Ehe-Gefängnis. The word, strictly speaking (which is how one should always speak), means ‘marriage prison’, and refers to an austere cell maintained in some of the magnificent fortified Saxon churches of central Transylvania. When a local couple decided to divorce, they were first locked in this narrow room for several weeks. There was only one bed: single. There was one chair, one plate, one knife, one fork, one cup. The result was that within a few days, the couple would realise they didn’t actually need a divorce after all — not because they wanted to escape the hell of enforced proximity, but because they had fallen in love again.

I’m here in the pastoral heart of Romania, attending the first ever Transylvanian Book Festival: a three-day extravaganza of talks, tours and readings, featuring bitter poets, wry novelists and rueful academics, and all of them what you might call professionally interesting. This sets the conversational bar pretty high over lunch, I can tell you. For one thing, since arriving in Romania, I’ve learnt that you should never, under any circumstances, mention Dracula. I mention him once, but I think I get away with it. Then up steps Professor Roy Foster, warily, warily perhaps, to speak of the unspeakable. And of course he turns it around, delivering a vampirically mesmerising talk, showing how Bram Stoker’s masterpiece is ultimately all about Ireland. And transgressive sex.

Along with war, one of the great narrative themes (laying aside, for a moment, transgressive sex) has always been the return from war, and returning home generally. The Odyssey and other stories about the Greeks returning from Troy, collectively known as nostoi, set the tone. Our word ‘nostalgia’, referring to a painful desire to return, can extend to the pain felt when you get home and find it isn’t what it used to be. Nostalgia is also a theme of this festival. The villages where we’re staying — Richis, Biertan, Copsa Mare — were built by Saxons in alien Romania in the 12th century, and sustained until 1990. Lured by the promise of a better life, many modern Saxons then moved to Germany. They called it ‘going home’, though often their new lives were in concrete blocks, while their derelict farms fell apart. Now, with the help of the Mihai Eminescu Trust, and in co-operation with the Saxons who remain, these old buildings are being restored. I had an idea of writing a spoof travel book, detailing my ten years spent living among the people of Chiswick. Or possibly even ‘amongst’ them, which always sounds like a more profound level of integration. But what I’ve seen here is curing me of the conceit.

A night on the tiles with William Blacker. His book Along The Enchanted Way, about his years living ‘amongst’ the people of northern Romania, also describes his passionate relationship with a gypsy beauty named Marishka. After midnight, we enter a bar in Richis, which is packed with gypsies, including brooding boys and a girl with what I can only call a bluge (my
invented word for a cleavage that defies gravity). The place falls silent as we come in. Should I lose the straw hat? William has a discreet word with the barman, who slips on a CD of gypsy music, and soon the dance floor is all movement: clicking fingers and smacked thighs. I tap my foot dexterously to one side. Wine, then beer: oh dear. Beer, then tzuika (the local brandy): eureka!

My fiancée and I have the occasional argument, shall we say. Anya, who languishes in London while I whoop it up in Richis, is Russian, and her deadpan manner can be disconcerting. I asked her recently what kind of man she found attractive. ‘Clowns,’ she replied. While I’m here, lawyers push the sale of our flat in Chiswick, which is the size of an Ehe-Gefängnis. We’re after something bigger, within striking distance of central London. Hold your sides, if they hurt from laughing.

But I mustn’t complain about property prices, with so much of interest going on around me. Artemis Cooper speaking about Paddy Leigh Fermor; Jessica Douglas-Home on the Mihai Eminescu Trust, which she runs; young Nick Hunt reading from his forthcoming book about following in Leigh Fermor’s footsteps; and all presided over by the seraphic Lucy Abel Smith, mistress of ceremonies. This has been, quite simply, the best and most inspiring literary festival I’ve ever attended. But more even than the readings, what has made it special has been the beauty of the countryside, the warmth of the locals, and — dare I say it? — the incredible cheapness of Romanian beer, which in a bar sets you back about 50p a bottle. All of which has persuaded me I’ve no choice really but to move to Romania. Now I just have to tell Anya.