

Winner of the Society of Women Writers Short Story Award.

Published in 'Southerly' Special 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue. Volume 59 Spring & Summer edition 1999

## The Baby is Sweet

The boy feels unimportant. He is called Alexander, the fourth in a family of five boys.

A good communist woman had to produce five children or more. Ceausescu's orders.

The baby is three and petted. Born 1990, one of the last Ceausescu babies. The baby was conceived before and born after. The father curses that there's another child for no reason now, but then, the baby is sweet.

It was Christmas Day 1989 when the boy's family watched Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu's bodies slump into chairs, bullet distorted, executed on black and white television. Alexander watched the television flicker. He used to be told to love the Ceausescus because they were peasant heroes, but he secretly always hated them. He was glad that they were dead. Now he is allowed to hate them.

His father drinks tvica. The three oldest boys drink tvica too. Alexander doesn't like the burning taste of plums. He's always surprised by the tvica's bitterness, when purple plums from the trees deny dripping summer sweetness. Laughing, the baby eats plums.

The boys pick plums from trees. The soil is hard and black from the belly of the petro-chemical works beside the lake. Ceausescu's modernisation, for Western currency. Nothing grows much by the lake, but the plum trees grow. The boys carry night soil and dig it into the roots of the trees so that the soil is soft under the trees.

They put the plums into wooden barrels and the father waits for the rotting. The father adds and takes away until one day the plums aren't purple. Just clear, white, burning liquid. "Good" he says.

The Australian doctor coughs when he drinks it. "Raw stuff." Chortling, the father laughs behind his handkerchief.

The father takes plums to the hospital where he works. "For, patients" and the Australian doctor smiles. There's never enough food for the people, only food for export. The father invites him for dinner.

The mother makes sour meatball soup for the Australian doctor. She says the family struggles with five boys to feed, and apologises for the small amount of meat in the soup. She says, "The baby was an accident. I am afraid that I will have more children."

The Australian doctor presses his hands together. "If you like ... if you want, I can ... in the hospital." He reddens. "An I.U.D.?"

The mother cries in front of the Australian doctor, but after he leaves she picks up the baby, smiling. "Father, you said it'd cost a month's pay for such a thing."

"No pay" the father smiles too. "The Australian doctor is stupid. He can sell it for a lot of money." He drinks more *tvica*. "We'll invite him again." The older boys nod.

The mother puts the baby down onto the floor. The baby stretches out his hand towards Alexander who holds it, then escapes into the bedroom. Lying on the edge of the big bed where all the boys sleep, the baby plays with the eiderdown until he falls asleep in his brother's arms. Alexander's comforted.

Alexander hates his home. He hates the grey-black mud path coming to the front door but his father is taking him to Bucharest. A present for his twelfth birthday. There's excitement as they board the train. Alexander's never been to Bucharest. The Dambovita River streams through the city of contrasts. Narrow crooked streets with cottages turn into grand boulevards. The grand palace, parks of bright flowers, restaurants, shops defy petroleum refineries, manufacturing plants, tanneries that seep dying throughout the streets. There are so many churches. Adorned, mysterious, carved in stone. It's Tuesday and his father takes him inside the Church of Curtea Veche to:-

"see a comedy."

Hundred of worshippers, women with their heads covered are praying.

“You see them on their knees? Every Tuesday they come.” The father laughs aloud, then rubs his son’s cheek.

The boy doesn’t laugh. As he walks beside his father, Alexander imagines the candles of Curtea Veche with their shawled women, reflecting light and gold.

Alexander looks at his feet. He doesn’t want his father to laugh at the worshippers.

The father has official business. Leaving him in the Museum of Romania, Alexander wanders through rooms of jewels and marble and paint. Images of monarchy, war, God envelope him into a kaleidoscope of pasts.

Satisfied with his official business, his father collects him.. They eat sausages at an inn before leaving for the train station. Alexander is confused as they pass crowded carriages with their dirt and humanity, then they enter the first class compartment.

“Thankyou for taking me to Bucharest, father.”

He smiles at his son before settling into silence as the train clangs out of the city.

The father is important in the town. When he belonged to the Communist Party, he reported neighbours to the police, but he also gave favours. He was powerful and people were afraid of him. Now that there isn’t any more communism, the people are still afraid of him.

Alexander isn't afraid because his father kisses him and says. "I do this for you. For a better life for my family." Alexander loves his father when he hugs him with his huge arms.

Alexander was surprised when his father cheered for Ceausescu's death. His father stood with the people - shouting against the Ceausescus, tearing down their photographs. He reported his enemies. Some had escaped, some starved in labour camps.

The people understand the father. He's like Romania they say. In the great war of 1914, Romania fought to survive. The country watched armies move across the land, kill the people. In the war Romania fought for the Allies, then for the Germans, then for the Allies. Romania survived, like the father.

At school, Alexander is taught that Romania won the war. He's proud like the other children in his classroom and stands before the Romanian flag. He learns there are rewards for winning -Trianon. The name of a palace, a French castle, a Treaty which gave Romania, part of another country. Hungary's heart.

Alexander sees pictures of white snowy mountains that were Hungary. Transylvania flaunts Dracula's castle on a craggy mountain with medieval towns and dense green forests. They speak Hungarian there.

"Hungary wasn't clever like Romania." He tells his sons. "She lost her slender arms, strong legs, beautiful white hair. Today the white mountains of Transylvania are

ours.” He doesn’t laugh, but shakes his head. “Foolish country. Foolish people. Romanian way is better.” He quotes a proverb. “‘The water flows, but the stones remain.’ We are those stones. Just let the water flow past. ‘Justice is as the rulers make it.’”

The Romanians understand the father. He’s still powerful, in charge of many things in the hospital. They’ll need the hospital one day.

When the father asks Alexander what he wants from the Australian doctor, he answers, “nothing”. The older boys want jeans and joggers. “Good boys” the father says, but he doesn’t understand Alexander. The father will ask the doctor for jeans and joggers for the children in the ward. An excuse.

Alexander hates the wooden boards of his home. They cry when he walks on them. He hates the open fire puffing soot inside, so that the inside is the same as the outside. He goes with his brothers to the forest to cut wood. The baby clings onto his back and tucks his legs around Alexander’s waist.

The forest is ugly. The petro-chemicals make the needles from the pine trees fall to the ground and the lake, black. No fish swim in the lake. No birds fly over it.

The Australian doctor shows the boy photos of Australian bush with blue rivers and greenness - not the deep green of Romanian pines, but strange white trunked forests with dusty-soft leaves. There are red and green birds and big white cockatoos with yellow combs, different to plain brown Romanian birds pecking at the edge of

survival. There are pictures of men in khaki shorts and bush boots climbing mountains, making new tracks. Alexander sighs and the Australia doctor gives him the pictures.

Alexander loves carrying the baby on his back, feeling the warmth, listening to his babble. As he carries him beside the lake, Alexander kisses the baby, pressing him tightly as if to squeeze out the blackness.

When Alexander goes to the hospital to give messages to his father, he takes the baby. His father rubs the soft brown hair on top of the baby's head. There's a sweetness in the baby.

The Australian doctor is busy, running between wards with other foreign aid workers. The Romanians watch half surprised, trying to understand why these strangers are here, searching for a past memory of when people were different.

Ceausceau is dead. Now they can work on their small plots of land around their houses producing rich fruits and cows heavy with milk so they can feed their families. They can look after themselves. What do the foreigners want?

The Australian doctor always talks to Alexander. Alexander is learning English at school. Everyone's learning English, because they want the affluence of the West. Alexander wants too, but other things. He dreams of a country where the people aren't afraid of speaking, where families don't cling together isolated because it's dangerous out there.

Alexander listens to the doctor talk about Australia where people shout against politicians in the centre of cities and families stand in front of bulldozers stopping roads into rainforests and students paddle canoes in front of war ships.

English is hard. Alexander listens to the doctor, re-reads the books he lends him, carefully copies words. There's excitement, sensing truths different to his father's, different to Ceausescu's classroom, different to this new free Romania.

He watches the Australian doctor stroke the hands of an old woman. The old woman stares and when the Australian doctor walks away and his back is turned, she reaches out, her fingers opening and shutting because she remembers another time.

At home, Alexander watches his mother stir the mamaliga. He talks about the old woman.

“What does the doctor care? The old woman is nothing to him.” She shrugs because she knows that only her family matter. Others will betray her and she can't remember anymore another time. Alexander's brothers shrug too.

The Australian doctor is changing. He sees the boys wearing joggers and jeans from Australia. He sees the Romanian doctor put an I.U.D. into his pocket to sell on the black market. He sees babies used as guinea pigs for experimental drugs in the hope of foreign currency. He sees .... no-one comfort, no-one hold a dying child, no-one  
.....

Alexander comes with the baby, to return the books to the doctor.

“I’m going back to Australia.”

“Will you come for dinner, to say good-bye?”

“No. There’s no point. We’re not friends.”

Bending his head, Alexander whispers. “Please.” He hardly breathes. “Can’t I and my baby brother be your friends? See, I don’t wear Australian jeans.”

The doctor shakes his head.

Quietly, the boy says. “I am different, and Romania will be different.” He holds up the baby. “You see, the baby is sweet.”