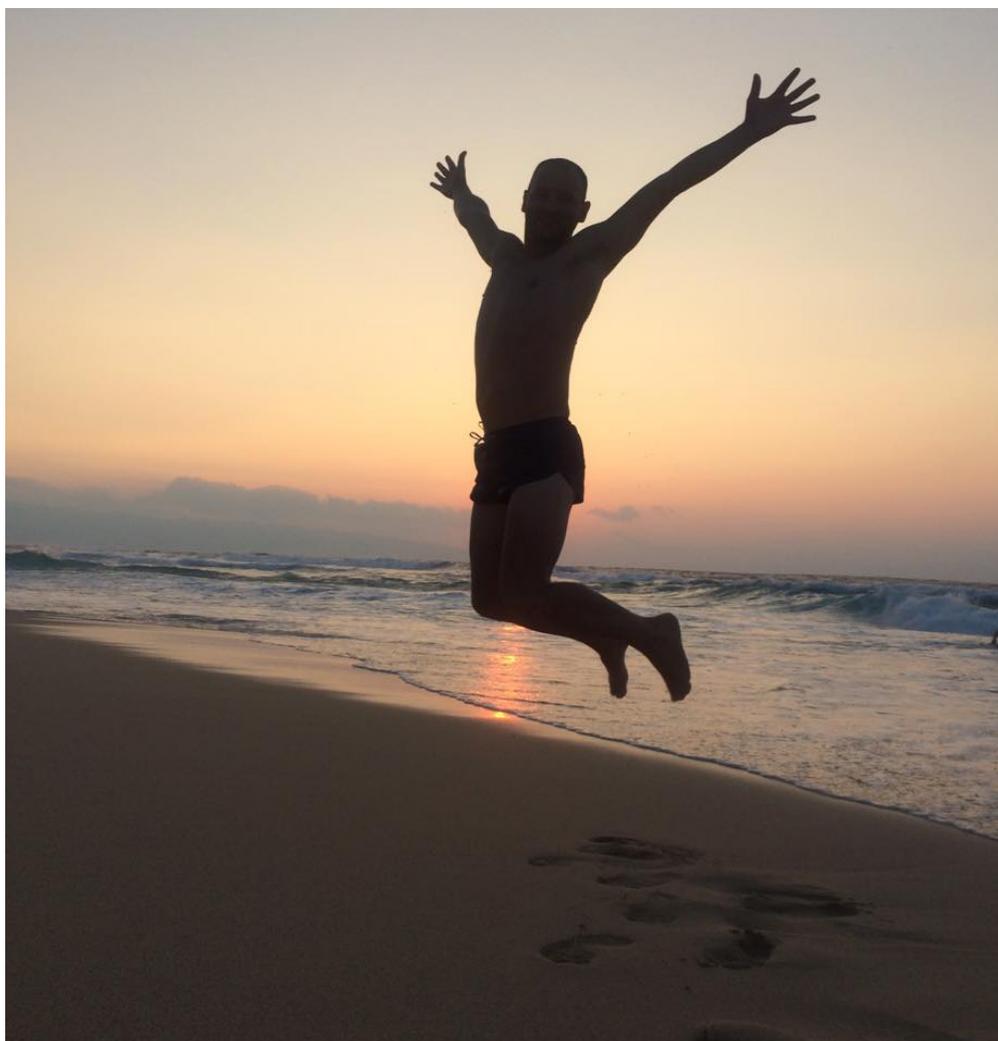


Hanne Broeng

# Lille mand i Wonderland





Fortællingen om det rumænske børnehjemsbarn,  
Claudiu Gagu, som arbejdede hårdt og blev  
**sucesfuld entreprenør i Chicago.**

*Til Edel Broeng og Svend Broeng  
grandma and grandpa*



# Introduction in English

*'Goodness is the strangest gem of human life.'*

*William Heinesen, Faroese writer, 1900-1991.*



# The first meeting

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No sooner had Claudiu set foot on Danish soil that he shouted: ‘Hanne! Where are you?’ A small, slight 11-year-old lad rushed forward to meet me at Kastrup Airport that day in July, since when life has taken a completely new turn for both the Romanian boy and my family.

Only eighteen months earlier, Claudiu had been a child without a name at a boys’ home in Gavojdia, close to the Yugoslavian border. One of the numerous victims of inhuman conditions under the dictatorial regime of President Ceausescu. Lonely and parentless, stowed out of the way at an institution where only the strongest survived. A pawn in a cruel, random game for human lives that could have had a tragic ending for Claudiu and many other children had the regime not collapsed in 1989 and foreign help organisations come into the picture with their aid.

The fall of the regime was the indirect cause of the meeting between Claudiu, me and my family in Skovshoved north of Copenhagen. After TV transmissions of the horrendous conditions the children were living under at the homes, I had registered with the Romanian project of the private humanitarian organisation Mødrehjælpen (= mothers’ aid) as a regular contributor, and one fine day the name was given us of the boy who received packages from us.

I sent photos and letters, and when convoys arrived from Denmark with food, medicine and volunteers who made the journey there to improve the wretched state of the children’s health in the unsavoury buildings, he often sent greetings back on small scraps of paper, written in a mixture of German, English and Romanian. Not easy for a receiver to decipher, except for the recurring sentence: I love you.



*Claudiu gives Hanne a kiss, 1992. Nicolai looking out in the bottom corner.*

# The luxury land of Denmark

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I could immediately recognise the boy who ran towards me at the airport. My expectations were great, but I had not imagined that he was so sweet and outgoing. Unlike quite a few of his mates from the boys' home, Claudiu was open and contact-seeking, and I am thankful that it was precisely Claudiu we were put in contact with. Several of the foster parents were less fortunate than we were. Some families had to give up maintaining contact with their child because it had been ruined by the miserable conditions at the children's home. Some of the children were scared. They just sat rocking backwards and forwards and were afraid of the slightest things. It is important for me to underline that we really were fortunate with our child, who quite clearly is a survivor – as well as a charming little boy. Many of the other children, on the other hand, looked as if they would be 'heavy going'. It would be hard for their foster parents to grow fond of them, I thought.

We had hardly got into the car before Claudiu started to straighten my hair, and it did not take long before he asked me if he could call me mother. He also told us that his parents were dead and that he had never seen them.

They were 'kaputt', a word he kept on using when talking about his country. In Romania everything was kaputt. In Denmark everything was just luxury.

This conviction caused me and my then husband Jack Elsberg certain problems. Claudiu was sure that he had arrived in wonderland, and that in such a land everything was of course allowed.

When we were out shopping, he would fill the shopping basket with loads of goods, for there were plenty to take from, and he would protest wildly when I took them away from him again. He did not understand a

‘no’, and I found it hard to explain that although we were well-off compared to him, there was a limit even so. It was a tricky balancing act. He was not to get the impression either that we had to do without because we had him.

Claudiu went off on his own whenever he felt like it. Sometimes he would get up on Nicolai’s tricycle and pedal away for all he was worth down Strandvejen. ‘Are you out of your mind,’ I said. ‘You could get yourself run over.’ He hadn’t thought of that. Sometimes I felt as if we had a wild animal in the house.

# Care, Danish style

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The meeting between the unknown and neglected child and our Danish family was not without its problems, but it was well worth the trouble even so. These first two eventful weeks were full of both challenges and times of great joy, and we were in no doubt that Claudiu had come to stay as part of our lives.

Claudiu's need of tenderness was boundless. He could not get enough caresses and would kiss me at all hours of the day. 'Mayn't I?' he would ask. 'In Romania people don't kiss children.' He told my mother several years later that he had stood lonely and alone in a bed until he was four years old. He was only rarely taken up and given a wash. The Romanian children were not washed in hot water. They were collected on the floor of the filthy bathroom and then hosed with cold water, winter as well as summer. No adult touched the children, who were thought of as subhumans without any dignity or right to demand human care.

In the evenings, when our own children were in bed, I used to sit rocking him until he fell asleep. He preferred to have me all to himself and was not particularly fond of Nicolai and Agnes, who were two and five years old at the time, whereas he adored Minna, who was thirteen.

He kept on surprising us the whole time. On the one hand, he took everything for granted and never said thank you. He just grinned when we scolded him, since he was probably used to more severe punishment if he was naughty. On the other hand, he was incredibly polite and helpful and waited on me hand and foot. He washed all the floors every day and insisted on giving us foot baths. My mother had given him a first-aid box, and he was constantly in search of a scratch he could clean.

I think he had found a niche at the boys' home as a service person for the staff. That was his way of getting by in a world that was a free-for-all one. And Claudiu is a survivor. A fun, strong little personality.

But he is also damaged. His face is scarred from bumps, and there are scars on his body from insect bites and scab from the time before Mødrehjælpen started the project. In spite of his quick movements, his gait is stiff, since until he was five he has stood up in a bed at one of those dreadful children's homes, where the children were only parked, and put on one side if they were ill or dying.

Claudiu has seen children that have succumbed. I once asked him what it was like at the children's home where he lived before help came from Denmark. He shook his head, as if wanting to say that this was something he didn't walk to talk about.

# A disobedient child

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When I think back to Claudiu's first summer visit, which I often do, I also recall the day Claudiu scared the life out of all of us. During a visit to Jack's workplace, he disappeared into a goods lift and shot up and down from bottom to top until they finally got him stopped. He didn't understand that it was illegal, nor that it was hazardous in any way.

I was very angry and tore a strip off him. He couldn't care less. So I put him on ice by simply not speaking to him for an hour. That worked. He got quite beside himself and refused to go to bed before Jack came home late that evening and had forgiven him. I felt bad about it, but what should I do when I had no desire to punish him physically?

We tried to explain to him that he had been in danger, and it took a long while before we found the right word in the dictionary. At which he was very surprised. He had never experienced before that anyone else was afraid of what might happen to him. The following day he cleaned the whole house.