

The Last Hundred Days

Patrick McGuinness

BLOOMSBURY

New York Berlin London Sydney

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for Sarah, who was there

Part One

'And yet, the ways we miss our lives are life'

- Randall Jarrell

One

In 1980s Romania, boredom was a state of extremity. There was nothing neutral about it: it strung you out and stretched you; it tugged away at the bottom of your day like shingle scraping at a boat's hull. In the West we've always thought of boredom as slack time, life's lift music sliding off the ear. Totalitarian boredom is different. It's a state of expectation already heavy with its own disappointment, the event and its anticipation braided together in a continuous loop of tension and anti-climax.

You saw it all day long in the food queues as tins of North Korean pilchards, bottles of rock-bottom Yugoslav Slivovitz, or loaves of potato-dust bread reached the shops. People stood in sub-zero temperatures or unbearable heat, and waited. Eyes blank, bodies numb, they shuffled step-by-step towards the queue's beginning. No one knew how much there was of anything. Often you didn't even know what there was. You could queue for four hours only for everything to run out just as you reached the counter. Some forgot what they were waiting for, or couldn't recognise it when they got it. You came for bread and got Yugo rotgut; the alcoholics jittered for their rotgut and got pilchards or shoe polish, and it wasn't by taste that you could tell them apart. Sometimes the object of the queue changed midway through: a meat queue became a queue for Chinese basketball shoes; Israeli oranges segued into disposable cameras from East Germany. It didn't matter - whatever it was, you bought it. Financial exchange was just a preliminary; within hours the networks of barter and black-marketeering would be vibrating with fresh commodities.

It was impossible to predict which staple would suddenly become a scarcity, which humdrum basic would be transformed into a luxury. Even the dead felt the pinch. Since the gargantuan building projects had begun in the early 1980s, marble and stone were requisitioned by the state for facade work and interior design. In the cemeteries the graves were marked out with wooden planks, table legs, chairs, even broomsticks. Ceaușescu's new Palace of the People could be measured not just in square metres but in gravestones. It was surreal, or would have been if it wasn't the only reality available.

I had arrived full of the kind of optimism that, in retrospect, I recognise as a sure sign that things would go wrong, and badly. Not for me, for I was a passer-by; or, more exactly, a passer-through.

Things happened around me, over me, even across me, but never to me. Even when I was there, in the thick of it, during those last hundred days.

To step onto the half-empty plane at Heathrow that mid-April day was already to step back in time. Tarom was the Romanian airline, but its fleet was composed of old Air France Boeings which, like so much else in Romania, had been recycled and brought back into use. It felt more like the 1960s than the 1980s. The air hostesses wore square suits and pillbox hats.

I took my seat in an empty row near the front and read the battered in-flight magazine. Two years out of date, it told of Romanian delicacies and showed blurred models of the 'Boulevard of Socialist Victory', a project described as 'the culmination of modern Romania's vision under Comrade President Nicolae Ceaușescu'. The touched-up picture of Ceaușescu was on the inside cover - Tovarășul Conducător, Comrade Leader - looking twenty years younger and with the lightly bloated marzipan blush of an embalmed corpse.

Even at Heathrow, with the flights landing and taking off all around us and London proliferating in the distance, our plane had become a capsule of its destination and its epoch. Both felt further away than the three and a half hours it took to fly to Bucharest.

I was still in my suit. I had had no time to change, much less go back to the house before catching my flight. I had attended the funeral with my suitcase and hand luggage, which I left in the crematorium lobby during the service. I hadn't meant to upstage him - there was room for only one departure that day - but that was how it all fell together: my new job, the new country, unalterable plane tickets. 'It's not every day you bury your father,' someone had said to me by way of reproach. No, but if like me you spent every day wishing you could, the event itself was bound to have its complicated side. Of course, that's not what I replied. I just nodded and watched them all pretending to pray, straining for that faraway look, something in themselves to help them say, later, how they'd levelled with death this afternoon, and hadn't erred into thinking about dinner or tonight's TV.

After landing we waited for the VIPs to disembark, square-suited men in grey with wives who looked moulded from a mixture of custard and cement. Their luggage was taken out unchecked and placed into anthracite-black limousines. I had seen the cars before too - the rear-engined Renault 14, the Dacia, made from French prototypes by the Romanian national car plant. The name meant something, as I knew from my limited reading-up. The Dacians,

according to Ceaușescu's officially sanctioned history, were survivors of the siege of Troy, poor cousins separated from the Roman tribe, founding their island of Latinity in eastern Europe encircled by Slavs, martyred by the Turks, caught now in the dark orbit of the Soviet Union.

This was April, but we had arrived in a heatwave. Outside the plane everything reverberated in the heat. The tarmac glistened, stuck and puckered underfoot, sweating out its oil. Beyond the perimeter fence stretched flat acres of chalky grass and net fencing over which a horse-drawn plough rumbled. A dead animal lay torn, caught in a tiller's blades and strewn in rags across the ploughlines. From high above, the furrowed fields had suggested musical notation. Up close it was just earth, turned and turned back over, earth that never rested, and those who worked it were hunched and beaten down with drudgery.

The VIP motorcade drove off, the way the wealthy and the powerful do wherever you find them: without looking back, into the next thing.

That smell of airports: the peppery scent of vertigo, exhalations of vacuum cleaners, perfume, smoke, used air. A sublimate of spent jet fuel and burned-off ozone giving the sky its improbable clear blue.

Otopeni airport was a two-storey building with plate-glass walls and red-veined marble floors; overstaffed, but with nothing happening. This atmosphere of menace and fretful apathy engulfed public buildings everywhere in Romania. The next flight, from Moscow, was not for two hours. The previous one, from Belgrade, had been and gone an hour ago. The airport was a place of perpetual lull, perpetual betweenness, as transitional as the plane we had just left behind. But it's the transitional places that hold us all the longer and enclose us all the more.

'Welcome to Romania,' read a tricolour billboard. The Romanian flag, blue, yellow and red with a Party crest in the centre, drooped on its pole and trembled in the faintest of drafts. Militia outnumbered civilians by two to one. Women in knee-high, lace-up sandals pushed dry mops along floors, redistributing butt ends and sweet wrappers over the marble. Great tubular ashtrays overflowed with crushed cigarettes and a miasma of blue smoke wrapped itself around what remained of the air.

The customs officers operated with malign lethargy, deriving so little satisfaction from the misery they inflicted that it seemed hardly worth it. Up ahead, through the glass walls, I saw the black Dacias already clear, coursing down Otopeni Boulevard towards the city that was to be my home.

When my turn came I was made to unpack and account for the

little I had. The two customs officers were well balanced. One had a face without a trace of expression, the other a face on which different expressions slugged it out for supremacy, inconclusively. The first spoke ragged English while the second, smoking US cigarettes, spoke fluently in an American accent. If the Romanian police had a fast stream, he was it - expressionless, lean, unreadable.

‘What welcomes you to Romania?’

It was a good question, and called out for a witticism, but this was no time to test the national sense of humour. He took my coffee and two chocolate bars and pocketed them with a flourish. His eyes never leaving mine, he added the batteries from my Walkman while his colleague, by some pre-arranged system of equalisation, confiscated my carton of duty-free cigarettes.

‘Tax.’ Deadpan.

My taxi, a white Dacia with tiger stripes of rust and an ill-fitting blue driver’s door, was driven wordlessly by a man whose face I couldn’t see and who didn’t turn once to look at me.

Coming over Bucharest you noticed the city’s contrasts immediately: a rigid geometry of avenues with new housing blocks, high-rise flats and public follies skewering the skyline. Around and between them, a shambles of old churches, winding roads, houses and small parks. As from the air, so from the ground: the old town revealed itself to you in layers; the new town came at you in lines.

Bucharest was not a city that tapered away, suburb by suburb, into countryside; nor did the countryside intensify, street by street, into a central urban hub. There were simply two miles of bad roads and fields; then suddenly apartment blocks reared up, the bumpy track flattened out beneath the tyres, and a city had materialised under and around you.

The flat that awaited me was surprising in its size and elegance: the whole second floor of a large nineteenth-century house on Aleea Alexandru, in Herastrau, a part of old Bucharest which remained for now untouched by Ceauşescu’s great ‘modernisation’ project. It was where Party apparatchiks, diplomats and foreigners lived; where I now lived, for as long as I could take it, or as long as they let me. All over town churches were being torn down, old streets obliterated and concreted over. Here it was possible to imagine otherwise, though the noise of building and demolition was always there.

On the front door the previous occupant’s name was still on a card in a small metal frame: ‘Belanger, Dr F.’ Mine was written on an envelope containing a key and a note inviting me to make free with whatever goods remained. The phone was connected, the fridge and cupboards stocked. The wardrobes were full of clothes

that fitted, and there were books and records I might have bought myself, along with a video recorder and TV. My predecessor must have left in a hurry. Or known I was coming. A poster on the wall advertised the 13th Party Congress: Ceaușescu's face rose like the sun behind a gleaming tractor, over which it emitted munificent rays. Beside it was a small, intricate icon of an annunciation scene. It looked old and weathered, the gilt worn, the figures faceless and eroded, yet the golds and the reds inside it smouldered like a fire in the undergrowth. It was dated 1989, this year, and signed 'Petrescu' with a small orthodox cross scratched into the paint with a matchstick.

It was 6 pm. I went to the fridge for one of Belanger's beers, then out onto the balcony. The tiles were hot underfoot and I settled into a frayed wicker armchair to watch the street below.

I must have slumbered because when the doorbell rang it was fully dark and the tiles were cold. In the shadows of the flat, a phone I had not yet seen rang three times, paused, then rang again. I lifted the heavy Bakelite receiver but the caller had gone. There was a tiny click and then the flat tone of a dead line.

The electricity across town had cut out, though here in Herastrau we were spared the worst of the power stoppages. I was conscious, now that traffic had died down, of a constant noise of clattering metal, drilling and thrumming engines. I stumbled through the darkness, unable to find the light switches, only gauging the position of the front door from the repeated buzzing.

At the door stood a short, overweight, lopsidedly upright man with a face full of mischief and an alcohol flush. I knew who he was, though I had never seen him before. I motioned him in with an easeful proprietorial gesture that suggested I had been here longer than a few hours. But I felt at home in Belanger's flat, and even his things, foreign as they were, seemed to confirm me.

'Leo O'Heix. Remember me?' said the new arrival with a mock-military click of the heels, a rolled-up copy of Scînteia, the Party newspaper, in his jacket pocket. He jabbed a hand at me but elbowed past before I could shake it. 'From the interview?'

I had not been to any interview. I had applied for a dozen postings, been interviewed for six, and failed to get any. When the Romania job came up I was too disheartened even to turn up to the interview. When, two days later, I received a letter 'pleased to inform' me I had been selected, I thought it was a joke. When the visa followed a week later I realised it wasn't, or that at any rate the punchline was yet to come. 'You were probably the only applicant - everyone else got the good postings and you got what was left,' my father had said. He was unable to piss or shit or even eat unaided by then, but he could still rouse himself for the occasional sally of

malice. But in this case, and for the first time in his life, he was giving me too much credit: I had dramatically improved my employability by not even attending.

Nursing my father through the last months was a test of endurance for both of us. I wheeled him through the wards as he fulminated about bad spelling, poor grammar and grocers' apostrophes on the laminated hospital noticeboards. The habits of work remained with him: twenty years in Fleet Street, he had manned the newspapers' hot metal printing presses, setting the pages by hand, learning his trade and learning, as he went, a way with words that a less unhappy man would have put to better use. When they sacked him, along with six thousand other print workers three years before, he stood on picket lines for a few weeks and threw bricks at police cars before one morning going back to work in a reinforced strikebreaker bus, its windows painted over and layered with wire mesh, protected by one of the new private security firms. My father liked his politics intense but changeable.

As he died slowly we kept reconciliation at bay by talking only about trivia. In those last few days of delirium he asked for her, my mother - complained she wasn't there to visit him. Even at the end he was still finding new ways to be angry. The doctor was baffled by the way he fought the illness inch by inch, holding his ground when by rights the cancer should have claimed him months before: 'trench warfare' the doctor called it. I knew what it was that kept my father going: anger.

Leo turned on the lights and made for the drinks cabinet with a manner yet more proprietorial than my own. Pouring a glass of gin, topping it off with a symbolic shake of the tonic bottle, he went to the freezer and tipped in a couple of ice cubes. This done, he sat on the sofa, crossed his legs, and looked up at me. My move.

Leo wore a sweaty flat cap that looked screwed on, leaving circles of red indented grooves on his forehead, and his skin was the texture of multiply resurfaced tarmac. His trousers were the colour of blotchy mushrooms, and though his legs were the same length, theirs were not. His shirt was that special shade of streaky grey that comes from having started out white and having spent years sharing washing machines with blue underpants.

Still dozy, I found it hard to compose myself. But composure was unnecessary: before I could say anything, Leo finished his drink and leapt up.

'We're going for dinner.'

He pushed me out of the flat and into the hallway. The phone rang behind me, but Leo had already shut the door.

'Welcome to the Paris of the East,' he said. Leo is the only person

I have known who could be both sincere and sarcastic about the same things, and simultaneously.

The Paris of the East... it was an epithet I'd heard before. Second-string cities are always described as the somewhere of somewhere else. But Bucharest was like nowhere else; that was its sorrow.

Two

Leo was drink-driving, not that it mattered here, thanks to petrol shortages and the seven-year wait for a car from the state car plant. With Leo at the wheel it was like riding dodgems in a ghost town, especially with the CD - Corps Diplomatique - badge he'd bought on the black market and affixed to the back of his Skoda. The cranes and diggers that dominated the streets gave Bucharest the look of a deserted funfair. Some of them were still desolately working, half-manned and on half power, hauling the shades of labourers up towards a smoky moon.

The pavements looked empty, but the shadows were crowded with militia in grey uniforms. You only saw them when your eyes had become accustomed to the darkness: they took shape, limb by limb, from the penumbra they lived in. In old Bucharest, rundown Parisian arrondissements had been crossed with the suburbs of Istanbul; East and West were in perpetual architectural dance. Plants hung from balconies where people sat in the dark, backlit by the blue of their televisions. Candles flickered in the windows of orthodox churches. Shift workers stood at beer counters, drinking silently, eyes down, their elbows touching.

Leo's car lurched into a vast trafficless square like a small fishing boat propelled into the open sea: Piața Republica, where the palace of Queen Marie faced the Party Headquarters across a vast cobbled intersection. I heard, but much closer now, the same insistent clatter of building works, the hollow peal of scaffolding poles and the chug of cement mixers. I saw the pall of light to the north where they worked, 24/7, on the Palace of the People and the Boulevard of Socialist Victory. A tall building, a skyscraper on this stunted horizon, stood nearby, western cars and black Dacias parked in front of it. Doormen fussed around revolving doors.

Leo had been silent throughout the drive, but the prospect of a fresh glass loosened him up.

'The InterContinental Hotel,' he said, pointing, 'home to the Madonna disco, and prowling ground for the Party's golden youth.' A heavy bass thudding reached us, intensifying and dying down as a basement door opened and closed.

A red Porsche sped across the square and braked hard outside the nightclub, its numberplate - NIC 1 - catching the streetlamp's glare. A man in a white suit and a metallic blue shirt climbed out and was ushered into the hotel lobby, followed by two thin girls in

silver miniskirts and shoes with heels so high their every step was a trembling defiance of gravity.

Leo grimaced: 'Nicu. The playboy prince. Ceaușescu's son and heir apparent.'

Capsia, a three-storeyed, French-style building on the corner of Calea Victoriei and Strada Edgar Quinet, was something out of fin-de-siècle Paris. The three sets of doors between the modest entrance and the resplendent dining room were like the decompression chambers of a submarine. They stopped the noise and smells and luxury from seeping out into the street, and kept the street's hungers and deprivations from tainting the Capsia dining experience.

Waiters in white shirts and dark green waistcoats with brass buttons fussed around tables heavy with silverware. Their uniforms were perfect, but their faces didn't fit: sallow and ill-shaven, they were scrappy parodies of the French waiters who had, in the 1890s, brought Paris to a standstill by striking over the right to grow moustaches. Yet Bucharest too had been like this: An island of Latinity, so my guidebook said, of French manners, French style and French food. I took it out and looked up Capsia. There it was. The guidebook recommended 'Absinthe, Cognac, Bitters or Amers, Curaçao, Grenadine, Orgeat and Sorbet', tempering its advice to sit at the terrace and observe 'Bucharest life in all its phases' with the caveat: 'Chairs placed in unpleasant proximity to the gutter should, of course, be avoided.'

But then my guidebook, the only book about Romania I could find at home, was from 1899 and had cost ten pence from the Isle of Dogs Oxfam. Leo took it from me and stroked its tired cover, the red string of its binding hanging from the spine. 'Dunno about the Curaçao, Grenadine, Orgeat and Sorbet,' but the gutter's still there. And as for Bucharest life in all its phases, well, I think I can promise you that...'

1899 - ninety years ago. Back then Romanians who returned from France with heads full of the latest books, and bodies hung with the latest fashions were known as bonjouristes. Capsia was a relic of that era, and also its reliquary: embossed leather menus, monogrammed tablecloths and heavy silverware. Chez Capsia read the cover of the menu: Bienvenue à la gastronomie Roumaine. The décor - gold fittings, damask screens and lanky tropical plants with dusty leaves - was matched by a string quartet grinding out some Strauss. The walls were mirrors, smoky from age and minutely fractured. You felt pieces of your reflection catching in the cracks and staying there, like dirt in the grouting between tiles.

Waiters rolled trolleys of food. At the far end of the room, a party of senior politicians was enjoying something flambéed in cognac.

The blue flames spat and lit their faces from below.

'There you go,' said Leo, smiling at them sarcastically, 'take a look: the Party has abolished want!' They looked up and grinned, still chewing. 'Bon appétit, comrades!'

The Maître d'Hôte, splendidly liveried and with a wolfish face, showed us to a table at a frosted window overlooking Cercul Militar. We could see out, but no one could see in. This was the Romanian way, encapsulated in the city's best restaurant: waiters sliced fillets of Chateaubriand with gentle strokes while in the shops beyond, unstacked shelves gleamed under twists of flypaper and the crimeless streets shouldered their burden of emptiness.

Capsia was, Leo told me, the only place where most of what the menu promised was available. 'That's why it's so short.' He placed a packet of Kent cigarettes on the table. These were blocks of currency here, tobacco bullion; to lay them out was to signal your desire for special attention and your ability to pay for it. Leo ordered a bottle of Dealul Mare and it arrived immediately, conjured from behind the waiter's back.

'There's a few things you'll need to know...' Leo begins, sloshing the wine around his mouth and swallowing it back hard. He abandons his sentence and looks me up and down for the first time: 'You look like someone who thought they could travel light but who's already missing his baggage.'

I tell him I'm tired, jetlagged by far more than the two hours time difference between Romania and Britain; that I'm sitting in an improbable restaurant in the half-lit capital of a police state with a jittery drunk; that I'm here because I got a job I never applied for, after an interview I never went to; that my baggage is all I've got to hold on to in these unreal times.

'Enough about me. Tell me something about yourself...' Leo has said nothing about himself. 'You were most impressive at interview. Ticked all the boxes.'

'Very funny - tell me, how much of a disadvantage did not turning up put me at?'

'Well, I pride myself on being able to see beyond first impressions... Professor Ionescu's looking forward to meeting you too. We think we've appointed the right person for the job. Someone who'll, er... grow into it. You'll notice too that we've taken the liberty of adding BA to your name: Bachelor of Arts. A welcome present from me,' Leo pushes a degree certificate across the table, an ornate, multiply stamped and signed piece of parchment with a blot of sealing wax and some ribbon. First Class Honours, Summa cum Laude. 'Mind you, if you want a PhD you'll have to pay for it like everyone else.'

Leo shrugs and laughs - he's already onto the next thing, ready to

give me the lowdown. 'And believe me, it's low.' His joke falls flat (is it a joke?), but he is undeterred. He begins the pep talk he has given many times before. Dozens of people have passed through before me, but none of them stuck it out beyond a few weeks. Only Belanger had looked as if he'd stay the course, but Leo does not talk about Belanger.

Leo explains, Leo contextualises and embroiders. There are things to exaggerate and things to underplay. After a few months here, it will amount to the same thing: life in a police state magnifies the small mercies that it leaves alone until they become disproportionate to their significance; at the same time it banalises the worst travesties into mere routine.

Our waiter, itching with solicitousness, comes to ask 'if all is delicious?' Since we have not yet ordered, this is certainly a good time to enquire. His eye is on the packet of Kent on the table.

Leo replies Da, multumesc, yes, all is very delicious.

'These new-fangled ways...' he says, 'asking you if your food's good, telling you to enjoy your meal. I preferred it when they slammed the grub on the table and went off scratching their arses... it's something they've picked up recently from foreign television. When I first arrived in Bucharest, I came here for lunch and one of the cleaning ladies was clipping her toenails on the carpet. That was old Romania. Ah! The old days... now it's all Hi! My name is Nicolae and I'm your waiter for the evening...' Leo's American accent is terrible. 'I blame Dynasty - they've started showing an episode twice a week. A way of using up a quarter of the three hours of nightly TV. It's supposed to make Romanians disgusted by capitalist excess but all it does is give lifestyle tips to the Party chiefs. Suddenly the Party shops are full of Jacuzzis and ice buckets and cocktail shakers...'

He motions the waiter to take our order: the house speciality, 'Pork Jewish Style,' a dish in which a whole continent's unthinking anti-Semitism is summarised.

Leo eats like a toddler, cutting pieces of food with his knife and skewering them to the end of the fork with his fingers, before changing hands and loading the food into his mouth. 'This is a country where fifty per cent of the population is watching the other fifty per cent. And then they swap over.'

I listen to his bad jokes and already I know they aren't jokes at all, just ways of approaching the truth at a less painful angle, like walking sideways in the teeth of a vicious wind. I eat the food and drink the wine as Leo describes a world of suspicion and intrigue in which he is happy, stimulated, fulfilled. The place suits him, not because it resembles him but because he is so far in excess of it.

But most of all, he loves it: 'It's all here, passion, intimacy, human

fellowship. You just need to adapt to the circumstances,' says Leo, 'it's a bit of a grey area to be honest. Actually, I might as well tell you the truth: it's all grey area round here.' He gestures at the world outside Capsia as if it is a correlative of the moral universe we now live in. He motions for a third bottle of Pinot Noir. I wonder if they have aspirin in Romania. Christ, I think, what a start.

But Leo is right. He is not like the other expatriates, who exist in perpetual mistrust of their Romanian colleagues, hush their voices when they come into the room, exclude them from conversations, or socialise with them only at arm's length, nostrils aquiver. He is someone who, for all his excess and swagger, has calibrated his behaviour to those around him, to their extraordinary circumstances and to the violence these circumstances have done to their daily lives.

It's a close call for Leo's special scorn, between the Party apparatchiks who rule their people with such corruption, ineptitude and contempt, and the expats: the diplomats, businessmen and contractors who live in a compound to the west of the city, with their English pub, The Ship and Castle ('the Shit and Hassle') and their embassy shop. One of his riffs is to compose designer scents for them: 'Essence of Broadstairs', 'Bromley Man', 'Stevenage: For Her'. Their parties, an endless round of cocktails and booze-ups, are 'sometimes fun, if only for a drink and a chance to read last week's English papers', but the circuit as a whole is, as he puts it 'a doppelgänger: where largely identical people fuck each other interchangeably'.

Sitting in Capsia that night I felt two things, two sensations that seemed at odds, but which took me to extremes of myself: a sense of the world closing in, tightening up, an almost physical sensation of claustrophobia; and something else: exhilaration, a feeling for the possible, something expanding around me as I looked out at that empty square. It was as if the agoraphobia the new city was designed to induce, and the political system it existed to make concrete, was translating itself inwards, becoming an intensive inner space. In the way an atom could be split to open out a limitless vista of inverted energy, so now, in the midst of constraint and limitation, my life seemed full of possibility.

The first thing I learned, and I learned it from Leo, was to separate people from what they did. People existed in a realm apart from their actions: this was the only way to maintain friendships in a police state. When Rodica, the faculty secretary, opened our offices for the police to search our things and copy our papers, or the landlady let them into my flat, I said nothing. I knew they knew I knew, and it changed nothing.

For all the grotesqueness and brutality, it was normality that

defined our relations: the human capacity to accommodate ourselves to our conditions, not the duplicity and corruption that underpinned them. This was also our greatest drawback – the routinisation of want, sorrow, repression, until they became invisible, until they numbed you even to atrocity.

‘Here’s the thing, right...’ Leo is telling me something – one of the few things – I already know about Bucharest: that it has the largest number of cinemas per head of the population in the world.

Leo judges that I have had enough for the night. Capsia is closing – it’s nearly midnight. He wants another drink, but I need to sleep and he is merciful and drives me home, slowly this time, stopping to point places out to me. At the InterContinental, the music is still going. Further on, the porch of the Hotel Athénée Palace, a more stately establishment, flickers in the gold of limousine headlamps. Leo drives down an avenue where every other building is a cinema: Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd.

‘No Chaplin,’ says Leo: ‘Chaplin’s banned – The Great Dictator, see? And no Marx Brothers either. Can’t work that one out, mind. You’d have thought...’

The Romanian censor has a fondness for those sad-faced Pierrot-types, Keaton and Lloyd, tragic/comic figures at odds with the world of things, Hamlets of the boom-and-bust West. Their comedy featured human beings crammed out of their own lives by objects in a world of surfeit, where material goods shut you out and marginalised you. Here, in Ceauşescu’s Romania, all is lack and absence, space unfilled, and the world of material surfeit as alien as the physics of Star Trek.

I climbed the stairs, not knowing where the light switches were, following the stairwell with my fingers in the dark. Once in the flat, I found my bed. Not having bothered to lay out sheets and pillows, I lay down on the bristly peasant blanket. My mouth was dry, my head already ached. I looked about me for a pillow, found none, and lay down in the spinning room. I had leapfrogged drunkenness and landed in the middle of a hangover.

In a new bed it is usually the unfamiliar sounds that keep you awake. Tonight it was the unfamiliar silence, a constant rustle just short of movement, tiny shifts in the stillness of Belanger’s flat. I woke up several times to piss or to drink rusty water from the bathroom tap. The phone rang, but I could not tell if I had dreamed it or if it was real. Each time I woke it had stopped. Pieces of the day gathered together in my mind: the plane, the glittering silverware of Capsia, the feral eyes of the Maître d’. I was tormented by the recollection of all the postings I might have had, all the cities I might be in: Barcelona, Budapest, Prague. Images of

each, none of them visited, coalesced into one, and the place they formed in my mind was the Bucharest I had been in only a few hours: a heat-beaten brutalist maze whose walls and towers melted like sugar, and where the roots of trees erupted through the pavements.

I slept late and woke in sunlight so hot the blood bubbled inside my eyelids. My first morning was given over to paperwork at the Ministry of the Interior. The building dominated a roundabout large enough to outscale even the cranes and diggers that stalked the city's streets like Meccano monsters. A few old buildings stood across the way, precarious for all their seniority. Were their foundations already tingling with intimations of demolition? In a few months they would be gone. From the outside, the ministry was boxy and grey, its only ornament a stucco Party crest. As an interior space, it was barely comprehensible. I remembered those posters by Escher that decorated student walls: physically impossible architecture and abyssal interiors; staircases that tapered into a void, or twisted back into themselves; doors that opened onto doors; balconies that overlooked the inside of another room that gave onto a balcony that overlooked the inside of another room...There were vast desks with nothing on them except for telephones, ashtrays and blank paper; voices loud enough to startle but too faint to understand; unattributable footsteps that got closer but never materialised into presence, then sudden arrivals which made no sound. The rustle of unseen activity was everywhere, like the scratching of insects in darkness. Kafka's *The Castle* came to mind, a book I had not read but that fell into that category of literature that culture reads on your behalf and deposits somewhere inside you. So I imagined Kafka's castle.

After an hour's wait, a man appeared, blinking and smelling of basements. I filled in the forms, leaving only the 'Next of kin' box empty. I had looked forward to the ceremony of leaving it blank, the cleanness of it. 'No kin,' I said, 'no next'; but he insisted I write something. There were no blank forms in this country. I wrote Leo's name.

My photo was affixed to a small card and stamped: my pass to Bucharest's diplomatic shops, special petrol stations and foreigners' clubs.

Outside, clouds of dust billowed from roadworks across the avenue where men worked without helmets, shirtless in tracksuit bottoms and flip-flops. Soldiers sat and smoked on the kerbside, rifles across their knees, beside black vans with barred windows.

Militia were stationed every twenty yards. Last night they had looked sinister and immaterial, restless shades patrolling a missing population. Now they stood and swayed in the heat, badly dressed

and bored and serving not as watchers but as reminders of a watchfulness beyond. As I walked, I sensed what was missing. No music came from any houses or shops; no radio, no one whistling or singing; there was nowhere to stop for a coffee or something to eat. No one stood about and talked and those who walked did so alone. The school playgrounds emitted no noise. A newspaper kiosk sold a brown drink called 'Rocola' - Romanian cola - cigarettes, and grey-green stubs of lottery tickets. It was hard to imagine what the prizes were.

Doubling back past my flat, I noticed a commotion. Drawing level with the crowd, I saw a building that gave away so little about itself that I had not seen it despite passing it three times already. Like Capsia, its windows were of frosted glass. This place too served the Party, I realised eventually: it was their discreet, hi-tech clinic, where the bosses and their families went for everything from abortions and gout to heart surgery and chemotherapy. Fronted by forceful iron gates, its marble steps led to a porch with a glass roof, elegant but inconspicuous. Drawn up in front were Party ambulances, white Mercedes estates with red stripes and blue revolving beacons.

Along the building's grey facade, workmen in overalls were slopping white paint over some writing, watched by young men in suits. It was an unequal battle: the bright red letters pushed through their thin emulsion. EPID - EMIA, the word's two halves separated by the gates' black bars, along which someone had dragged the brush in a long bloody hyphen. The red gloss had dripped like something from a cheap horror film, a ghastly violent red in a place so grey. Passers-by hurried past, eyes safely down.

I saw that graffiti frequently in the months to come. And when it wasn't there I saw its outline, not sure if I was imagining it or if, from under the layers of feeble paint, the letters kept searching out the light. The word was everywhere around me, but translated into flesh: the emaciated faces of the poor, the sick, the rag-pickers on the scrap heap of Romanian society. Days later, returning from work one Friday afternoon, I saw a young gypsy woman, exhausted and obviously in her last hours. Her clothes were colourful and a necklace of amber beads hung from her neck. A hand was cupped begging, the thumb crossed back over the open palm: that tiny detail sticks in my mind as the very symbol of destitution and hopelessness. I watched from the stalled tram as two soldiers stood over her where she sat on the pavement, piss runnelling down between her legs and over the kerb; snapping on white rubber gloves they slung her into a Dacia pickup. Her ghostly outline remained in sweat against the wall, where her body had wrung itself dry of moisture and winnowed itself to bone and air.

EPIDEMIA: its name was marked out in the eyes of the thin

savage young men who stalked the outskirts of the market, where produce was so scarce most of the stalls had packed up and gone by eight in the morning. Items I was used to buying in bags and seeing in heaps were, here, displayed like jewellery, laid one by one and side by side across the concrete tables: green peppers withered like old socks, gnarled carrots, a few lettuces. The only things that seemed in plentiful supply were pickles: pickled vegetables and roots that looked like brains in jars, organs and appendices suspended in formaldehyde, waiting for the jolt of current that would turn them into living limbs, a human body. But what sort of electricity would it take to transform these bowed and broken dollpeople into revolutionaries?

Why didn't I - why did none of us - see it coming? Was it because it really wasn't ever going to come until it came? Maybe. But Leo had seemed to know. 'Hang on tight or get out quick,' he'd say, arching his eyebrows and pointing at something behind or to the side of you: 'Which will it be?'