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# The Last Cold Winter

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE LAST COLD WINTER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Gabriela Pura Suarez

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences & Education

This thesis, written by Gabriela Pura Suarez and entitled *The Last Cold Winter*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Lynne Barrett

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Lester Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 2, 2017

The thesis of Gabriela Pura Suarez is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences & Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

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## DEDICATION

For Ary

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE LAST COLD WINTER

by

Gabriela Pura Suarez

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Lester Standiford, Major Professor

The Last Cold Winter is a historical novel that takes place in Romania at the end of the 1989 Communist Revolution. George Bird, a naturalized American citizen, returns with his thirty-year-old son, Adrian, to the country they had defected from twenty-eight-years earlier. George Bird is dying of lung cancer, and he wishes to see his parents and his country one last time. The trip quickly turns into a nightmare when he is kidnapped the first day back. Adrian, who doesn't speak Romanian, must now meet the kidnapper's demand for a list he knows nothing about in order to save his father. With the help of a hotel clerk, Simona, they travel to Transylvania to uncover his father's troubled past. In the end, the journey helps Adrian understand the circumstances that had influenced his father's decision to defect, and his need to atone for them now.

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December 18, 1989

George Bird stood on the steps of the Intercontinental Hotel in Bucharest and looked up at the night sky. The wind howled in his ears like a half-starved animal and kicked up the fresh snow on the ground. He adjusted the collar of his wool coat, dug his chin in, and smiled.

Twenty-eight years—that's how long it had been since he felt a Siberian cold front try to knock him off his feet. Welcome home, it said.

He crossed Nicolae Bălcescu Boulevard. There was something eerie being the only person walking on the deserted sidewalk, and passing dark storefronts. Over two million people lived in the capital of Romania, but at five o'clock on this cold December morning, he was the only one about to be leaving footprints in the snow.

A few more steps and Bucharest University, his old school with its Neo-Classical lines and mansard roof, emerged from the shadows. A lot of happy memories happened there, too many to acknowledge all at once, but they stirred in him, warned him that the next few days would not be easy.

He turned west, on Regina Elisabeta Boulevard, a wide street filled with shops and cafés. The wind swelled around him. George thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets. He remembered the note that the girl at the front desk had given him the night before, and for a split second he feared that he still had it on him, but then he recalled ripping it up and tossing it away.

The check-in girl's friendliness should have been his first clue that something was wrong. Customer service was not a Romanian employee's mantra; most locals didn't

offer any pleasantries beyond a grunt and a lift of the chin. It made no difference that the Intercontinental was the highest rated hotel in Bucharest and that it catered to foreigners and businessmen—the people who worked there were equally dissatisfied with their lives as the rest of the population.

George shouldn't have taken the note from the girl, but he'd been momentarily thrown off by the sparkle of her blue eyes. By the time he realized what he was reading, his son, Adrian, had looked up from the papers he'd been filling out and saw him put the note into his pocket. "What's that?" he had asked.

"It's nothing. A standard welcome letter from the hotel." And George had flashed what he hoped was a smile while bile inched up his throat.

The sudden screech of a bus stopping at a light startled him, brought him back into the present. George quickened his pace, eager to get the meeting over with so he could go back to the hotel before Adrian woke up. A few more blocks and he crossed yet another large intersection, and there, on his right, he finally arrived at his destination:

*Grădina Cișmigiu.*

Beyond the weathered brick wall that encircled the park, the sky was changing from charcoal gray to a washed-out hue. George's lungs burned, and the frigid morning air was suddenly too much. He leaned against one of the two pillars at the entrance. The cough came as it always did—violently. He lurched forward and felt his shoulder blades contract, each spasm like a wave breaking against his insides. The raw pain brought tears to his eyes. He fumbled in his pocket for a tissue and held it over his mouth, and when it was over, he spat on the ground. He ignored the blood stain on the snow. It was a reminder of the cancer cells mercilessly attacking his body.

George entered the park. So many years had passed, yet Cișmigiu Gardens had not changed. It was like stepping inside one of his own black and white photographs. He looked past the snowflakes that fluttered and drifted in the air, at the pre-World War I iron lamps that lined the pathway before him. The massive chestnut trees greeted him, their snow-covered branches like tattered white sleeves. Even in the dead of winter, this hundred and fifty-year-old park in the middle of Romania's capital continued to anchor the city and define it in a way that no building or monument ever could.

After defecting from Romania in 1961, George had felt lost and out of place for many years. America had not been an easy country to acclimate to and whenever he had felt at his loneliest, only a few of his old memories had settled his soul. This park had been one of them.

He followed a winding path as a heavy stillness settled all around him, the kind that made him think he could hear the snowflakes hit the ground. He crossed a bridge that stretched across what appeared to be a field blanketed in snow which George knew was a lake. Somewhere to his right was the boat house where he and Maria would rent canoes. That was a lie—they had only gone on the lake once, but he felt as if they had done it more often because he had played that memory repeatedly in his mind.

George realized he had reached Rondul Român when he looked up and saw the twelve limestone busts of Romania's most influential writers. They were arranged in a circle as if condemned to face off for eternity. This was where he used to come after his classes at the *liceu* and meet up with his schoolmates.

He walked up to Mihai Eminescu's statue and brushed the snow off the stone shoulders. The first time he had kissed Maria was on this very spot while leaning on the poet's bust. His wife's face appeared before him, and George felt his breath catch.

George Bird had loved Maria like the sun breaking on his face after a long cold night. Like that feeling you got when you were on a swing and it didn't matter if you were flying high or coming down—it was all good.

Here, in their old stomping ground, it was impossible to deny her memory any longer. He placed his hand over his heart as if to shush it and walked over to a nearby bench. He lowered himself, and the memories came rushing. He shut his eyes. His life played out before him like grainy images spat out from a projector: Maria. His parents. His friends.

He heard the sounds of early traffic. Bucharest was waking up. Soon, the streets would be jammed, and the air would be clogged with diesel fumes. The snow that had fallen overnight would turn to slush. George squeezed his eyes tighter and willed his mind to return to Maria for a bit longer.

He heard a branch snap somewhere close by, and his eyes flew open. He caught a sudden movement and raised his arm to shield himself, but it was too late. The blow on his head was more shocking than painful, and George's last thought as he fell to the ground was of Adrian asleep in the hotel. He tried to call out to him, to warn him, but a darkness washed over him, and he had the sensation that he was falling into a bottomless pit. And that too felt familiar.

Dawn

Adrian woke up to the sound of utensils clinking against plates and the muffled squeak of wheels. He opened his eyes and slowly focused on a water spot on the ceiling while he tried to remember where he was. At the foot of his bed was a gray television with antennas pointing in opposite directions. A bright sliver of daylight seeped through a set of thick burgundy curtains. It landed on the empty bed next to his.

Panic seized him, the kind he would have as a child when he'd wake up and not recognize his room. Except that he wasn't a child anymore; he was a thirty-year-old man, college educated, an accountant, and he was engaged—

*Scratch that,* a voice interrupted his thoughts. *Amy left you. She broke off the engagement a week before you found out your father had terminal lung cancer.*

Adrian remembered now where he was. He propped himself up on his elbows.

“Dad,” he called out. “Are you in here?”

The walls creaked. A car beeped in the distance.

He stared at the bathroom door expecting an answer, but instead he heard a dripping faucet, and he knew that his father wasn't in the room. His old man hated the drip, drip, drip sound of a running faucet, drove him crazy. He would have been all over that in a heartbeat.

Adrian flipped the bedcover off and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. His feet touched a plush carpet but the room was cold, freezing. Chills spread over his back like brushfire.