

“I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, ‘This must thou eat’. And I ate the world.”

-Emerson

The train groaned to a stop next to a small gray building on a tired gray Monday morning. The stiff, wet air pathetically refused to rain, and I held my breath waiting to see what was going to happen as we crossed the Romanian border.

“This isn’t Oradea is it?” I asked the six other volunteers waiting nervously with me.

“No, we’re at the border of Hungary and Romania I think, they will probably just check our passports here,” I heard one of my fellow Americans distantly reply.

I looked out of the window on the other side of the train. Heavy, mute clouds overwhelmed the flat skyline illuminating the overgrown weeds of the train station. Beyond the station, buildings and factories stood in crumbles. Houses were mostly wooden shambles, homes of the very poor, typical homes as far as I could see here. They were far past needing repairs, not even the tarps covering gashes in the roofs could keep out the somber wetness of this land.

A man with a blue jacket of purpose came to our train cart and asked for our passports. After having traveled across several borders by this point, we thought little of the situation and handed them over with our most polite American and British smiles we could muster.

The man saw where we were from and spoke up curiously in broken English, “What you do in Romania?”

Like star students trying to impress a new teacher we all excitedly replied, “We are volunteering outside of Oradea teaching English.”

“For how long you be here?”

“About three weeks.”

He nodded, took all of our passports and walked away and off the train. First, we all smiled because he spoke to us in English which was a rare skill in rural Romania. Then we realized he just took our passports and got off the train with them.

“He was the guy that checks passports, right?” one of the girls asked as we all looked around worried. “He’s going to be back with those, right?”

The clouds seemed to get darker as we sat there wondering if we had already gotten duped and had our passports stolen. The train didn’t move though, we had to be safe. Finally after a good twenty minute wait, the man came up to our window outside, handed all of our passports back and said “Good luck” in a doubtful tone.

Whether this was a sarcastic welcome to Romania, which it seemed to be, or a genuine one, the train lurched and we were off to Oradea flustered with fearful excitement.

When we got to the Oradea train station we all jumped off the train and walked around like a confused gaggle of geese. We were supposed to meet a woman here who would match us with each of our host families, but the place was crowded with people. We waddled around with our giant backpacks looking for a person we did not know, until a young woman with black hair and jagged teeth came up and started speaking English with a thick Hungarian accent. Families with small children and young teenagers gathered around our foreign circle and the nervous energy between all of us could have powered the entire city that day. Rain

came down in a sad drizzle. Old, beat up cars sped past the busy station, around road workers and tons of older women wearing scarves over their hair, thumbing their way home.

What was I doing here? I didn't belong here I began thinking. The urge to turn around and jump on a train swept over me, but I couldn't do it. I had no where to go and no one to ask for help. Our crowd was quickly dwindling as families whisked their volunteers, my only connection to anything I knew, away. My confidence leaked out of me like a broken faucet. I was so nervous I could barely put together a small smile to say goodbye as they drifted away. Soon, all of the volunteers were gone, but the woman still had not called my name. I looked around and there were no more happy families and excited children waiting anxiously for their foreign volunteer, for me. Finally she said my name, grabbed my arm and threw my hand into the tiny, bony hand of a wire-haired woman with small thin lips. The woman, half my size and named Eva, hurried me away from the crowded station as though I was a celebrity running away from paparazzi.

I would later find out that Eva was my host mother, but for those first two hours, she could have been the secretary to the Prime Minister of Romania for all I knew. She pushed me into a small, ugly brown car that sank with each extra pound added. Another woman sat in the driver's seat. She was small also, with a nicely shaped mullet of reddish brown hair, and pretty eyes. Who was she? I had no idea. The car rattled to a start and we left the train station, my only way of escape, for a village far away called Cubulcut.

Why did I get in that car? Why was I even in Romania in the first place? When I told some people that I was going to volunteer my time, even pay for my expenses, they praised me for doing good in the world. While I was traveling through Europe the thought of their praise poked at me in a guilty manner. How much of this trip was me doing good, and how much of

it was a selfish way to explore and test myself? A rebellion! I thought. An escape from the dull, middle-class struggles my world at home faced. Not only was I going to prove that there was a beautiful world beyond my American borders, but also that I could survive a more visceral challenge than the constant nagging questions that Western life brought on. I was naiveté and a touch of arrogance rolled into one shy, awkward package.

The ride to Cubulcut was long and I was confused. Neither of the women spoke to me. We stopped at a gas station and I saw a sleek silver car where Martha, a fellow volunteer, was squished in next to two little boys and talking excitedly with the mother. I couldn't help but feel jealous. I wanted a mom that talked to me, that filled me in on what I was to expect in the village and at school with my students. I wanted little brothers and sisters to grab my hand and pull me away to play. I felt alone in the back seat of that dumpy car as the women in front of me spat and grumbled their Hungarian words at each other. We drove on and I saw Lilly, another volunteer, with her family pulled over on the side of the road. She had two teenage sisters with her that pulled her out of the car to go see the vast sunflower fields. The flowers were well over six feet tall and still bright and yellow even in the dreary grayness. Sunflowers are my favorite flowers and at that moment I wished I could be with Lilly's family.

We drove on. Half way to the village, Eva loosened her seatbelt and turned around gracelessly to look at me. She gave a very slight smile and nodded. My fears were becoming reality. I was told that someone in my family would be able to speak some English, enough to communicate with, but this woman spoke absolutely no English, and I spoke no Hungarian. At that moment I prayed that this was just a nice neighbor that had picked me up for my host family, that when I got there, I would be received by a loving family with lots of kids and someone I could talk to. We drove through corn fields and through sunflower fields, the car

bounced violently over unpaved roads until we finally stopped. The road came to a fork and we got out of the car just to the right of it. I went to grab my giant backpack from the trunk but my hands were pushed out of the way. The two women, who together might have equaled my size carried my bag for me up the broken path and through a rusted steel gate. I had arrived at my temporary home.

“I know only that the doors opened, a little; that somewhere along that iron corridor we travel from babyhood to maturity, doors swinging inward began to swing outward, showing glimpses of the world beyond, of that bright thing we call ‘reality’.”

-Lillian Smith, Killers of the Dream

In that first hour in Cubulcut my brain went through an intense period of realization, adjustment, and acceptance. Never had I had to be so quick to learn how to communicate with someone without language. When we got into the house Eva walked with rapid little steps back to the rear of the house. There was little time to soak in what was around me because she was barking wretched Hungarian at me, hoping that I might understand some of it. I understood none of it. She patted a bed, and I assumed this was to be mine and then she took me to the kitchen. The whole time I followed her around all I could understand was the hoarse, gravel-like tone of her voice. Hungarian is a language completely unlike any language I’ve heard or studied. It originates from an ancient tribe in Siberia and is only similar to the Finnish language. There were no words I could latch on to like I could have with French or Spanish.

When we got to the kitchen Eva turned to face me. We stood eyeing each other for several long seconds as we both took in the fact that we could not speak to the other. I fully

realized this now and how difficult a challenge this would be. Nervousness took over my mind. Fear of how utterly uncomfortable and lost I would feel here consumed me. I wanted to run away. All of a sudden though, I looked at Eva again. I looked at her not as a strange foreign woman in front of me, but as just another person and realized that she was just as nervous as I was. Eva was offering her humble home and traditions to me based on a faith that told her my stay with her was important and would mean something not only to me, but to her and her community. I tried to set aside that fear and meet her half way between the silence we shared. When Eva finally spoke up, I held up my hand and waved her to where my bag was. I rummaged through my back pack and pulled out my bible for the next month. A small English-Hungarian dictionary. I thumbed my way to the back where Eva could look up a word in Hungarian and show me the English word. First she looked up the word *igazgato* and pointed to herself.

Igazgato means director I read. Okay so Eva was a director. I looked at her still with confused eyes. She nodded and thumbed her way to *iskola*. I read the word for school. Aha! I thought. Eva was the director of the school here, probably the school that I would be teaching at. All right, so I was living with the director of the school. This thought made me feel a little better because she could make sure I was well connected with the school. I looked up the word for where.

“*Hol iskola?*” I asked butchering each word with my soft voice. She looked puzzled because she couldn’t understand my pronunciation. I pointed to *hol* and then to *iskola*. I saw her face understand my question and she grumbled an answer as though I had all of a sudden learned Hungarian. I stared at her waiting for some sort of acknowledgement of my misunderstanding. She saw my confusion and waved the question away, as though it were too

difficult to answer at that point. Eva then grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the kitchen. She rubbed her stomach, and I tried to clarify her question by saying, “hungry?” She cocked her head, rubbed her stomach again and said, “ehes, igen?” I reached for the dictionary again and handed it to her. Yes, she was asking if I was hungry. I nodded, frightened of what I would be eating.

Before I could eat though, I had to find out where the bathroom was and so I tried to ask Eva where it was with awkward gestures. I didn’t know exactly how to make this question clear without being somewhat crude, so I did a little hopping and leg crossing. The whole time I pictured myself looking absolutely ridiculous to this woman. Thankfully, she quickly recognized what I was trying to say so I could stop dancing around her. Modern toilets are not yet in fashion in Cubulcut I learned, because Eva took me by the arm and led me outside, under the clothes line and to an outhouse about 30 feet away from the house situated in a muddy corner next to the barn. She looked at me like she was waiting for me to make some sort of disappointed face at the outhouse. I wanted badly at that moment to show my disappointment at my bathroom for the next three weeks, but I tried hard to look as though this didn’t even faze me. I didn’t want Eva to feel as though I thought badly of how she lived.

To physically get into this outhouse, however, required more strength than a stoic expression. I pulled the creaky wooden door by two fingers placed into a small hole that was apparently the door handle. I couldn’t just walk in and squat though, because I had to learn an intricate maneuver to safely get to the toilet “seat”. Spider webs bordered a good one-third of the door frame and covered all corners and cracks. The walls were made from mud bricks mixed with straw leaving a dark, rough texture, not that I ever tried to touch them. To avoid the muddy splotches, spider webs and their endearing little or big spiders, I stepped in, twirled,

bent my knees to duck, and craned my neck to safely back my way to the hole. I would later learn how nice the outhouse was compared to other bathrooms around the village, which simply consisted of a small hole in the ground. This dance was especially hard in the dark, and when it was raining. Hey, at least there was toilet paper though!

When I got back to the house, Eva had set two places at the small wooden table covered in an orange and brown plastic table cloth. First she put two bowls of yellow soup in the microwave. After visiting the outhouse, I was a bit shocked that she had a microwave, but she did. About ten minutes later, she put lukewarm soup on the table. I suppose it was similar to chicken noodle soup, but it had dumpling like balls in it also. Though rather cold, it was tasty so I sipped it down politely thinking that this was a nice lunch and avoiding the deep discomfort running through my veins. The only noise I could hear were the clinking of spoons against bowls and the slurping sound of soup. We didn't try to speak. When we were done Eva cleared our bowls and I started to get up.

“Nem, nem,” (no, no) and she gargled more words. I sat back down nervously. Then she pulled a bowl out of the refrigerator, yes there was a fridge also, and uncovered it. She threw several pieces of sliced, crusty bread into a basket and heated up some coffee. She also sliced up a tomato and a yellow pepper and sprinkled thick salt crystals over them. I sat watching her, holding myself back from my natural urge to get up and help because there was little I could actually do at that point. Finally she sat down and I saw that she was spreading a greenish purple, chunky dip over a slice of bread. I can do that, I thought. I followed her every motion trying to quickly learn how she did things. The dip was a bit odd looking but I went for it and was pleasantly surprised. I think it was made mostly from eggplant. After lunch, she poured coffee into a miniature mug and put out creamer and sugar. The coffee was strong, very

similar if not the same as Turkish coffee. Eva kept saying, “*jo*” and thinking she was just using another word for yes, I repeated her *jo* with my own “*jo, jo*”, a big smile and nod. After about a week and a half, I realized *jo* meant good, not yes, and this realization clarified why Eva laughed at me every time I said it.

When we were done with lunch and all the dishes were put away, Eva waved me to her and started making gestures emphasized with her harsh mumble. She rubbed her arms and pinched at my shirt. I tried to make sense of her movements, but remained confused. Eva made gestures at her hair and then my hair, and then pretended to scrub my arms down. I began mimicking her until I realized she was making bathing motions. Was she going to bathe or did she want me to? Did I smell bad after a long day of travel, or was she trying to make me feel comfortable? I decided it would be best to just follow her questions and nod my head. So I made my own bathing gestures, combined with a slight smile of comprehension, nodded my head, and said, “*jo, jo*”. Of course she gave a little gruff laugh and pulled me to the back bedroom where she handed me a hooded towel, let me gather some clean clothes and led me back to the kitchen. Here she pointed to a big bowl of water she had put on the stove, touched the side to indicate its heat, held up five fingers and pointed at her naked wrist to tell me it would be about five minutes until the water was ready. I sat there figuring out her gestures and realizing that I wouldn’t exactly be taking a bath. A couple quarts of hot water wasn’t enough for a bath. Obviously there wasn’t a shower, and so it hit me that during my stay in Romania, if I wanted to get clean, I would take sponge bathes.

When the water was done, Eva set the bowl in a small room beside the kitchen and motioned for me to go in and closed the door behind me. I stood barefoot on a wet slab of concrete and looked at a rusty, ancient claw-foot tub and wondered how I would attempt

cleanliness. I took off my clothes and set them on a small stool next to the door and stepped into the damp tub. This couldn't be that hard could it? People do this all of the time, I thought. I brought the bowl of water closer to me and filled my hands with warm water. As I cupped the water onto small sections of my body, I wanted to both laugh and cry. I pictured myself standing naked in that dark, wet room, throwing cupfuls of water at my body. The dirty white walls around me were torn and scratched all over, and water hoses poked bleakly out of giant holes in the wall. A shelf behind me was strewn with empty and half empty bottles of soaps and shampoos with Hungarian names. Maybe it was because I was standing there naked and the air was cold and goose bumps quietly appeared all over my body; maybe it was the sinking feeling of understanding the depth of my situation that made me feel so absolutely vulnerable. Whichever it was, this haunting feeling of being unbearably exposed didn't leave me until many months later.

Later that evening, after Eva had walked me around the main part of the village and gotten me ice cream, we went back to the house where I began unpacking some of my things and read a bit. As I sat on the bed which was covered in what looked like long-haired shag carpet, a most important character walked into my life. She was about 5'5'' with bleach blonde hair. She had a big nose and dark eyes. Her firm, youthful body was tan and exposed in short athletic shorts and a tight tank top. Her name was Eviťse. Eviťse was in no way beautiful, but something about her was mesmerizing. She walked right up to me and shook my hand with complete confidence and then went and sat next to a shelf with books, a boom box and a vase of flowers on it. She pushed away the vase of flowers and pulled out about twenty-five different shades and sparkles of nail polish. Aggressively, she tackled the chipped paint on her toenails with polish remover and then began speaking to me. I had no idea what she was

saying but it sounded different than how Eva spoke. I listened intently and began recognizing words and inflections. Eviťse was trying to figure out if I could speak other languages.

“*Italiano?*” She asked me. I was shocked to find out she knew Italian, and frustrated I had not pursued an interest in Italian that I had in high school. At least I could kind of recognize the language, but definitely not enough to communicate with. Then she tried what I would later learn to be Romanian. Romanian is also a romance language and is similar to Italian or French in some structure and sound. However, Romanian was a second language in the region of Romania I was in because the people here were ethnic Hungarians and still considered themselves to be Hungarian people because until borders were redesigned after World War I they were a part of Hungary. I moved off the bed to sit on the floor with Eviťse so we could try to learn more about each other. She pointed towards the kitchen where Eva was and then back at herself and said a few words. I shrugged my shoulders to show her I didn’t understand and she tried again. I attempted to find words to help her describe what she was talking about, but neither of us understood. After a long confusing “conversation” I went and found my dictionary and showed Eviťse how to find Hungarian words so she could show me what she meant. The first word she looked up was *anya* and pointed to Eva. As I read that *anya* meant mother, I quickly put together that Eviťse was Eva’s daughter, which meant she was going to be my host sister. It also meant that this room I was staying in was hers’ and we would be sharing it for the next three weeks. For the rest of the night we made slow progress in getting to know one another. In about five hours I learned that she was twenty-one, she had a boyfriend, and could count to ten in English.

“Sometimes I open, pried like a fruit. Or I am porous as old bone, or translucent, a tinted condensation of the air like a watercolor wash, and I gaze around me in bewilderment, fancying I cast no shadow. Sometimes I ride a bucking fath while one hand grips and the other flails the air, and like any daredevil I gouge with my heels for blood, for a wilder ride, for more.”

-Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

My first full day in Cubulcut was also the first day that I taught my class. I woke up at 8:00 in the morning to the drumming of a heavy downpour outside. The house was dark, but noisy. Baby kittens were whining for food and roaming around the carpeted floors bumping into chairs because their eyes were not yet open. A pot in the kitchen was whistling to tell us the coffee was ready. And Eva and Evitse were throwing bread, jam, plastic plates, and hot chocolate on the table. When they saw me they nodded me toward the table and started asking me questions that I could only respond to in “I don’t know”, shrugs, and gestures. They filled me up with the leftover eggplant dip from the day before, which I would actually end up eating for several days to come, coffee and hot chocolate, bread and jam. Evitse rubbed her arms and chattered her teeth to tell me it was cold outside and so we both went to put on long pants and jackets. When we got to the door to put on our shoes, Both Evas shook their heads at my feet and ran around frantically as I stood there watching and wondering what they were doing. Soon they came back and handed me a pair of old tennis shoes to wear. They didn’t want my flip-flops to get muddy, I think. There was no way to refuse these tiny shoes and so I put them on and Evitse and I rushed out of the house hovering under broken umbrellas down to the school house about a mile away.

It was raining hard like a monsoon and the mud and cow shit flooded the road and the pathway. When I stepped into the first day of class, I was soaked and my pants looked as though they had been spattered with chocolate fondue. My initial excitement for this challenge was drowning swiftly with every moment that passed. I thought my students would be nervous on their first day of class, but instead it was me that was overwhelmingly nervous. About thirty kids between the ages of six and twenty-one stared me down as I walked into the room trying my hardest to look confident, but feeling like a defeated dog already. They were crowded in at wooden desks covered with pencil shavings, and next to a single book shelf filled with more paper arts and crafts than books. I couldn't help but question my reasoning for volunteering to do this. What could I possibly offer these anxious kids?

“Hello!” I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. I peeled as many wet layers off as I could.

Awkward mumbles and an exchange of curious glances was all I received.

“My name is Caitlin.” I spoke clearly and loudly. I even pointed at myself to indicate that I was trying to introduce myself and wrote the phrase on the chalk board.

Nothing. Evitse was sitting in the back of the classroom and spoke up in Hungarian. The whole class turned and listened, smiled and turned back to me for more. I can only assume she cleared up that I was just introducing myself. As I stood there looking at these kids, I wanted the ground to give in and let me fall out of that room. Where was the person that was going to help translate for me? Evitse only knew what I was doing because we had done it fifty times the night before when we met. How was I supposed to teach them English with absolutely no foundation in the language, and why hadn't I tried to learn more Hungarian than yes, no, and thank you? I saw disaster unfolding. How quickly were these people in Cubulcut

going to figure out what a fraud I was? The potential I saw in myself to share the goodness I carried had drowned in the mud on the way to school. I was a cheater and a liar being there under the alias of *volunteer*, when really I was stealing bits and pieces of these people's lives and judging them with my naïve and idealistic perspective. Everyone there must have been able to see right through me, but I wasn't able to see past myself. There I stood in front of a crowded room of kids literally as a teacher, but I had never felt more like a floundering student in my life.

Fortunately though, the ground never gave way. It was simple really, all I had to do was choose not to fail because it was the act of failure that would teach these kids everything I was against. I had three weeks to learn to communicate with everyone and I knew that no one was leaving this class with fluent English. If Eva and I could figure out how to communicate the idea of sponge bathing though, then I could at least get these kids to be excited about learning a new language, and maybe better yet, I could learn some of their language. I had to trust that these people would meet me somewhere in the middle of this silent relationship and together we would make this happen. I knew now that communication relied on the efforts of both parties, but I was scared to death to put myself out there more so than I already had.

“You have stumbled on in darkness, you have been pulled in opposite directions, you have faltered, you have missed the way—but, child, this is the chronicle of the earth.

-Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*

The first four days were excruciatingly long. I sat on Eva's pullout couch, which was also her bed, watching Hungarian TV looking at my cheap blue dolphin watch every five

minutes. It rained incessantly for those first four days. Going outside was done only when necessary, so after my two and a half hour long class in the morning, I did nothing for the rest of the day. Minutes felt longer than days, and as hours came to an end I secretly congratulated myself for making it through. I never knew what would happen if I didn't make it through each hour, but whatever that dark side of time was motivated me to just keep breathing. In the grand scheme, I know that three weeks really is not a very long time. However, everyone knows how it feels to be crushed by an unending hour. My struggle with time was not just a desire for one hour to be over. It was the inability to succumb to the nothingness filling my time, and the knowledge that every day I spent there would be a struggle to overcome this feeling. I called myself out for being weak. I knew I was being weak allowing myself to think this way. Thinking was the problem though. Too much quiet time means too much thinking and too much thinking just makes what few things could have felt natural, painful. I only brought with me a couple of books so I had to ration out my time reading because I didn't want to run out of material. Reading and writing in my journal kept my mind occupied, but still left so many empty hours of thinking, thinking, thinking and I couldn't talk about any of it to anyone. Thoughts are meant to be shared, but I could only share mine with myself sending me into a vortex of bitterness and confusion. There was no one there to check my disillusionment.

Because our communication was still very stressed the Evas basically had me sit on the couch and watch awful American horror movies dubbed in Hungarian as they filled me with food during these empty hours. Normally I don't have a problem with watching movies, but there it was one right after another, and I could understand none of it because they weren't in English. Every movie they showed me was another grotesque venture into someone else's

desire to murder people in the cruelest way. I think I saw all of the *Saw* movies, *Final Destination* movies, and other similar bloody murder movies. All of the death I was watching without an understanding of the plot made me sick to my stomach and I began, slightly jokingly, wondering if these people had some other plans for me while in Romania. Under the crushing perpetual struggle with time and the anxiety sitting in my stomach from just watching death, it was incredibly difficult to try to keep a good perspective of what was going on. There were points when I felt completely suffocated by the unending waves of time and fear.

Food is usually comforting in lonely situations, but here it was more like a duty. The food wasn't ever bad, but it was constant and so heavy. Soups, greasy meats, pastas, potatoes, dumplings, and tons of bread were at every meal. One day I even saw what looked like a boiled baby hand sticking out of Eva's soup bowl. I told myself it was probably just a chicken foot, and at least it wasn't in my bowl. In between the giant meals the Evas brought me plates of cookies, crackers, and chips. My glass was never empty, and nearly always orange. It felt as though all I drank there was orange soda because I was told not to drink the water because I would get sick, and so it was orange soda or dehydration. Occasionally they brought home big bottles of sparkling water, and I gulped that down quickly. Even if I shook my head when they pushed more soda or cookies on me, even when I said, "Nem, Koszi" (an incorrect way of saying No, thanks) they gave me some anyways. I swear I felt like I was living in the witch's candy house of *Hanzel and Gretel* and they were trying to fatten me up. And of course, drinking leads to peeing, and peeing became a common hobby, a task even, especially in the rain.

I had a lot of time to study the inside of this little house I was staying in because I couldn't sit still throughout the day and focus on the death movies in front of me. From the

outside it does seem small, but like it could potentially have a lot of room. However, it's divided up so that we would walk through the front door and into the kitchen, where the floor was covered in a curling vinyl. There was a small sink, a small stove, and the kitchen table. Above the microwave was a window, and like all of the windows in the house, was draped with lace curtains. Though the lace was washed by hand quite regularly, it was browning and the ends were splitting from time and wear. A dark brown wooden cupboard stood tall across from the kitchen table and held just enough dishes for the two person family and maybe a guest or two. It also held a lone cup of sugar, powdered cream, and a baggie of hot chocolate mix. Inside, there were plastic baskets and loaves of bread. To the right of the stove was the "spongebathroom" as I called it in my head. There was probably only one piece of art, as I might think of it, in the entire house and it was in the kitchen above the kitchen table. A poster-size painting that curled out at the edges and dark brown through and through. The image looked somewhat colonial, with horses and perhaps some hint of royalty in the scene. It didn't seem, at least to my unknowing eyes, to represent anything significant about this family or their heritage.

Then, to get to Evi's room, we had step up from the kitchen and into Eva's room which could also be considered the living room. Her pull-out couch was stiff and covered with rough, thick brown blankets which felt more like tapestries than anything else. To the right of the door was a single wood stove that vented through the ceiling, and an ironing board. Beyond that was a giant, wall-length dresser built with various cubby holes and spaces. In here, I could see Eva's small wardrobe hanging, and also extra blankets and pillows. The window above the bed was slightly hidden by the lace curtains and had three window panes with built-in shutters on the inside. One window was always left open just a bit so that mail

could be slid onto the sill. Every inch of the floor was covered with rectangular rugs overlapping each other. Each one had individual patterns and were made with dull browns, oranges, and reds. This room shared very little personality and gave few clues as to who Eva was. All I could see was that she was simple, utilitarian, and though different from myself, completely normal. I wished there were family photos or some kind of reference to Eva's history or what kind of person she was. Everything seemed so cut and dry and made it difficult to read into this family I was with, which was frustrating because everything I knew about Eva and Evitse was superficial.

After passing through Eva's drab room, we arrived in Evitse's room. Her floor was actually carpeted and she also had a wall-length cabinet on the far side of the room. Her cabinets were filled with old stuffed animals and dolls collected over the years. There were encyclopedias on the bottom shelf, close to the nail polish and a boom box that played what seemed to be some sort of constant melodic rave music on shuffle. In one of the cabinets the five kittens that were born what must have been only a few days to a week before I got to Cubulcut, were sleeping or meowing. When Evitse would let them out to play they would blindly roam on shaky legs around the room figuring out what places were soft enough to sleep on, or where they could climb and tumble over each other. As cute as they were though, their fleas were everywhere. I woke up the first couple of mornings covered in brand new flea bites, hoping that this was something I could force myself to adjust to.

One afternoon, I wandered around Evitse's room and look at the ancient couch they brought in for her to sleep on while I was staying with them. It was pushed against the wall adjacent to the door and next to a giant chest of drawers. I noticed that there was an old door behind the couch that must have lead to either the outside or another part of the house I hadn't

seen. There was a large curtain covering the window, and curiously I stepped up to pull it back to see what was out there. I looked out the window and all I saw was a very dark and dirty segment of the house with a string hanging from corner to corner. The dull daylight seeped through a cracked door and old windows on the opposite wall leading to the outside illuminating the bodies of dead farm animals hanging from the line. I know for certain that I saw a chicken, and instantly realized that I had probably just seen the food I would be eating for the rest of my stay, and it was hanging just outside my bedroom.

“From the beginning you recognized him as one of your own.”

Daniel Quinn, Ishmael

Almost every other day, Evitse would set up a wooden table next to the TV and pour out her bag of metal cosmetic tools. Never had I seen so many brushes, clips, tweezers, and even things that looked like they were made to poke and pull at places I didn't want to think about. Evitse always had music playing in the background of whatever we were doing. It wasn't the eclectic eastern European tunes I expected though. Every man, woman, and child seemed to own his or her own cell phone in Cubulcut, but the kids at least, didn't use them to call anyone. They blared the absolute worst American rap music I could imagine. Here I was in the middle of rural Romania and I felt like I lived inside a thugged-out club constantly. One of the only questions in English I got the entire time I was there was: *“You have favorite rapper?”* If these kids had any idea what America was like they must only have seen MTV and thought big butts and bling were what we valued over in the States.

While listening to the ever progressive lyrics of Lil Jon and Lil Wayne, Evitse situated a pink mirror in her lap and then plucked and moisturized her nearly black eyebrows. Then she twisted her dyed blonde hair into tiny twists like corn rows. Sometimes she sat there stretching her face this way or that way to see potential wrinkles or blemishes in her twenty-one year old face. One afternoon, Evitse walked into Eva's room followed by four other girls. They were all students in my class so we nodded and said hello. Evitse laid out a towel on a table she situated next to the bed and set up all of her tools and nail polishes. For a couple of hours they all sat there getting their nails done, laughing and DJing the rap music. I sat there quietly, even bitterly as I yearned to be at home hanging out with my friends, and then Evitse said, "*Catty, Catty,*" and waved me towards her (after a couple of days everyone gave up trying to pronounce Caitlin, and so from then on I was known as Catty, with a strong emphasis on the t sound). She brought a bowl of warm water to the table and motioned for me to put my hand in the bowl. I did and for those few moments I forgot about where I was. When my fingers were good and almost wrinkly, she pulled them out and began scraping away at the dirt and extra skin around the cuticles of my nails with one of her torture-like tools. She clipped and smoothed all of my nails and then rubbed them down with some kind of oil. Once they were dry she spread layer upon layer of various colored paints on each nail, all the while focusing intently on the work in front of her. Her face never strayed from the serious expression she wore as she did my nails, every nail was her masterpiece. After the initial layers of paint were dry, she would use a contrasting color, or even glitter paint and use something like a toothpick to dot and swirl the paint, giving my nails a three dimensional sparkle.

Never having been much of a girly-girl, my cynical youth had always laughed at primping and taking part in superfluous hobbies like manicures and getting my hair all done

up. In America, I see these things taken to such an extreme with surgery, botox, tanning beds and it disgusts me because it ruins who people really are. Childish, a waste of time, and a destruction of girls' self image, I thought that first time I saw Evitse bring her friends over and paint their nails and do each other's hair. A bitter monologue of unhealthy and university bred beauty standards went through my head, as I sat alone on the corner of Eva's bed watching those girls giggle and take pleasure in their colorful new nails. But when Evitse invited me to join their cosmetology club, like a sharp slap to the face my cynicism shattered and I realized my attitude and my education was ruining me. I was no better than these girls, I was just one of these girls. I like looking pretty, I like getting dressed-up sometimes, I like attention. I had forgotten one of my most powerful tools in building a bond with Evitse; being a girl. I had to get back to the basics, not just of communication, but of myself to connect with the people around me.

"People seldom see themselves changing."

-Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road

I expected to be different from the people I met in Romania, but their untrusting stares in the first week of my stay made me feel completely unwanted. The kids I hung out with ignored me for the most part because rather than attempting to make some confused effort to talk to me, they pretended I wasn't there. Once the rain ceased, we spent every evening at the general store drinking orange soda and eating sunflower seeds. A couple of times I tried to bring up pieces of what Evitse had tried to communicate to me earlier in the day. "*Boyfriend?*" I whispered knowing she had a boyfriend and curious as to whom it was. "*Mmm very*

beautiful, no here,” she said. I had taught her the word beautiful, *szep* in Hungarian. It became her favorite English word, but she had nothing to say after that. She had told me something about a disco, and I said, “*Disco?*” wondering if there was going to be some kind of dance. Evitse clapped her hands together and yelled “*Disco!*” and all of the kids started chattering amongst themselves, I understood none of it. Being a person who easily gets nervous in situations involving more than two other people, it was very difficult overcoming the language barrier and my shyness at the same time. When my first simple efforts opened no doors, I started giving up and giving in to the danger of my quiet nature.

After a couple of days I disengaged myself entirely and situated my body so that I could watch the sunset and try to think about anything but wanting to get out of there. I felt like an orange soda slurping ghost in these kids’ world. The worst part was when I heard someone say, *Americai* and sometimes nod in my direction. I knew they were talking about me and I had no idea what they were saying. When I knew they were talking about me, I looked at them with eyes that asked them to try to communicate with me, but by this point I never said anything, I failed to assert myself, and they just avoided my looks and kept on talking. Afterward, Evitse would always glance up at me guiltily and sometimes shrug her shoulders. Was I just here to entertain these wanna-be-gangsters? I selfishly thought. After a couple of days of attempting to put myself out there to get to know these kids and receiving nothing but, “Catty, lets going”, nothing more than a demand that I follow them, I began falling far into myself. It seemed obvious that I wasn’t necessary to these people, not even interesting and I wanted to go home more than I ever had. It got to be much easier to villainize people in my head than to actually try to do anything about it. I had gone into Romania, into this whole summer of traveling and teaching thinking I was going to make a difference, I was going to

change the way people understood others. But when I realized this was not the way the world works, I gave up. I am young and idealistic, and full of hope. I knew my work would not alter the state of the world, but it would have its own impact on the people I met, I had hoped. No one I met would end up changing as much as I did though, and it's in these small personal changes that I can only hope I make some difference in my own world, at least.

It took me several days of feeling sorry for myself before I even began realizing that I absolutely had to make more of an effort. I wish I had been more outgoing, more willing to look foolish, but it is so natural for me to separate myself from people and live purely inside of my mind. It's both a safety net and a dangerous flaw that I finally pin-pointed in my reflection of my time in Romania long after I left. I only let down these personal walls for two and half hours in the morning during class where I sang and danced, and somehow got the kids to love the games we played. After class though, I shut off and refused to allow myself to be more vulnerable than I already felt. The way I saw it in these moments of complete disconnection was that these people could tell me where and when to do everything, what to wear, what to see, what to eat, but I would give them no more than my physical self at this point. A mistake and a loss for everyone involved, my stubbornness killed me, but it was the awareness of my inability to change that ate so viciously at my insides.

*“To hold a damaged sparrow
Under water until you feel it die
Is to know a small something
About the mind; how, for example,*

*It blames the cat for the original crime,
How it wants praise for its better side...*

-Stephen Dunn, "With No Experience in Such Matters"

I told myself on the first day while I was following Eva around that I couldn't cry, I couldn't even let a single tear fall until the day I left Romania and I got back to Budapest. Though I felt like my eyes were constantly ready to flood over, I did hold it back until the fourth day. The rain outside had finally stopped and Evitse and I went down to the decrepit old dance hall in the middle of the village. The yard was fenced in and covered in branches and foot high weeds and trash. Windows were broken and dirty almost beyond cleaning. The floor was covered in a thick brown, muddy dust, and spiders clung to every corner. I realized quickly that we were here to clean the building up and I was excited to be doing something outside the house. Students and other kids showed up and all began wiping down windows, weeding and sweeping. Giant piles of weeds and plants were gathered outside the fence where Evitse's neighbor came around on his horse and carriage to pick them up in loads and dispose of them in a carved out hole in the middle of a field several miles away (It was far more common to drive a horse and carriage than a car there in Cubulcut). After about an hour of bending over pulling up weeds and trash in the silence of my own head, Eva came pattering up the road and through the gate holding out her hand and grumbling something in Hungarian. She came straight for me and for a second I thought she might grab my arm and pull me off somewhere to scold me for some unknown reason. Then I saw that she had a cell phone in her hand and she was holding it out for me. Completely confused and scared, I took the phone from her and said hello.

My stomach sank and rose back up simultaneously. When my dad answered the phone, the tears I had been holding back poured out. I had been traveling through Europe for over a month at this point, and hadn't spoken to my parents in a couple of weeks.

“Caity?” Only my dad can call me Caity.

“Dad, I'm here, it's me.”

“It's so good to hear your voice, are you okay sweetie?”

“No, no I'm not, I can't talk to anybody, it rains everyday, I've never been so uncomfortable. I'm tired of pissing in a hole. I want to come home. Dad, I want to come home.”

I walked around to the back of the building so that no one would see me cry.

“It's going to be all right Caity, just take it moment by moment...”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Our connection was lost after about two minutes of talking to my dad. I tried calling back probably twelve times. I tried dialing different country codes, calling my mom's phone, but nothing worked. I had lost him after two minutes. When I walked around from the back of the building, Eva had left and I began making my way back to the house to return her phone. I tried redialing ten more times between the dance hall and the house, nothing. I left her phone on the kitchen table and walked back to the dance hall, trying to hold back more tears. Once I regained control of myself, I felt just a little bit stronger. I stared at my feet stepping on each stone in the pathway and revisited each word my dad said over and over in my head. I had to take each day as it came; no not even each day, each moment; no matter how slow, or how lonely I was. Difficulty is not falling into the hole of your mind, when it's that very hole that already surrounds you.

As I walked back up to the dance hall I was wondering if Evitse would understand what that phone call meant to me. There was no father that lived with her, there was no older man that seemed to be a part of her life. I never found out what happened to her dad, whether he was ever a part of her life, or maybe he died when she was younger. I did learn that she had three other siblings dispersed throughout the Balkans and that family seemed important to her, but what did the idea of a father mean to her? Fortunately I heard, “Catty, lets going” and saw Evitse wave me up to the horse and carriage with her. I tried to let the strength of my dad’s voice sink in and forget about home for a while. I was excited about going for a ride in the horse and carriage and seeing more of the village.

Riding in this horse and carriage definitely reminded me of the luxuries of cars back home because though a horse and carriage sounds romantic and rustic, I now know exactly why people moved on to cars. Normally you don’t accidentally sit and stick your hand in wet horse shit, smell constant horse farts, and get whipped in the face by horse tails in cars. As gross as all this was though, I welcomed this new adventure as a chance to experience this Romanian life. We rode high above the gravel roads, bouncing sharply over rocks and mounds of dirt, but even the horses who were tall, chestnut, gorgeous animals seemed defeated. Strapped and tied into the wooden carriage, they showed no personality like I remembered animals back at home. I realized that animals here, especially ones like horses, were not pets or friends. They were purely work animals, and appreciated only for their work. I had wanted to pet them and rub my hand on their soft noses so they could know my smell, so they could know I was gentle and friendly, but this wasn’t accepted here. I was told, “Nem” and got a finger waved in my face.

We rode through the village and past cracked houses and overgrown yards. Gardens grew brightly in each yard. Fruit trees filled large areas behind houses and beneath them, their muddy apples and pears sat on the ground waiting to be picked up. Enormous sunflowers grew everywhere. Rows and rows of yellow and green accentuated the gray houses and roads. Old men stood at fence posts wearing thick dark pants and home-knit drab vests over long-sleeved shirts. Their faces were set in stern frowns framed with deep canyons of sad expressions. They stared at me with unchanging postures as we passed them by.

“*Sziasztok!* (Hello)” Evitse would call out. A nod, a mumble and a continuous stare was all we got. I even mimicked Evitse’s *sziasztok* and smiled a big one, but I learned rather quickly that a smile in Romania got me nowhere with people. I was so used to using my smile to at least soften a first impression back at home, and even other places in Europe. Smiling is so natural to me, I had never thought until I got to Romania just how relative a smile can be, or even how taken-for-granted a smile was to me. I remembered hearing somewhere along my trip that a smile in some parts of Eastern Europe wasn’t a trustworthy quality. It meant that the person smiling had something, specifically wealth, that made them feel better than the rest of the people. Of course this was by no means what I meant with my smile, but I often wonder if it was my initial smile that might have turned people away from me and if people in Cubulcut thought I was arrogant. I especially realized how true this thought could be when I became so disengaged and unwilling to share myself with anyone. With these two parts of me combined, I can’t blame them one bit if they thought of me as an arrogant American.

We rode on and finally got to a vast field of thick grass. Up the hill a ways was a huge, abandoned brick building. It was the only thing like it around this area from what I could see. It looked like it had been a part of something rich a long, long time ago; maybe a barn for a

wealthy family that no longer existed. We stopped at a hole barely visible to the passerby that served as a dump for Cubulcut. I held the reins, keeping the horses still while Evitse and her neighbor unloaded the weeds from the carriage. On the way back from the “dump” I felt a sense of understanding towards the people that lived there. I didn’t feel quite so empty after seeing more of the people and the village. However, something happened on the way back that sent my opinion of these people into deeper conflict than I could have imagined.

We were riding up a hill back towards the dance hall when we passed by the little school that I taught at. Streaming out of the school were tons of beautiful little kids screaming and laughing as they began running around the school grounds playing. At first they made me laugh, but then I realized that every one of these children was very dark skinned. They looked nearly Indian in complexion, and even facial structure. They looked far different than the white-skinned Romanians with deep-set eyes. None of these kids were in my classes in the morning, and I hadn’t seen them around the village at all. I remembered something someone had told me in Croatia a couple of weeks earlier. They said that the gypsy people in Central and Eastern Europe were a bad breed. They said that they stole and refused to work, and only took handouts from people and the governments. Just a couple of hours earlier, Evitse and I were walking and passed a dark woman, and after she was gone, Evitse said, “*Gypsy*” pointed back at the woman and then said, “*no clean*”. One night at the general store, a very dark boy came up to our picnic table, and Evitse and others yelled and sneered at him. They flapped their arms angrily to make him go away. As I began piecing these separate events together, Evitse stood up in the carriage and started yelling at the children. Of course I have no real idea of what she said, but I got the impression from the tone in her voice that she was not just joking around with them. Some of the kids that passed us by either yelled back or looked very

uncomfortable. All of a sudden I realized that their classes and activities must be segregated from the white Romanian kids' classes and activities. Though I saw all of this only in action, I had hoped that there was some other explanation for what was going on, but I learned later after my stay in Cubulcut that they did indeed segregate. Martha, another volunteer who stayed in a similar type of village had gypsy kids physically removed from her classroom by local, white adults.

Growing up white, in the American South, I learned all about segregation and the awful pain it caused so many people. I read stories and history books. I watched videos of people fighting for their rights as human beings through both words and violence. And when I read and watched, I felt sympathy and anger for the history I would never fully feel because of who I am and when I lived. I get to live in the aftermath of the peak conflict, and enjoy the slow-coming benefits of diversity. Knowing about the struggle that people were willing to go through, and even still endure to this day, impacted me more in Romania than it ever had in America. For the rest of my time in Cubulcut, I became hyper-aware of the racist dynamic between people and had a difficult time dealing with it because I couldn't say anything. At the same time though, even if I could have said something, what could I have said to remotely impact the deeply engrained and even ancient prejudices of these people? Their understanding of civil rights and equality were unlike mine entirely, at least from what I could gather. When all of this sunk in as we got back to the dance hall, I heard my dad's voice again and remembered him telling me the story about where he was the day Martin Luther King died. He said when the news hit, it wasn't just a sadness that swept across the people around him, it was the violent shattering of a faith in change. He was in Atlanta at a burger joint, a college student like myself. The restaurant was mainly employed by black women, and he said they wailed

and fell to their knees like they had just watched all of their faith drown. Then he went back to his dorm room at Georgia Tech where all of the guys were cheering grotesquely at the news.

I tried to put all of these stories and experiences together and find my own place within it all. I looked at this village and the information I could gather from watching and hearing bits and pieces of racism and stereotypes, and then I looked back through my dad's eyes and tried to feel what it was like to be an American when he was a college student. Back at home while I was in Romania, a young senator with a diverse convergence of interracial family and personally experienced politics was reining in support for his candidacy for president. Barak Hussein Obama, a half black, half white man from humble origins was about to become America's next president, and I would get to be a part of it. The appreciation for a struggle I never had to fight, and the respect I felt for the people fighting for values long forgotten overwhelmed me. Never before had I felt even an ounce of pride for my pompous country, but my experiences with segregation in Romania illuminated the tiny elements that strengthened what America was to me.

Cold rapid hands
Draw back one by one
The bandages of dark
I open my eyes
Still
I am living
At the center
Of a wound still fresh

-Octavio Paz, "Dawn"

The first week in Romania slowly and silently slipped into the past. I was counting the days down until I would be getting on that train and riding back to Budapest. Each day replicated itself, and I saw deeper and deeper into the insanity of loneliness. However, I tried harder and harder each day to dig myself out of my lonely hole and embrace anything I could. By the middle of that second week, little things happened that began filling me with just a touch more confidence and comfort. One morning I was walking to school, and a very old man standing at a well, slightly bent at his waist from age, looked right at me and in a very thick accent said, "*Good morning.*" My heart jumped and I lit up and said good morning and waved at him. He waved back and carried on with his task. That very same evening, I was walking somewhere and a different old man watched me walk towards him and he said, "*Good morning*" and nodded at me. I completely disregarded the incorrect time of day he used and addressed him the same way. I don't know if I had been so happy in Romania up to this point. These men had reached out and made an effort to say hello in my language and made me feel

more welcome in Cubulcut. It was these tiny moments that began cracking the shell I had been building up over the last week, and I was so thankful for them.

It wasn't that these moments solved everything, but they helped build me back up to the point of trying to accept how things were. They gave me courage to try and ask more questions, to try to make more conversation with Eviťse. I began asking her more questions about her language and tried to learn new words and phrases. I went with my students after class to get ice cream and talk about simple things like pets and family members. One afternoon, I got Eva and Eviťse to sit down at separate times and I showed them a small photo album I had brought of my family and my dog. They seemed much more interested than I had expected and asked how to say mother and father and brother. They got to see pictures of the beautiful mountains that I love and hike through when I'm at home. There were no words or dramatic hints, but I could feel that they were growing to understand me just a little bit more, and see that I was just scared and far from home, not arrogant and distant. Our appreciation for each other grew as our walls fell.

Suddenly I found it easier to talk to my students, not necessarily with words, but still with motions and gestures. David was my favorite kid. He was about ten and had a giant round face, and when he smiled it was so genuine. He seemed to begin trying harder than anyone else to help me out. David didn't come to class everyday, but when he was there he was there early to help me set up games or pass things out. He would clean the chalkboard and open windows for me. On some level I think he understood my quiet nature because he too was very quiet. He didn't like to participate in the class activities, but was always there to take care of anything I needed and walked his bike quietly next to me and Eviťse on our way back home after class. I even asked him if I could play football (soccer) with him and his friends at the

general store in the evenings, and every night after that he would yell, “*Catty!*” and wave me into the game. Instead of sitting quietly with the older kids, I loved running around with the younger kids showing them my lack of skill in the sport. We would play until it got too dark to see and then we would all walk home under the stars.

The sense of community in Cubulcut always surprised me, especially among the younger generation. I was envious of the camaraderie all of the kids felt. They all helped each other out, and made sure everyone was always looked out for. Even the older kids were friends with the younger kids, and teased them only in what seemed like a brotherly fashion. One of my favorite nights with the kids and other adults was when Evitse gestured for me to put on some warm clothes and to help her carry blankets and her boom box. I didn’t have any idea what we were doing but I followed her directions immediately and we walked down to the now clean dance hall. Evitse set up music at the door of the dance hall and spread out the blankets in the yard, then she and several of the older kids went off somewhere. This happened often, so I waited for David to show up and then he and I and bunch of his friends started a competitive game of soccer. We played hard, running back and forth over the spiky grass, kicking goals into a rotting fence, and swatting at gnats. After a while, Evitse and the others came back with handfuls of twigs and branches and even a small tree they had ripped out of the ground. Before I knew it they all had a fire blazing just as the sun was disappearing and kids from all around the village sat around the fire chatting and laughing.

Here I was introduced to a peculiar, but I must say, tasty tradition in Romania. As we passed around jugs of orange soda and boorish cola (a mixture of red wine and coke basically) everyone started pulling food out of plastic bags. I looked over at Evitse and saw that she was cutting thick slabs of what looked like meat into wallet sized cubes. On the top of the meat she

carved criss-crossed lines and then shoved a pointed stick into the side of the meat. Not knowing what to think, I could just stare at all of the kids doing the same thing with such casual confidence. David got up and came and sat next to me smiling probably at the slightly disgusted look on my face. I looked at him helplessly and shrugged my shoulders and then he handed me his prepared stick. I took it but did not know what to do with it, so he motioned for me to put it in the fire. I then realized that it wasn't exactly meat that we were roasting, it was cubes of fat, pig fat probably. Its whiteness quickly began glistening in the fire and drops of fat rolled off the edges, sizzled and popped in the embers. By this time, most of the kids were doing the same thing and I mimicked their roasting procedures. After a few minutes David tugged at my shoulder and handed me a piece of bread. He wanted me to let the fat drip on the bread. Knowing I couldn't refuse, I repeated this dripping method just like all of the other kids did several times until the bread was slathered in a clear coat of fat. When I put the rest of the cubed fat down and turned to face David he handed me sliced onions to put on the bread and then smiled waiting for me to taste whatever it was I had in my hand. With big eyes and a big mouth, I took a bite and swallowed my disgust and fear of heart disease. It tasted just like bread and butter and onions. What else would it have tasted like? I asked myself. I made a bunch of funny faces and made David laugh and he began making his own snack. I wondered if these kids had ever tried s'mores, and wished I could show them what I do back at home around a campfire.

As the evening turned into night and the younger kids headed back home, the flickering fire and starry sky allowed me to just let go a little bit more. Edmund was at the fire that night, and made it an especially good experience for me. He was eighteen and was able to speak a little bit of English. Of course we could not have long-lasting and intellectual conversations,

but we could communicate. I think that our minor discussions meant more to me than most “deep” ones I might have back at home because with each few words we shared, we shared worlds more than just talk. Kids were huddled in small groups mumbling to each other about anything they pleased, and I lay down on a bench next to the fire. Edmund sat next to me quietly as we slipped in and out of conversation. There were few bright lights in Cubulcut, so when it was dark, it was very dark. Even the fire was dwindling, so I stared at the night sky and its glittery stars. All of a sudden the biggest shooting star I’ve ever witnessed fell slowly across the sky. It left a dusty trail far behind it and disappeared into the blackness.

“Shooting star!” I said softly but excitedly to Edmund and pointed at the sky.

“Shoottt...?”

“A shooting star,” I repeated.

“Shoot-ing stah?” he asked, trying to pronounce it correctly.

“Yes,” I nodded, then pointed at the stars and tried to differentiate between a star and a shooting star.

“Ahh, yes, a shooting star. It fall from sky, yes? He asked.

I smiled and said yes, “shooting star, *szep, szep*”

Edmund smiled back at me and said, “Yes, it beautiful”

“I turned my collar to the cold and damp

When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light

That split the night

And touched the sound of silence.”

-Paul Simon, “The Sound of Silence”

The day before I was scheduled to leave Cubulcut forever was abundant with mixed emotions. A knot in my stomach had formed many days earlier from anxiety over feeling like I would never leave Romania. I recognize the absurdity of this statement, and I recognized it then too. However, my mind had visited so many crazy places in those three weeks, it had partially convinced itself that it was never going home. Where was home? I asked myself. How can a world that is so familiar to me still exist when I have no way to touch it? Romania was my reality and I felt so completely cut off from everyone I knew that a part of me simply could not grasp anything outside of Cubulcut. I woke up that morning of my last full day exuberant at the thought that in twenty-four hours I would be on a train back to Budapest where one of my very best friends was meeting up with me. After this thought passed though, the dark side of my mind decided to torture me just a little bit more. Twenty-four hours is a very long time and many things can happen, it told me. The knot tightened and I yelled back, shut up, shut up, shut up! I am going to make it through this day and leave a stronger person. With this argument raging inside my head, I was off to my last day of class.

When I got there, the kids were waiting excitedly at their desks for me to start class, but before I did, Eva came in and talked to them in Hungarian. I had no idea what they were talking about, but the kids had giant smiles on their faces and little legs were anxiously tapping the dusty floor. Were they glad that this was my last day? Were they tired of Catty? Eva left the room and I shrugged off whatever they might be discussing and stepped in front of everyone and said good morning.

A mumbled good morning came back to me and then I said, “How would you guys like to play BINGO for our last day?” Of course the only word they probably recognized was

BINGO, but they got the point. Shouts rang through the little school house and desks were shoved together. I'm not sure how I was able to teach them how to play BINGO, but they learned quickly and they absolutely loved it.

Everyday after I taught them, they all whined, "Bingo, please Catty! BINGO, BINGO!" I would have loved to play BINGO everyday, but we had to have other lessons too. That last day though, BINGO was my best bet at going out on a good note and having some fun with the kids. I pulled out my handmade BINGO cards and passed them out to everyone and then gave each student a handful of torn paper pieces to cover their boards. I set on the front desk a plastic bag full of stickers, erasers, and fun pencils as the prizes I would hand out to the winners. We played Bingo for about two and a half hours, somehow, and everyone seemed pretty happy, even me.

As we left the school that morning a couple of my students took me by the hand and brought me to the general store. They bought me a big plastic cup full of ice cream and walked me back to the house. They mostly talked amongst themselves, but tried to ask me some questions and include me. This conclusion to the teaching part of my time in Romania was perfect I thought. I know I didn't teach them perfect English, but I didn't expect to do that in the first place. However, I was able to get at least some of the kids excited about English and I was pretty sure that they even respected me to some degree. The easy part of the day was over though, I would have to make it through the long, lonely hours of the afternoon and evening in order to finish this day. Luckily I planned on packing my bags and finishing off a National Geographic magazine that I had saved intentionally for this last day. When I said goodbye to my students and walked through the rusted steel gate in front of my house, I took a deep breath and told myself I could make it through one more of these difficult days.

When I got into the house though, all of my plans were blown to pieces. Eva had lunch prepared already and gestured for me to eat quickly. As I ate she looked up the word for city in my dictionary and pointed to it. Then she held up her thumb and pointed at her watch. Apparently we were going to a city at one-o'clock. Then she motioned for me to brush my hair and get ready to go. Not expecting any adventures on that day, I was excited that I had something to do even though I didn't really know what it was. However, as soon as I got in the car with Eva and Timme` (the woman who had helped Eva pick me up from the train station) I realized that this might be the something that would keep me in Romania forever. I sat in the back seat waiting for a head-on collision or the car to break-down or a random abduction of a blond American. I knew I was being ridiculous, but I couldn't control it at this point. On our ride to Marghita, Romania Eva reached back for my dictionary. I handed it to her and she thumbed her way through the words.

Because we were back in that incredibly bouncy car, our communication was doubly as difficult and caused me to panic even more. As Eva found the word she was looking for, she pointed with index finger so I could read the English word. Her finger kept moving up and down the page, so I couldn't figure out what she was pointing at. I kept shrugging my shoulders and looking at her unknowingly. Finally she pointed directly at a word and tried to hold the book completely still. The word her finger was on was *fogamzasgatlo*. I moved my eyes to the English translation and read "contraceptives". What the fuck was happening to me? I wanted to scream, were these women taking me to a doctor, were they going to sterilize me? Why did I need contraceptives? I knew it, I knew it, I was never leaving!

"Contraceptives?" I asked looking extremely distraught.

Eva looked back at the word and fortunately grunted, “*Nem, Nem, fogorvos,*” and she pointed to the word directly above contraceptives. I took a deep breath thinking I was in the clear, but when I read “dentist” I panicked again.

“Dentist?” I asked.

“*Igen,* (yes)” Eva said and tapped her front teeth.

Oh good god, I thought. What was wrong with my teeth? I seemed to be the only one in the village with clean teeth. Everyone else, even the kids had black teeth and I can’t say I ever saw anyone using a toothbrush on their teeth. I even got weird stares when I brushed my teeth. The thought of going to a Romanian dentist for no real reason terrified me. Maybe Eva saw that brushing my teeth was important to me and wanted to make me feel like I was able to leave with clean teeth? What? No, why on earth would they waste their money on sending me to the dentist? I could think of no reasonable answer, and so I nervously waited the rest of the ride to see if they really were taking me to a dentist. I even came up with a plan that if we got there and I was taken to a dentist I would scream, or make myself throw up, or run away before they could strap me down. Obviously my imagination was taking over at this point because none of these were really feasible options, especially running away. What would I do then?

We parked the car outside a busy shop and walked to an ATM where they pulled out some odd amount of cash. I awaited my sentence as we walked back down the street trying to figure out what we were doing. All of a sudden Timme` stopped, said something to Eva and waved. Eva turned to me and tapped her front teeth and pointed at Timme`’s back. A great relief instantly settled over me. I was not going to the dentist, Timme` was. I was going to be okay.

The rest of the afternoon, I followed Eva around as we went in different shops looking at random things. I had no idea what she was looking for, but it was nice to be a part of the city life. Several stores were closed though, and I could tell Eva was getting frustrated. However, she wanted to make sure I was okay so she took me to a little grocery store and pointed at the ice cream. We spent probably fifteen minutes trying to pick out an ice cream bar for me because every time I picked one up Eva would shake her head, take it and put it back. Then she would find another kind and hand it to me. She kept suggesting the ones I didn't seem to be interested in, but I would nod to be agreeable. She saw I didn't really want it, so we did this over and over until I just picked one and said, "*Igen, jo*" (yes, good). I began walking away when she came up behind me and handed me another one as we checked out. Now I was stuck with two ice creams on a hot day after I had already had ice cream a couple of hours earlier. Realizing the silliness of the situation and knowing I would rather be smothered with ice cream than at the dentist, I laughed and began eating quickly. Unfortunately it wasn't quickly enough as the second one melted and fell down the front of my shirt in a wet, pink glob.

I felt like a five year old following Eva around with sticky hands and a pink stain on my white shirt and not knowing what was going on, but I tried to enjoy it and put the dark thoughts out of my mind. Finally we went into a shop full of random kitchen items and decorations. Eva pointed to an ornate, silver bowl. It looked like a giant goblet, wide enough to hold fruit instead of drink. I figured she was shopping for her kitchen and said that it was *szep* (beautiful). She wasn't sure though and continued to ask me (I think) if I liked it. After a while she purchased it and then handed it to me. I wasn't positive, but pretty sure that she had collected money from my students and they were buying this as a gift to me. I couldn't believe they had done this and was incredibly grateful to her and them. An odd gift, I confess, but their

generosity was very touching. After we left the shop we went to sit down and wait for Timme`. As I sat there waiting, Eva walked out of the café behind me with a huge ice cream cone and handed it to me. I never thought I could be sick of ice cream, but at this moment I forced myself to embrace the cold creaminess and the fact I was not being sterilized or flossed. This was the fourth ice cream that day, and there was another to come.

When we met up with Timme` we went back to one of the shops and looked around. There Timme` showed me necklaces and gestured for me to pick one out. The lady running the store came over and actually spoke English and explained that Timme` wanted to buy me a necklace to show her appreciation for teaching her son Balazs, the littlest, whitest gangster I have ever met. Through the woman in the shop, I told both Eva and Timme` thank you repeatedly and tried to talk to the woman a little about what I had been doing. When I tried to make real sentences though, I had considerable difficulty communicating much of anything. I hadn't spoken in more than broken phrases and gestures for three weeks and this task was both emotionally and physically hard for me.

The three of us left and drove back to the village where we proceeded to have a beer, take a nap and share the book about Asheville I brought for Eva. I was already feeling better about my entire situation and my departure by the late afternoon. All along I assumed that my visit wasn't all that important to the people I met in Cubulcut, but I was beginning to understand that I had, indeed, made some sort of quiet impact and brought a bit of excitement to the community. After Eva and I looked through the pictures of Asheville, we went back down to the school for an afternoon event with the students. They wanted more BINGO, I knew it! Planning on a couple more hours of BINGO screams, I walked into the class happily. However, when I got there I realized the kids weren't just wanting to play BINGO. They had

written little messages all over the chalk board saying thank you and goodbyes to Catty, to me. Then, each of the kids walked up to me bringing me bouquets of colorful flowers and candy bars. Instantly, all of the resentment and misunderstanding melted away and I saw that I meant something, no matter how small, to these kids. They had had so much fun over the past three weeks singing and playing with me, and they appreciated me. I was overwhelmed with the fact that, with barely any words or verbal communication, they came to mean so much to me, and me to them. I wished that I could do more for them or tell them what this experience had done for me, even though I didn't even know at that point. I couldn't have articulated it right then, but that silent barrier had invisibly disintegrated, and all I could do was yell that it was time for BINGO!