play it straight. I ignored him when he put on his little acts. He knew I was serious the day I took loaves of bread out his hands and told him to go to hell. There is more to the story, of course. On a temperate day in the autumn, I had spent an afternoon on the second story patio of the *Sus* Bar along the town's main drag. Victor made his rounds as soon as he spotted us. His complaint that day was hunger. He needed money for *piine*, bread. I relented and gave him money for the purchase with the charge that he was to buy three loaves and return directly to give me one loaf and show me the other two. I did not trust him at any time. He seemed disappointed by this development, but he left and returned as he promised. I took the one loaf from him and thanked him for his efforts. He sprinted off quickly with no word, which was unlike Victor. I watched his progress down the street to the front of the municipal building at the town center. Victor approached a man sitting on the steps of the building with a large burlap sack at his feet. He proffered the loaves toward the overweight, middle-aged man who pulled a few bills off a wad of money, and Victor stuffed the notes in his pocket. I was irate.

Victor returned to our side a little while later. Some of the other women on staff had come down to the bar and were sitting at another table, so he decided to approach them for treats. I let it happen, but watched intently, listening to the words exchanged. He used the same story of hunger and the desire for bread. Being used to the offers also, Kath sent him on an additional errand that would force him to come back to the table to show her the loaves. Upon his return, he made the same quick exit. I sprinted after him and overtook him at the town square, pulling the loaves from his hands not twenty feet from the grime encrusted bread buyer. He looked everywhere but my eyes, and from that day on we had a relationship based on relative honesty and respect.

The story of Victor's life was one of the common tragedies of the severe economic depression

and cultural values. He was one of five children in his family, all boys, who lived on the edge of town in a small hovel. Each morning his father would throw him and his two older brothers out on the street to fend for themselves. He admonished them not to return unless they had money or food to offer upon their return. It had been this way since his sixth birthday. Much of the day was spent trying to fill the empty stomach that he carried for most of his life. At others times he was running from the hands of shop owners that would lash out at any gypsy face that entered their establishments, fearing that all were thieves. His clothes were a motley of threadbare things that he found where he could.

Occasionally he would appear at the hospice gate with his brother, Rasvan, to beg for shoes when the soles would separate from his current pair. He would remain out until one or two in the morning, hoping to beg or steal money from people in the disco and local bars. He confirmed the stories of the begging, thieving waifs who ran the streets of Eastern European towns. He was the stereotype, except he had a face and a name. Except I had seen him with bruises on his face and arms. Except I had found him crying on street curbs, filthy and hungry. It is an obstacle that a tourist can avoid, but one that I could not. This town was my home, and I was here to help. Victor was part of this charge. I watched out for him when ever he was near. I am not so deluded to think that I saved him from his horrible life. What I did do was offer a respite from it. When he was with me he could be a little boy and not a hardened street thief.

Gypsy stories accent my experience of Romania. They are characters that must be included to view the country in its entirety. Their images impress upon my mind anytime I recall my months in Romania. The memories range from dancing women at the town square to the mother that placated her four year old daughter's tantrum with a few drags from her cigarette. They were like another people, another foreign nation, within my already alien experience of life in Romania. I

will never deny that they are master thieves that made more than a few plays for my money belt.

Yet, I will also report that they are people just as we are. Their behaviors come from having to survive in the only way that they can in the landscape of Eastern Europe.

History in Five Parts

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century there were many powerful warlords in the lands that now constitute Romanian. One such leader was Stephan cel Mare, Stephen the Great, one of the first kings of Romania who succeeded in unifying most of what is present day Romania with the exception of the northwestern corner that was held by the Hungarian warlords. Stephan was known as a good, fair king that fought the invading Turks who wanted to conquer the southern lands of the new confederation. For his efforts, the Pope conferred the title of "Defender of the Church" upon Stephan, though he was not Roman Catholic, noting that he was responsible for the deaths of some 15,000 Turks. What is not often acknowledged is Stephan's cousin Vlad, also a proficient Turk and Bulgar killer. In fact, Vlad was a bit more accomplished than his cousin having to his credit an estimated 300,000 Turkish deaths. The Pope granted no title for his exploits. He did have a title given him, awarded by both his countrymen and his enemies. He was called Vlad the Impaler, for the habit he had of impaling enemies and prisoners on large stakes and watching them struggle and scream. Maybe we in the West would have never heard of this vicious warrior were it not for a drunken Irishman who wrote a Gothic horror novel entitled Dracula. Vlad was none other than Vlad Dracul, the devil. His life now exists in the hazy area that is a hybrid of history, legend, and folktale. In any event, he is one of the premier heroes of Romanian tradition.

Constanta is the major port city for Romania. It lies along the Black Sea Coast, where the dark blue waters touch the sandy coast. It began as a Grecian trading outpost in the far reaches of what was an unknown northern land for the Greeks. They traded with the indigenous people

who called themselves the Dacians. The Dacians lived in the Danube River Valley and operated as a primitive clan society. The Greeks were wary of these people who were fierce warriors. This frontier with its fertile coast, dark, unmapped waters, and fearsome people struck both fear and wonder in the Greeks. Scholars now believe that it is the Black Sea Coast that the mythic Argonauts sailed to in search of the Golden Fleece. This is the homeland of giant serpents, blood thirsty kings, and Medea of the black arts.

Current excavations show that this was quite a well established and supplied outpost for the Greeks. The large amphorae that carried precious oils to and rich wines from this land have been found throughout the many strata of the digs. Ancient ship wrecks also yield such artifacts as well as stones and coins that were once used for trade credits. The regular trade experienced a small disruption as the Romans eventually conquered the Grecian Empire and asserted their influence throughout the Mediterranean lands. With much more endeavor than their Greek predecessors, the Romans sent expeditionary forces to the Danube River Valley to secure it with many *cetate*, or fortresses. They realized that this would be a challenge when the first pioneers were massacred by the Dacian clans of the valley.

The Roman campaign against the Dacians, while not well documented, is recorded by the researchers of the British Museum as the most costly and long fought of Roman martial history. The battles went on for over a decade, thwarted by the logistical nightmare of transporting troops and supplies to the Black Sea. A concerted effort was mounted after peace was achieved over much of the rest of the Empire. Legions poured onto the shores joined by the military engineers that would build the roads and bridges which would allow the war machine to penetrate these wild lands. It was in the reign of Emperor Trajan that the final campaign south of the Danube would be waged.

Spurred on by the assassination of Trajan's favored lieutenant, who was also his nephew, the army met the Dacians at Adamclisi and slaughtered the remaining forces. No mercy was shown to the Dacian people for the great cost they had been to the Empire. At Adamclisi they erected a great war memorial which stood atop the highest hill. Around the exterior, marble relief panels told the story of the campaign, culminating in the victory over the Dacian barbarians. At the top of the monument stood a Roman warrior in full battle dress while at his feet, about a quarter of his size, crouch the bound Dacian slaves with chains around their necks. The memorial could be seen for miles, forever reminding the Dacians of the punishment that would be visited upon them for further disobedience. A recreation of it stands there today over the ruins of *Cetate de Tropaneum Traiani*, the fortress of Trajan's Triumph. It is recorded that Trajan then held 366 days of gladiatorial games in honor of the great victory.

Over the generations, the Dacians assimilated into Roman society and became good citizens on the far northeastern edge of the Empire. They never lost their fierce fighting skills and were one of the last parts of the Empire to fall. To this day, Romanians take great pride in both their Dacian and Roman ancestors. This was even true during the Soviet era when they refused to adopt Russian and the Cyrillic alphabet that was ordered by the Soviet officials in Moscow. The Romanian language and highly Latin culture of the people is the source of identity for Romania, the only country of truly Western origins among its Balkan and Slavic neighbors.

Constanta was named for a granddaughter or niece of Emperor Constantine and served to export the riches of the Danubian farmlands and medicinal muds of the Black Sea Coast home to the Imperial seat. It also became the final home of the poet and exile Ovid. The great author of *Metamorphoses* was sent into a life of exile by Emperor for some crime that is still quite undefined. Historians claim that Ovid was charged with sedition because of comments and

writings critical of the Emperor. The folk legends of the Romanians hold that Ovid was caught *in flagrante* with the Emperor's niece. Either way, Ovid spent his last years in Constanta. He continued his writing and produced *The Sorrows*, in exile. In his missives to friends he complained about the horrible food, the primitive lifestyle, and the bitter, mercurial climate. To the Romanians credit, he spoke of the wonderful hospitality of the natives. His statue stands, today, in the square of the historic district, his gaze cast upon the blue sea.

Today's Constanta is trying to make itself into a modern port city and, hopefully, a vacation destination for Eastern Europeans and Russians. Many poorly built hotels and resorts served the former Soviet tourists in a heyday that came during the 1970's. These ugly, hulking buildings now stand quiet along the coast. The thin ribbon of beach is still a favorite destination for Romanians, and during the summer every inch of sand is covered by towels and bodies. The frequent warnings of hepatitis infected waste water does not seem to keep them away.

The downtown is now enjoying some investment by foreign companies as European and American banks are slowly establishing themselves. Delta Airlines and Microsoft Software both have offices along the main street. The more recessed streets still serve as homes for the traditional markets and street hockers. Everything from pirated music cassettes to freshly killed chickens is for sale along these passageways. Packs of street kids work in teams to pick the pockets of the sailors on leave in the city. Among these sailors, there are large numbers of African merchant marines and Chinese Naval personnel. Apparently China is heavily invested in the port trade of the city, owning several of the wharves in the harbor. Other than Otopeni International Airport in Bucharest, Constanta is Romania's only point of traffic with the rest of the world.

Vlad Tepes, Vlad the Impaler's father, was a small lord in the northern part of Romania. His sign was that of the dragon, or dracul, the original source of Vlad's title of Dracula which means son of the dragon. He held a seat both in the town of Sighasoara and outside of the city of Brasov. Both towns were under the Hungarian warlord Hunyadi, and trade was controlled by the Saxon merchants that owned many of the markets and toll bridges around both cities. After paying these two camps, Vlad Tepes also had to pay an annual tribute to the Turkish sultan to avoid invasion by his army. Vlad Tepes had two sons, young Vlad and his younger brother, Radu. The sultan, fearing that Tepes may one day become bold, ordered that in lieu of the annual payment, Tepes was to send his two sons as ransom. Tepes complied, and the two boys were delivered to the Turkish court. Records tell us that Radu was a compliant charge and soon became a favorite of the sultan. He would later be one of the court viziers. Vlad, being older and more embittered by the extortion of the sultan and the betrayal of his father, openly resisted the sultan. It is told he spent many months in and out of the sultan's prison, witnessing and being subjected to many different forms of torture. It is here that he probably saw the Turkish punishment of impalement.

Upon his father's death, Vlad was sent back to his homeland to take his seat as Voivode (prince) of Wallachia, present day Transylvania. His ascension would signal the beginning of an era of Romanian independence and a move toward an identity for the Romanian people. Upon the death of the Hungarian warlord, Hunyadi, Vlad raised his own armies and began training them in the art of warfare, both European and Turkish. When it came time for the annual tribute, Vlad did not send his payment. The angered sultan sent two emissaries to collect his due from the errant voivode.

The ambassadors arrived in Vlad's court at Sighasoara and began to state the sultan's claim.

Vlad glared down on the two and, without acknowledging their message, demanded they remove their turbans, as no headcoverings were to worn in court. The brash men responded that this was not a Turkish custom and that they did not feel compelled to comply. The powerful form of Vlad Dracul shuddered for a moment, and then his face broke into a smile. Tradition holds that he expressed a concern that it would be horrible to ever think of these gentlemen losing their turbans and desired deeply to help them avoid this. With quick orders issued to nearby attendants, the two men were brought to their knees, and the turbans were nailed into their skulls! Vlad had two courtiers transport the bodies back to the sultan's court with the message that he also felt no compulsion to comply with the orders of the Turkish court. The war had begun.

Bucharest was once called "little Paris" during its construction during the eighteenth century. Builders imitated the wide avenues divided by islands of trees and greenery. The architecture also reflected the French styles, ranging from Neo-Classicism to the excesses of the Baroque school. It became a prosperous city with wonderful universities. French even became the second language of the population, and the unofficial language of the learned. The capital of the Romanian nation sat proudly over the most stable unification of the principalities. A time of peace had visited this often torn nation, and Bucharest was the focus of all the events that had led to it. Though the king did not live in Bucharest, the controlling parliament did and legislated an enlightened plan for the nation's development. Rich with resources and at the crux of many overland and Danubian trade routes, Romania was poised to take its place among the European powers. Bucharest would be at the pinnacle of this time of potential.

Bucharest became one of the noted centers of learning and culture during the nineteenth century, still drawing largely on Parisian models. A more modernized army and a few good

politicians had gained more lands for the expanding nation, and the capital city reaped the rewards. The city was at the height of its grandness. By the early 1900's, after WWI, Romania was again expanded, much to the credit of a Romanian baroness who attended the Peace talks in Versailles. They gained lands along the Bulgarian border that had been lost to the Turkish-Bulgar forces of the past, as well as some disputed lands on the border with Hungary. These lands are still disputed to this day, the Hungarians having temporarily reclaimed theirs after the Revolution of 1989. It appeared that Romania would become a central power in this new century. Of the Eastern European nations, it had the most stable currency, actually out competing some Western powers. No one new what lay ahead with WWII.

During the 1930's, Romania aligned itself with the rising nationalistic power of Germany. Upon the outbreak of the war, Romania found itself marching along with the Axis powers and expected to gain great power for their role in the conquest of Europe. With the defeat of the Axis, Romania was at the mercy of the bargaining table shared by Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt. Having a greater knowledge of the country's riches, Stalin made a move to include the nation in the Soviet sphere of influence. As some historians and all Romanians have it, Churchill conceded Romania to the ravenous Stalin without protest while Roosevelt still questioned the wisdom of the deal. So began the dark time for Romania and the disintegration of Bucharest.

After so many years under the Ceasescu regime's corruption and inefficiency, Bucharest became a rotting urban hulk. Today more than 12 million people live within the confines of the city. Romania's next largest city contains only 300,000 inhabitants. The once great structures of the 1800's were demolished because they were seen as remnants of the bourgeoisie culture of the capitalist society before communism. The bleak, concrete slab behemoths of Soviet style flats

replace these glorious buildings. Even now, the half finished lines of such edifices rise from the skyline, their crumbling walls never completed by the bankrupt government. The streets are filthy and in disrepair, usually filled with the traffic of the rusting cars of the more monied population. The rest of its residents press down the narrow sidewalks, most unemployed and looking for work. Alleys wreek of urine and sewage where broken pipes leak between the buildings, or the homeless make their cardboard villages.

The industrial sector still pumps its toxins into the sky, as testified by the brown and yellow haze that hovers over the city and its skyline. The particulate falls from the sky when it rains, staining the gutters black. Blowing one's nose will yield a thick collection of soot that is constantly drawn in from the atmosphere. Glimmers of better days occasionally appear along city streets. Old, Orthodox churches lay recessed in rows of drab, grey city blocks. Grand townhouses, their facades now crumbling into disrepair, exist in the older quadrants of the city. The oldest area of the city, though, has been lost forever. At the height of his megalomania, Nicolae Ceausescu ordered the demolition of the entire area to make room for his master plan. He built the People's Palace.

The monstrosity stands off of the central piazza of the city down a street adorned with fountains. It occupies the crest of a small hill and stands some twenty floors high. Its squat frame would dwarf the Capitol Building in D.C. without challenge. This was to be the new government center where all of his cabinet members and lieutenants would both work and live so that he could have them observed by the Securitate, his secret police. Ceausescu was paranoid that a coup would come from within his ranks. He was sure that this edifice would not only serve as a living memorial to his greatness, but would also give him ultimate control over his officials. It did not stop his eventual overthrow in December 1989. Even now, evidence points

to the communist party leaders for facilitating his loss of power and summary execution. In fact, the first president of the new government was Ion Iliescu, a number two man in the old communist regime who was recreated as a Social Democrat.

The vestiges of the revolution mark some areas of the city, especially near the University where protestors clashed with the army. The graffiti that called for independence from the dictatorship still decorates the university walls. In addition, there are black circles painted around the bullet holes left by the lethal spray unleashed on the students. Wooden crosses stand in the traffic median and along the sidewalks, remembering those who lost their lives in what now seems to have been a staged revolution that saw no transfer of power back to the democratic ideals of the people.

And what rewards of freedom did the people receive for the blood of their comrades? McDonald's now has three convenient locations in the Romanian capital, one right down the hill from the old parliament building and not a mile from the People's Palace. Joe Camel and the Marlboro Man are regular features on the urban landscape. American cheeseburgers and cigarettes are now freely available to the populace of Bucharest. If only they had the money to purchase these goods. Foreign investors seek to use Romania without improving it too much. It will be reaped for what it is worth and then abandoned. Well, that's not quite true. Coca-Cola has set up the plant at Ploesti, hasn't it? Maybe they are working with the Mormons and the Baptist from American churches to save the heathen souls of the Romanian people. God and consumerism have been rushed to the Romanians to help them through their time of turmoil. Now if someone can just give them a job, a decent place to live, and food to eat they might just become the perfect corporate colony for these foreign product companies.

Vlad Dracul asserted his power a step further by taking over the interests of the Saxon merchants and killing or exiling them in the process. He now collected the taxes and tolls that had once gone in these German pockets. The Turks, in answer to the slight visited upon them, mounted an army of Turkish cavalry and Bulgarian conscripts to punish the Romanian insubordination. They did not expect the fierce fight they received. Their first forces were repelled back to the Bulgarian border, and Vlad and his forces rode forward. The battles were fiery and frequent, with many Turkish and Bulgar captives taken by the Romanian forces. After almost a year of his aggressive campaign, Vlad found his forces depleted and his supplies low. His scouts reported that the Turks were raising a new army which would ride within the month. It seemed he would be repulsed. That is until he fell upon a scheme that would become his signature for all of history.

The desperate Vlad ordered that all of the Turkish and Bulgarian prisoners were to be taken to the plain of battle. He had his soldiers cut down poles from a nearby forest and the points of the poles sharpened. Vlad then put to practice his education in the Turkish prisons. Some 100,000 prisoners were impaled, and the poles planted in an area that an ancient historian reported to be some two miles long and two-thirds of a mile deep. The bodies rotted in the elements and were picked upon by the insects and carrion birds for a month. When the Turkish force rode over the ridge leading down to the plain, they were met with what may have been one of the most horrific sights predating the death camps of the Holocaust. The decaying bodies of Turks and Bulgars looked up out of eyeless sockets, their withered flesh reeking. The forest of death was never traversed by the army. They turned, shaken in their resolve, and returned to Bulgaria.

Vlad also visited such atrocities on his own people, killing off huge numbers of the poor and

those courtiers he suspected of treachery at public impalements. Indeed, wood cuts show Vlad sitting at a banquet table before the writhing figure of an impaled courtier. He was a man greatly feared, but one thought to be symbol of Romanian bravery and also a champion for justice. Though he worked many crimes against his own people, today's Romanians see him as an icon of justice in their corrupt times. He will forever be a national hero for his furious assault of the Turks. He began the move toward Romanian independence and nationhood. Still, he met a bad end at the hands of his countrymen. The story continues like this.

Fearing that Vlad would usurp their power even more, some of the courtiers formed a conspiracy to capture Vlad which proved successful. The voivode was imprisoned, and much of the power he had amassed was decentralized by his brother Radu, who was given the throne in a compromise with the sultan. Vlad was furious and escaped after a year's time to seek revenge on the treasonous courtiers and attempt to raise a new army to combat the Turks. Seen as too much of a liability, his former supporters instead turned him over to agents of the sultan.

This is where history clouds a bit. It is believed that the assassins of the sultan took Vlad out to the isolated forests of Snagov Island, just north of Bucharest. There they took the rebel out in the woods and decapitated him, claiming his head as a trophy for their master. Legend claims that the head was displayed proudly by the sultan on a table in his court, a glass cover protecting the prized possession. The monks who lived in the monastery on Snagov were given the body and, surely enough, there is a grave in a sub chapel that marks the final resting place of The Impaler. Over time, the tales grew more fantastic, claiming that upon his death, a great earthquake shook the ground, and the Devil himself came up to escort the soul of Vlad Dracul to a seat of veneration in hell. Other stories held that the man's ghost still walked the countryside, performing unspeakable acts on the evil and corrupt of the land.

Later, Mihai cel Rau (Michael the Bad), Vlad's only son, took the throne from his uncle for a short time. For a few months, the legacy of Vlad seemed to be returning. Unfortunately or fortunately, the young voivode was stabbed in the back coming out of church one Sunday. Even this could not end the legend of Vlad Dracul. He will be remembered forever in the history and cultural identity of the Romanian people.

