

## When We Get Organized

I need tea, strong black tea. Not this Lipton's Yellow Label stuff that dominates Romania's supermarkets and tastes like sawdust. I want real tea – Twinings or Tetley or Fair Trade or something. So I phone home. My mother – a serious tea-drinker – clucks in sympathy down the line and agrees to post some from England. But she sounds concerned.

“Will it reach you OK? Won't there be problems at the Post Office, in Romania?”

“No,” I reply, “Now that we're in the EU, all EU mail is delivered to our doors. Or so I've heard.”

It certainly sounds like a good idea. No more little grey tickets in the mailbox, no more endless queues at the Post Office. Three weeks later, tongue hanging out, I call again. *Mother, where's my teabags?*

“I sent them the day you asked,” she replies.

Later in the week I open my mailbox and find a little grey ticket. It says I've got a package from England. It's at the Post Office, so come and get it.

I grab my coat. It's either an hour's walk or twenty euros in a cab. I decide to walk, enjoy the sunny day. En route, two tough-looking guys try to hustle me who-knows-what. I feel like saying *Excuse me, is this 1990 or 2007?* But I've had enough smacks in Romania already.

At the Post Office, clerks are busy stamping forms – it sounds like Tchaikovsky’s *1812*.

I hand in my little grey ticket and join the long grey queue. A stubbly man in shades yaps loudly on his mobile. A glamorous lady with four-inch heels pulls at her tight denim jeans. Through a doorway, a woman the size of a house stands knee-deep in a room of brown paper parcels, scratching her head and sucking something that makes her mouth go round and round like a washing machine.

After twenty minutes, somebody in the queue gets called on the intercom. After thirty minutes, somebody else gets called. After fifty minutes, I’m still leaning at the marble counter, wondering when it will be my turn. Then I notice that some folks who arrived later than me are now leaving with parcels and smiley faces. How come? I go and check. The big lady says *yes, we found your parcel, but you have to wait*. After one hour and fifteen minutes they announce my name on the intercom, slowly and deliberately, as if to say *who-made-this-up?*

I go and get my parcel. I’m surprised to discover it is quite a small one – small enough to fit in my mailbox – so why didn’t they deliver it? The big lady makes me open the parcel so she can see what’s inside. A big man in a security uniform comes to see. They seem a bit surprised to find only tea bags. I sign a form and tell them I’m surprised they didn’t deliver it.

“Doesn’t mail from the EU come to our boxes now?” I ask.

“Yes,” replies the big lady, “when we get organized.”

“So when will that be?” I ask, as nicely as I can, “Next month, six months maybe?”

She stamps my form with a loud thud and says:

“Yes, when we get organized.”

## *Lupa Capitolina*

I like that statue. Romulus and Remus suckling beneath a she-wolf. It sits in the middle of a boulevard off Piața Romana. The original was made in 6 BC, an Etruscan bronze, whatever that means, now in the Conservatory Palazzo in Rome. In 1918, Italian diplomats gave five bronze copies to their Latin cousins in Romania to mark the Great Union, the birth of Romania as a state. One copy was unveiled in Bucharest and I'm looking at it, all black and shiny in the rain.

I'm in a phone box, calling an animal shelter about a sick dog. The one I see every day, not far from the statue. It hops around for scraps, brown fur falling out in clumps. As I dial, it is watching me from a patch of rough grass, as if it knows what I'm up to.

The dog is just one of thousands, the offspring of those abandoned by bemused Romanians when President Ceaușescu forced whole communities into blocks of flats, part of his plan to destroy and rebuild the capital. Or so they say. The dogs have been breeding ever since. Not to mention barking and biting. Once, they even killed a man. Down the phone, I explain that this particular dog is starving, has a severe case of mange and a bad leg.

“And what am I supposed to do?” asks the guy on the other end of the line. I’m puzzled by his tone.

“Is this Wet Nose, the NGO that helps street dogs?” I ask.

He growls back in broken English:

“Yes, but that one needs care and attention!”

I’m starting to feel like Alice down the rabbit hole.

“That’s why I rang,” I say.

He tells me to ring back in ten minutes. When I do, he barks a number and hangs up before I can clarify who it’s for, maybe the Veterinary College? I have an idea that Wet Nose has links with students. I saw something about it on the glittering website with the cute logo. I call the new number, wondering.

A lady answers. It’s some kind of animal charity hospice. She is refreshingly polite and makes helpful suggestions to treat the mangy dog. But she keeps saying *if you can afford it, that is*.

“So it’s not free?” I ask, puzzled. “You’re not funded by a grant or something?”

“No,” she sighs, “we’re private. You pay 15 euros per day for board and 30 euros per treatment. But a skin condition can take months. Plus, you have to bring the dog to us and catching them can be a bit tricky.”

Outside, the skinny brown dog stares at me as if to say *you bet*.

“Sounds expensive,” I reply.

I probably sound like a complete dope. Maybe I am.

“Have you tried Wet Nose?” asks the friendly lady from the hospice. I try not to laugh. “They sent me to you,” I reply, looking down at my shoes. Defeat hangs over my head.

“Yes, they do that a lot,” she says, sounding a bit weary of it all.

“What else do they do?” I ask, thinking about that nice website. But she maintains a diplomatic silence. When I look up, my mangy brown dog has found a friend under the statue.