

*The Eyes of Sibiu*

THE TREES ON MY STREET HAD GROWN MICROPHONES. Ten million microphones—not for broadcasting, but for listening—loomed throughout my country over a population of twenty-three million, one for every two and a third people. The sense of constant scrutiny pervaded us like a ghost of old Vlad the Impaler, whose castle still stood on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains from my home in Sibiu. On the morning of December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1989, I had no sense that we'd be watched more intensely than usual, though the day would change the history of Romania. On my first day of winter break, I just wanted to eke out a little Christmas, a holiday that had officially ceased to exist over 40 years ago.

My parents and I were getting ready to go shopping in the Piata Mare, Piata Mica—plazas great and small—and Balceşcu Street. My mom had taken a day off from her job as a lab technician in a sweets factory, and Dad would be leaving for his job as an electronics technician at the Sibiu Airport. Everybody shopped early to stand in long lines before going to work, and if we didn't shop then, everything would be gone in an hour or two. I wanted to cheer my Buni, my father's mother, with a pretty new dress for the illicit holiday. I also wanted to look nice that day because an interesting Someone might be out shopping, and I wanted to draw an admiring gaze.

Should I risk wearing my red faux Coco Chanel, I asked myself as I admired the jacket made of material smuggled in from our German relatives, or play it safe in the black sweater Buni knitted for me? We'd worked out the design together, and she managed to turn the yarn into something fashionable. Romanian co-op fabrics tended to be gray, gray-and-brown plaid, black, dull checks or stripes, or, occasionally, a few somber shades of blue and green—never any colors that were warm or bright—all sharing a drab ugliness, as if grayness had spread like cholera, entering houses, covering our bodies, taking over lives, and dulling our minds.

“Come on, Aura, hurry up for goodness' sake!” My dad called from the front door. “What's taking you so long?”

“Just a minute,” I answered.

“Rica,” I could hear Dad saying to my mom, “Go to your daughter’s room and speed up the process! Ughh, women!”

Mom walked into my room to help me out with my crucial decision.

Even under a brutally strict communist regime, I was picky about my clothes and had been creating my own wardrobe since I was fourteen. I loathed the clothing from the trade co-ops, the “Cooperativa Mestesugaresca,” their dusty shelves and rusty metal hangers offering garments that look more like uniforms for prisoners or orphanage donations. Mismatched suits were either too short or too long and required an expert tailor’s skill to redesign them into anything presentable. I constantly scoured the black market for fabrics, accessories, zippers, buckles, thread, buttons, and lining. Even though I was only a senior in high school, I’d earned money tutoring during the last four years. I copied designs from catalogs sent by my relatives in Germany and smuggled into the country. I also created dresses for Mom and for Buni who rewarded me with money for every A on my report card. As a straight A student, my little “pension” would allow a few nice things—if we could find them.

“Aura, sweetheart, pick something and let’s go.” My mother was soft and round and her eyes always reminded me of Sophia Loren’s, dark and sparkling, beautifully outlined by her long, curled eyelashes and perfectly shaped eyebrows. “Come on!”

“Maybe I will just wear my black sweater with my green wool pants. I don’t think it’s so chilly outside.” It was a decision that may have saved my life.

The ice crunched beneath my black boots as I trudged with my parents across the slick walkways. Our house grew smaller behind us, and the bare chestnuts, childhood friends that harbored my shoes among their green branches in summer, blurred the house further, as if erasing our safe haven. We turned right onto Rusciorului Street and walked past Suru, the corner tavern named after a mountain peak. At 6:30 A.M. before work, during work breaks, and after work, people hung around outside, dressed in their dreary, unwashed clothing, throwing away their meager salaries on alcohol, the only pleasure that could soften the grueling boredom of working long repetitious hours six days a week. The reek of sweat and government rotgut made my nostrils sting. If they looked at me, their expressions were sulky. Most averted their eyes. Dracula’s victims were called “the undead.” These drudges could hang out with them and go unnoticed. Dad nudged my elbow to hurry me past these degraded people.

I heard a train approaching, coming from Copsa Mica. Emissions from a nearby factory that produced carbon black for dyes had earned this station the distinction of being one of the most polluted in Europe. The factory's steady belch coated homes, trees, and even animals with soot. A smelter in the area emitted such noxious vapors that it had caused lung disease, impotence, and a life expectancy nine years below Romania's average.

The uneven pavement and potholes made the streets a dangerous place to walk. My parents and I passed the usual houses, the paint faded and flaking, the dingy bricks chipped. Ghostly slanted chimneys loomed, as if ready to collapse on our heads. The carbon and the sickly green of moss and mold rendered a uniform drabness that extended to the discolored window curtains hanging in tatters inside dirty, cracked windows.

Dad said, "It's going to snow again." He nodded toward the low, gray clouds that were moving along the vast, white Carpathians just south of Sibiu. "Maybe a blizzard."

Yesterday and all last week, the weather had been mild, the cold sun shining in vibrant blue skies, glaring off the snow on the steep, tiled roofs, melting and freezing into silvery icicles, brightening the banks along the dirty streets. This city could be a truly charming place if its old world charm were restored. Now, the leaden sky dampened my holiday mood.

I shivered. The red jacket would have kept me warmer. I tugged my black knit angora beret—which I thought looked quite flirtatious against my auburn hair—down over my ears and pulled on black leather gloves, gifts from my parents after careful saving. Despite the deprivation in our lives, I considered myself, at age eighteen, quite fashionable. By Western standards, my clothing may not have been special, but in my city of Sibiu in Transylvania, I stood out—which wasn't exactly a good thing.

"Aura! Dear God!" My father turned to my mother. "Do you see what she's wearing?" He turned back to me. "Are you crazy?"

I felt the blood rush into my cheeks as if they'd been pinched. I'd hoped that for once I could just wear my jeweled Byzantine cross set with diamonds, a cross no taller than the end of my thumb. I'd received it from Buni when I passed my entrance to Octavian Goga High School. It was part of my family's heirloom, passed down through the generations in secrecy for fear or being confiscated by the many oppressive governments that held power over the years. I was so proud to have received it, and I knew better than to show it off, but it was almost Christmas, and what good was having something in a box, never publicly enjoying it?

“Cover it up. Now!” Dad said. “You already draw too much attention. Do you really want to get us all in trouble because of your vanity?”

My mother jumped in to save me, calling my father by his pet name. “Fanel, don’t make such a fuss for nothing. There is nobody around us anyway.”

“Nobody you see,” Dad said. “That doesn’t mean they aren’t here, watching, listening, following our moves. We must always be in control! Use your mind before acting, Aura!”

“Ok, I will, I promise.” I tucked in my white gold cross, so cold, so virgin to strangers’ eyes, so beautiful.

Just then two neighbor ladies crossed our path, but we didn’t exchange a Christmas greeting. We nodded, and they sort of twitched. One of the women in a threadbare gray coat eyed my beret and green pants and then murmured something to her companion, most likely critical of my attire, which defied the government-mandated drabness. Clothing that exhibited any semblance of individuality was forbidden because individuality threatened the communist agenda. I knew I was already on a black list somewhere, but the whispers of the women sent a chill up my spine. Spies were always listening, opening and checking every piece of mail. Every other neighbor became a secret agent and informant for Securitate.

If your face registered all the pessimism, sadness and pain you felt, nobody thought anything of it, but if you squinted in defiance or spilled over with excitement or laughed in merriment, someone would notice you and wonder why. He or she would start watching you. The homeland that had produced Vlad—Dracula’s prototype—had somehow inhabited the soul of our President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Romania, *Tovarasul Nicolae Ceaușescu*. *Tovarasul* meant the comrade of comrades, the one most equal among equals—in other words dictator.

Nothing drew public scrutiny like the spending of money, and spies would eagerly report someone who might not be able to account for certain expenditures, who might have an independent thought. Some people suspected their own parents or siblings or other family members and neighbors as informants, people who’d been lured into spying on locals because of an alleged crime, usually the sort of cheating everyone did to try and support their families—such as shopping on the black market.

People of all ages, some in clusters, headed toward the town squares in greater numbers than usual—the only clue that revealed any holiday expectations. An outside observer would assume

we were on a grim march of some kind. There were no decorations, no carols playing from speakers, no gypsy music, no color anywhere. For all but a few days out of the year, there was no purpose and no future, no desire. Yet at Christmas, many people seemed to reach deep down in their souls to rekindle a reason to live. They covertly sang and danced around a small fir tree, snatched from the forests that were all guarded by government rangers. From the dank, black holes in the earth where the miners toiled, to the plant workers who labored long hours for subsistence wages, to the peasants who scraped away at their dry plots of land, the Christmas season offered the only flicker of gaiety in a country that bore the weight of tyranny.

I searched the faces of young men for the one I most wanted to see, but I saw no one else I knew that day, though I glimpsed a wary animation that morning, an occasional expression that could turn into a smile. Certainly no one suspected that the Christmas season of 1989 would be any different from those of the last five years.

We turned left onto Karl Marx Street with its state-run markets. We always hit them first before everything was gone. The basic sources of survival—bread, milk, sugar, butter, potatoes, and meat—had become increasingly scarce, and lines stretched ever longer. Only last week, my parents woke up at 3:00 A.M. to stand in line until 6:00 A.M. to get milk. My mother had saved eggs to bake a pie that would last the family two weeks. Luckily, we still owned a refrigerator with a freezer that worked, though both were often empty. The state allowed each individual to buy no more than ten eggs, 500 grams of meat (just over one pound), one liter of cooking oil, and half a kilo of sugar per month.

Mom dragged me into a government grocery store, while Dad waited outside. I stared at the gray, dusty shelves offering mustard, more mustard, and even more mustard. Jars of pickles filled other shelves, but our lives were already sour, so who needed pickles? We passed right by the dark, unrefined soy oil for cooking and the bottles of horrible-tasting cola-colored juice made from prunes. Mom bee-lined over to the produce section, only to find a display of nearly rotten apples. Though Ceaușescu had outlawed Christmas, its celebration was tolerated to some extent, so one time per year, grocery shops received oranges and bananas, wondrous flavors we would savor and remember throughout the whole year. On Christmas day last year, a working day, my parents rushed out early in the morning to queue up to buy one kilogram of each of the fruit delicacies—which, in English, I used to mistakenly call *delicatessens*. But on this gray morning of the twenty-first, no part of the exotic fruit shipment had arrived.

Next we tried the refrigerated section. There, a few small bricks of cheeses that were mixed with starch or flour lay aside the “București Salami,” consisting of soy, bone meal, and pork lard, and, the *piece de resistance*, “tacâmuri de pui,” which meant chicken wings, gizzards, and claws.

“Pfhh!” Mom said.

Of course, she didn’t really expect much better. Our renowned Sibiu and “Victory” salamis along with high and mid-grade meats were strictly for export. Goods of any quality went out into the world, a world that was supposedly starving just like we were.

Mom and I both stopped to gawk at one display of endless bottles of cheap champagne called “vin spumos.” We thought of it as fizzled wine. Why would anyone need sour champagne? What government mockery was this? What did they imagine worthy of celebrating? Another year lived near starvation? A moment to toast the idea that under communism, equal rights meant equal misery?

We couldn’t even whisper these thoughts to each other in public, but Mom gave me a look that told me she was thinking the same thing.

Dad stepped inside and subtly tapped his watch. Since the check-out queue stretched for what looked like a half-hour wait, we left with nothing in Mom’s shopping bag. We had to meet one of her underground connections made through a somebody who knew somebody who had a supply of things the stores didn’t sell. At Christmas, people tried to buy almost anything not made in Romania, like women’s clothing and blue jeans. Any American brand cost the equivalent of between \$100 and \$300 for a new pair of jeans. French and German cosmetics sold well also, along with electronics from Western Europe or Japan, and any Swiss, German, French, or Belgian chocolates. Currency, gold and other jewelry were traded only on the black market, so authorities couldn’t track them. Everyone was supposed to declare jewelry among his or her possessions. The beautiful cross I wore exceeded the limit of diamonds allowed as a personal possession. Dad was right. I was an idiot to wear it.

We trekked on toward the imposing Piata Mare, where the famous “eyes” of the buildings still looked down on all who entered. Originally a grain market that began in the early 1400s, the site of beheadings, hangings, and even cages for “crazy people,” the square gave rise to a unique architecture. Its buildings featured attic windows, which peeped out of a smooth rise in the roof—instead of a gable—forming an uncanny “eyelid” that hung over dark, recessed panes. It looked as if black, unblinking human eyes, sometimes five to a single stretch of tiled roof, were always

watching. With Ceaușescu in power, this felt especially disturbing and eerie. They saw you, but you had no idea what or who was hiding behind those haunting windows.

Closer to the Piata, Mom kept looking around, subtly shifting, so she could scan for our black market man without drawing attention. She most wanted to buy items that served as a second currency in Romania: Kent, Marlboro, and Camel cigarettes, Johnny Walker, Ballantine's Scotch, and Teacher's Whiskey, the items that would get you what you wanted. Everyone bribed medical employees—nurses, doctors, and dentists, even the hospital security guards. To get a raise or secure a job, you bribed your boss. Bribing the City Hall administration was the only way to get a permit, approval or avoid fines. You bribed the Militia (Police) to get out of trouble—real, pending, or just imaginary. You bribed your auto shop to get your car fixed, if you were lucky enough to have one. You bribed the manager at your grocery store, so that he'd share the good news when they were "getting something," like fresh meat, sugar, oil or any "delicatessens." Even if you shopped in approved department stores, you had to bribe certain managers to buy the occasional imported appliance, clothing, or other goods. Romanians were forbidden to possess foreign currency, particularly U.S. dollars and German DM-Deutsche Marks. People went to jail for transactions of merely \$40 USD.

I was eager to see if this particular contact carried chocolate, which I craved like an addict. We were looking for a "Gigi Kent," part of the underground world, the one you never wanted to know about but couldn't live without. His real name might be George, but he'd go by his nickname, "Gigi." His specialty was his surname, as in Kent cigarettes. One Gigi Kent was a doorman at the Continental Hotel and wore a uniform. He sold chocolate, soap, peanuts, and cigarettes. If you bought a pack of smokes for ten to twenty dollars, you wouldn't get arrested, so he was a god to anyone in a hurry for American cigarettes. There was always another side to this sort of god, however.

Anyone in uniform—policemen, postmen, anyone in security—was likely to meet many people in the course of a day, and so they became potentially valuable to the machinery of state operations. Many black market operators were also part of the eyes and ears of authority's web. Anyone who tried to buy, say, \$500 worth of cigarettes from Gigi Kent could get into instant trouble, big trouble. He or she would be arrested, held by the police or Securitate for intimidation during the night, and by next morning that "customer" would agree to become an informant. If the police determined that the new informant was well connected in his or her place of work or had a

sizable social network, he was “invited” back to the Police or Securitate, and there, in some petty bureaucrat’s office, he would “negotiate” his future “support” for the principles of communism. His future and that of his family would depend on whether or not “they” decided that he might prove valuable to them.

We kept moving toward the square to connect with our new Gigi Kent, but since we carried no bundles or shopping bags of groceries, I got nervous, fearing the consequences of the wrong attitude, the wrong comment being overheard, the wrong black market vendor turning our names over to the Securitate. If we were caught, they’d discover my cross. I must have looked frightened because Mom gave my hand a little squeeze.

We couldn’t see any morning sun at all through the heavy cloud cover, and the mountain’s icy breath left my woolen clothes feeling like skimpy summer weight cotton. On the walkway ahead of us, a child coughed, and Mom started coughing as well. We’d passed other people wheezing and coughing up phlegm behind the closed doors. My mom and I both suffered from bronchitis and asthma due to the cold temperature in our house, at school, and at work. During winter, the temperature in all public places couldn’t exceed sixteen degrees Celsius/sixty-three degrees Fahrenheit. The government rationed gas and allowed each family a mere twenty kilowatts of electricity per month. Temperatures over our long winters never reached anything like comfort.

Just inside the Piata Mare, we turned toward Perla, a bakery. No one who could be a Gigi Kent stood there smoking, though we were exactly on time.

“He’s not coming,” I said, sulking a bit. “Ohh, I could almost taste the chocolate.”

“Let’s go to the Piata Mica,” Mom said. “You can get your fabric for Buni.”

We started walking toward the Piata Mica. The black market trader’s failure to appear might have been a clue that the day would not be a normal shopping day. The man might have known things we did not. Oddly, as I walked alongside my parents, I thought of the college applications and exams I’d be taking and how hard that year was going to be. An Armageddon year, I told myself.

I had no idea how accurate my prophecy would be.

As we neared the smaller square, two guys dressed in black rushed past us, speaking a foreign language. The Securitate usually wore black as if on endless funeral duty, but we rarely heard foreign languages in the street.

“Aura!” Mom said. “What were they saying?”

I had taken foreign languages since the age of four and was familiar with English, French and German. “Something in a Slavic language. I really didn’t get it.”

“Slavic? Interesting,” Dad said. “Wonder who they were....”

We were only a few blocks from the entrance to the Piata Mica. A thirteenth century Council Tower divided the large square from a small one. As we approached, I could see one of the slanted roofs, which also had an “eye” in the middle. Snow covered the “lid,” and icicles hung from its eave like hoary, defeated eyelashes. It looked weird, diabolic. “Old Frosty Man,” an imagined gift-giving figure enthroned in the Communist coup against Saint Nicholas, must have had such an eye.

It started to snow, and I felt it melting into my hair at the back of my neck and dampening my face. A cold white shawl settled on the shoulders of my sweater. The snowflakes danced in lazy flurries, reminding me not of a Christmas carol but of the delicately insinuating opening adagio of Ravel’s “Bolero.” A fragile moment of beauty and simple perfection...just before hell released its demons.

A loud popping erupted all around. People screamed and shouted as a volley of gunfire echoed off the buildings. Bullets zinged past me. Children clung to their parents.

People took cover, and just beyond, I saw that blood had splattered on the fresh white dusting of snow.

Chaos. Desperation. Terror.

My God, I was scared.

My father’s arm crashed against my back and I dived, hitting the ice and cobblestones in the street. I ate snow.

## 2

### *Heirlooms*

STEADY RIFLE VOLLEYS AND RANDOM GUNFIRE sent bullets whistling above me. Ricochets shrilled off posts and the trunks of bare trees. I tried to flatten myself against the snow

and ice, the rough cobbles of the street gouging into my face. I breathed snow, freezing my nose and lips. For a moment, time froze the hourglass as well, each grain as slow-moving as a glacier.

I didn't dare raise my head, even to see where the snipers hid or if they were advancing. All along Piata Mica, adults and children screamed, shrieked, shouted out prayers, swore, and wailed.

“God save us!”

“Where are these bastards?”

“EVA!...Eva? EVA?...Oh, my god!”

Boots pounded the snow. My heart thundered so fiercely, I thought it would bang its way out of my chest. I was numb, panting, and hysterical. My breath escaped in white puffs, revealing my position and the life still inside me. The snowfall intensified, powdering me as if I were slowly fading away into the whiteness.

Something cold clamped my gloved right hand. I raised my head just enough to look toward my mother. It was her hand that had found mine, though her face was still buried in snow.

Sirens blared in the distance, and frenzied people rushed away from the Piata Mare. Nearby, I heard the shuffling footsteps of the elderly, the quick moosh-moosh-moosh-moosh of young people running in a tumultuous, screaming panic. I wanted to join them, but an iron vise gripped my left arm, dragging me through the snow, my feet digging a path. My father said:

“Crawl, Aura!” He spoke my name through clenched teeth. “Rica, hurry!”

Mom—Rica—and I obeyed instantly. Shards of ice and grit hidden by the snow ground into my knees and elbows, as we scuttled along. Creeping underneath eaves, pressing against the walls of the houses, I fixated on every attic window. The “eyes” of Sibiu harbored murderers.

Who were these snipers? Where did they come from? What did they want from me? Why were they hiding themselves in the attics? Why were they firing at us?

If I'd worn my red jacket, I'd have made an ideal target, and I'd have drawn fire to my family.

Still crawling, we reached the part of the street that ran underneath the old Liars' Bridge—the first cast-iron bridge in Romania—which connected the upper town to the lower. A popular legend claimed that if a person told a lie while standing on it, the quaint old structure would collapse with the liar's weight. It clearly wasn't true. Communists officials crossed it all the time, and the bridge continued to support them.

On the other side of the bridge, the street seemed wider than ever. There were no people there, not even a stray dog. We crawled like frantic reptiles to the bottom of Karl Marx Street.

“Okay, run for it!” Dad said.

As I stood, I half-turned my face toward the direction of the relentless gunfire. An explosion shook the earth and then another.

Some survival instinct took over my legs, and I ran with a hell fury inside, trampling anything in my path, flying over the ice patches, leaping in great strides over banked snow.

*I must escape...find safety...must not slow down...God, I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die!*

I gasped frigid air into my lungs and felt like I was a fugitive not only from that moment, but from my whole life. I was aware of myself as a Romanian with so little to run to. I had a sense of losing my identity and vanishing into a white abyss. Yet, I wanted to live. I raged against “them” for stealing my country and wanting my life and my family’s lives. I ran. With every stride, I felt a conviction that beat within my pounding heart, knowing my anger was greater than my fear. I grit my teeth with the rebellion that teemed in my soul that morning as I ran.

I ran.

Rusciorului Road! We flew around the corner onto the street that I walked every day to go to high school. It never felt so long, never so ominously empty. I would normally be about to salute the tri-color flag that stood alongside Nicolai Ceaușescu’s portrait, which hung in every classroom, before singing the Romanian Anthem, “Trei Culori Cunosc pe Lume” (The Three Colors I Know in This World.) Would there be any more school? Would I live to graduate?

A few drunks stood around Suru’s, bleary-eyed, too wasted to relate the popping noises and blasts with danger. One watched us with a puzzled expression, mouth open.

My mother wheezed, barely able to catch her breath. Further down the block, I glimpsed an old man inside one of the houses, one of many people whose silhouettes I had often seen on my way to school. The old ones like my Grandma were afraid of sliding on the hidden ice patches, so they stayed indoors, often just staring out their windows. In that split-second as I ran by, I read pain on the man’s face. I had seen this expression before. It was as if his eyes were begging for forgiveness for a world he didn’t create but hadn’t been able to prevent.

The old man had probably fought in the great World Wars, and maybe those other wars had begun for him in just this way, with sniper fire, explosions, and neighbors running in terror. Our history bore many boot-prints, hordes fighting for a homeland in Romania. Early Romans

conquered and mixed with Dacians, whose descendants battled and assimilated Slavs, Greeks, Hungarians, and Saxon Germans. Our ancestors were warriors.

Was that what was happening? The start of World War III?

As soon as I glimpsed our bare chestnut trees, I rasped, "Our house!"

We rushed past the trees and scrambled inside, slamming and bolting the door behind us. My mother and I flopped onto kitchen chairs, trying to catch our breaths. I could still hear the distant gunfire.

"What is happening?" Buni asked. "I've been at the window since I first heard explosions! Is it tanks?"

"I don't know," my father answered, and hurriedly related the story of Christmas shoppers being gunned down, our long crawl through a war zone, our dash home.

My stoic, levelheaded grandmother had survived both World Wars. Eighty-four-years-old with white curly hair, she was as tall as an Amazon and acted like a woman half her age.

"Quickly!" she commanded. "We'll barricade ourselves inside."

I wanted to sit down and warm myself, but like a trained battalion, we dispersed in all directions, each with a mission. Dad closed the front shutters outside and locked all doors. Dad and Buni climbed past the sausages we'd hung in the cold dry air at the top of the stairs to the attic and brought down wooden planks. Dad, Mom, and I angled irregular boards to fit into the wooden window frames that sat recessed in our eighteen-inch thick brick walls. Driving in long nails, we secured the two dining room windows and my two bedroom windows, which all faced the street, and other windows at the sides and back. Buni prepared sandwiches and hot tea. Mom rounded up warm clothing, and I made myself helpful with whatever anyone needed me to do. We turned on one single light bulb in the kitchen and gathered around it, suddenly quiet, not really knowing what to say or how to face this new reality. I was too upset to eat my sandwich. I just sat there holding my lovely hot tea cup, smelling the fragrant tea sent by German relatives, the steam warming my face.

More gunfire. It was still at a distance, but from a different part of town.

Who were these aggressors and upon whom were they firing?

We began calling all our friends and relatives. Snipers were firing throughout the city. Heavy gunfire was also raining down from the Continental Hotel and the Municipal Hospital. A few

people reported having seen hulking strangers around the city last night, believed to be foreign soldiers. I told Buni about the men dressed in black and speaking a foreign language.

“Damned bloody Cossacks!” Buni made a spitting sound. “Wonder how many girls have been raped....”

“You know what Diana said a few days ago?” I said.

“Your friend from school?” Mom asked.

“Yes. Her father is in the Romanian army. He said that four MiG-29s arrived in Romania.” I knew from the times Dad took me to work with him in the Romanian Airlines in the Control Tower that the Soviet Union had built these planes to counter the American F-15 and F-16 fighter jets.

We stared at each other a moment, and then Dad turned on our television, which Uncle Nelu bought from the duty-free boutique, called “The Shop” using a year’s worth of Buni’s savings. We could not go inside the shop, for everything was sold in foreign currency, and Romanians could not possess any. We watched it only rarely, fearing it might get broken easily, but that day we tuned in without hesitation. This time, instead of seeing a controlled close-up of our “beloved” President on the screen, cameras panned the Romanian masses protesting and booing him live while he tried to deliver another of his wooden speeches, one already heard many times. He’d recently returned from a trip to Iran and seemed totally baffled and shocked.

The Securitate—the presidential watchdogs—singled out people in the crowds. They tried to arrest them in the manner they were used to, but the masses wove left and right, distracting their attention. Ceaușescu withdrew, and later gave a televised speech from the studio inside the Central Committee Building declaring “martial law” over events at Timisoara, claiming there was an ongoing “interference of foreign forces in Romania’s internal affairs” by “Hungarian fascists” and an “external aggression on Romania’s sovereignty.” Whatever that meant.

TVR, our only Romanian TV station, rehashed Ceaușescu’s words and further suggested Palestinians as possible aggressors. Dad turned it off.

“Events at Timișoara?” I asked him, astounded. “What was he talking about?”

“I heard a little about this,” Dad explained. “There was a revolt in Timișoara five days ago. I heard it on Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe. The details were sketchy.”

My mother sighed, clearing away the plates and napkins. My uneaten sandwich would be saved for another time. “Uprisings come and go. Conspirators are punished. Life goes on.”

“And how many people will be taken away and disappear forever?” Dad asked.

Anger came through in his words. Their political thinking diverged into frequent opposition. My mom was a diligent worker and preferred to be compliant rather than risk the official harassment meted out to those who resisted or defied authority the way my father did. She had agreed to be the official Communist Party Secretary at the Victory lab where she works, and she was the one who had to welcome Ceaușescu in Sibiu during one of his visits.

Dad banged his teacup down on the saucer. “Rica, even if you serve this bastard, his words have never blinded you. How can you be so immune to what’s happening now?”

She glared at him, carried the plates to the sink, and returned. “I’m afraid. You’re already blacklisted, Fanel. Aura too, probably. I don’t want anything to happen to you two and Buni. I don’t want to make waves.”

“And, so you close your eyes?”

“No, I do not. I just do whatever is in my power to keep this family safe.”

“Safety means getting rid of the regime.” Dad’s voice was insistent. “There is no other way!”

Fresh gunfire volleyed, sounding perhaps three blocks away.

Dad cocked his head toward the sound. “I think Colonel Dragomirescu is behind the snipers here in Sibiu. He’s telling us not to get any ideas like they did in Timișoara.”

We all looked at each other, knowing Dad’s theory was correct, but if so, it was a threat that wouldn’t stop me from wanting to support any rebellion against the Securitate.

“Since Nicu Ceaușescu isn’t a bastard like his father,” Dad said of the presidential couple’s son, “he makes Dragomirescu nervous.”

Dragomirescu was Elena Ceaușescu’s right hand, her “eyes and ears,” charged with constantly monitoring Nicu, who was appointed by his parents to rule Sibiu, a post similar to being a governor. Nicu, however, dismissed all his special agents who were supposed to supervise and report his daily routines to his mother. The son was known for his non-allegiance to his family and their politics, so this might have made Dragomirescu think that any citizens of Sibiu who liked Nicu must be discouraged from getting any crazy ideas. But I did anyway.

“Dragomirescu has brought in the damned bloody Cossacks down on us!” Buni made her spitting sound again. Then she went a little pale. “We must hide the china and jewelry!”

Mom agreed. “Fanel, give me the key,” she said to my Dad. “Aura, come help us.”

Dad retrieved from its hiding place in a drawer, the long iron key opening the cedar chest that held the evidence of what the Imbarus clan used to be. Buni and my parents had managed to keep a tiny portion of the elegant valuables our ancestors had acquired before “*those bastards took all of our land and wealth,*” as Buni often repeated.

Buni threw a ragged old quilt over the polished splendor of the two hundred-year-old dining table made from the gnarled wood of nut tree roots, and then she spread the family’s heirlooms in an array worthy of a Sotheby’s estate sale. The jewelry had inspired my childhood fantasies. I had imagined wearing the ring with flower petals of rubies and emerald leaves one day when a higher justice restored my family’s properties. I pictured my blond, blue-eyed great aunt Maria wearing the three strings of pearls with her beautiful silk dresses as she rode off in a carriage.

“Hurry!” Buni said. “We’re going to bury these in the cellar.”

“Not in the dirt?” I asked, stunned at the idea.

“Yes, underneath the potatoes.”

Dad went down to dig proper holes.

Buni handed me soft torn cloth, and Mom brought in a stack of old newspapers. I set about wrapping necklaces, bracelets, brooches, clasps, coronets, girdles, earrings, and flexible strands of gold beads, then knotting the bundle into a little bag and wrapping it in the paper. I had learned the names of gemstones by asking questions about the jewelry as a child. Clear, bright beryls, and their impurities that created color: emeralds, aquamarine, yellows called heliodor that came from Russia, and pink beryls as well; amber, jasper, lapis lazuli, and my favorites, the amethysts.

I dawdled over a ruby and sapphire necklace with matching gold hoop earrings.

“Quickly!” Mom said.

The air turned so cold, I could see my breath, but we didn’t dare stop to light a fire.

I wrapped the velvet-lined cases containing a tiny sack of loose diamonds, a necklace with square-cut stones of aquamarine, a chunky ring with three champagne diamonds, a turquoise cross with matching drop earrings, and a necklace with dark hematite beads, shiny as silver teamed with tigers-eye stones.

Mom was wrapping the box of old gold coins, while Buni took extra care wrapping an antique Russian enamel cloisonné egg.

I stopped to marvel at an amber necklace with beads ranging from light cream to dark brown which I pictured around the neck of the tall, proud Ana Imbarus. And there were gold pinky rings

with stones of onyx and emeralds, no doubt worn by my great-great uncles, Iosif, Valentin and others.

I started to wrap a Greek cross with an aquamarine in the center and four matching diamonds on each of its lengths, but Buni snatched it from me. “This piece belonged to Aurelia Imbarus, your great-great grandmother.”

“My namesake.”

“Yes. She and her husband built the Stefan Cel Mare church.” She lifted the cross and kissed it. “With its unseen power, it has always kept us safe.” Tears sparkled in her eyes like the little diamonds I’d just wrapped. “Put your own cross with it, Aura,” she said gently.

I hesitated.

“Do it!” she said, all business again.

Mom nodded.

I brought my cross out from under my sweater, and the whole endeavor became personal. For the first time, I had the feeling that I was about to bury a loved one.

Dad came in for the jewels and coins. They would be buried the deepest.

As he headed to the cellar, three loud explosions sounded to the west. Buni, Mom, and I sat and looked at each other, listening. Intense bursts of gunfire followed, then nothing.

We went to work frantically wrapping three sets of porcelain china, silverware and a few platters, vases and ashtrays plated with silver or hammered gold, but after a few minutes, I balked at wrapping my silver saucer.

“Can I at least keep this out for my marmalade and five o’clock cookies?” I asked.

“No, Aura, you cannot.” The blasts had obviously made Mom’s patience run low. “We must hide everything. Everything. We cannot leave a trace of what *Imbarus* used to mean. Nothing that will remind them of who your father’s people were.”

“But, Mom, it’s just one saucer...”

“One saucer can stir the mind of a looter. If this is what is shown, then what is hidden? That’s what these dogs will think.”

“By God,” Buni said, “they will *not* take these from me. They took everything else, included my own brothers and sisters, the servants we used to have, the carriages, even your dad’s nanny. And all the property....So. They will not have these last remains. Ever! As long as I live!”

Gunfire peppered away somewhere, maybe to our south. We finished wrapping, and I helped Dad take all of it down into the cold dankness of the cellar, where the war noise sounded no louder than a few woodpeckers, pecking nearby trees. Shaking a little with the cold, I handed him the wrapped items as he buried them on top of the jewelry. He carefully returned the soil, and piled potatoes on top. We nestled other items behind the array of preserved pickles in great jars, and behind canned vegetables, and among all that visibly remained of the wondrous colors of our jewels, the ruby and amber marmalades Buni made from summer fruit.

To stop the shivers, I took the cup of hot tea with both hands that Buni had waiting for me in the kitchen.

“Let’s eat something,” Mom said. “Who knows if we’ll be able to eat all that pork from the Saint Ignatius pig? Who knows what will happen tomorrow?”

Raw pork filled our refrigerator, its blood pooling on the shelves and trickling out at the bottom of the door. This particular bonanza arrived out of the custom on Saint Ignatius Day, the previous day, of sacrificing a pig. We’d bought a share of my uncle’s hog, though he didn’t go in for the barbarous tradition of slaughtering the pig in his back yard, as others still did.

Grafted onto a Christian saint day, the custom originated in pagan times and included drinking a round of *tuica*—a plum brandy—all to ensure the soul of the pig, an entity which would then gratefully bless the celebrants not only with the nourishment from its body, but also by putting in a good word in heaven for its slaughterers. I guess it seemed logical back then. In good years, we loved the rich traditional *Turta* cake made with butter, walnuts, and honey and rolled into thin layers to represent the swaddling clothes of the Christ Child. I think I was twelve the last time I ate a delectable slice of *turta*.

“We don’t dare use three hours of gas to roast that meat,” Dad said. “Find something else.”

With the pork and the contents of the freezer, which we stockpiled throughout the year, we could last the winter—if we could figure out a reasonable way to cook it. A few times, we couldn’t pay our electric bills and lost power, losing all the carefully saved meat to spoilage.

A simple supper of potatoes, toast, and polenta with farmer cheese and sour cream would make a meal that used less energy. I drank reconstituted powdered milk, thanks to Mom’s “borrowing” abilities. She smuggled the milk powder from the Victory lab in a little bag carried under her hat. She also sometimes smuggled powdered egg yolks, but each time she “borrowed”

something, she had to pass an inspection from a security guard and a doorman. You'd think being a Party secretary would bring perks the way higher positions did, but she was as frightened of being caught and turned over to the Communists as any of her fellow workers. She took such great risks during the leanest times when there was little food to live on, but also sometimes when she just wanted to see the smile on my face when Buni turned the purloined treasures into special desserts.

As we tried to cook and eat our meal, Dad continued monitoring the gas and electricity meter.

"Do you think they'll be totally shut off during the attacks?" I asked.

"There's no way to know," Dad said.

We had gas stoves in every room in the house, but they were all shut off except for the one in the kitchen. Even there, we often used the butane canisters or charcoal or logs stolen from neighboring forests, or from Paltinis, a ski resort where the only people given access were the *tovarasi*—high-ranking comrades of the Communist Party. Stealing logs from the resort was terribly risky, for if you were caught, you would end up in jail. But men did it for their families even if they knew the consequences.

The phone kept ringing with reports of new damage from the violence in the streets and everyone speculated about what was going on. The gunfire was intense one minute, and then eerily quiet, then sporadic, and then another series of pops and blasts.

The kitchen stove went cold, and Dad shut off the gas jet. Then our one bulb went out. All gas and electricity had been shut down for the rest of the day and night. We couldn't look outside to see if it was still snowing because of the boards on the windows, and I imagined great drifts piling up. The cold set in quickly. Dad used a *butelli* container for another hour of minimal warmth, and, by candlelight, we turned on our radio, praying we had enough batteries to see us through for however long the violence would last. We listened to BBC reports of widespread fighting and explosions throughout the whole country.

"This is no ordinary uprising," Dad said. "People all over are fighting back. This could be a civil war...."

Buni, Mom and I stared at him, wanting him to soften the words, saying he didn't think it would last long, or that this time maybe there would be positive reforms afterward. But we knew about the Soviet tanks that rolled through the streets of Prague and the harshness of the

suppression of any dissent in any of the Communist satellite countries. As grim as our lives were, we might be facing even more austerity if we survived the immediate conflict.

Over pajamas, I dressed as if I were going outside for a walk, wearing a wool cap, long stockings and gloves to keep from freezing while I slept. Mom crawled in bed with me to cuddle for reassurance and warmth, an effort to keep our mutual asthma in check. I thought of our own eye-shaped windows up in our attic. Attic windows were where most of the sniper fire had come from. We hadn't boarded ours up, and someone with a pick and rope could climb in that way.

Mom and I lay there silently, neither of us breathing the slow deep breaths of sleep. During normal times, street lighting was minimal, and break-ins happened often. They would almost certainly increase during the fighting. What if the Securitate decided this was the time to teach blacklisted people like my father a lesson and break in and drag him away? Or what about the foreign thugs with looting on their minds? Or rape? They wouldn't want to stay outside in the cold. They'd try to break in. Every time I shivered, Mom snuggled a bit closer, and I tried not to think about my fears.

At least there was no wind howling. I imagined snowflakes floating rather than falling in flurries out in the blackness of the winter night.

After what seemed like hours of lying there awake, the sky seemed to have cleared because I could see the silhouettes of my great chestnut trees in between six-inch gap in my boarded windows that aligned with the crack between the shutters outside. I could tell by the glow that the new snow was reflecting moonlight, illuminating the grace of the bare branches, as if the horror of human power struggles did not exist, and nature's stark beauty was all that mattered.

"God help us!" people had screamed in the streets.

"God help us. Please!" I prayed. "Please, God, help my mom, my dad, and my Buni!"

### 3

## *Footprints*

I MUST HAVE SLEPT A LITTLE BECAUSE SOME KIND OF NOISE WOKE ME. Was it a distant explosion? Were Russian tanks rolling in? Or was it something close? I imagined

someone climbing in through the attic. Mom was gone from my bed. I was alone. Maybe the Securitate had come for my Dad. Were they out there, pounding on our boarded windows? Was that what I heard?

My father's refusal to join the Communist Party remained steadfast. The state was highly suspicious of my father because of his family ties in Germany, and for another more important reason: his spirit. Athletic and muscular, he exercised every morning from 6:00 to 7:30 A.M. He never called in sick or arrived late to his job with Romanian Airlines. Opinionated, dependable, and hard-working, he could always think of a better way to do things and had created numerous electronic inventions, two of which served in the control tower of the Sibiu airport. The government couldn't dominate this man who refused to become a "tovaras," a member of the Communist Party—a comrade. He was a traitor without ever doing anything remotely seditious.

His work was vital to the airport and his picture was always posted on the "*panoul de onoare*," the honor employees' board, but several years back, a high-ranking Party man was sent from Bucharest to inquire about the people whose names and photos were displayed on the honor board.

Imbarus was *not* a Party member? The Party big shot was horrified that Dad remained independent. The airport's director summoned my father to persuade him to join. His response was again negative. They told him that his picture couldn't be there as long as he was not a Communist, so my dad asked for his picture to be removed, to prevent his boss from having to take this endless heat from Bucharest. Years later, I still treasure this picture, a proud testimony of Dad's character and unwillingness to yield in front of the Communist regime, despite pressures much worse than the simple removal of his picture.

Whenever certain officials were informed that my uncles were in the country and trying to contact us, men dressed in black arrived in black cars and demanded entry into our house, getting my dad out of his bed in the night. They took him away for interrogation at the Securitate headquarters in Sibiu. Buni, Mom, and I were not allowed to accompany him. We stayed behind, worrying, crying, and praying for his safe return. Many who disappeared in the night this way were never heard from again. We prayed each night to see my father the following morning, still alive and unharmed.

After my Dad's cousin Petre spoke twice against the government on Europa Libera, Radio Free Europe, the government blacklisted our family, tapped our phone, and checked our mail. My father's cousin, whom I called "Uncle Petre," originally lived in Romania. He was caught floating

on a self-made raft on the Black Sea, trying to reach Turkey. They beat almost to death and sent him to Gherla, the notorious high-security penitentiary, and labeled him a most dangerous person, a “political detainee.” It was said that the moment anyone got inside Gherla, there was no way out unless it was with “your legs in front,” meaning dead. My father thought he’d never see his cousin again, but the authorities released him after a year and seven months. When he’d regained his strength, Uncle Petre tried escaping the country once again, and again he was caught and turned in to Securitate. They released him again in September of 1977, but he was deported from Romania and banned from ever coming back. Six month later, his brother Nelu tried to escape and was also deported and banned. In 1985, Nelu and Petre’s sister Maria also left the country.

By that morning in December of 1989, he’d settled in West Germany in the pleasant city of Baden-Baden. I only vaguely remembered their faces, but I studied their photos in hopes of meeting them someday—when I too would get out of this hellacious country. I swore daily to my parents that I would leave at the first opportunity. The thought of finding a new homeland must have allowed me to sleep again.

I woke to a silence as intense as the brightness that shone through the gaps in my boarded window.

It was December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1989. Without looking, I knew that clear morning sunbeams sparkled off fresh white surfaces outside to create such light. I’d survived the night unharmed. I hated the thought of leaving the relative warmth of my blankets, but I wanted to see how much snow had fallen. As I lay there procrastinating, scenes flashed in my mind of shooting, screaming, and crawling, the memory of shivering with fear and disbelief still too vivid. For an instant, it seemed like yesterday’s horrors had only been a nightmare. I bolted out of bed and dashed to the hallway’s window. I pried the board open wider at the crack and saw the fresh powder in the back yard, the serenity like so many other December mornings. Did the quiet mean that the fighting had ended?

Back in my room, I dressed quickly, hurried to the front door, unbolted our heavy “night” door of solid oak, and then unlocked the outer door with its fancy glass panel—all without stopping to think. I stepped outside onto the small front doorstep. The world still seemed calm. The snow was not as deep as I’d expected, only a new sheet of powder. My cherished lilac bushes held pockets of glinting snow among their bare, frozen limbs. We had probably panicked in boarding up the house and hiding our valuables, I decided; I looked down at the two-inch layer of snow on our front steps, no longer smooth, but indented in an odd configuration.

No, not odd. A ripple-soled boot print was embedded in the fresh snow, and right there, another. And others. The two nearest ones pointed directly toward the door. They were huge. My own shoe looked like a small child's next to these terrifying prints. I had seen few men in Sibiu tall enough to require boots that would leave such prints, even among the police. I could not move or breathe. Was someone watching me? I stared at the prints, following their direction toward the side of the house but saw no one.

Securitate... hulking foreigners... Russians.... Palestinians... looters... rapists....

I cupped my ears with my hands like the figure painted by Munch, silently screaming. I could feel my body tightening, pulling itself inward. My legs turned heavy, leaden. They could not move or even support me, much like in my nightmares when I was paralyzed and utterly powerless in the face of danger.

Next, I remember that I seemed to be lying down, but I felt nothing. Above me, the face of my father peered at me. His lips moved articulately, as if speaking, but I heard nothing. Lines on his face hardened, and his eyebrows arched high. I heard his voice making sounds, but they seemed to have no meaning. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

“Aura! Aura! Please respond! Aura? Are you okay?”

Oh, that was what he was saying. My name. *Aur* means *gold* in Romanian. I was precious gold to my mother who named me. Dad wanted a girl as well. Buni too. *Thank you God or Buddha or Allah for such a wonderful family....*

Dad smoothed my hair and caressed my cheek. “Aura? Please... Aura!”

“She’s in shock,” I heard Buni saying from the doorway above. “I’ve seen this before.”

I willed myself to take a deep breath, Alice returning from Wonderland. “Daddy...” is all I could say, as if I were five years old. He was holding me in his arms out on the front walkway.

“Fanel, what happened? Oh my God, what happened?” Mom was almost screaming in the doorway as she slipped her *galosi* (galoshes) over her shoes. She pushed Buni aside, and flew down the stairs with her arms outstretched toward me; Dad moved aside. Mom dropped to her knees and hugged me hard.

“Aura, honey, sweetheart, what happened? Honey, do you hear me?”

“Yes.” I breathed in the vanilla scent that always had seemed to cling to her, probably from the Victory sweets lab where she worked, and because she loved to make rich desserts whenever we could find ingredients on the black market. I sat all the way up.

“Get back inside!” Buni yelled. “Hurry!”

Dad helped me stand. “Back in the house! Now!”

I stumbled up the steps, not looking at the horrible footprints. The second we were inside, I turn to see if Dad followed us.

He just stood on the porch, arms akimbo. “Lock the door. Do NOT open it again until you hear my voice!” He was not coming in.

“But why aren’t you...?”

“Do it!”

I shut and bolted the inner oak door, while Buni disappeared in the attic.

“Why didn’t he come *in*?” Terror had knifed its way in again with Dad’s absence, and my voice was high-pitched. “Why is he still *out* there?”

“He is following the footprints into the back yard,” Mom said, “to see if whoever made them is still there.”

Still there? Oh, my God...Dad’s own shoeprint would leave quite a gap if aligned at the heel inside the trespasser’s boot print. Dad was fit and strong, but I could not imagine what might happen if the big man or men were still there and jumped him. As I waited for Dad’s signal, I imagined pacing the length and width of the yard in back. What was taking him so long? Our backyard is big enough for another home to be built...plenty of room for someone to hide. I thought about our garden in the half of the yard closest to our house. There we grew lilacs, roses, and hyacinth, and Buni grew her vegetables—potatoes, cabbage, carrots, peas, and spinach. A tall row of bushes divided this section of the yard from the back, where there was a shed. Could someone be hiding back there? Someone who might want to hurt us in order to take refuge in our home?

Buni stormed down the stairs, carrying the ax that usually hung from a nail in the attic. She unbolted the door and ran outside to save Dad, her son, from the unknown. I called after her to please, please, please turn around. Mom held me back from following Buni outside and again bolted the door. So brave, my dad and grandmother, running toward death without hesitation. Tears welled in my eyes, spilled over, and streamed down my face. I made bargains with God.

The huge grandfather clock, solid wood with a cherry finish, ticked off the slow seconds. In its mirrored perimeter, the swinging pendulum appeared and disappeared in a steady peek-a-boo that matched the ponderous tick.....tock.....

What was that? I thought I heard something thunk....

Silence. I waited. Mom and I stood, sat, paced, always straining to hear any indication of what might be happening. The clock's chime nearly short-circuited my nerves.

Ten times it bonged.

Footsteps. I heard voices outside and jumped to unlock the door. Mom blocked my move.

"Leave me alone!" I shouted "What are you doing, Mom?"

"Aura, don't unlock the door! It can be anybody, anybody! Do you hear me?" Tears flooded her eyes as well.

"Buni!" I heard her voice—low and distant, but definitely hers and no one else's voice. She was all right. In a rush, I jerked the lock aside and opened the door to see my grandma and Dad trudging up the front walk. Once inside the house, Buni set her ax down, and all four of us hugged and kissed as if reclaimed from the portals of death.

"There was someone in our yard last night," Dad said. "Footprints everywhere. One person, the way it looks. Soldier, for sure. Very tall. His boots sink deeper than mine, so he's heavy."

Buni added, "He jumped over our front gate and exited through the backyard."

But how many more like him were around? Would he or they come back? None of us had to ask these questions. They pumped through our brains with every heartbeat.