

It's 4:30 a.m., and the morning is still young. I stumble home and collapse onto my bed. For once, I am grateful for the darkness.

I recently came across a great ad for Dos Equis, the Mexican beer. There's a photo of a man in his late fifties, cigar in hand and looking vaguely like Hemingway. On either side of him are two younger women, gazing admiringly. (And, oh, yeah, some beer, too.) The man has this look in his eye, this I-know-things-about-life look. The text reads: "Being boring is a choice. Those mild salsas and pleated khakis don't buy themselves."

And so it is with happiness. When the talk of genetics and communal bonds and relative income is stripped away, happiness is a choice. Not an easy choice, not always a desirable one, but a choice nonetheless.

Faced with a brutal climate and utter isolation, Icelanders could have easily chosen despair and drunkenness. The Russian option. But instead these hardy sons and daughters of Vikings peered into the unyielding blackness of the noon sky and chose another option: happiness and drunkenness. It is, I think, the wiser option. Besides, what else is there to do in the dark?

Chapter 6

MOLDOVA

Happiness Is Somewhere Else

All of this happiness is starting to bum me out. As the German philosopher and fellow malcontent Schopenhauer once said, "Because they feel unhappy, men cannot bear the sight of someone they think is happy."

Exactly. What I need, what will cheer me up, is a trip to an unhappy place. According to the Law of Relative Happiness, such a place will boost my mood since I'll realize there are depths of misery to which I have not yet sunk.

Such a place, too, could lend valuable insights into the nature of happiness. We know a thing by its opposite. Hot means nothing without cold. Mozart is enhanced by the existence of Barry Manilow. And happy places owe their station, at least in part, to the unhappy ones.

Yes, I need to travel to the dark side of the planet, some place not merely a bit blue, a bit down in the dumps, but truly and deeply miserable. But where?

Iraq immediately jumps to mind. Now, there is an unhappy place, as the daily carnage on my TV screen attests. But Iraq's unhappiness says more about the nature of war than it does about the nature of happiness. I dig up my notes from the World Database of Happiness. Let's see. A few African countries certainly qualify as miserable, and I briefly consider hopping the next flight to Zimbabwe. But African misery, too, is easily diagnosed, though the remedies may prove elusive.

Then it occurs to me: Moldova. Of course. The former Soviet republic is, according to Ruut Veenhoven's data, the least happy nation on the planet. Even the name sounds melancholy. Moldooova. Try it. Notice how your jaw droops reflexively and your shoulders slouch, Eeyore-like. (Unlike "Jamaica," which is impossible to say without smiling.) I can even imagine the word "Moldova" doubling as a synonym for generic disquiet.

"How are you doing today, Joe?"

"Not so well. A bit Moldooova."

"Sorry to hear it. Cheer up."

Yes, Moldova is just the tonic I need.

How to pack for a trip to the world's least happy place? Maybe I should bring some dark Russian literature—is there any other kind?—some Dostoevsky, perhaps, just to show that, you know, I am one of them.

First, though, I need two visa-sized photos. I'm sitting on the little stool at one of those quickie photo shops. "Smile," says the clerk. I freeze. What should I do? Would a smiley photo score me points, like arriving in a famine-stricken nation with bags of wheat? Or might it be seen as subversive? I imagine a dour immigration official—is there any other kind?—taking one look at my beaming mug and shouting to his colleague, "Hey, Boris, come here. We've got a troublemaker." I opt for the middle path: a neutral half grin that could be interpreted as either mirth or snideness.

The next order of business: finding Moldova on the map. This proves trickier than expected. I scan my atlas several times before finally locating it, sandwiched between Romania and the Ukraine, two significantly unhappy countries in their own right. Misery loves company.

Getting to Moldova turns out to be nearly as tricky as finding it on a map. It's almost as if the Moldovans are off sulking in their corner of the globe. "Leave us alone. We're not happy, and we like it that way. We said go away!"

I know it's just a cry for help, though, and am not about to give up. Let's see, there's a flight from Frankfurt on Air Moldova. But

I dismiss this option out of hand; I'm not about to trust my fate to some seriously bummed out Moldovan pilot. There's an Austrian Airways flight from Vienna. Good. The Austrians may be a bit humorless, in a Teutonic way, but they score a respectable 6.5 on the happiness scale. I book my ticket.

The small jet touches down in Chisinau, Moldova's capital, and before long I'm standing in line at immigration control. The airport is small; it feels more like a Greyhound bus terminal than an international gateway. I find myself checking for overt signs of unhappiness. Is it in the air? Is it the emotional equivalent of landing at a very high altitude airport—La Paz, Bolivia, say—and immediately feeling light-headed? No, I detect no immediate drop in my mood.

A sour-looking woman is sitting behind a counter marked "Visa upon arrival." I hand her my visa photo, with its neutral half grin, and three crisp twenty-dollar bills. As a rule of thumb, the more fucked-up a country, the more said country insists on crisp bills. The Swiss, for instance, don't mind rumped, torn, or otherwise imperfect bills. But I remember standing at an airline ticket office in Kabul, as the clerk examined each hundred-dollar bill I handed him like it was a genuine Matisse, or possibly a good forgery. He rejected at least half. One had the slightest of tears, another was deemed too old; a third just didn't feel right.

The woman looks at my photo, then up at me, then at the photo again. Oh, no, I've been found out. I knew I shouldn't have showed any teeth. But then she suddenly stamps my passport, asks me to sign something, and says, "Enjoy your stay." She doesn't sound like she means it, though.

I've officially entered Moldova, the world's least happy country. There's something oddly exhilarating about this, as if I were Sir Edmund Hillary climbing Mount Everest or, a more accurate analogy, Jacques Cousteau diving to the ocean floor.

I'm scanning the crowd for Natasha. She's supposed to meet me and take me to her grandmother's apartment. That's where I'll be staying. Hotels are wonderful inventions, but they are not the ideal window to the soul of a nation. In fact, as my stay in

Qatar demonstrated, they are designed to do exactly the opposite, to keep you and the country you're visiting at a comfortable distance. No, if I was going to plumb the depths of Moldovan misery, I needed to plumb up close and personal. I needed to stay with a real, live Moldovan. I had found a woman named Marisha, of Marisha.net, who provides just such a service. She puts travelers like me in touch with Moldovans like Natasha who are strapped for cash (which is pretty much every Moldovan) and who will gladly rent out an extra room for a few crisp American dollars. Marisha and I had exchanged a few e-mails—I was circumspect about my happiness research, lest I arouse undue suspicion. In a few days, Marisha e-mailed back. She had found an apartment for me. Centrally located. Genuinely Moldovan. Perfect.

Except where was Natasha? She was supposed to be here, holding a sign with my name on it. I scan the crowd. Nothing. Finally, a young woman, not more than nineteen, runs up to me, with a crumpled cardboard sign in one hand.

"Mr. Eric?"

"Natasha?"

"Yes, sorry for late."

"That's okay."

Natasha and I walk to the taxi she has waiting outside. For the first time, I get a good look at her. She's wearing an alleged skirt, spiked heels, and so much eye makeup she looks like a raccoon. A sexy raccoon. I begin to wonder what I've got myself into. Is Marisha, of Marisha.net, renting out rooms or something else?

We climb into an old Mercedes taxi with worn seats and a pungent, unidentifiable odor. Natasha sits in the front seat, her knees resting so close to the stick shift I'm worried the driver might shift her into third.

The radio is blaring Russian pop music. Russian pop is—how do I put this diplomatically?—bad. Very bad. So bad that it may have contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. I ask the driver to turn it down. He complies, begrudgingly. As we approach the city, the streets grow increasingly crowded with pedestrians, and I

see other Natashas, many others, all wearing the same microskirts, with the same raccoon makeup. My god, I think, is every woman in Moldova a prostitute? This is worse than I imagined. Then it dawns on me. They are not prostitutes. They just dress that way. It's the national uniform.

Otherwise, the city looks pleasant enough. The streets are tree lined, and while the cars—and the people—look like they could use a good scrubbing, I see no overt signs of misery. In this, the Visual Age, our minds are trained to look for obvious signs of distress: bombed-out buildings, gun-toting teenagers, smog, so we assume some place is reasonably happy if it lacks any of these prominent signposts of despair. Yet misery, like still waters, runs deep.

"Is it true," I ask Natasha, "that people here are unhappy?"

"Yes, it is true," Natasha says, in passable English.

"Why?"

"We have no money for the life," she says, as if that settles the issue and I could go home now. Funny, I think, I was recently in a country where they have too much money for the life. Maybe you and Qatar could work something out.

"How long you stay in Moldova?" asks Natasha, as the driver shifts her into overdrive.

"Nearly two weeks," I say. She nods, impressed, as if most visitors don't last that long.

We arrive at my accommodation, inside a series of low-rise apartment buildings designed in typical Soviet fashion. The Soviets did for architecture what Burger King did for gourmet food. The apartment fronts a park of sorts, which features a few stray pieces of decrepit playground equipment, far outnumbered by the empty beer bottles strewn about. There's more trash inside the stairwell, plus some examples of Moldovan youth at their most expressive, graffiti that says, "White Power" and "Fuck the System."

Natasha introduces me to her grandmother and my host for the next two weeks: Luba. She is a babushka. Stocky, with a crown of reddish hair and a fierce expression that, frankly, scares me. This

is offset, slightly, by the housecoat she is wearing, an unfortunate collage of bright colors and floral prints.

Russian by birth, Luba came to Moldova decades ago, one of the millions of Russians who fanned out throughout the Soviet Union, determined to spread Russian good cheer. Life was sweet. Until the Berlin Wall came down, the Soviet Union collapsed, and so did Luba's life. Now she is reduced to scrimping for food and renting out her spare bedroom to a neurotic American on some crazy search for happiness. The wheels of history can be cruel.

Luba's English consists entirely of the words "no" and "feevty-feevty," the latter of which she invariably accompanies with a seesawing of her palm. For Luba, everything is feevty-feevty, from the fish sold at the local market to the president of Moldova. Except for Mikhail Gorbachev. The former Soviet leader, the man who hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union, scores much lower than feevty-feevty in Luba's estimation.

My Russian is more extensive than Luba's English, but just barely. In addition to "no," I can also say "yes" and "I don't understand" and "one more vodka, please." So you can imagine my horror when Natasha explains that she's leaving, and I will be spending the next two weeks alone with her grandmother. God help me.

Luba's apartment looks like it hasn't changed much since Khrushchev's day. The centerpiece is the TV, which Luba spends hours in front of, watching Russian soap operas and occasionally making a pssst sound, like air seeping from a leaky tire, when something on the TV displeases her, which is often. The apartment makes sounds too. Creaking sounds and construction sounds, which I find alarming since there is no construction anywhere nearby. Must be the plumbing, I tell myself.

I ask Luba if I can use her phone, a request I convey by holding an invisible phone to my ear, and she points to a black thing on a table in the corner. It's a rotary phone. I can't remember the last time I used one. It feels so heavy and slow, like dialing upwind. Yet there's something unexpectedly satisfying about the heft of the dial, the feel of my finger snuggled in the casing, the whirring

sound as each number spins. By the time I've dialed the last number, a half hour later, I feel like I've earned my phone call.

At the other end of the line is Vitalie, a blogger, one of the few in Moldova. He seemed like someone who could shed some light on Moldovan misery. We agree to meet the next day. Vitalie asks me if I know any good restaurants. This strikes me as odd, since he's lived here all of his life and I've been in Moldova for about one hour. I take this as a discouraging sign about the culinary prospects in Moldova. Later, someone explained that in Moldova the relationship between host and guest is reversed. It is the guest's obligation to make the host feel at ease. Reverse hospitality. One of the many peculiar customs in this country.

I pantomime to Luba that I am going for a walk, and she hands me a key and shows me how to unlock the many latches on her double door. The streets are pleasant enough, in a gray, Soviet sort of way. At least there are trees. I hop on a bus to go downtown. It is packed. Every face is frozen in an expression that is simultaneously vacant and vaguely pissed off, an expression I came to identify as the Moldovan Scowl. (A close relation of the Moldovan Shuffle, which is the preferred walking style.)

The Moldovans got the short end of the Soviet stick, and, truth be told, it wasn't a very long stick to begin with. When the Russian empire collapsed, the Moldovans, unlike the Baltic states, had no fervent nationalism to fall back on. And unlike the Muslim nations of Central Asia, the Moldovans had no abiding faith or culture on which to rely. They had only themselves, and clearly that was not enough.

All around me, I see misery. A blind man with sunglasses and cane, like some caricature of a blind man, hobbling down the street. An old woman hunched over so far that her torso is nearly parallel to the ground. I hear someone sobbing behind me, and turn to see a middle-aged woman with dark hair, her eyes red from crying. I wonder, though: Is this place really so miserable, or have I fallen prey to what social scientists call confirmation bias? I expect Moldova to be miserable, so I see misery everywhere.

I pass a building labeled the Special Institute for Infectious Diseases. It is ramshackle and dirty, the kind of place where you might catch an infectious disease as opposed to cure one. Maybe, I wonder, that's what makes it special. I decide to stop at a small outdoor café. A group of Moldovans are drinking beer. It's 11:00 a.m.—a bit early for beer, I think—but they look happier than anyone I've seen so far, except for the smiling faces on billboards selling cellphones. The air is thick with smoke. Moldovans smoke like there is no tomorrow, which in their case might be true.

Moldova is nation building gone horribly awry, and, like plastic surgery gone horribly awry, the results are not pretty. You want to look away. The Russians tried to create a nation out of Moldova, when historically one never really existed, at least not the kind of nation the Soviets had in mind. Moldovans are basically Romanians. They share the same historical roots; the Moldovan language isn't a distinct language any more than American English is distinct from British English. Someone once published a Romanian-Moldovan dictionary; it was more of a pamphlet.

That old saw about the glass being half full or half empty is dead wrong. What really matters is whether water is flowing into or out of the glass. In Moldova, the water is gushing out. During Soviet times, Moldova was wealthier than neighboring Romania. Now Romanians poke fun at their impoverished neighbors to the east. During Soviet times, Moldovans could travel freely to any of the fourteen other republics. Now they need a visa to go just about anywhere except the Ukraine, and how much fun can that be? The most popular song in Moldova is the Beatles' *Yesterday*, and no wonder.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. In the early 1990s, hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid poured in. There was talk of Moldova being the next Luxembourg. Today, the only thing Moldova has in common with Luxembourg is that no one can find it on a map.

I pass a couple of Moldovan cops. The cops, like all Moldovan men, have a thuggish quality and look like they could use a bath.

Unlike most Moldovan men, they are markedly pudgy. It's never a good sign when a country's people are thin and its police fat.

I spot a bookstore and decide to check it out. It's dark inside, another power outage, but in the dim light I can make out lots of Pushkin. Moldovans are proud of the Russian writer, who lived here for several years in the nineteenth century. Alexander Pushkin does not return the affection. "Accursed town of Chisinau," he wrote of the Moldovan capital. "To abuse you the tongue will grow tired." Part of Pushkin's animus, I suspect, owes to the fact that he was not here by choice. He was exiled to Moldova, and rarely can we muster affection for our places of exile, even if they are lovely places, which Moldova is not.

I pass a guy, thick-necked and thuggish. He looks like he could be in the mafia. As he walks by, I turn and see that on the back of his T-shirt is printed the word "mafia."

On my way back to Luba's apartment, the bus suddenly stops. The driver makes an announcement—apparently there's a mechanical problem—and everyone starts to get off. What strikes me is the resignation. No grumbling, no sighing, not a word or a sound. It's tempting to conclude that the Moldovans are accepting of their lot in life and have achieved a Buddha-like acceptance. I don't think that's the case, though. I suspect something more is going on here.

In the late 1960s, a young Martin Seligman, now the poohbah of the positive-psychology movement, conducted experiments with dogs. He would place a dog in a cage and give it a (supposedly harmless) electric shock. The dog, though, could escape to another side of the cage and avoid the shock, the onset of which was signaled by a loud noise and a flashing light. Then Seligman put the dog in a no-win situation. No matter what he did, he couldn't avoid getting shocked. Then, and this is the part that surprised Seligman, when he returned the same dog to a cage where he could easily avoid the shock (by jumping over a low fence), the dog did

nothing. He just sat there and endured the shocks. He had been taught to believe that the situation was hopeless. He had learned to be helpless.

As I stepped off the broken-down bus, I wondered: Are Moldovans like Seligman's dogs? Have they been beaten down—shocked—so many times that they've simply stopped trying? Is this a nation of the learned helpless?

No, Moldovans tell me, the source of their despair is much simpler than that. In a word, money. They don't have enough. Per-capita income is only \$880 per year. They need to travel abroad to make money. Some Moldovan women are tricked into working as prostitutes. A few Moldovans even sell one of their kidneys for cash.

None of this is good, of course, and I don't mean to belittle the economic difficulties Moldovans face. But if I've learned anything in my travels, it's that things are rarely as simple as they seem. Many countries are poorer than Moldova yet happier. Nigeria, for instance, or Bangladesh. The problem is that Moldovans don't compare themselves to Nigerians or Bangladeshis. They compare themselves to Italians and Germans. Moldova is the poor man in a rich neighborhood, never a happy position to be in.

When I return to the apartment, Luba greets me at the door—after spending a few minutes unlatching the various latches. Palms opened, shoulders shrugged, I "ask" her how she is. "Feevty-feevty," she says, pointing to her left shoulder, which is sore, I presume, and fanning herself to indicate that the heat is getting to her. It's amazing, I think, how much two people can communicate with a shared vocabulary of only six words, one of which is "vodka."

A few minutes later, Luba cocks her head to one side and rests it on her hands. She's going to bed. I take the opportunity to look at the photos, framed and sitting on the mantel. Luba's past. There's a picture of a man, Luba's now-deceased husband, I figure. It's taken from a distance—too much distance, I think, squinting to make out his face. He has a shock of salt-and-pepper hair and

strong masculine features. He's standing in front of some gray Soviet monument. He's not smiling, but neither would I describe his expression as a frown. I squint some more, and then I see it: the trace of an aborted smile, barely perceptible but definitely there. Later, Luba would explain through an interpreter that the picture was taken in Kazakhstan, where they had lived years ago. I wonder if that faint smile survived Moldova.

My days fall into a comfortable routine. In the morning, Luba makes me breakfast: a sharp Moldovan cheese, instant coffee, and a biscuit filled with something mushy. Then I shower and head onto the streets of Chisinau, probing Moldovan unhappiness. Within a few days, I forget that the world beyond Moldova exists. How amazing, I think, that in this age of broadband and satellite TV, places can still engulf us so thoroughly that they make their world our world.

I buy a bottle of Moldovan wine and bring it back to the apartment. Moldovans are proud of their wine, one of the few products they export. There are tours of Moldovan vineyards and exhibitions of Moldovan wine. People make wine in their homes and proudly serve it to guests. I pour a glass for Luba, and she takes a swig, then closes her eyes for a second or two, before pronouncing it feevty-feevty. She is being generous. Moldovan wine doesn't rise to the level of feevty-feevty. The sad truth is that nobody has the heart to tell the Moldovans that their wine, their national treasure, stinks.

The next day, I meet Vitalie, the blogger, at a nearby restaurant—one that serves authentic Moldovan cuisine. I'm eager to try it, mindful that food is the mirror of a nation's soul. Vitalie is in his twenties, with a shiny face and perfect English, which he says he learned by throwing away his textbook. A surly waiter leads us downstairs to a dark and musty basement. It's noon. We're the only customers.

So why are Moldovans so unhappy? I ask, diving right in. Vitalie gives me a how-much-time-do-you-have look. "Well, there is the problem of Transnistria," he says.

"Can't antibiotics take care of that?" I ask.

It turns out that Transnistria is not a disease but a breakaway republic, a thin strip of Moldova controlled by pro-Russian forces. They make Cognac and textiles in Transnistria. Every once in a while, a bomb goes off, and mediators from Brussels fly in, wearing double-breasted suits and drinking Evian water. Conferences are held, and resolutions resolved. Then the men from Brussels fly home. Until the next bomb.

Vitalie declares the whole Transnistria situation "definitely dumb," and I'm inclined to agree. Later, I'd detect a strange pride that some Moldovans take in Transnistria, as if they're thinking, "Yes, we are a backward, profoundly unhappy nation, but at least we have our very own breakaway republic, just like a real country."

Vitalie is a freelance financial advisor. Most of his clients are foreign, so he earns a good living by Moldovan standards: \$230 a month. His wife earns about the same, putting them solidly in the Moldovan upper-middle class. They live in a Khrushchev-ka, an apartment style named after the former Soviet leader best remembered for banging his shoe on a table at the United Nations, and about as charming. Mass-produced five-story apartment blocks, each the length of a football field. Each unit is tiny. "They were built for sleeping. You were working during the day, so what do you need space for?" explains Vitalie.

The surly waiter arrives to take our order. Vitalie recommends something called *mamaliga*, the national dish. I like the way it sounds. Like a *Sesame Street* character. Hey, boys and girls, say a big hello to the *mamaliga*.

Vitalie regales me with interesting Moldovan facts. Like the fact that the president of Moldova is a former baker and the prime minister a former confectioner. They'd make a great catering team but apparently not such a great political team. Moldovans despise their government—if they think of it at all, that is. They have other concerns.

Vitalie's biggest gripe—and he has many—is the lousy service

in Moldova. A holdover from the Soviet era, he says, when sales clerks viewed the customer as a necessary interruption that, if ignored long enough and with enough animus, would eventually go away. That attitude persists, and it drives Vitalie nuts. Unlike most Moldovans, Vitalie doesn't just take it. He fights back. Just the other day, he yelled at a supermarket manager, telling her to train her staff to be more courteous. She didn't take the suggestion kindly. "This is the staff we have," she said. Typical, says Vitalie. The Moldovan default mode is defensiveness.

The food is taking a long time. Where is my *mamaliga*?

Trust—or, to be more precise, a lack of trust—is why Moldova is such an unhappy land, Vitalie tells me, echoing the findings of researchers about the relationship between happiness and trust. Moldovans don't trust the products they buy at the supermarket. (They might be mislabeled.) They don't trust their neighbors. (They might be corrupt.) They don't even trust their family members. (They might be conniving.)

Another reason for Moldovan misery? "People in Moldova are neither Russian nor Moldovan. We have been abused and abandoned by everyone. We have no pride in anything. Not even our language. There are ministers in the Moldovan government who don't speak Moldovan. They speak only Russian. I hate to say it, but it's true: There is no Moldovan culture."

I'm instantly reminded of Qatar, which has no culture either. Qatar, however, is a fabulously wealthy country with no culture. Moldova is a dirt-poor nation with no culture. All things considered, the Qataris have the better deal. At least they can afford to rent other people's culture for a while.

I ask Vitalie about democracy, reflexively gesturing toward my Sprite, as if a carbonated artificially flavored lemon-lime beverage somehow symbolized humanity's eternal quest for freedom. Moldovan democracy may be far from perfect, but certainly it is better than the totalitarian regime under the Soviets. Isn't that a source of happiness?

No, says Vitalie, without the slightest hesitation. "In Soviet

times, nobody thought about freedom. Communism was all they knew. They didn't wake up every day and say, 'Gee, I wish I had more freedom.' Freedom to do what? At least back then, people had jobs and a place to live. That was a kind of freedom, and they don't have that now."

For years, political scientists assumed that people living under democracies were happier than those living under any other form of government. It made sense, intuitively, and there was some data to back it up. But the collapse of the Soviet Union changed all that. Most (though certainly not all) of these newly independent nations emerged as quasi-democracies. Yet happiness levels did not rise. In some countries they declined, and today the former Soviet republics are, overall, the least happy places on the planet. What is going on? That old causality bugaboo, political scientist Ron Inglehart concluded: It's not that democracy makes people happy but rather that happy people are much more likely to establish a democracy.

The soil must be rich, culturally speaking, before democracy can take root. The institutions are less important than the culture. And what are the cultural ingredients needed for democracy to take root? Trust and tolerance. Not only trust of those inside your group—family, for instance—but external trust. Trust of strangers. Trust of your opponents, your enemies, even. That way you feel you can gamble on other people—and what is democracy but one giant crapshoot?

Thus, democracy makes the Swiss happier but not the Moldovans. For the Swiss, democracy is the icing on their prosperous cake. Moldovans can't enjoy the icing because they have no cake.

"Okay," I say to Vitalie, grasping at straws, "but you have a McDonald's now. That must mean something, yes?"

No, says Vitalie. It means nothing. McDonald's is prohibitively expensive for ordinary Moldovans. Only a few wealthy oligarchs and the Russian mafia can afford to eat there. And schoolkids on field trips. He tells me that his ten-year-old sister's class recently visited McDonald's. Vitalie wondered what the educational benefit

was. He asked his sister if she and her classmates got to go behind the counter to see how the burgers are made. No, she said. They just ate and left. Vitalie suspects nepotism—maybe someone at the school had a relative who worked at McDonald's? In Moldova, nepotism is the default explanation for everything. It's usually the correct explanation. Corruption is rampant, unbelievable, says Vitalie. He tells me of patients bribing hospital staff so they can jump the queue. "It's very difficult to remain clean here," he says.

Finally, my *mamaliga* arrives. I dig in. If food is a window to a nation's soul, then Moldova's soul is bland and mushy. And has something to do with corn, I think.

"How is it?" asks Vitalie.

"Not bad," I lie.

We talk a bit more while I nibble at my *mamaliga*, just enough not to appear rude. I pay the check, and we get up to leave.

We're standing on a busy street corner surrounded by brooding pedestrians, about to say goodbye, when it dawns on me that I have forgotten an obvious question.

"Vitalie, is there anything you like about life in Moldova?"

Vitalie pauses for a moment before answering. "We haven't become too soft, like people in the west. We're a little less expecting, and I think that's a good thing. Also, the fruits and vegetables."

"What about them?"

"They are very fresh."

As if on cue, a woman carrying plastic buckets brimming with raspberries and cherries walks by. Yes, I think, they do look fresh.

In the former Soviet republics, there are three staples of life: vodka, chocolate, and corruption. I know someone who once survived in Uzbekistan for two weeks solely on these three items. I pick up two of them at a local grocery store and head home; that's how I think of Luba's apartment now, as home. And so I eat my chocolate and drink my vodka, a brand deceptively called Perfect Vodka, while

Luba sits in front of the TV, making psst noises, and laughing occasionally. All things considered, I think, not a bad way to pass an evening in Moldova.

The next day, I sit down for lunch with Marisha, of Marisha.net. She is the happiest Moldovan I've met, possibly because she just married a British guy and can leave the country any time she wants. Her husband was one of her clients. Marisha makes a living helping the few foreign tourists who brave Moldova. For a while, she also helped men who came to Moldova looking for brides. But no more. Too many of the women, she explains, were looking for something other than love. "Scammers," that's the word she uses, who would write to their boyfriends in America or Britain, saying they needed money for a visa to visit or claiming to have won a new car in a lottery and just needed a few thousand dollars to pay the tax. Could you please send the money? It is such a beautiful car.

"Do the men fall for it?" I ask Marisha.

"Some do," she says.

I picture some poor slob, sitting in front of a computer screen in Cleveland, wondering why he hasn't heard from Olga since he mailed that check a while ago. Maybe he sends a follow-up e-mail or two, figuring the Moldovan server is down again. How long does it take him to realize he's been scammed? A week? A month?

That might explain the guy in Cleveland's unhappiness, but what about Moldovans themselves? I ask. Why are they so unhappy? Money, she answers, but she doesn't mean a lack of it. "We are substituting real values with money values."

A few minutes later, though, Marisha is gushing about the new megamall, Moldova's first, that is being built on the outskirts of town. Marisha sees this as a sign of progress. I want to shout NO! Don't do it! Before you know it, you'll be drowning in malls. But I hold my tongue.

After lunch, we walk a few blocks, down pleasant tree-lined streets, to the Museum of Nature and Ethnography. The museum looks like it hasn't changed one iota since Soviet times; neither do

the women who work there. They seem annoyed by our presence. The exhibits are rudimentary yet oddly endearing. My favorite is the one about Moldovan dirt. Different shades and colors of soil are displayed in large Plexiglas cylinders. "We don't have minerals—no gas or oil—the treasure of Moldova is our soil," explains Marisha. It's true. As Vitalie said, Moldovan soil produces some very fresh fruits and vegetables. You'd think the wine would be better.

In another room, there is a giant mural, a Soviet ideal of the cosmos and humanity's place in it. The Soviets denied God's existence yet tried to improvise a spirituality. The mural is a raucous, dizzying hodgepodge of images that covers the entire ceiling and parts of the walls. My eyes don't know where to focus first. There are spaceships and skyscrapers—all drawn with hard angles and dark colors. On one wall, a young couple, completely naked, is holding their infant skyward, toward the godless heavens. No wonder the Moldovans are spiritually adrift. This is what they had to endure for more than fifty years.

I learn more at the museum. I learn that over the centuries, the Moldovans have been invaded by the Turks, Mongols, Tartars, Kazakhs, and, of course, the Russians. Yet Marisha claims that Moldovan unhappiness is a recent development. "We've always been happy people," she says, unconvincingly.

Marisha and I are about to say goodbye. But there is something I want to know.

"Marisha, I'm not sure how to ask this, but have you noticed how Moldovan women dress. It's very..."

"Sexy."

"Yes. Why is that?"

"They think it's normal."

Marisha offers an explanation, one rooted firmly in the principle of supply and demand. So many Moldovan men have left the country in search of work abroad that Moldovan women must compete fiercely for what has become a scarce resource: the Moldovan man. This imbalance also explains why Moldovan men care

so little about their appearance. "It is not their job to look good," Marisha tells me. "It's their job to make money."

I take the bus back to Luba's apartment. It's hot. The driver has completely unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a hairy, flabby chest and, unknowingly, underscoring Marisha's point.

The Moldovans have amassed a repertoire of expressions to blunt their despair or at least explain it away. One of the more popular is "*ca la Moldova*": "This is Moldova." It's usually said plaintively, palms open. That and its companion "*ce sa fac*"—"What can I do?"—are employed when the bus breaks down, again, or the landlord demands an extra forty dollars a month in rent, just because.

My favorite, though, the expression that sums up this country, ties it into a neat little package and sticks a bow on it, is: "*No este problema mea*." Not my problem. A country with so many problems yet nobody's problem. Nobody takes ownership. Luba's apartment building, for instance, desperately needs a new water pump. (That explains the strange noises.) She tried to get people to pitch in—it would benefit everyone—but nobody would. No one is willing to contribute money to something that will benefit others as well as themselves.

What the Moldovans fail to recognize is the power of selfish altruism. It may sound a bit Sunday school-ish, but helping others makes us feel good. Psychologists at Kobe College in Japan proved this. They divided a group of college students into two groups. One group did nothing differently for a week. The other group was asked to count the number of kind acts they performed during that week. They weren't asked to perform any kind acts, merely to take note of them. After a week, this second group reported a marked jump in happiness levels compared to the control group. "Simply by counting the acts of kindness for one week, people become happier and more grateful," concluded the researchers.

Neuroscientists, meanwhile, believe they have located the part of the brain linked with altruism. To their surprise, it turns out to be a more primitive part of the brain than initially suspected—the

same part associated with our cravings for food and sex. That suggests that we are hardwired for altruism and not just faking it.

"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," says Nell, the legless trash-can dweller in Samuel Beckett's one-act play *Endgame*. Beckett never visited Moldova, I bet. I see no humor here, not even the unintentional variety. The Moldovans, though, do have at least one joke. It explains a lot about Moldova.

A visiting dignitary is being given a tour of hell. "Over here," says the tour guide, "is our room reserved for Americans." Flames shoot up from a boiling-hot cauldron, while scores of armed guards keep a careful eye on their captives. "And over here is the room for the Russians." More flames and another cauldron, though fewer guards. "And over here is the room for the Moldovans." Another cauldron, more flames. But this time there are no guards at all.

"I don't understand," says the visitor. "Why are there no guards watching the Moldovans?"

"Oh, that's not necessary," replies the tour guide. "If one gets out of the cauldron the others will drag him back in."

Envy, that enemy of happiness, is rife in Moldova. It's an especially virulent strain, one devoid of the driving ambition that usually accompanies envy. So the Moldovans get all of the downsides of envy without any of its benefits—namely, the thriving businesses and towering buildings erected by ambitious men and women out to prove they are better than everyone else. Moldovans derive more pleasure from their neighbor's failure than their own success. I can't imagine anything less happy.

I begin to wonder if perhaps not all Moldovans are unhappy. Maybe it's just the inhabitants of its capital city who are so miserable. I need to get out of Chisinau.

I call Marisha and explain my plans. She translates for Luba, telling her I'll be away for a few days. My destination, a town

called Cahul, in the far south, is reachable by a series of shared taxis, called *rutieras*. Luba offers to show me where to catch the first one. We walk out of her apartment and step into the elevator. I gesture toward the graffiti—a riot of colors, as if a tie-dye factory exploded inside here, mingled with some foul language. Luba throws up her arms and says, “*Perestroika*.” It is her one-word explanation for all that is wrong with Moldova, for why her life is such crap. Potholes? *Perestroika*. Crime? *Perestroika*. Lousy vodka? *Perestroika*.

We walk to a bus stop. We both stand there, waiting in silence, until finally a *rutiera* arrives. Luba says something in Russian to the driver, and I wave goodbye. The *rutiera* is packed. They always are. Standing-room only. Not more than six inches in front of my face is a woman’s breast. It is a nice breast. I know this because a good two thirds of its surface area is exposed. After a few minutes, beads of sweat begin to collect on the breast. Soon, they form rivulets. I am fascinated, not in an erotic way but more in a fluid-dynamics way. After about fifteen minutes, I notice that the rivers of sweat have formed tributaries and are branching out to the other breast.

The *rutiera* stops every few minutes, and more people board. I can’t believe how many people they manage to cram into this small van. No one complains. Not a word. The ceiling is low. I have to crouch. I notice that the driver is barefoot. This disturbs me, though I’m not sure why. Some guy’s sweaty armpit is in my face. This disturbs me, and I know exactly why. We, the passengers on this overcrowded van, are like a living organism, expanding and contracting at each stop, as a few people disembark and many more board. Finally, a seat opens up, and I experience a jolt of joy, of good fortune. Benjamin Franklin, America’s first self-help author, once wrote that happiness “is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen as by little advantages that occur every day.” He was right.

We pass a billboard, an ad for a plasma-screen TV. “LG: Life is good,” it says. They’ve squeezed a lot of irony into those few

words. For one thing, life is not good in Moldova. Also, nobody in the van can remotely afford the plasma-screen TV—except for me, and I prefer my plasma in my veins, not my living room. The billboard, indeed, all consumer culture, is mocking the Moldovans, most of whom will never be able to afford the products advertised—unless they sell a kidney. Joseph Epstein, in his book on envy, described the entire advertising industry as “a vast and intricate envy-producing machine.” In Moldova, all of that envy has nowhere to dissipate; it just accumulates, like so much toxic waste.

I switch vans. This one is less crowded, but one seat is occupied by a farmer with about two dozen chirping chicks. At first, I find this endearing local color, but after a few minutes it starts to drive me nuts, and I want to strangle those little chirping birds. But I don’t. *Ca la Moldova*. This is Moldova. One must remain passive at all costs.

It’s hot, so I crack open the window next to me and drift off to sleep. When I wake up, maybe a half hour later, I notice that someone has closed the window. I open it again and doze off once more. When I wake up, it’s closed again. What’s going on? Later, I learned that it’s considered bad luck to open a window in a moving vehicle, even if the moving vehicle in question is not air-conditioned and it’s one hundred degrees outside. The Moldovans, it turns out, are a superstitious people. A few of their superstitions are optimistic, like the one that says, “If you sneeze it means someone is thinking of you.” But most involve the terrible things that will befall you should you be careless enough to wash your clothes on Sunday, or give money on Monday, or toast with a glass of water (your children will be stupid), or go back for something you’ve forgotten, or sit on the bare pavement, or put your bag on the ground, or, of course, open the window of a moving vehicle. I realize that many people around the world are superstitious, but usually this is yoked to some larger belief system, religious or spiritual. Moldovan superstition is free-floating, anchored to nothing but the cloud of pessimism that hovers over this sad land.

A few hours later, I arrive in Cahul. It's supposedly Moldova's third-largest city, but it feels more like an overgrown village. I find my hotel, and, in a combination of broken English and broken Russian, the woman at reception explains that I have a choice of three types of rooms: Simple, Semi-Luxe, and Luxe. Keeping in mind the ancient Greek advice about "all things in moderation," I choose Semi-Luxe.

The room has a certain decrepit charm. Cracked wood furniture, towels like sandpaper, and a TV that gets sixty-seven channels, not one in English. I watch it anyway. I find it a pleasant diversion, and I play a guessing game. There's a woman in a headscarf shouting angrily. What is that story about? Click. There is President Bush dubbed into Russian. What's he saying? Click. A soccer match. What's the score? I'm not sure exactly how long I do this, but I'm pretty sure it's longer than most people would consider normal.

The official mission of the U.S. Peace Corps is "helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women" and "helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served." Really, though, the mission is to spread a bit of American happiness around the world. We can't very well call it the U.S. Bliss Corps, but that's what it is: an attempt to remake the world in our own happy image.

I feel sorry for the Peace Corps volunteers in Moldova. They have their work cut out for them. I've arranged to meet with a group of volunteers. My arrival is eagerly awaited. I'm fresh blood, a new set of ears upon which to vent. I find the café, which is pleasant enough, sort of half indoors and half outdoors. We sit and eat salads and drink beer. It doesn't take long for the whining to begin.

Abby, a cheerleader blonde, gets things going. She went to the bank the other day to withdraw money from her account. But the bank teller wouldn't let her. "He kept saying, 'Why do you need to

take out the money? You just took out some yesterday.' I couldn't believe it. It's my money."

"They don't know how to treat customers," says another volunteer.

Everyone here has a different gripe, large or small. The bad fish, for instance, which I'm told is caught in polluted rivers and can be deadly. The biggest complaint, though, is the lack of queuing. "It's not first-come, first-served, it's most-obnoxious, first-served," says Abby. The lack of trust is another popular gripe. "Friends don't even trust friends. If bad things happen to their friends, people think, 'Good, maybe it won't happen to me,'" says one volunteer.

Corruption is another theme. Paying professors for passing grades is widespread, so much so that Moldovans won't go to doctors under thirty-five years old. They suspect—with good reason—that they bought their degrees. Thus, the radius of mistrust is widened.

Mark is a thirty-two-year-old from Denver. I like him. He speaks Spanish and wanted to go to South America, so the Peace Corps sent him to Moldova. He complains that everything in his apartment has something wrong with it: drippy pipes, squeaky doors. He works at a center for the victims of domestic violence. He sees only one woman a week, which, Mark is convinced, says more about how scared women are to seek help than it does about the extent of domestic violence in Moldova.

Mark is concerned that Moldova is beginning to affect him. The other day, a woman came up to him on the street. "She said, 'Mark, what's wrong with you? You used to smile. I never see you smile anymore,' and I thought, She's right. I don't smile anymore. What's happened to me?" This is not the way the Peace Corps is supposed to work. The young, cheerful, and generally gung-ho Americans are supposed to instill a sense of hope in the hopeless. In this case, Moldovans seem to be getting the last laugh. That is, if they laughed.

These once-cheery Americans can't wait to leave Moldova.

Until that time, they cope as best they can by drinking lots of beer. Abby likes to pretend she's in Greece. It's warm, and the countryside is nice, and they have feta cheese here, sometimes, though it's really not very good.

I mostly listen, absorbing their grievances like a sponge. I can't believe things are so bleak here. "Come on, surely there must be something nice about life in Moldova. This place must have some redeeming traits."

The loquacious group suddenly grows silent. Everyone is staring down at their salads. Finally, someone, Mark, I think, says, "The fruit and vegetables. They're very fresh."

"Yeah," others chime in, enthusiastically, "very fresh fruits and vegetables."

I return to the hotel. My Semi-Luxe room is hot, very hot. I call down to the front desk.

"Where is the air-conditioning?"

"Oh, no, sir, there is no air-conditioning in the Semi-Luxe room. Only in the Luxe room."

"Well, can I upgrade to a Luxe room?"

"No, sir, that is not possible."

"Can I get a fan?"

"No, sir. That is not possible. But you are free to bring your own."

I turn on the TV. The national channels are trying to promote Moldovan culture. From what I can tell, this consists of women in Heidi outfits, dancing in a circle, arms at hips, while a man wearing a peacock hat sings. I fall asleep but do not sleep well.

The next morning, I trundle downstairs to meet Joanna for breakfast. She's another Peace Corps volunteer. She's been here nearly two years, making her the dean of the bunch. Everyone said I should meet Joanna.

She's waiting for me at the hotel's coffee shop, a dingy place with a waitress who is widely known as The Bitch, a moniker that is not used ironically. She is quite possibly the surliest waitress I've ever had in my life. Anywhere. Yesterday, there was much discus-

sion about whether The Bitch ever smiled. Someone said yes, they had seen her smile once, but the others had quickly dismissed this as a grimace; the lighting conditions had created the illusion of a smile.

Joanna and I take a seat and place our orders, cowering behind the little cardboard menus. The Bitch's expression cannot be construed as a smile, under any lighting conditions.

Joanna asks me to pass the salt and proceeds to empty a shakelful into her coffee. "I'm a salt person," she declares, in response to my look of disbelief. Joanna, it turns out, puts salt in pretty much everything and does other "weird food things," a habit she gets from her mother.

I ask Joanna why she decided to join the Peace Corps in the first place. "I'm a doer. I do things," she says. But that's not the real reason, she adds. The real reason is airplanes. She used to be terrified to fly. She'd cry every time she flew, afraid the plane would crash. Then one day she stopped crying. She hadn't gotten over her fear of flying. She just didn't care anymore if the plane crashed. "That's when I realized I needed something to make me care again, care if the plane went down." So she quit her job at American Express in New York and joined the Peace Corps.

Joanna had asked to be sent to a "rice-based, not a bread-based society." Asia, maybe. But there was a mix-up with her paperwork, and by the time it was sorted out all of the rice countries were spoken for and Joanna ended up in Moldova. "This was about the last place I wanted to go," she says. It strikes me, not for the first time, that nobody wants to be in Moldova, including the Moldovans.

Joanna volunteers, unprompted, that she is a recovering alcoholic. Moldova is either a great place to be an alcoholic or a terrible one, depending on whether you're in recovery or not. Moldovans drink heavily. Unlike Icelanders, though, they do so joylessly. I see well-dressed Moldovan women slip into one of the tiny bars that dot the city, down a shot of vodka, and then be on their way to work. Alcohol as anesthetic.

Joanna's on a roll, pouring more salt into her coffee and talking at a breakneck pace. (At one point, she tells me she meditates every morning for forty-five minutes. This surprises me, and I shudder to think how fast she would vibrate if she didn't meditate.) She tells me how she tried to organize AA meetings in her Moldovan village, but it didn't work out as planned. Most people showed up drunk. They heard the word "alcohol" and thought it was some sort of drinking club, she concludes. "If I were Moldovan, I would drink, too," she says.

Joanna lives in a nearby village with her Moldovan host family and a small bird named Bu-Bu. They are nice enough people, but they give her no privacy. They just walk into her room at any time and force her to eat. And they won't let her open the window in her room, even when it's ninety degrees inside and there's no air-conditioning. That might bring bad luck. (In Moldova, how could you tell?) And she's only allowed to flush her toilet twice a day, which she reserves for "special moments." Plus, they think she's old.

"In New York, I was this thirtysomething *Sex and the City* chick. Here, I'm a babushka. That came as a real shock to me."

"Why are Moldovans so unhappy?" I ask.

Joanna doesn't hesitate. "Powerlessness. As a Moldovan, you are helpless, powerless, and there is nothing you can frickin' do about it. That's the way things are here. Every day, every step of the way. Then there's the nepotism, which seems designed to prevent people from trying. It takes a year to start a frickin' business here. And they buy college degrees, and they think there's nothing wrong with it. It just frickin' freaks me out." At this point, Joanna bangs her hand on the table to underscore her point. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot The Bitch glowering at us.

Joanna isn't finished, though. "When students register for college and pay their tuition, they are guaranteed a degree, no matter what they do in school. If a child fails, then it's the teacher's fault. I could just throw things when I hear about this."

I truly hope she is speaking figuratively. The Bitch would not

be happy if things were thrown. Joanna is out of breath and takes a moment to sip her salty coffee.

The happiness research backs her up. People are not likely to be happy if they don't have control over their lives—not in some abstract geopolitical sense, but in a real, everyday sense. Moldovans are caught in a misery loop. Their unhappiness breeds mistrust, which breeds more unhappiness, which leads to more mistrust. I feel obliged to ask Joanna if she is happy here, though it seems like a formality.

"Actually, yes, I am," she says. "Happier than I was in New York. I feel more useful here."

I can hardly believe it. Yet it makes sense. Being useful, helpful, is one of the unsung contributors to happiness. Researchers at the University of Chicago recently surveyed some fifty thousand people in widely varying professions. The results were surprising. The high-prestige jobs—lawyers, doctors, bankers—scored low. Who were those who reported the highest levels of happiness? Clergy, physical therapists, nurses, and firefighters. In other words, helping professions. Those engaged in selfish altruism.

Besides, says Joanna, life in Moldova isn't all bad. There are some nice traditions here, she says, like the respect for elders and the dead. Once a year, there's a holiday, a sort of "Easter for the Dead"—that's what she calls it—where everyone brings flowers to the grave sites and pays homage to their deceased families. Moldovans, it seems, treat the dead better than the living.

"And of course, there are the fruits and vegetables," she says.

"Very fresh, right?"

"Exactly."

I pay The Bitch, who takes my money without a word or a smile, and head up to my room to pack. I've seen enough of the Moldovan countryside.

On the ride back to the capital, the van is hot, but I don't bother opening the window. I worry that I'm turning Moldovan, and I

scan my mind for other signs of this ailment. Yes, I'm not as polite as I was. I no longer say "thank you" or "please," since these niceties are never reciprocated. Moldovans just walk into a shop and say, "Give me this, give me that." Marisha had told me, in so many words, that Moldovans can't afford the luxury of politeness. A few weeks ago, I might have agreed with her. I spent four years living in probably the politest country in the world, Japan, and it drove me nuts. All of that please and thank-you and *gomen nasai*, I'm sorry.

I was wrong about the Japanese. They understand intuitively that politeness is the lubrication that makes the gears of society turn smoothly. Without it, the parts start grinding against one another, wearing one another down. Yes, I will take Japan's ersatz politeness over Moldova's genuine rudeness any time. Thank you very much.

Luba greets me at the door, wearing that lurid housecoat. Funny, I think, in my short time here we've become like an old married couple. She cooks for me. I do odd jobs around the apartment like changing lightbulbs and opening pickle jars. Sometimes we bicker, which is quite an accomplishment, given our language limitations.

"How was your trip?" she pantomimes.

"Feevty-feeovty," I say, and she smiles.

She offers me dinner. A nice-looking fish, which I devour. A few minutes later, panic sets in. Oh, no, I ate the fish! I'm going to die, just like the Peace Corps people warned.

Luba pantomimes that she has to leave for a while to get her hair cut. I peer out the window and catch a glimpse of her as she walks past the pathetic park and heads toward the, no doubt, pathetic beauty salon. I am suddenly filled with a deep affection for this babushka, a feeling that catches me unawares.

I realize, though, that I know very little about Luba, about her past. I call Marisha and arrange for her to come later that week to translate. I need to hear Luba's story.

Meanwhile, I pick up the rotary phone and call a cellphone, a

technological leapfrog of sorts. On the other end is Alexandru, or Sandru as he calls himself, a dyed-in-the-wool Moldovan nationalist. I hadn't known there was such a thing. I'm hoping to meet him.

"So you don't have a mobile phone?" Sandru asks, incredulously.

"No, I don't believe in them." This is my new thing. I've decided to stop using cellphones. Having had fleeting moments of bliss interrupted by them in Switzerland and Bhutan, I've decided that cellphones are antithetical to happiness. They take you out of the moment and, even more important, out of the place.

"Yes, but you're calling a cellphone now."

"That is different," I counter. "I don't believe in using them, but other people are free to do so."

He grudgingly accepts this explanation, and we agree to meet.

I hop on a bus, and, for the first time since I arrived in Moldova, witness an act of kindness. An old woman, with gold teeth and tufts of gray hair protruding from her chin, is trying to get on the bus, but she's too weak. A man grabs her arm and pulls her on board. I can't believe my eyes. Maybe there is hope for this place after all. Or not. It turns out that the woman is on the wrong bus. Everybody is yelling at her angrily, including the man who helped her get on board. At the next stop, her fellow passengers practically push her off.

Sandru is thin and young and twirling a pair of sunglasses. I apologize for being late, but in Moldova ten minutes late is not really late. We walk to his favorite hangout, a pleasant place with outdoor tables and umbrellas. Sandru is only twenty-six but has enough hatred and bitterness in his heart for a seventy-year-old.

Sandru hates the Russians for what they did to Moldova. "We lost our identity. We Moldovans don't fit in anywhere. In Russia, they say you're Romanian. In Romania, they say you're Russian. Moldova is an injured body. It needs to heal." Moldovans are unhappy because they don't know who they are. How can you feel good about yourself if you don't know who you are?

When the waitress comes to take our order, Sandru speaks to her in Moldovan. The waitress replies in Russian. Two people having a conversation in two completely different languages, neither willing to back down.

"Do you speak Russian?" I ask Sandru, after the waitress has gone.

"Yes, fluently."

"So why don't you talk to her in Russian?"

"Why should I? This is my country, not hers. She should speak Moldovan. I can't take this, being humiliated all the time. Do you know what they say to me? They say, 'Why don't you speak Russian? Why don't you speak a human language?'"

In Moldova, language is not a source of joy, as in Iceland, but a source of divisiveness. Language as weapon.

"You know," I say, "the Russians claim they liberated Moldova."

"Yes, they liberated it from the people."

I try another tack and tell him about Luba. She is Russian, ethnically at least, and she is the nicest woman. She is suffering, too. She lost everything.

"I'm glad she lost everything," he says, refusing to back down. "The truth will come out. It always does."

My meeting with Sandru has put me in a funk. On the bus ride home, I wonder if I've misread this place. Misread Luba. Was this kindhearted babushka really complicit in the decimation of Moldova? Was I, once again, naïve and unsophisticated?

I am ninety minutes late for dinner. Luba is angry. She gestures toward her watch—or the part of her wrist, rather, where a watch would be if she had one.

After dinner, Marisha arrives at Luba's apartment. She is smiley and bubbly, as usual—proof that not everyone in a hopeless situation slips into learned helplessness.

We all sit down at the kitchen table and, over a snack of tea and cheese, the story of Luba's life unfurls.

These are the facts: one of thirteen children born in the Russian countryside. Meets her husband at construction college. They marry and move to Kazakhstan. Mine uranium. (Yes, for nuclear bombs.) Have a beautiful daughter, Larissa, and a son, too. Daughter falls ill from the radiation, so they move to Moldova.

Luba takes out a yellowing staff directory and shows me her picture. She looks important. She had risen high in the construction ministry; she had a car and a dacha. She lived well, not extravagantly but well. Then a man entered her life. His name was Mikhail Gorbachev, and he was a fool, she says, with a roll of her eyes. He moved too quickly in dismantling the Soviet Union. She lost everything. With this, she begins to sob. I hand her a tissue. Her husband had a stroke and lapsed into a coma for a year, then died. Now she survives on a forty-dollar-a-month pension. Her daughter is in Turkey working as a "hairstylist for dogs." (At least that's how Marisha translates it.) Her son is in Russia's Far East, working construction. She hasn't seen him in ten years. He'd have to work six months to pay for the airfare.

"Is there anything better about life now?" I ask.

"Yes, the stores are bigger, and there is more selection, but only 10 percent of the people can afford these goods."

"And the freedom?"

"Freedom to do what? Freedom to consume? I don't need this freedom. Today, the free ones are the ones who have money. My daughter knows the value of work, but my granddaughter, Natasha, only knows the value of freedom." And, it's implied, that is not very valuable at all.

Luba is not happy. That much is clear. But I ask anyway: What makes for a happy life? I expect her to mention money, at least enough money to survive, but she doesn't.

"I have a different attitude toward money. Everything comes with hard work. So you must be hardworking. And be good to people. All people are good and deserve love."

We all just sit there for a moment, then the spell is broken. It's back to business. I need to settle my account. I hand Luba a crisp

hundred-dollar bill. She takes it and then presses it against her lips in an exaggerated kiss.

I go back to my room to pack and contemplate Luba's sadness. Journalistically, it's an old story. I've written many of these sad tales over the years. The geopolitical landscape shifted, tectonic forces beyond Luba's control, and so she lost everything. The privileged position, the nice car, the country home. Thus, she is unhappy. Case closed. Plausible, I suppose, but what does the science of happiness tell us about Luba's unhappiness? It would point to other reasons for her misery besides the obvious monetary ones: the loss of camaraderie at work, for instance, or the fact that she hardly sees her children. It is these relationships that account for a large chunk of our happiness, and they have little to do with money. Something wasn't right though. That golden rule of positive psychology, hedonic adaptation, states that no matter what tragedy or good fortune befalls us, we adapt. We return to our "set point" or close enough anyway. It's been fifteen years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Why hasn't Luba adapted?

I think it comes back to culture. That sea we swim in. Drain it, as happened in Moldova, and we can't breathe. We lose our bearings, and hedonic adaptation is short-circuited. Luba lives in a sort of Russian shadow land. It is Russia, but it's not. The ethnic Moldovans live in their own shadow land. Romanians, but not.

Charles King, author of one of the few books about Moldova, calls this place a "stipulated nation." I would go a step further. Moldova is a fabricated nation. It does not exist. Oh, yes, you can go there, as I did, and walk its streets, eat its *mamaliga*, drink its bad wine, talk to its miserable people. Later, safely home, you can flip open your passport and admire, if that's the word, the stamp that says "The Republic of Moldova." None of this matters. Moldova does not exist, and existence is, in my book, a prerequisite for happiness. We need a solid identity—ethnic, national, linguistic, culinary, whatever—in order to feel good about ourselves. We may not use these identities every day, but they're always there, like money in the bank, something to fall back on during hard

times, and times don't get much harder than they are now in Moldova. That is, if such a place existed.

Yes, it's time to leave this nonexistent place and return to the real world, which, while troubled in many ways, does at least exist. First, though, I decide to do something. It is impulsive and, really, silly. I hesitate to tell you about it. When Luba is not looking, I slip an extra hundred-dollar bill into the English-Russian dictionary she has on a bookshelf and is always using to look up words. I put the bill next to "*schaste*," the Russian word for happiness. It's a melodramatic gesture, maybe even a selfish one—in the altruistic sense, that is. Certainly, it is ineffectual. Who am I kidding? All of the research, not to mention my time in Qatar, concludes that one hundred dollars will not make Luba happier in the long run. But it just might in the short run, and sometimes the short run is good enough.

We're standing outside her apartment building, Luba and I, waiting for the taxi that will take me to the airport and the outside world. "Come back to Moldova," Luba says, surprising me with her sudden burst of English. I tell her I will, but I'm lying, and she knows that. The truth is, I've never wanted to leave a place as much as I want to leave Moldova. Charles Dickens once said, "One always begins to forget a place as soon as it's left behind." God, I hope he's right.

I arrive at the airport early—I'm not taking any chances—and so I find myself with plenty of time on my hands. I order a glass of bad Moldovan wine and assess my journey to this wretched place. First of all, I can pretty much discard the Law of Relative Happiness, which claimed that a miserable place like Moldova would make me feel better about myself, since I am, comparatively speaking, less miserable than your average Moldovan. It didn't turn out that way. The Moldovans just dragged me down a rung on the hedonic ladder, and I didn't have many rungs to go.

Are there bigger lessons, though, to be gleaned from Moldova's

unhappiness, other than the obvious point that one should at all costs and under all circumstances avoid being Moldovan? Yes, I think there are. Lesson number one: "Not my problem" is not a philosophy. It's a mental illness. Right up there with pessimism. Other people's problems *are* our problems. If your neighbor is laid off, you may feel as if you've dodged the bullet, but you haven't. The bullet hit you as well. You just don't feel the pain yet. Or as Ruut Veenhoven told me: "The quality of a society is more important than your place in that society." In other words, better to be a small fish in a clean pond than a big fish in a polluted lake.

Lesson number two: Poverty, relative poverty, is often an excuse for unhappiness. Yes, Moldovans are poor compared to other Europeans, but clearly it is their reaction to their economic problems, and not the problems alone, that explains their unhappiness.

The seeds of Moldovan unhappiness are planted in their culture. A culture that belittles the value of trust and friendship. A culture that rewards mean-spiritedness and deceit. A culture that carves out no space for unrequited kindness, no space for what St. Augustine called (long before Bill Clinton came along) "the happiness of hope." Or as the ancient Indian text the *Mahabharata* says: "Hope is the sheet anchor of every man. When hope is destroyed, great grief follows, which is almost equal to death itself."

No, there is nothing I will miss about Moldova. Nothing. Well, that's not entirely true. I will miss Luba and her floral housecoat. She's a good soul. And, of course, the fruits and vegetables. They are very fresh.

THAILAND

Happiness Is Not Thinking

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we fall face-first into a cliché. And so I find myself at 1:00 a.m. at a bar called Suzie Wong's, watching naked Thai women painted in Day-Glo colors grinding and shimmying and doing things with Ping-Pong balls that, frankly, never occurred to me before.

I told myself I wouldn't let this happen, but one thing led to another, and here I am. I'd like to think my friend Scott is to blame. He lives in Bangkok and should know better. But the truth is that even on the flight over I had an inkling of the trouble that lay ahead.

Sitting next to me was Nick, an entrepreneur who jets between New York and Bangkok, where he has his hand in all sorts of businesses. He's wearing shorts and sandals and has a wild, unruly beard. Nick knows many things about Thailand, and he's eager to share all of them with me during the seventeen-hour flight. I will spare you the unabridged version and cut to the highlights.

Nick on *muay Thai*, or kickboxing: "Don't sit in the front rows. That's for tourists. Besides, you'll get blood splattered all over you. Sit in the back."

Nick on proper Thai business attire: "This is what I wear to business meetings. Shorts. But no tank tops. I made that mistake once. The Thais don't like hairy armpits in their face. It's bad for business."

Nick on Thai dating customs: "Not all Thai girls are easy."