

## *Making a Whip Out of Poo in Romania*

“Face din rahat bici.” Elena's frown thawed into a warm grin at my confusion. “It means 'to make a whip from poo' – make little go long way. We Romanians are good at this, we had no choice.” She thrust a greasy mici into my numb hands. The balmy roll of ground meat was a perfect remedy for the Transylvanian winter which slowly dissolved into darkness outside. The train coiled through the valley, away from Râșnov where Elena found me, cold and lost.

\*

A steely haze was heading straight for Râșnov, tumbling over the Carpathians; swallowing the peaks into obscurity. The town's Hollywood-style 'Râșnov' sign swiftly became a flickering apparition from within the mist.

The lonesome crunch of my steps in the snow broke the deserted silence, reminding me I was alone. The inky sky promised a barrage of snowflakes and they soon began falling like fluffy lead pellets, eventually suffocating the cobblestone streets. The old town's pastel homes were quickly sucked into a chalky murk.

A bus shelter provided meagre refuge as the haze slowly consumed the rest of the town. A distant chime echoed from the clock tower somewhere within the fog's recesses... another hour had passed. Still - no bus. The journey to Brașov suddenly felt impossible.

“Autobuzul nu vine acum”, a voice barked from the mist. Its hoarse tone broke the silence. Elena's silhouette emerged from the shadow, briskly swiping snow from her black leather jacket. She quickly decided I must be a tourist, instinctively switching to English. “Brașov Bus. Not coming.” A frosty stare pierced through her squinted eyes while snow settled atop her meticulously combed hair. Her powdered face was as white as the snow; her scarlet lipstick conspicuous like blood on lace.

“Come, we go to gară. Train - Brașov.” Her arms flapped in a confused frenzy as she waved me over. Gold rings shone from her fingers like beacons. Something compelled me. Was it her insistence, the bitter twilight or sheer curiosity? Perhaps all three. Suddenly, I felt my legs struggling to keep up with Elena's march.

Elena stomped through the fog, her thick black boots stamping crater-sized footprints in the snow. Something about this stranger intrigued me. Who was she? What is her story? Whoever she was, she was my only hope of getting to Brașov.

”German?” Her head snapped in my direction awaiting a reply.

”British. England”, I replied.

Her scowl thawed into a thin smirk. ”Ah, Queen and tea”, she replied.

\*

The train squeaked and rattled its way towards Brașov and Elena's rigid gaze melted into the warmth. From the train's refuge, the wintry Transylvania adopted a savage beauty. The track unfurled through the valley like a runaway ribbon. Petrified trees shivered in the wind, their bare branches twisted like contorted limbs. Sugar-dusted peaks occasionally poked through the rolling mist.

Elena gently unwrapped another mici from its foil. I insisted that she kept it for herself but with the affection of a nurturing Grandma, she clasped my fingers around it. Her lips spread into a genial smile. "If Ceaușescu taught Romanians one thing, it's how to share, no matter how little."

As the Romania I'd learned to adore sank into darkness outside, Elena pulled me into the old Romania, a country ravaged by the former communist dictator. "We waited in long line for hours, all day for food. Sometimes bread was all we had, for whole family. We made that little go long way."

I'd learned about Ceaușescu's Romania during my A-Level history. He had grand plans for his country. But who were the only people who seemed to benefit? The Ceaușescus themselves.

"Sometimes we had no running water. Every night, electricity was cut. There was not enough for everyone", Elena continued.

"But, we managed. We must. Ceaușescu, he teach us how to share and how to make the most. For that, we should be grateful." Her mouth spread into the same warm smile again.

I realised that the half-eaten mici was still in my hand. I stared at it. It was no longer a greasy roll of meat. It became a testament to Romanian tenacity and above all, the kindness of its stoic people. Elena found me at that cold bus stop and shared what she had with me, a stranger. I'm thankful that the bus never arrived.

When Romania's cold front melts away you see a nation which has survived the toughest times by uniting as one. Elena showed me how you can triumph through challenges by putting your faith and trust in others, emerging all the richer. As Romanians say, you can indeed make a 'whip from poo'.

Lost in Elena's words, I nearly missed the train jolt into Brașov. But that didn't seem to matter.