

In the Pines

Florina

HERE'S A SECRET THE CHILDREN KNOW. There's a house at the end of town built in the German style, with gingerbread trim, thick wooden beams and rafters, windows with Gothic arches. The woods start behind the house, pines and birches spread across the hills. The street dogs gather there, as if they know that's where the wild places begin. Or maybe they're waiting for scraps of the rich food the German man eats. He has a German name so they call him the German but he isn't German, he's American. Maybe he's CIA; probably he's CIA. He teaches courses at the university, but he isn't really a professor. His Romanian accent is uneven, but he refuses to ever repeat himself, and you must strain to understand him. He doesn't use his hands when he talks, the way Romanians do. He has the soft, small hands of an intellectual, an unruly mustache that he chews at with his bottom lip when he is thinking, and the absent eyes of windows in an abandoned house. You might think the German's house is abandoned, too. The lights are never on in the kitchen; the street dogs gather at the gate. But late at night, the German pulls up in taxis with children, two or three at a time, sometimes four. The children leave in taxis before dawn.

I've been inside the house, been one of the children in the German house at the beginning of the woods. Most of us have gone at least once because we know the German will give you candy, Western candy, Mars Bars and Wrigley's Spearmint if you touch it, and money if you don't get upset when he brings out the camera. He likes boys and girls both, as long as you're not too old or not too young. Just a little hair, he'll tell you once. He won't repeat himself. I'll be too old soon.

There's a real German cuckoo clock in the parlor, so you can count the passing of time and think about how much candy or money you're going to get. He opens up the sofa bed. He asks you not to look straight into the camera. Look at each other, look at him, look at his thing. He wants it to be like a real movie. He doesn't like us to wear lipstick. He tells us, what does it matter what clothes you're wearing? You're going to take them off anyway.

In the office, there are calendars of girls in bikinis and signed photographs of the Romanian women's gymnastics team. You wait in the office with your candy while he calls you a taxi to take you back down to the Red Bridge, or Tatarasi, or Nicolina, wherever it is that you stay. One of the orphanages, if you're lucky enough to have a bed there and know how to sneak back in at night. I used to, in

Children's Home Four by the Red Bridge. I would sew the money into a hole I dug in my mattress.

Or back to your apartment, if you're lucky enough to belong to a family. I never have. Larissa used to visit me, but she never brought me home. Everett would say, I wish you were mine, but I'm too old for his games. Liviu says Everett is looking for me, but I don't care.

I stay under the Red Bridge now. I used to keep the German's money wrapped up in newspaper and stuffed in my underclothes at first. I can't remember what it was I was saving it for. I give it straight to Liviu now. He's the Fish for us. If you give him the money you make, he'll be sure to hurt anyone who hurts you.

You might think we hate the German, but I don't. I like the candy. What I do in the German house at the beginning of the woods is nothing better or worse than what I've done with the older kids at the orphanage. His mustache tickles, but it's all right.

Everett

SHE LEFT IN APRIL. It's October now, and I promised myself I'd find her before winter comes. I keep going over what I could have done to make her stay.

Her name means flower, although I've never seen a child less likely to bloom. Everything about her was faded. Pale skin so that every vitamin shot she got in her arm left a blue-black record, pale clothes hand-washed so many times they weren't red to pink, blue to gray but colors seen through a fog, pale brown hair that didn't hold enough color for her to be considered blonde by the staff at Children's Home Four. If her hair had been blonde, she might have been one of the darlings, the pretty babies that thrive on attention, that learn how to stay alive because someone beside themselves wants them to live.

If Florina had been blonde, it would have been clearer that she wasn't gypsy. You'd think such a pale girl would be beyond suspicion, but the ladies at Children's Home Four have turned suspicion into an art form, and Florina's sulky expressions and the way she faded out until it seemed she wasn't there, how you could almost see through her thin arms as she reached out to us, made it clear to them that she must be a gypsy. Besides, they'd met Florina's mother, Larissa, so bossy and with manners so common that if she wasn't gypsy she'd been raised by them. Larissa won't relinquish her rights, so Florina can't be adopted, by me or anyone else.

This year's volunteers from Brigham Young told me Florina had dishwasher hair. They wanted to give her highlights, make her cute. They were all blondes themselves, six of them stuck together with their chaperone in their apartment near Cathedral Square. By spring, they were so bored they flirted with me, touch-

ing my arm while they asked me to watch the Super Bowl they'd had sent from America. Oh, Everett, they giggled, tossing their ponytails as I walked by.

They know I'm evangelical, that I don't consider Mormons as part of Christ's church; they're worse than the charismatic churches or the Catholics even, and I would do anything to keep them from converting the babies in their care, but I'm the only American man they know. I'm young enough at twenty-six for them to call me cute behind my back. I play the guitar, I jog, I throw the football around on my breaks. I'm the kind of guy the Brigham Young girls understand, not like the short, skinny Romanians who whistle at them on the street or the teenage orphans who bring them wildflowers, not like the Peace Corps or Soros people who won't talk to the Mormons because they're trying to blend in while the Mormons, in their sweatshirts and jeans or suits if they're going door to door, are staying out of place on purpose. Besides, I'm a missionary, too. These girls understand a mission.

I've been in Romania for four years, since I graduated from Penn in 1996 with a degree in child psychology. My Romanian is so good that the Peace Corps and Soros people use me for translation. They try to pretend that I don't do what I do because the Lord has called me. I've asked Annie, why do they think that being called by Caesar to do what might be the work the Lord wants done is inherently better? This summer, they began inviting me to their parties, Annie's doing I know. With Florina gone, I've got time on my hands. I play the guitar, I can do Pearl Jam and Nirvana plus endless Beatles covers, I always stay straight-edged, but I'm a good guy to have around. They think they might convert me, but they don't get that I went to college with a million of them and they've only met one of me.

If Annie were Christian, and our parents willing, I might be courting her. Her Romanian has a purring village accent from where she spent her Peace Corps days. Sometimes she tries to hold my hand. Once when she was drunk, she kissed me and I let her. Since then, I make sure we're never alone. She's little, dark with pointy features and beady eyes that squeeze tight when she's mad at me. She blends in more than anyone, looking like a Romanian student from the university on the Copou hill: tight black pants, high-heeled boots, cigarettes and scarves. When she doesn't want her friends to understand us, we talk fast in Romanian, the way I used to with Florina. Annie calls me Mount Everest on the days she likes me.

If I can bring one of Annie's friends over to the Lord, maybe that's what I'm here to do. The economic, political, even Caesar-like power they wield over the world is dazzling. Convert one of them, versus converting one hundred orphans, converting Florina, and I'd stir things up. But the Lord loves each one of my kids as much as any one of those secular missionaries. There's something innately

blessed about my orphans. They're the ones who taught me Romanian, taught me because they couldn't believe they couldn't talk to me.

I began learning Romanian with my kindergarten, but I perfected my Romanian with the street children who live under the train station bypasses. That's where I learned all my dirty words, words I haven't let myself use in English ever since I dedicated myself to my mission. Everything those kids say is about f-ing the c--t of their mothers, worst of all, f-ing the c--t of God's mother. If I play my guitar for them, for a little while the cursing, the glue sniffing, the drinking of new wine from plastic liter jugs, the rutting around with each other in the darker corners stops, and they look like children again. Ever since they beat me up and stole my guitar and I came back to them with black eyes and a cheaper guitar I bought in Bucharest, they treat me with wary respect. Some of them will even come to my classes for the soup and bread I offer. None of them, though, no matter how much I beg, no matter how much I speak in the dirty language, not even if I get them alone, will tell me if they've seen Florina.

There are only so many places where the street kids live in Iasi, and since Florina left Children's Home Four I've haunted them all. She's chosen to be lost to me, deliberately erasing her tracks, perfecting her act of fading out, finishing what she'd been working on since the first day we met. What always scared me the most about Florina's chances was how she was constantly moving from being one of my kids, actually *my* kid if I would admit it to myself, to belonging to the streets and the streets alone.

When I met Florina, she was eight. She didn't even come up to my waist and her wrists were so frail her bones must have been the size of matchsticks. She kept rubbing one wrist against the other, as if the friction kept her warm. I didn't notice her right away. The other children ran to me for hugs and kisses, holding on to my legs as I walked through the corridors. I've read book after book on institutionalized children, but even so, I was troubled by their indiscriminate interest in everyone who walked into their wards. Florina was different. She showed no interest in me.

The month I met her, she came down with double pneumonia. Her wrists were tied down to the sides of the bed to keep her from scratching. I stopped by to put a cold compress on her forehead at the same time every day, evenings as it was beginning to get dark. My classes for the day were over and the night ones yet to begin, the sky pink over the hills that ring the city. The Romanian poets call Iasi Little Rome. She wouldn't twitch, keeping herself still, her eyes unblinking as the compress came down. I would hold her clammy hand, her fingers clenched up away from me as much as she could with her wrist restrained. After a week, she looked up at me and said, You're always here. And I will be, I told her, and I was.

For the next four years I saved my evenings for her. We'd sing songs together, draw pictures, stroll through Cathedral Square. She'd make me small presents of chestnuts or walnuts, toys and treats that she was given by other foreign volunteers: yo-yos, friendship bracelets, coloring books, Hello Kitty pencils, gum. I learned to accept them all from her, learned that you don't have something if you can't give it away.

I wanted her to belong to me. I realize that people would wonder why a grown man like me would want to adopt a twelve-year-old girl who looks like she's nine or younger. There are some children you fall in love with and some children who fall in love with you, and sometimes you can't tell which is which but you know that child is going to break your heart. The missionary who worked at Children's Home Four before me warned me how hard it is not to have favorites. It's why I adopted three, he said. Remember, it's the multitudes of children who need us, not the one. I tell it to every new group of Brigham Young volunteers. I try to tell it to the secular missionaries who will listen to me, although Annie just laughs at me and reminds me that I'd adopt them all if I could. In spite of our mission, in spite of what the Lord has called us for, it's impossible to love the general without taking delight in the particular.

The last time I saw Florina, she asked if I could teach her the words to songs from Nirvana's *Unplugged* album. She was wearing her ancient Nirvana T-shirt given to her by a summer British volunteer. It went down to her knees, ripped in two places where the fabric had worn through, and the staff ladies wouldn't let her wear it unless she sewed it up each morning with her own thread and needle. I tried not to think how much Florina looked like Kurt, his light hair falling across his face as he looked downcast at his guitar. Florina was rubbing her wrists behind her back as she waited for me to say yes.

We sat down on the lone unbroken bench in the orphanage's yard. As I practiced a few warm-up chords, kids gathered around us, squatting and never sitting — Romanian children, orphans or not, know not to spoil their clothes. The Brigham Young girls showed up, sitting cross-legged in the dirt. They have a washer and a dryer in their apartment; they don't know what it's like to wash clothes by hand. They wanted "Love Me Tender" and "Mmmmbop," even though they knew I'd take the kids' selections first. Florina asked for "Pennyroyal Tea" and "Jesus Don't Want Me for a Sunbeam."

I said, Florina, Jesus does want you for a sunbeam.

Florina laughed and rubbed her wrists together, but she didn't look at me. She looked out the gate, to the water rivulets flowing down the muddy road. She said, Everett, you want me for a sunbeam. It's not the same thing. I'm not a sunbeam. I'm not a flower, either.

The Brigham Young girls said, in English because they never did learn any Romanian besides please and hello, Oh Florina, we can make you pretty as a flower if you'd let us. It's amazing what happens when you wear your hair a different way. Florina walked with them hand-in-hand into Children's Home Four. After they combed her hair back, stuck in a barrette with rhinestones in the shape of a daisy (we found the barrette on the ground by the wall) and sent her into the main hall to start her homework, Florina must have gone out the back door, climbed over the iron railing and walked down the road to the end of town, because we never saw her again.

Florina rarely made choices. Ask her if she wanted a cookie or a banana, the blue crayon or the green, English or math lessons, and she'd watch you, paralyzed, rubbing her wrists, peering at you through her shaggy pale bangs, waiting for a sign telling her what you wanted her to choose. She chose those songs for me. "I sit and drink pennyroyal tea, still the life that's inside of me. I'm anemic royalty." From "Jesus Don't Want Me for a Sunbeam": "Don't expect me to cry, don't expect me to lie, don't expect me to die for me." I never asked her to die for Jesus. Over and over, I tried to explain to her that Jesus died for her.

The song I keep thinking about is one she didn't ask for, the Leadbelly song on that album and Annie's favorite. I play it at those parties, but I won't sing it. Annie does instead, in her unwavering alto: "My girl, my girl don't lie to me, tell me where did you sleep last night? In the pines, in the pines, where the sun don't ever shine, I would shiver the whole night through."

I'm no fan of the Orthodox faith, its obedient faithful literally on their knees as they worship a barely literate priest instead of Jesus Christ, Lord, in all his glory, but lately I've been thinking about the legend of Saint Paraschiva. When she died, her body didn't rot. It gave off the perfume of roses. Her chest cavity didn't cave in, as if her lungs were still going about the business of breathing and her heart was still beating on, waiting for that day when body and soul clasp hands and rise to the reward. Her body waits in a gilded casket inside the Metropolitan Cathedral. All over the Moldovan region in the north of Romania, they've built their faith around that wait.

This October, I keep walking through Cathedral Square as the crowds gathered for Hram, the week-long festival for Saint Paraschiva's hallowing day. I push through the waves of whining orphans tugging on coats and the cripples pulling themselves along in their hand carts or propelling themselves forward by the strength of their arms alone while their stumps drag behind them. Red-eyed street dogs bark on the edges, gypsies hawk their cheap plastic toys at every corner, and in front of the Cathedral, the nuns sell painted wooden icons the size of postcards. As I move down into the town, the air is thick with the smell of newly fried doughnuts and grilled sausages. I know the new group of Brigham

Young girls are looking for me, wishing I'd buy them doughnuts and shoo away the beggars and dogs. Everywhere I'm looking for a glimpse of pale Florina. I'm hoping that, like Saint Paraschiva, she can keep the rot from setting in, but that unlike Saint Paraschiva, she doesn't die. She isn't dead yet. She can't be. She's got to be somewhere moving on ahead from one state to another, turning into whatever it is she will be when she joins up with the Lord.

Larissa

THE RESEARCHERS ONLY ASK ME about the babies I didn't have, not the one I did, never about Florina. I must be ruining their statistics, but if they're so lazy as to get their subjects from the same clinic, it's their fault.

I told the lady that with my first one, I was just a kid. I had to leave school after the eighth form to work as a night janitress at the hospital. He said he would pull out, and it's true he had many times before. He was an intern. It was always clean under his neatly-clipped fingernails. There was always an empty bed somewhere in the hospital.

It would have been easy enough for him to arrange the abortion, but he told me he would say he didn't know me. A neighbor knew what to do. A spindle, a knitting needle, bay leaves. Only it didn't work, and I had to go to the hospital. I bled all over the waiting room chairs. I almost died. The doctor took pity on me and filled out the forms as if I'd had a miscarriage.

After that, I didn't want to have anything to do with men, but that's not how they felt about me. The second time, I tried it myself. The spindle, the oleander. I thought it worked, but I must have been raving because the neighbors broke down the door. They called a nurse who lived across the courtyard. I didn't even know her name, only knew her by the starched uniforms she wore and the silky mustache on her upper lip. She bundled it up in rags and threw it out in the garbage down the block so the dogs couldn't get at it. Someone must have told, because I ended up in court trying to describe my spontaneous miscarriage. I spent two years in prison, as did the nurse who helped me. When I tried to thank her after we both got out, she refused to see me.

I couldn't get a legal job placement because of my prison record. I managed by baking cabbage pies and selling them at the station. That's how I met her father. He was a maintenance man for the tracks. He'd have me do the sewing his wife couldn't because of her crippled hands. He was handsome, a strong chin like a movie star, like that Marcello in *La Dolce Vita*, and silvery hair, too.

I kept her because I was sure he would leave his wife. He paid for a room for a while. He visited Sundays. I'd cook for him frantically, even with my swollen feet, borsch and fried pork the way he liked it. Once she was born, he stopped paying. We stayed on a month before the landlord kicked us out. She was so small, I

thought I might break her. I would dream I'd lost her in the folds of the quilt or that she'd gone down the drain in the sink and I couldn't get her back. She cried all the time because she was hungry, but after I breast-fed her she would coo at me as if maybe she could get to be mine. One Sunday, I bundled her up in all of the clothes I had for her plus the two blankets and left her at the orphanage. I was leaking milk, but when I visited, they wouldn't let me feed her. It would be too confusing, the ladies said.

I used to visit her, at Children's Home Four. She clung to me like a monkey. She recognized me right away every time. She'd push the other kids off me to have me for herself. I always told her, don't share your little bird with anyone, not until you're grown and married.

When I was with Nicu, I meant to take her. Then he started hitting his own kids, and me, too, and I couldn't bring Florina into that. I stopped visiting. I didn't want her to see her mother with black eyes. I had two more abortions in those years with Nicu. I didn't need something else to defend.

I got a job at the clinic because it's funded through Soros, so they don't care about my prison record. They're proud of it, and I'm trotted out to meet foreign visitors. I've got a dormitory room I share with another lady who works at the clinic. There's no room for Florina. Besides, I've heard now that they've fixed up the orphanages with all the foreign money, English lessons and computers even.

I said to the lady researcher, do you really need to know anything more? What possible use will this be? What about the one I had? The translators didn't talk in English long enough to match what I said in Romanian. They gave me the money and a pack of Camels and they were gone.

Annie

THE FULBRIGHT PROFESSOR I'm working for this month is named Candy. She's middle-aged but well-preserved, turtlenecks to guard wrinkles, constantly applying hand cream. She's old enough to like it when the Romanian gentlemen kiss her hand. She's spent just enough time in Romania to pick up the paranoia without sensing what to be paranoid about. She keeps asking me, Annie, which person is the one the secret police sent to spy on me?

My answer—the person you least expect—has done nothing to calm her down. I've already picked out my spy. It's my host father's cousin, the one with the harelip who drops in on me in unannounced. Candy's asked me to come along to all of her interviews because she doesn't trust her official translator, Hadrian of the oily lips and acne scars and phony Oxford accent. Hadrian would like to sleep with Candy. Candy thinks he only wants a green card, but Hadrian seems generally interested in Candy's project, excited each morning to interview Iasi's street children, whores, petty thieves, glue sniffers, and ex-cons.

Candy is a sociologist looking at rehabilitation. She wants to blame most of the subjects' problems on being Roma. Maybe she's right, but my Peace Corps time in Truseni gave me village attitudes. I have to be careful to say Roma instead of gypsy in front of her. I'm glad her Romanian is poor because the things Hadrian and I say about the poor fuckers we interview would shock her. Hadrian gets the coffee for us in the morning while I tell Candy what we've got lined up each day. She listens to me leaning out of her balcony, watching the barking street dogs on the Square. Her salmon-colored, nineteenth century hotel was designed by an architect named Eiffel, but not the Eiffel Tower Eiffel. Iasi is a town of the almost famous, desperate cousins and second sons.

I haven't told Candy that Hadrian and I have done it before, back when he was a student at the university and I was still living in Truseni. We did it in the woods at the edge of town, pine needles poking us. We did it in his dorm room on his skinny bed while his roommates slept, Hadrian covering my mouth with his hands to keep me quiet. I've promised my Peace Corps friends I would stop dating men with the names of Roman emperors. Since this summer, I've only had eyes for Everett, which my friends think is just as bad. Or worse, they said at our last party. Don't let the fact that he's American fool you. Your cultures are crossed in spite of yourselves.

This morning, Hadrian forgot to bring the Camels, so I had to run out to a kiosk and purchase packs out-of-pocket. When I came back, Candy gripped my arm and hissed, he's my spy, I'm sure of it.

I have to stay on Candy's good side because I need her recommendation. I want to study anthropology. I told my host mother I'll study her and Truseni. She said, fucking unlikely. Because I spent so much time in Truseni trying to become an insider, it's hard for me to see it now with the eyes of an outsider. When in Truseni, I do as the Truseneancas do—cross myself backwards the Orthodox way, drink all night on holidays, polish my boots when I come back in the house, never bring an even number of flowers unless it's for a funeral.

My adaptations make Everett nervous. Everett's the kind of Christian who doesn't think anyone else is Christian. He tells me I've picked up all the worst aspects of Orthodoxy at the village church. I think the icons are beautiful; the more unrealistic, the better. The long-nosed Marys, Jesus with his overly attenuated fingers up in blessing, the colors in their faces verging from blood red to a murky green. I like the idea of miracles. I like the idea of submitting to a higher authority that works through a bureaucracy you can't hope to understand. It reminds me of Peace Corps or the Romanian government.

I could talk to Everett about things like that, in ways I couldn't to my host family or my Peace Corps friends. As I walked this evening to Cathedral Square to meet him, I tried to think about what I might tell him about today's interviews.

One of them wouldn't follow Hadrian's questions. She didn't want to talk about her abortions and prison term; she wanted to talk about her daughter. Candy kept nodding and tapping her pencil, even though she hadn't understood anything the subject was saying. If she knew how far afield the interview was going, she would have been furious and Hadrian would have been that much more likely to end up unlucky.

I've been unlucky all summer. I used to think someone should write a short story about Everett and me called "The Missionary Position." He can't date without chaperones. He saw someone in his study group at Penn, but he warned me it wasn't anything I would think of as dating. More like having a very close friend who is a girl that you see for group activities, he said, and I asked her father for permission first. He looked away from me as he said it and held on to his clunky Jesus fish necklace.

Everett hates meeting me at Metro Pizza off Cathedral Square. He wanted us to go to Little Texas, the restaurant run by missionaries at the edge of town by the cemeteries, but I wouldn't go. You have to take a taxi to get there, the waiters smile as if the corners of their mouths have been pinned up by the missionaries in the spirit of customer service, and you'll run into every missionary in Romania.

At Metro Pizza, the waitresses are surly, they never have mushrooms, and the sound track is invariably German techno. Everett was waiting for me outside, kicking at the crumbling leaves caught up in the iron-wrought fence by the Cathedral. He's always early. He doesn't want me to wait alone for him. I'll look too much like a streetwalker, I'll invite trouble, there will be implications he can't bear.

He greeted me with a handshake. His hands are long and thin, like the icons. I knew not to hold on for too long. He's growing a Jesus beard. His ruddy cheeks are partially camouflaged by the advance of the beard. His eyes look old in his too-smooth, broad face. He looks like a college boy playing at hippy rather than college boy playing at missionary. He doesn't tuck in his shirts and he wears his Jesus fish necklace, but everything is always clean, too clean. He always polishes the necklace before we go out. He says he has to keep it as close to sterile as possible because of the orphanage.

We ordered mushroom pizza but got primavera instead. We asked for the radio to be turned to Romanian pop. The waiter snorted at us and forgot to bring our drinks. I told Everett about Candy, avoiding talk of Hadrian. He talked about his search for Florina. He'd started to have fantasies that Florina was a modern-day Paraschiva.

Now who sounds Orthodox? I asked.

He blushed under his beard. I wouldn't be able to talk him into going to the Hram Fair now, or walking up on Copou for the fireworks. He asked me to come

to a party one of the married missionary couples was having. I couldn't help thinking that having a party on Hram was a good way to keep the flock from being tempted by beer and carnival rides. Everett paid the bill, stalking the waiter and thrusting our crumpled bills into his hand so that he couldn't refuse. Everett likes to overtip to shame the Metro Pizza staff into customer service.

Yes, let's go play Pictionary with the missionaries, I told him. Forget the fireworks. Forget the Fair. You can draw a triangle, and I'll guess the Trinity. You can draw a cross, and I'll guess the one true faith.

He ignored me. As he hailed a taxi, he said, I'll have an unfair advantage, all those hours I put in drawing with the kids.

In the taxi, I reached for Everett's hand. Mount Everest, I whispered. We're going to defeat them all. He stared at me so I added, at Pictionary. I know you can't be trying to win at too many worldly things at once.

He put my hand in my lap and held it there for a minute. Annie, it's a sin to be with you like that. He took his hand back.

I wanted to tease him, but it came out wrong. Maybe I wanted it to come out wrong. I asked, How do you want to be with Florina? Like that?

Annie. He brought his face closer and closer to mine so I could see the individual hairs that made up his beard. What I want is for you and me and Florina to be a family together. That can't happen until we find her.

And until I change my wicked ways, I said, trying to glide through the conversation. Even while we were having it, I guessed it might be our last.

He reached out for both my hands, holding them the way he would if we were about to begin a Romanian dance, a *sirba*, a *joc*. If my host mother were to see it, she would think we were courting. He said, It would be easier on me. If you changed. Do you know how hard it is to watch someone you care about risk damnation? Don't you know I'm constantly praying for you to find your way?

You mean *your* way, I told him. I turned away from him to look out the back window. We were stopped at a light. The fireworks started up behind us, splintering across the sky. I couldn't believe I wasn't at the Fair, couldn't believe I wasn't back in Truseni for Hram with my host family, couldn't believe I was going to a missionary party. I turned back to Everett. His eyes were glued to a group of street children huddled at the corner around a trash can fire. A pale girl was haloed in the light of an exploding firecracker. Everett opened the taxi door and jumped out. I watched Everett running after that moon-faced kid. She slipped into the crowd. He never once looked back at me.

I had the taxi take me back home. I sat up in my kitchen drinking gin. There was a confession I hadn't made to Everett. Last week, Candy wanted to interview pimps. Hadrian and I set one up with the *Peste*, the fish, down under the Red Bridge. Liviu was an orphan and had spent time in prison. Even under the bridge, the

weather was perfect, the sky the dark blue it is in Iasi sometimes, metallic blue like an icon. The leaves of the chestnut and linden trees were a brilliant ochre. Liviu was dressed in a flashy suit and kept winking at Candy. Hadrian found the whole situation distasteful, brushing his hands over and over on the seat of his pants as he checked off the interview questions with the mechanical pencil he kept clicking. All I had to do was hold the mini tape recorder steady. As Liviu listed his successes, the number of girls and boys working for him, neighborhoods he wanted to move into as he franchised, my eyes wandered through his kingdom. There, under the dripping Red Bridge, I saw Florina playing tug of war with a mangy puppy. I recognized her from the pictures stuck to Everett's fridge: pale bruised skin, limp light hair, a girl so distinctly absent she'd created a presence.

I didn't call Everett on his mobile phone. I didn't tell him about it later, pretending I didn't realize I was talking to her right away. Instead, I interviewed her, using Candy's standard set of questions. Everett wants Florina's soul and as it turns out, all I'm interested in is her data. Florina kept going on and on about a house at the end of the woods, a house at the end of the woods. She stuttered as she talked, first holding on to the squirming puppy, then rubbing one of her wrists with the other—the usual tics you see in people who've lived through institutionalization. My host mother told me once that everyone in Romania is crazy, that the whole country is a big nuthouse. There was a story Florina wanted to tell that had nothing to do with life on the streets, nothing to do with life under the Red Bridge; something about Germans and a fairy-tale house, but as she began, Liviu came over and had me tell Candy there had been no arrangements for any of his working girls to be interviewed. I gave Florina a pack of Camels anyway.

It's time for me to go home, but where's home? Truseni? Michigan? Where should I be celebrating my real Hram? Sometimes it feels like all of us, all of these bad Americans, are part of some diabolical homecoming leading us straight to Iasi. Tonight at Saint Paraschiva's Cathedral, I'll make my true confession. The priest will mumble something back to me. No matter what he says, I'll hear it as *Dumnezeu sa ierte*. Forgive us, Lord. On my way out, I'll give the nuns a 5,000-lei note and light a candle for Florina, sticking it up straight in the sandbox and making sure it doesn't blow out at least until after I've left the cathedral.

Karl

SAY WHAT YOU WANT, I always fed those kids and no one else was looking after the health of their bodies. No one loved their bodies as much as I did.

If I hadn't gotten greedy, it could have gone on forever, a sad little society chock full of orphans they weren't keeping track of. I'm not sure whether I chose to be a scholar of Balkan languages or Balkan languages chose me. Slavic, Magyar,

Romance, Hellenic—if it was Balkan, I dabbled in it. I received grants to Bulgaria and Romania in the early eighties and never looked back. Bulgaria had better weather and spicier food, but it lacked the orphans. I set up shop at the university in Iasi, teaching American culture. The U.S. State Department used me as a source of information in Ceaușescu’s weird country. The coeds thought I was sexist, but the truth is I simply had no interest in them whatsoever.

The opening up of Eastern Europe in 1989, the Internet, cheap digital technology, all made the business end of my enterprise possible but the more money I made, the more I knew I would lose everything. What a time we had, though, the orphans and me, before it all spiraled out away from us.

The United States Embassy gave me up quick enough once the authorities in Iasi built their case. Too much of what the street children were saying matched the evidence on the videos. Too many children were ready to testify, their cute little faces in the paper, on the TV.

The other prisoners would like to kill me. Their shanks are ready, sharpened and hidden. The guards will let them. The coroner won’t be too careful at the autopsy. I’ll be stomped to death in a riot, stabbed in the heart by my cell mates. A good way to go in the country of Dracula, as I wrote in one of my scholarly articles. It’s a hell to balance the paradise I used to have, those skinny, all-too-knowing virgins in and out of my sofa bed. A house to call my own at the end of the woods.

Actually, I can’t even remember Florina, and you wouldn’t either if the videos with her weren’t so popular among guys who like the idea of making it with the saddest orphans.

It isn’t a sin to be with you, pretty one. They said during the trial I told her that in one of the videos. The best-selling one. If it’s so, if I really said it, I was lying. She wasn’t pretty, not like those tiny boys with their coppery skin and black satiny hair, or some of those supple girls that were regular little Nadia Comanecis once you started to film them, back flips in bed and I’d be calling 10, 10, 10 as I came all over them.

If you’ve seen the videos, shouldn’t you be confessing, too? Maybe confession is what you get off on. Some people get off doing, some seeing, some reading. Can you say you haven’t ever thought of the possibilities? What would you do with a city of orphans spread-eagled before you? It can become a mechanical problem, a question of architecture, where to arrange the bodies and what you would like them to do with their nimble, cold fingers.