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KYLE MINOR

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*DOGS*

It was the dogs she feared most. They roamed the streets of Bucharest in vicious packs—pit bulls, Dobermans, German shepherds, some large as an eleven-year-old girl, some large as Lucy herself. Her mother had said, “Lucy, when you walk the streets alone, carry a broom handle, carry a stick.” But her mother was gone. Her father, too.

They had left before the storm, left to buy two slaughter lambs to serve in breakfast omelettes to the guests at the hostel they ran in the family home. They had planned to buy them from a man they trusted in Birlad, a village to the north serviced by a slow train. Sabina, a neighbor, had stopped by with a newspaper. “Look,” she said in Romanian, and showed Lucy grainy black-and-white pictures of washed-out bridges and flooded tunnels. “They might be dead,” Sabina said. This she spoke in English.

“They are not dead,” Lucy said, though she could not know for sure. “They called me last night. They took a detour to Brasov. They will be home in two days.”

But her parents had not called. Two days passed, then three, four. She did not believe they were dead. Her mother was terribly unhappy in Romania, always threatening her father that she would leave in the night and return to Toronto. Perhaps she had fled, and Lucy’s father had followed.

A fifth day. A sixth. Lucy occupied herself with the day-to-day business of running the hostel. She greeted guests and assigned them rooms and took their money and made change when they departed. She washed their sheets and cooked their breakfasts and made their beds. When they asked about her parents, Lucy said they were on a brief trip, that transportation in Romania was unreliable, that there had been rains, but that they had called daily and were even now on their way.

On the seventh day, Sabina came to the door and demanded to speak with Lucy’s mother. “I know she is not there,” Sabina said. “This is true,” Lucy said. “She came and she went. My father, too. They have traveled to Serbia to purchase new rugs for the guest rooms. I will tell them you stopped by.”

She feared Sabina because her skin was so dark. Her mother was prone to threats and outbursts when she was angry with something Lucy had done. “The Gypsies will come and take you away,” her mother would say. Lucy feared Sabina might be a secret Gypsy.

And there were worse things than Gypsies. On one occasion, a guest had paid in euros rather than lei. Lucy was good at math, but the guest was in a hurry, and in her haste, Lucy miscalculated the exchange rate and gave too much lei in change. On that day, her mother had said, “Perhaps I will have to give you up. Do you know how awful it is in Romanian orphanages? Children are forced to eat raw meat. Strange men crawl

into their beds at night, and if they cry out, they are turned out onto the street, with the dogs.”

More than once, walking the city together, they had been accosted by strays, and, twice, Lucy had been bitten, once by a mutt, and once by a pit bull. Her mother had beaten the mutt away with her stick, but not before Lucy had contracted a nasty infection that caused her arm to ooze white pus for days before the doctors finally prescribed an antibiotic that killed the bacteria. But the pit bull had been the worst. Sabina had been with them that morning, and her mother and Sabina had entered into a nasty argument, a dispute, in fact, about the way Lucy was being raised, and they had begun walking faster in their anger.

Lucy could not keep pace. As she passed a cardboard box beside a dumpster, a pit bull lunged at her and caught her at the hip, and brought her down to the ground. Worse than his bite was the sound of his bark in her ear at the moment of attack, so loud that he sounded to her like a hundred dogs. It was the cry of predator finding prey; and other dogs, as many as six her mother had later said, had heard it and come running, no doubt ready to fight for a share of the meal. By instinct, Lucy had raised her arms to cover her head and neck, and it had saved her life, because the pit bull lunged for her throat, and tore away instead the flesh of her arms. Her mother had come running at the sound of the bark, and swung at the pit bull with her stick, and the dog had turned on her, had bitten her twice on the right calf before she could drive it away. Sabina had, by herself, scared away the lesser dogs that had come for the easy meat, and for once Lucy was grateful for her presence. When the dogs were gone, though, Lucy’s mother had slapped Lucy’s ears with her cupped palm so they rang for the rest of the morning, and had told her she was a stupid girl for falling behind, that she could have been killed, and that she had caused wounds, her own and her mother’s, that would be expensive to mend. Lucy was in great pain as she said it, her arms ripped open and bleeding (in time they would scar, and the scars had not faded), and in that moment she wished her mother wounds like her own, so she would know what it felt like.

But her mother could also be wonderful and kind. Many afternoons they walked together to Bucharest’s vast outdoor market and shopped for fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, fresh flowers for the dining room table. Her mother taught her to haggle, how to fight for a good price and for how long, and when to say no, to walk away.

Her mother knew Bucharest’s hidden places, the wild alley gardens where they could pick yellow Mirabelle plums from the low branches of untended trees and white grapes from tall vines. In the early evening, she could describe the sunset with English words more beautiful than Lucy had ever heard, more names for reds—scarlet and pink; crimson and rust; burgundy, garnet, and raspberry rose—than Lucy could distinguish hues.

[end of excerpt]