

1 Ivonia

Ivonia gently lifted the coarse, woollen blanket and wriggled carefully down between her sleeping sisters to the end of the bed. She glanced at them momentarily. Laura was older than her by 18 months; she looked so pretty and peaceful, her light brown hair spread out on the pillow like a spiky crown. On her other side lay Ana, the baby of the family. Not that she actually was a baby any longer, she had grown up so quickly recently and it would soon be her third birthday! Ivonia smiled as Ana stuck her thumb in her mouth, turned over and began to suck noisily.

Quietly, she tiptoed across the threadbare carpet, wrapping her dad's coat round her shoulders before opening the front door. A blast of icy air slapped her face and she quickly pulled up the furry collar to cover her cheeks. It was springtime but the weather was still cold and a wise old man in the village had predicted a spring snowfall.

She hurried across the courtyard to a small shed that stood alone a short distance from the house and clicked open the door. A shiver ran through her body, but she smiled.

“At least the cold weather means it's not so smelly in here!” she whispered to herself.

The toilet was so much better since Papa had decorated it. The half-used tin of paint, given to them by a kindly neighbour, had whitewashed all the wood and resulted in a cleaner, fresher feel.

She stretched up to smell the dangling bag of lavender left by an Australian visitor to the village. The pleasant smell had long since disappeared but it still looked pretty and she knew it would not be thrown away.

Ivonia shuddered as a cold draught blew through the shed, disturbing her thoughts and making her hurry even more. She skipped back across the courtyard and stopped by the deep well to wash her hands in a bucket of water that her papa had drawn up the previous evening. The neighbourhood dogs were already beginning to stir and the birds twittered cheerfully in the trees as if announcing the arrival of dawn. She rested for a moment on the rickety wooden bench beside the gate and happily ran a finger over the frozen gatepost, the warmth of her hands making fingerprints in the ice. Then, with one bound, she leapt up onto the bench and peered over the fence surrounding the house to gaze at the nearby fields and hills which were shimmering as the early morning sun reflected off the frost.

“My beautiful Romania,” she sighed. “There can be nowhere else in the world like this place.”

She turned and faced the house, lovingly built by her parents when they were first married. There was nothing she loved more than to sit round the stove in the evening, listening as Papa reminisced about its building.

“Your mother built non-stop for three years,” he would say, leaning back in his chair with a twinkle in his eye.

“The only time she stopped was to give birth to the three of you ...” He would turn and nod at Laura, Stefan and Ivonia before he continued.

“Best thing I ever did, marrying your mama! Needed some help with the building ... I married her for her muscles. Got muscles firmer than any man!”

He would playfully squeeze Mama’s upper arms and look at her in a way that somehow conveyed clearly that he married for love not muscle!

The family had moved into the house when Ivonia was three months old. The next four years had seen the birth of two boys, Petru and Adi, and then three years later Ana had arrived.

The house was hardly big enough for eight people, especially as they grew older, but it was homely and Ivonia vowed that she would never move away. It contained only three rooms. The sparsely furnished parlour was rarely used, except for special occasions like birthdays or Christmas. The kitchen housed the large brick stove where Mama made her delicious bread. The living room was used for every other activity! A tall dresser took up the majority of one wall. Most of the doors had fallen off and been used as fire-wood long ago and the shelves displayed the family’s meagre possessions. A large stone heater, characteristic of all Romanian homes, stretched from floor to ceiling in one corner. It was roughly the size of a wardrobe and was covered in ornate brown polished tiles with a small metal door in its base, through which wood would be added. This was the only source of heat for the house and there was always a race to be the

first to sit beside it when freezing feet needed warming in the winter!

Other than a fold-away table and three brown settees, there was no other furniture in the room. Each evening the settees would be folded down into beds and bedding dragged from the top of the dresser, allowing all the family to snuggle down to sleep at the same time. These were always moments of great hilarity and giggling, until Mama or Papa ordered ‘silence.’ Then they would all sleep till dawn-break, three boys in one bed, three girls in another, and Mama and Papa in the third. Mama always said that God knew they needed equal numbers of boys and girls in their family so they could all fit in a bed!

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The sound of laughter floating out into the cold air from the open window interrupted Ivonia’s thoughts and sent her scurrying indoors. The boys were having their daily pillow fight, Ana was running round and round in circles with her trousers on her head and Laura was pulling out the foldaway table ready for breakfast.

Dodging to avoid the boys, Ivonia moved to the kitchen where Mama looked up from the stove and smiled.

“You were up early!” she laughed. “I wonder why?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Ivonia whispered in a dreamy voice. “One more day...”

She raised her eyebrows and sighed, “... and then they’ll come!”