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ADRIAN

SCHIOP

SOLDIERS

A

BUCHAREST

STORY

TRANSLATED BY
PHILIP Ó CEALLAIGH

TYPE - M

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ANA

The real reason I broke up with Ana was so I could drink all I wanted and lose my mind in a flood of alcohol and not feel guilty about it. But events played a part: I got really drunk and paid some destitute guy in Braşov train station 50 lei to let me suck him off and back at the hotel had to blab all the sordid details to my friends on the veranda, with Ana in a room just above, listening. She dumped me the next day, said she'd never felt so ashamed. I got an email from her a week later, telling me to skip the melodrama, I disgusted her utterly, and good luck with my cocksucking life.

Despite my passion for drink, I didn't touch it for two weeks. I don't drink when I'm deeply depressed. An instinct for self-preservation kicks in. It was late autumn and I persisted in cycling to the office, hands freezing on the handlebars.

Predictably enough, what I missed most when I got into bed and turned off the television was that intimacy that developed between us; I thought how simple it would have been to have grown older with her, and for her to learn to know me and submit her body to mine. And so what if she was a woman: we got along and we found things to talk about. Yes, it was the

closeness I missed. Her sex, though I'd learned quickly enough how to use it, was the part of her body I'd been slowest to learn to enjoy. After two years, it was still strange to me. It wasn't easy to ejaculate, and often I'd think of boys, to move things along. But, twisted and crippled as it was, our relationship had given me an emotional comfort I'd never experienced before, and it was a salve to the fears and terrible feelings that had gripped me until the age of thirty-six, when I met her.

It still hurt weeks later, when the first phase of withdrawal had passed, but in a different way. I still fought with her all the time in my head. I couldn't shut it off: as soon as I was on my own, I'd start to argue with her, to explain, to convince her she was wrong.

Around that time—a little before it, in fact—the loneliness of the long winter nights had got a bit much for me, and I started going out each evening to one of the local dives. I didn't drink much there, two or three beers—enough to get wasted at home by topping it off with a bottle of wine. I don't usually drink much in public because I lose control after four beers and can't stop, and wind up in the most bizarre situations and shoot my mouth off and end up feeling utterly ashamed the next day. Which isn't necessarily a problem if I go out in the city centre with friends and people who know me. But I live in a rough neighbourhood called Ferentari and when it happens here it's a problem. The people here don't know what to make of my behaviour and respond unpredictably.

I'll give you an example. One December evening I had three beers at a bar called Boieru and instead of going the short route home my damned legs took me off in the opposite direction, to a boozer in Zeicani Street. Frequenting cheap bars is part of my

job, as I'm researching a doctorate on the ethno-pop phenomenon called *manele*. I lived in Ferentari to be close to my subject, since it was the only neighbourhood left in Bucharest where *manele* still ruled and where people didn't give you dirty looks if that was what you enjoyed listening to.

Boieru's is empty in winter, even at weekends, but the air in the two rooms of the Zeicani bar is fuggy, like in a stable. It's always packed because the poor get to drink their two-litre plastic bottles of beer there. It's a clever little racket: you buy your beer at the owner's shop and take it to his bar next door, a clapboard shed at the back of a yard. In the summer, people drink in the little yard and in winter they cram into the shed. The previous autumn they'd renovated the shed, cladding it with plasterboard, then in November one of the owner's relatives started to flout about, adding spot-lighting, a false ceiling, an attempt at a counter, and so on. In other words, gave it a bit of class to get the poor to hold their baptism parties and wedding receptions there.

Anyway, as I was saying, about when I got drunk and made a prick of myself. I remember, I'd had three beers at Boieru's and no longer cared it was December and a blizzard was blowing; I went to the bar on Zeicani.

It was lively there so I said, all right so, I'll stay for a couple. One of the guys who works in the shop, a relative of the owner, came up to my table and said there was a wake that night, with musicians playing by the coffin: if I gave him 20 lei, he'd take me there. I didn't give him anything. I'll stand a beer or two, but handing out money is going too far. Anyway, I was drunk and I told myself I'd manage on my own.

In the first room was a ping-pong table, where two *bagabonts* (one in his mid-twenties, the other over thirty) were playing

dice with a worker in his forties. After ten minutes the sister of the owner appeared and ejected the *bagabonts* and the worker asked me if I wanted to come along, the lads were waiting outside. Why not?

The snowstorm lashed your cheeks with shards of ice and made your eyes stream—evil weather—and the lads were waiting around the corner. One was big and fat (about 1 metre 75, in fact), and the other was skinny. The fat guy warmed the dice in his hand and gave them a shake: he was gloveless and you could hear him wheeze, the way people do when they're very drunk. After the guy I'd come with lost his money (about 3 lei in 50-bani coins—less than a euro), he complained the dice were loaded, and the fat guy stepped up and showed him his fist, What did you say? Can't remember what this tastes like? That shut him up. The fat guy oozed aggression like a peasant smells of sweat.

The worker was broke and the fat one insisted I play, didn't matter I didn't know how, whoever threw the biggest number won, but drunk as I was I didn't give in. I told him I was going to the wake of the brother of such-and-such a musician, did they know where it was?

In a tent between some of the slum-blocks, said the fat guy. Poor boy was only twenty-four, an overdose. I'm Alberto the Fist, by the way, you'll find me in the bar in Zeicani. And that's how I met Alberto—but it's not him I want to talk about here, it's that wake.

The wake was indeed in an army tent set up between apartment blocks. There was a table at the entrance, one of those round plastic ones with chairs around it, and another at the back of the tent. I took a seat at the back, right beside a rusty space heater, powered by a gas canister in a basin of water. A middle-aged man, a relative of the deceased, put a bottle of wine

and some cheap salami on bread in front of me—and that wine was the end of me. I tried to get the man to pay attention to me, but he replied in monosyllables, through gritted teeth. He was plainly grief-stricken, and an exotic tourist was the last thing he needed. I wasn't welcome there and had only been served with food and drink out of courtesy, because it was a wake. I asked about the deceased, but that was a conversation-stopper. It was a private matter and the boy had died in shady circumstances.

Drink makes me thoughtless: I lose my judgement and get so cocky anything seems possible. At the big table, the friends of the deceased were fooling around, taking the piss out of each other and falling about laughing, and that table drew me like a magnet. Without a thought, I was there. To ingratiate myself, I said, Look, I work in the press and, if they want I can call someone to film this, make a star of the deceased.

So where do you work, big-shot reporter?

In fact, at that point I no longer worked in the press. I just wrote a couple of articles a year for a crappy lefty website with an overly intellectual readership, and they just laughed when I mentioned the name. What's that? What did you say? Never heard of it, pal. If you're a journalist, I'm a priest. Go home, man, you're drunk, let us mourn, we don't need any circus here—but I wouldn't listen, kept on about filming, making the boy famous, and one of them got fed up and took off my glasses and pinched my nose, Look how big it is, what did you do to make it grow so big and crooked? Sure it's not plastic? And he tweaked it left and right to make sure, while the others burst themselves laughing. And when he was done humiliating me, he told me again, scram, you're drunk—and in the end, because I refused to get up, he took me by the elbow, not even annoyed, and ushered me out of the tent, and gave me a lackadaisical farewell kick in the hole.

He had the same jaded manner as those bored mutts who bark pointlessly in the wastelands between the blocks.

For two weeks I avoided the bar on Zeicani, though it was my favourite in that part of the neighbourhood. I don't know what it was about that bar I liked so much. The buzz, the human fauna. It has no waiting staff. Homeless people clear the empties and sweep the floor in exchange for any dregs left in the glasses. Three or four of them have been there forever. The clientele is mostly middle-aged workers and those nearing retirement. They get wasted on plastic jugs of sweet wine or cheap spirits and start to talk at each other very loudly, like country folk on the telephone. There are no women: it's an exclusively male domain. Two or three old female drunks sometimes dropped by but they could no longer be properly considered women, so a dive of a bar was not compromising. The horrifically filthy Turkish-style toilet in the yard—like something from a nineties bus station—was enough in itself to deter females. Then there were the kids and *bagabonts* playing the machines or hanging around watching. Two players and an audience of four was usual. Among the onlookers was always a kid of ten or twelve who wore plastic flip-flops and was sockless even in winter. He was a kind of bar mascot and had something feral about him. His scavenging eyes darted about, looking for his chance to filch something from the pockets of a drunkard. Once, a pack of cigarettes fell from the pocket of one of the guys playing a machine and into the kid's waiting fingers. Nobody snitched on the boy when the man, a regular, noticed he'd lost his cigarettes, though everyone had seen the kid swipe them. The boy stood there by the machine, looking around innocently. And a *bagabont* in a grubby tracksuit even

began to declaim—which one of you fuckers took the cigarettes, have you no decency?—though he too had seen the kid.

I'd often sit alone and wait for someone to speak to me. Usually they were homeless people, misfits, pensioners or simple proletarians who prattled about utility bills, poverty, a TV demagogue called Dan Diaconescu, or how great it had been under Ceaușescu. I don't know why, but I also got attention from guys claiming to be working undercover—or who just boasted about having been paid informers under communism. Maybe they were loudmouths; maybe they were trying it on to see what kind of a sucker I was; maybe the cold, lonely winter nights got a bit much for them too. The *bagabonts*—the public that interested me—rarely paid me any notice. If they did, they kept their distance and it was just small talk, nothing personal. They didn't open up unless you caught them drunk and got them drunker—but usually I took the easy route and eavesdropped.

I was the resident weirdo, and well aware of it: too polite, too well dressed, my gestures too refined for that dirty, womanless place. One time, two guys who had let me understand that they were working undercover probed me for a whole evening, as though interrogating me. What did I do? Where was I from? Where did I get my money? The older of the two had concluded I wasn't Romanian, that I was Russian for sure. Try as I might, I could never have blended in there.

While I was giving that place a break, I went regularly to Boieru's, where I chatted with Florică, the waiter, or else we both watched *Suleiman the Magnificent*, a Turkish soap opera on Kanal D. Accompanied by women from town, I would also go to a kebab joint. Until the previous year, they just served through a hatch,