

My Transylvanian cousin

Inez Baranay

It is dark enough to step outside. I inhale salty air off the sea and gaze at the sculptural shape floating above the horizon at an indistinct distance at the northern end of the long beach: an other-worldly city, its tall towers seeming to lean into each other, shimmering in the fading last light of the day. Gold medallions glinting and flashing off high windows are reflections of the last rays of the sun, invisibly low out west, and are as much of daylight as I can now bear to see. From this distance that cluster of high-rise apartment blocks looks like a monolith, unsettlingly unvertical, shifting according to the changing light, appearing sometimes as a block of marble, sometimes as columns of smoke.

Electric lights come on, like fireflies. I turn to see the slowly blinking light of a plane in the southern sky; it pulsates with a briefly brighter flash, a farewell from cousin Vlad, old Europe returning with re-made knowledge from the new world. I go back inside. Should do some work.

I find a bottle of red opened. I sniff, it's still all right. I pour a glass. Its scent bursts into my brain: grapes, sugar and bodily fluids, its rich sensation spreading in my mouth.

It wasn't so very long ago, as I once counted time: an evening like any other. That mix of dread and pleasure as I pull the curtains, turn on a lamp. Red wine black coffee green tea. Time at the computer tapping, doodling, brain vibrating to the flicker of the screen. Restlessly pacing, flicking through TV channels or momentarily engrossed in a program, maybe getting interested in eating and either stirring a painstaking risotto or barely pausing to make some toast with cheese. New music or no music or old music, once in a while the phone, or switch the phone line to the modem. I can think of some mail I'd like to arrive. There's no clear line between working and not working, this is a writer's life. My editor has been at work today, plus there's a personal reply due to me. The modem.

Dial up.

Delete these:

Turn phone calls into money. Doctor approved pills add 3 inches. Easily lose weight.

Ah, here it is: *Re: corrections*. And oh, here it is: *Re: re: re: re:.*

For now I deny I am wondering what the Thai Boxing guy could possibly say next. I'm not going to open that first. Open *corrections* first.

Attachments, edits on next ten chapters, nothing major, get rid of more of those semi-colons, all looking good. Just got to find that perfect ending. What is it with endings? Find it, then see about writing an ending with the Thai Boxing Guy. Show me something I haven't seen. How do you get it right, not get into a blah mundane relationship but create an exhilarating reason to keep seeing each other?

So look at this. *Re: re: re: re:.* What was it going to be this time? First it was me saying soon as I finish this chapter that's been giving me trouble; then it was him saying as soon as he gets back from this trip. Soon, soon, we'd been saying to each other, we'll get together again soon, when the houseguests leave, when I've recovered from my cold, after this deadline at work, when I finish this bit of extra work. And now I've got to prepare for a competition. And now there is this earlier obligation. And now something's come up.

For a moment there I had thought we were going to move beyond the went out with once to the once went out with, and we both did want it, but there was always something. This isn't even a personal email but one of those links to some new cool website he's mailed to everyone on his list. Delete. Fuck the Thai Boxing guy, it is so his turn to make the next move and this doesn't count. Call it over. Move on. Some artists would choose an unresolved ending. That exhilarating reason could only lead to sentimentality.

Alcohol detector. Add three inches. Boost your sales. Britney naked. Confidential. Delete, delete.

Inez, I am your cousin.

Yeah, right, delete.

Congratulations, inezb, you've won a prize. Thanks for your inquiry. Add three inches.

Absolutely Free Satellite... Delete.

And then:

Inez, I am your cousin.

Huh? Didn't I just delete that? Was it there twice and I only imagined it just sprang up again? But weirdness happens at the computer: old emails spontaneously re-send themselves, you send a personal message to a list instead of an individual *oops*, try out silly explanations to ex-lovers in the middle of the night and press send while you're online *fuuuuck*. So, maybe I didn't notice it before, or it just got re-sent ...

Delete.

It appears again.

Inez, I am your cousin.

Delete. It appears again.

Ok, this is weird. This message won't delete. So, what's going on is, there is a thing they can do now where the message gets re-sent at once automatically if you delete it. Spam the next generation.

I go off line.

It appears again: *Inez I am your cousin.*

How did that happen? I open it.

'I am your cousin, distant in generations but close in blood. I am traveling to Australia soon and I will look you up.'

I've had the odd cousin turn up on email before, a real one, from the USA, who was researching a family history and we mailed each other for a little while. An old friend once turned up, found me on the internet, and we wrote until we didn't. No-one is unattached, no-one can't be found and nothing is irretrievably deleted.

The phone rings.

I pick up. This is what I hear: 'Inez, I sent you an email. I am your cousin. I have come to your area. We will see each other soon.'

There is an echo-ey sound; it's a man's voice, inflected with an odd hybrid accent, two or three continents, four or five cultures, seven types of incongruity.

'Well' I say. 'I am quite unprepared and astonished.'

'There is nothing to prepare, I predict we shall get along famously. We first will meet for a coffee in a public place, I insist; after all you will have no way to judge me but what you perceive.'

True, there was no-one to introduce us, no-one to tell me if he was truly related to me. Would we perhaps find someone in common? How many degrees of separation can there be? Even if he'd come all the way from ...

'Wait, how did you find...'

Like he was even listening or would tell me.

I make my way to the café at Main Beach to meet the man who says he's my cousin. If he turns out too weird or boring, I'll just cut it short, then avoid around here for a while.

I watch a BMW parking and three women - sparkly tops tight over coconut-shell breasts, low pants underlining flashing navels on personally trained bellies, thin sparkly high-heeled sandals, streaked hair extensions brushing spray-tanned shoulders, puffed-up lips and that'd be the latest in sunglasses - stumble into the café next door.

He's standing there, right at my table. Linen suit, pale, something quite elegant about him, the cut of the suit, his pale face, the grey hair cut into artful spikes, elegance and money, age anywhere between...

'Due espressi, doppio' he is saying to the waiter who has arrived with menus, young blond guy in shorts, white tank top, excellent body.

'Cool' says the waiter, 'excellent choice, my name is Luke and I'll be your waiter today.'

'So, who are you exactly? What's this about being my cousin?'

'Does it seem so unlikely? You an Australian novelist and I ...' like I could finish his sentence.

'What? What are you, what do you do?'

'...a Transylvanian games designer.'

'There's a games industry in ...?... Is that a country again? I don't keep up with East Europe. I've lost touch with the, what, whole Balkan thing, awful wasn't it. But I don't know about anywhere much really.'

'That is your privilege.'

'Yes. We're so far away and don't really believe it matters.'

His glasses have a tint, so I can't quite see his eyes. 'You, of course, are not really an Australian...'

'But I am, of course I am, this is the story of my life, becoming Australian.'

'You belong to the same tradition as I do...'

I hear traces of an accent I knew long ago, stirring complicated feelings, but other intonations and rhythms modulate his speech. 'So which side of my family...?' I suddenly remember being a kid and figuring out my mother and father were both related to me but not to each other, what a curious thought it had seemed.

'I am your cousin on your father's side.'

I shook my head. 'Maybe. You probably know more than me, about the family and who is who and where they all went. My mother ... when she died all those connections were gone. By the time I would have thought of asking father he'd gone too. We never talked much about before they came here. But I heard from a cousin in the USA that's she's doing a family tree, though that's my mother's side...'

I had always suspected that history from the old country was too dark to inspect and felt lucky to have the life of a bottle blonde in a bright land where the past was obliterated. If my heredity were stained with historical evil it was bleached out here, especially where I lived now, this touristic territory for transient and re-invented lives, where people came for new beginnings or the leisurely reward for previous toil in cold, dry or frantic cities.

Vlad was listening patiently, just watching me. Our waiter put down our coffee, and we both watched him. ‘Two short blacks’ the waiter announced cheerily, ‘double shots, can I interest you in anything else this evening?’ He had cultivated one of those lines of hair around his chin that you have to be that young and pretty. Vlad’s eyes and mine, in unison, traveled down and up the young man’s surf-toned body while we declined anything else for now.

I drifted back. My father didn’t have real siblings, maybe a step-brother or was it a half-brother...? I never usually thought about it. So how was this guy my cousin?

‘We look alike’ Vlad stated, staring at me.

‘What?’ I exclaimed. I couldn’t look away either, appalled to be seeking anything of myself in him.

‘But you are younger than me’ he provided, with a smile.

‘Yeah? How old are you? Which is a rude question round here ...’

‘Rude...’ He shrugged, pronouncing the word, conjuring a magnificence of rudeness.

‘Older than you, that’s for sure! Older than you would quite believe!’

Facials, manicures, he was that kind of man, and maybe more, the skin did look kind of tight, maybe those injections they have, because if he’s very much older than me, he doesn’t look all that much older, or maybe, uh oh, I don’t look all that much younger.

‘But I will show you how to stay young’ he adds.

I frowned. This region was said to be the cosmetic surgery centre of the nation, but I wasn’t sure if that’s what he meant. As for ageing, I was going for a mix of graceful and denial. Denial works for me.

‘In a traditional way’ he adds. ‘A timeless way.’

‘Can’t wait. So, what’s your story? Where have you lived all your life? How’d you come here?’

As he spoke, telling me in terms I would later think vague and imprecise, but at the time apparently satisfying, indeed spell-binding, that he had spent a great deal of his time in the old

country, once living according to an old idea of destiny, and little dreaming that he would one day transform himself from a Transylvanian soul into a global soul, becoming aware that his arena of operation was not only the brooding darkling plains but the planet, for the world had no more ends.

‘Two dry martinis’ suddenly announces Luke, our waiter, for at some time in this narrative we have decided to have a drink and here they are. As Luke bends a little to place the ice-frosted glasses where our coffee cups had been, I notice a pulse at his neck, a barely perceptible throbbing, suggesting the flow and surge of his rich red blood. I thoughtfully spin the green olive in the liquid then take a sip, my mouth blasted with a cold tang that momentarily distracts me from Vlad’s tale.

‘Perhaps I took the Transylvania within me to all the corners of the planet’ Vlad was telling me. ‘Perhaps I traveled the planet without leaving Transylvania.’

‘Well, you’re not in Transylvania now.’

‘No? And you?’

‘Me? I never was. Once I felt I was neither Transylvanian or Australian, but now it’s different, I’m Australian. But I didn’t really grow up with Transylvania consciousness, I did sort of know it was where my father once came from.’

‘An old, old family, a name,’ he said, saying *name* with a wealth of meaning.

‘We don’t have names like that, people just have names, they might talk about where their names come from but no-one thinks one name is better than another.’

‘Ah. What an interesting country you came to.’

‘Best bloody country in the world mate’ I said in the broadest.

It’s like I’m having a drink with someone I’ve known a long time, like indeed, a cousin, which is a relationship I am unfamiliar with. Something like an old friend but more a sense not that you’ve chosen this person, nor have they chosen you, but you are irrevocably part of each other’s life and you’re lucky if you can make the most of it.

Vlad says that he has come to find me because he believes in tradition. I was next in line to be part of his tradition. I wondered if I were going to inherit some Rumanian ruin. I had never expected to inherit anything and was suspicious. Some terrible pile you were in debt for ...Or maybe this was one of those land rights restitution deals, people claiming their rights of

ownership over lands and houses that belonged to them or their families decades long ago, in previous regimes, previous governments, property bestowed or inherited in previous monarchies and empires. I never wanted to get into that either. It's not just that I'm not a property owning type, I'm also not convinced about historical rights.

Plus, I was wary of even thinking about a climate that encouraged a moody temperament. I'd still get flashes of a feeling from childhood that I was a terminal weirdo and amazed every time I was treated like I was a regular human even if that was most days. I thought this was down to a combo of ethnic and artistic but maybe something else would explain it, what inheritance was Vlad talking about?

Vlad and I are both looking at the waiter, Luke, removing glasses from the next table. Then our eyes flicker towards each other, an almost subliminal acknowledgment.

'So,' I ask, 'what, where you grew up, was it, like, repressive? Or oppressive?'

'I have never, ever felt oppressed ... not until very recently. That is why I've found you.'

'Sure, me, good move' I say, puzzled. Some family thing kicks in for even the most non-family type people when they hit an age: they start wondering where their grandmothers were born, want to frame old photographs, display ancestors' portraits, seek to meet people related to them, travel to countries they don't know.

'You are next in line' Vlad explained, not really explaining.

'For what?'

'To have whatever you want.'

'Yeah right, like you do.'

'I have whatever I want' he said evenly.

'Yeah, maybe, easier for men,' I mutter somewhat automatically.

Our waiter has come by again. 'Another one of those?' Luke suggests amiably. "Or can I interest you in our dinner menu at all?"

I shake my head. 'I've got to go.'

'The check,' says Vlad to him. 'Whatever you want,' to me.

Some kind of self-help mind control sign here cult thing? Do they have those in Transylvania, they probably do, they're everywhere, globalisation, but he is so not the type.

There were dark forests in my dreams, a shadowy castle rising from a craggy cliff, howls of wolves rending the air like children of the night, a flapping of furry wings in the air next to my head in the darkness, a cloaked figure melting into the shadows, a creaking of a coffin lid, a long orgasmic sigh

But never mind the dreams. You would want to interpret, and interpretation is the enemy of dreams.

'So' I ask as I join Vlad 'had a good 24 hours?'

'Restorative' he says. 'Martinis' he says to Luke, for we're at the same café and our waiter is the same guy, in a fresh white tank top, saying it's good to see us again. I suspect it's Vlad he's pleased to see again. 'And you?' Vlad asks me.

'Yeah, didn't get up til late, unusual for me' I say, for that day I strangely had not welcomed the first light of day, but lingered in bed as if I'd had a flu or a heartache, drifting back to the embrace of phantasms from stories I never knew. 'So you're not a morning person?'

'I got up just an hour ago' says Vlad. We look over towards the bar where our waiter is looking at us, pointing to a young woman making our cocktails and holding up two fingers to indicate our drinks'll be right over in two minutes.

'He's looking at you' I say.

'He looks at you.'

I don't think so. I tend to look at men who look at the men I'm with.

It is getting dark now, and I realise I hadn't gone for a walk today. I begin to feel a restless energy stir in me.

'You were made for a European light' Vlad suddenly remarks.

'No,' I say. 'I was made for this climate, hot, it's winter when you wear something with sleeves.'

Vlad's tropical night look is another outfit in very smart pale linen.

'Your skin is almost milky white, is that your natural color all over or only the bits I can see?'

'Do you want me to show you? You're not sporting a tan either' he remarks.

'Oh, I keep meaning to lie in the sun more, but the bits you can see are darker than the rest of me, from just driving around.'

I suddenly realise I hadn't gone out at all today.

'So what else are you up to?' I ask, 'anything touristy?'

'I'm not here for tourism' he says 'but I am curious about this.' He shows me an advertisement he's found in a tourist booklet from his hotel, an ad for a night of fun, an ad for a place called Dracula Castle. I am trying to explain to Vlad the concept of theme parks and theme restaurants and popular culture's bricolage of appropriation, and 'I used to work there' says Luke, unshyly looking at what it is we're looking at. I am faintly amused by the existence of these popular pseudo-places around here, but have never considered a visit.

'It's not an actual castle is it?' I ask Luke.

'It's locals having birthday parties' he says 'and office parties at Christmas and hens' nights. We'd have to get dressed up and act in the shows but we never got paid for that only for waiting.'

'No way I'm going to explain all that' I say to Vlad, 'but I don't reckon you need to go there, trust me.'

When Vlad and I leave the café, Luke is loitering outside. We walk alongside him a few blocks, among the high rise towers of apartments, pink and aqua, driveways studded with neat palms, everything new, made for those lucky enough to live here on redundancies and superannuations, investments and retirement schemes; or those lucky enough to be taking a holiday – the whole southern winter or just a couple weeks among the amenities, or those lucky enough to have a job serving them in all the casual modes of employment that are available here and best suited to those who live like Luke: job's OK for now though he moved here for the modeling opportunities, and he's house-sitting for absent owners to provide security in return for free rent, and come on up if you want.

I hesitate for a moment but apparently I am included. We enter a lift and go up a couple of floors.

'You two are different,' says Luke, 'it's good to meet people that are a bit different.' I suddenly felt very hungry.

'I can't make you a martini' says Luke 'but I've got some Baileys.'

The floor is fake marble tiles; fake palms sit in giant pots painted turquoise; matching pieces of oversize rattan furniture are covered in a printed green and gold fabric with a plastic sheen.

Vlad walks over to him. Places his hand on Luke's shoulder, runs it down his spine. Luke leans back into him, his head thrown back, his eyes closing.

They know I'm watching. I guess that's what I'm here for, to watch.

Vlad arches his neck forward as Luke arches his head back, Vlad brings his lips to Luke's neck, to the place I had watched the throb of blood at the pulse, as if to place there a tender kiss. He bites hard into the pulsating vein. Luke groans and thrashes his arms a little in a mix of protest and appeal but he is held fast at the neck by Vlad's teeth, as Vlad begins to suck rhythmically, a little trace of blood running down his chin. Vlad lifts his head just as the body is completely drained and I walk over, bend to the punctured neck and lick the remaining drops of blood, their vinous flavor bursting in my mouth like fermented grapes, like earth and sugar and the pleasures of aeons.

I go to bed at dawn and wake in the late afternoon. I don't open the curtains til the last light of the day is about to fade. This is how I am, these are my natural daily rhythms, the rhythms of a former and future life and self, coming alive in the darkness of night.

At night, where the crowd is, in the mall, it's a brilliantly lit darkness in which real darkness is not obliterated that's not the point but real darkness is adorned and ignored, transgressed and teased, referred to while concealed in abstruse allusion by too much fluorescence.

It's barely a city block, this beachside down-town; a strip of burger and donut joints, emporia of cheap t-shirts, surfer gear, tacky mass-produced boomerangs and fridge magnets and upstairs for bongs and rainbowed apparel to wear under ultraviolet lights in the night clubs above us or pagan nights in the forests not so very far away.

The tourists are from Down South; the young are from south and west and even north, seeking jobs or better lives in unemployment; the women in black veils are from beyond the seas that ensure our insularity and this is all we know of such lives, that they include shopping tourism; the people in couples on dates live in suburbs west of the highway with lives no less unimaginable, at least to me or to Vlad. And the gangs of young men, well they may be the same wherever you are, bold in bonding, scared alone...

Suddenly Vlad stops, I walk a few steps more before I realise he has; I turn and look at him standing stark still, concentrating hard.

I can't tell for a moment what has arrested him so. It's the techno-trance sounds coming out of a music shop, between a condom shop and a wig shop, a narrow corridor of space lined with racks of CDs, opening out down the back. I follow him in.

'That, where can I find that?' Vlad is asking a sales assistant, pointing upward to indicate the spacey rainbow and laser-light doof doof sounds that fill the air around us. As Vlad is led to

the left and down the back, at that moment, as I am about to follow, the Thai Boxing guy almost runs me down. We stare and shake our heads at each other.

‘It’s you’ says the Thai Boxing guy to me.

‘Well hi there’ I say, hating to be surprised.

‘Funny, I was just thinking about you.’

‘And I’d never have known.’

‘I was going to call you.’

‘Just when I’d stopped holding my breath.’

‘I didn’t want to call too soon.’

‘When is it not too soon?’

A new music track comes on, trippy robotic kind of thing. I look where down the back, the sales assistant is showing Vlad a couple more CDs. The Thai Boxing guy looks where I’m looking. ‘It would be good to talk’ he says.

‘You used to tell me so much in email but not since we met.’

‘Yeah? It was good, ay’ he says, conjuring all the revelations and flirtations, the replies to replies, the way we described ourselves to each other and described each other.

‘Yeah I thought it was all right’ I said.

Was it me or was it him? Was virtual life always the one you longed for? How could we get something going without that tired old couple thing neither of us wanted? How much could we need each other?

‘So what are you up to?’ he asks. ‘Out on the town?’

‘With this distant cousin of mine from Transylvania actually, and an actual blood relative is not a species I’m used to.’

‘He’s staying with you?’

‘A hotel, but I’m seeing a lot of him.’

‘How’s it going?’

‘Yeah, ok, he’s pretty westernised. I’m learning a lot about tradition. Who’re you with?’
Yeah, let him wonder if I’m learning more than he is. We are staring into each other’s eyes, blood pounding, like the night we finally met, made all the moves so smoothly, and had no idea what came next.

‘Be good to talk’ he says again, knowing how to get a woman interested. Talk, he likes to talk, this one, what he thought and what he meant and how he feels and where it’s going and whether he’s reading me right.

‘So I’ll call you’ I say, and join Vlad with his three new CDs. Vlad has gone in for chemical dance music in a big way. ‘On most CDs track 5 is best’ I remark to Vlad. ‘Six I think’ he replies.

‘Ok’ I tell Vlad later ‘I’m ready to join history.’

‘History is an invention but tradition is real’ says Vlad. I don’t have time to puzzle over this, for as if to prove his point, a printed souvenir of Dracula Castle falls out of the linen jacket he has tossed over one shoulder. ‘People go there with the intention to have fun’ he tells me somewhat wonderingly, ‘and they do have fun.’

‘I don’t get it’ I say, referring to his complete refusal to find anything distasteful in this pastiche amusement of frolicking vampires, pirates, furry critters and a Wicked Witch, ‘where is the authenticity here?’

He just gives me a look of ancient jadedness and new-found appreciation for cultural fusion.

Vlad explains the tradition. It starts with a bite, then it is a kind of kiss or a kind of suck. These words sound better in certain other languages, they are long words with complex declensions and conjugations, full of nuance and punning possibilities. Words not so blatantly erotic but suggestive, rather, of both everyday acts and rare, occult transmutations.

The kiss is something that when I do it to you and I don’t do it to just anyone, then you will have to pass on one day, no hurry, but it is a contagion, and has to be passed.

The suck is, well, you were there, the other night, all the blood is drunk, once you have experienced the kiss you will need to do this suck every so often, make sure you take every drop of blood or it is incomplete. The suck is for energy. It is all take.

Oh yes I recall that taste of blood like ruby wine, bursting into my mouth like fruit and sugar and fermentation... I have had no nourishment since then.

‘Have I got this right?’ I ask, ‘given these terms are not exactly translatable but someone you kiss ends up in the same condition as you, and someone you suck ends up over?’

‘I suppose condition is the word’ he says. ‘An existential condition or do you say ontological condition?’

‘The point being...?’

Once you pass on the kiss you will die, you understand, like a regular mortal, not at once but soon, unless you get the kiss returned, by someone who has had the kiss to give. That's how serious kissing of this type is, if only this language could convey how different all these kisses essentially can be. Do you understand? When you ask me, I will give you the kiss and then I will ask you for the kiss. So you and I can live forever in the tradition, both of us.

Why does Vlad want me to be part of this tradition so much? Doesn't weary melancholy win in the end, aren't those thousands of years sufficient for finally real detachment? It must be a desire instinctual and driving, a hunger, not like the hungers you know, but one that keeps its host alive, long past the time they want to rest forever.

It is good to know what dying feels like, but you don't have to go all the way.

'Just ask me' Vlad says. 'We can do it to each other for as long as there is good new music.'

I do, I find, want to go on living and living, I am sure that no matter what, if you are in sound mind and body and with sufficient material wherewithal, you hold onto life no matter what, tolerate the stages where it seems too boring or difficult. They will always happen, but now I feel more intensely alive than I ever have, aglow, intense, magnetic, ready, ready for something so good that's been on its way to me for such a long time.

'So you never get tired of life?' I ask Vlad, contemplating his centuries of waking and sleeping. 'There is always something new' he says, looking fondly at some recent trip-hop CDs, and the announcement of a new program at Dracula Castle, involving dwarves, ghost-busters and an evil cyborg. 'Humankind changes, and I adapt.'

'Yes' I wonder, 'if you die it's always in the middle of a story, but then, some people get to a stage they don't care how it turns out, they get tired.'

'Why not live for ever?' he challenged me.

'People think there's a terrible price.'

'What is more terrible than death?' he asked.

'Things you can do nothing about don't seem so terrible' I muse.

'So you are ready for death?'

That was the creepiest thing I had ever heard. You submit to or are seduced or taken by death, it's not something to be ready for.

‘All right,’ I then said to Vlad, ‘do it to me. Hey, it’s what you came all this way for!’ I remind him as I see him hesitate. ‘Do me, Vlad, make me historical.’

I call the Thai Boxing guy. ‘I’m only going to say this once’ I say.

‘You don’t have to say it’ he says, ‘can I come over?’

‘We can talk afterwards’ I say when he gets there.

‘What can I say’ he says after a couple hours, not a question.

‘Can I do anything I want to you?’

‘You can do anything you want to me’ he says.

‘Do you promise to do anything I ask you to do?’

‘I promise to do anything you ask me to.’

‘First lie still, I’m going to bite you just here. Tell me you want me to.’

‘I want you to bite me.’

Oh the pulse at his neck, throbbing gently, pulsating with vivid fluid, his flesh slippery and salty. I lick him gently at first, circling the precious spot, he chokes on phoenix desire, I place my sucking lips right there, his neck arches, his spine arches, I bite into him, puncturing him and how he throbs and flows and spurts into my mouth, I drink deep, mouth and throat filled with the taste of salt and earth and wine.

And I stop, don’t ask me why, raise my head to watch him thrash about, place a finger over the hole to arrest the fountain of blood, just enough so that his heart can beat again though only just as he lies there limp. It’s a kiss after all.

‘It’s like this’ I tell Vlad, ‘I chose him. I’d rather keep biting him than you, no offence. If you ever got a taste of this guy’s blood you’d know what I mean. He’s promised to do it to me, so, you know. I could never commit before but this is a relationship.’

Vlad just looks at me for a moment, opaquely, then that look of weariness flickers deep in his eyes.

‘I couldn’t help it, I meant to suck but it just became a whole other thing.’ In my selfish way I hadn’t given much thought to the consequences for Vlad of my choice. He was in pretty good shape, though, so it wasn’t like he wasn’t going to ever have any more fun.

‘Sorry’ I said. ‘The mortality thing is a drag, I suppose.’ Although I was fast forgetting any knowledge of a necessary end.

‘Ah well. Those of us from the Old World are accustomed to expect the worst. You New World folk always act so outraged when things go against you. And then, it’s certainly an interesting condition. I never understood that about you mortals, the way you accepted an end that would come so soon. Telling yourselves absurd stories to help you deny it, or managing not to really believe in your own individual finality. Odd isn’t it, how things you can do nothing about don’t seem so terrible.’

‘So are you still going back to Transylvania?’

‘Of course,’ Vlad tells me. ‘Maybe it’s all worked out for the best. Do you have any idea how much money there is around here looking for offshore investment?’ He takes out a handful of paper headed by a logo I now recognise. ‘I’ve got the chance of heading up a very hot venture over there. These days you can live anywhere, right? Satellite, cable.’

‘You what?’ I say, flipping through his documents, ‘You’re going to open a chain of Gold Coast Dracula theme park restaurants back in Transylvania?’

‘There’ll be franchises, tie-ins, computer games...I would have invited you but writers are not good at business...’

‘It’s the idea of forever that got me. Ever after. What happens after an ending. I need that now. It’s been good, Vlad.’

‘If you ever change your mind or want to visit.’

‘Sure’ I say. ‘Let’s stay in touch.’

When it’s time for his flight to depart, it’s dark enough, and I step outside and cross over to the beach.