

Dear Reader,

Have you ever felt like you were being watched? Wondered if you were being followed? Can you imagine what it might feel like to distrust family, friends, neighbors—*everyone* around you? Cristian Florescu doesn't have to imagine; that's his daily life.

In Eastern Europe, in 1989, many Communist regimes are beginning to crumble. But not Romania. In Romania, dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu feeds his people a steady diet of fear and lies, creating a culture of suspicion. The secret police regularly dole out violence against citizens, and worse, children as young as thirteen are forced to report—no, *spy*—on those in their community. There is no choice. Betrayal is a means of survival.

But Cristian wants more. He wants to be a writer, a philosopher—just like Bunu, his grandfather. Cristian also wants to give the Romanian people a voice, to share the injustices happening in his country with the rest of the world. He wants freedom. And he really wants Liliana.

When Romania goes up in flames, Cristian risks everything to fight for change—even if it means turning his back on those he loves most.

*I Must Betray You* is no ordinary work of historical fiction. This is a page-turning, unputdownable historical thriller that opens readers' eyes to a country on the brink of revolution, and a little-known period of history, based on real events from just a few short decades ago. To think that I was a young reader myself during this period in history, and had no idea what was happening in Romania, gives me chills.

As we've come to expect from her novels, Ruta's latest exposes, and brings to startling life, a portrait of the dangers and the lies that came to define an entire culture—and makes us care for those we've never met. Layered with anonymous informer reports, secret journal entries, photos, and more, Ruta has elevated the past from hidden history to part of our collective consciousness. And she's done so by infusing turmoil, struggle, and loss with humanity, empathy, and hope.

In other words, *I Must Betray You* is Ruta Sepetys at her very best. Watch your back—and enjoy.

Best wishes,



Liza Kaplan  
*Senior Editor*

PHILOMEL BOOKS

Romania, 1989. Communist regimes are crumbling across Europe. Seventeen-year-old Cristian Florescu dreams of becoming a writer, but Romanians aren't free to dream; they are bound by rules and force.

Amidst the tyrannical dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu in a country governed by isolation and fear, Cristian is blackmailed by the secret police to become an informer. He's left with only two choices: betray everyone and everything he loves—or use his position to creatively undermine the most notoriously evil dictator in Eastern Europe.

Cristian risks everything to unmask the truth behind the regime, give voice to fellow Romanians, and expose to the world what is happening in his country. He eagerly joins the revolution to fight for change when the time arrives. But what is the cost of freedom?

Master storyteller Ruta Sepetys is back with a historical thriller that examines the little-known history of a nation defined by silence, pain, and the unwavering conviction of the human spirit.

Magda Starowiczka



**RUTA SEPETYS** is an internationally acclaimed, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of historical fiction published in over sixty countries and forty languages. Sepetys is considered a “crossover” novelist, as her books are read by both teens and adults worldwide. Her novels *Between Shades of Gray*, *Out of the Easy*, *Salt to the Sea*, and *The Fountains of Silence* have won or been shortlisted for more than forty book prizes, and are included on more than sixty state award lists. *Between Shades of Gray* was adapted into the film *Ashes in the Snow*, and her other novels are currently in development for TV and film. Winner of the Carnegie Medal, Ruta is passionate about the power of history and literature to foster global awareness and connectivity. She has presented to NATO, to the European Parliament, in the United States Capitol, and at embassies worldwide. Ruta was born and raised in Michigan and now lives with her family in Nashville, Tennessee.

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# I MUST BETRAY YOU

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Thank you,  
PHILOMEL BOOKS

*I Must Betray You*  
Ruta Sepetys

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I  
MUST  
*betray*  
YOU

RUTA SEPETYS

PHILOMEL BOOKS

ALSO BY RUTA SEPETYS

*Between Shades of Gray*

*Out of the Easy*

*Salt to the Sea*

*The Fountains of Silence*

PHILOMEL BOOKS

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*In memory of the brave Romanian students.*

*December 21, 1989*

**MAP TK**

**MAP TK**





# BENEATH THE GILDED FRAME

SUB RAMA POLEITĂ

They lived in darkness.  
Breathing shadows.  
Hands plunged deep within their pockets, hiding frozen fingers balled into fists.

They avoided the eyes of others. To look into the face of fear brought risk of getting trapped in its undertow. But somehow—invisible eyes—they were forever upon them. Even in the darkest darkness.

Watching.

Always watching.

*Romania's perpetual sense of surveillance.*

That's how it's been described: the burden of a secret storm.

This is not recited from memory.

There was a student, a young man in the capital city of Bucharest. He wrote it all down.

Then feared it was a mistake.

We speak of mistakes—some believe that Dracula is the most frightening character associated with Romania. When they learn the truth, will it haunt them?

Dracula is fiction, with no real connection to Romanian history. But there was once a real bloodthirsty monster living in a castle in

Romania. He remained in his tower for twenty-four years. While Dracula chose specific victims, this other monster chose to be evil and cruel . . .

To everyone.

He denied them food, electricity, truth, and freedom.

The citizens of Romania were stoic and resilient, but they suffered a terror of tyranny.

How many, you ask?

Twenty-three million people.

Names and history, largely unknown. Then—

A metal box. Found next to a grave. Inside was a manuscript.

This is how one boy told the story.

**Din biroul lui  
Cristian Florescu**

**CIORNĂ**



**BUCHAREST, ROMANIA**  
**1989**



# 1

## UNU

Fear arrived at five o'clock.

It was October. A gray Friday.

If I had known? I would have run. Tried to hide.

But I didn't know.

Through the dim half-light of the school corridor I spotted my best friend, Luca. He walked toward me, passing the tedious sign shouting from the concrete wall.

*New Men of Romania:*

*Long live Communism—the bright future of mankind!*

At the time, my mind churned on something far from communism. Something more immediate.

School dismissed at 7:00 p.m. If I left at the right moment, I'd fall into step with her—the quiet girl with the hair hiding her eyes. It would feel coincidental, not forced.

Luca's tall, thin frame edged in beside me. "It's official. My stomach's eating itself."

"Here." I handed him my small pouch of sunflower seeds.

"Thanks. Did you hear? The librarian says you're a bad influence."

I laughed. Maybe it was true. Teachers referred to Luca as "sweet"



but said I was sarcastic. If I was the type to throw a punch, Luca was the type to break up a fight. He had an eagerness about him, while I preferred to evaluate and watch from afar.

We paused so Luca could talk to a group of loud girls. I waited, impatient.

“*Hei, Cristian,*” smiled one of the girls. “Nice hair, do you cut it with a kitchen knife?”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “Blindfolded.” I gave Luca a nod and continued down the hall alone.

“Pupil Florescu!”

The voice belonged to the school director. He lingered in the hallway, speaking with a colleague. Comrade Director shifted his weight, trying to appear casual.

Nothing was ever casual.

In class, we sat erect. Comrade Instructor lectured, bellowing at our group of forty students. We listened, stock still and squinting beneath the sickly light. We were marked “present” in attendance but were often absent from ourselves.

Luca and me, we wore navy suits and ties to *liceu*. All boys did. Girls, navy pinafores and white hair bands. Embroidered badges sewn onto our uniforms identified which school we attended. But in the fall and winter, our school uniforms weren’t visible. They were covered by coats, knitted mufflers, and gloves to combat the bitter cold of the unheated cement building.

Cold and dark. Knuckles aching. It’s hard to take notes when you can’t feel your fingers. It’s difficult to concentrate when the electricity snaps off.

The director cleared his throat. “Pupil Florescu,” he repeated. “Proceed to the office. Your father has left a message for you.”

My father? My father never came to school. I rarely saw him. He worked twelve-hour shifts, six days a week at a furniture factory.

A slithering knot coiled inside my stomach. “Yes, Comrade Director.”

I proceeded to the office as I was told.

Could outsiders understand? In Romania, we did as we were told.

We were told a lot of things.

We were told that we were all brothers and sisters in communism. Addressing each other with the term “comrade” reinforced that we were all equal, with no social classes to divide us. Good brothers and sisters in communism followed rules.

I pretended to follow rules. I kept things to myself, like my interest in poetry and philosophy. I pretended other things too. I pretended to lose my comb, but really just preferred my hair spiky. I pretended not to notice when girls were looking at me. And this one—I pretended that studying English was a commitment to my country.

“Words are weapons. I’ll be able to fight our American and British enemies with words, not only guns.”

That’s what I said.

Our weapons course was called Preparing Youth for Defending the Country. We began training with guns at age fourteen in school. Is that old or young compared to other countries? I remember jotting that question in my secret notebook.

In reality, my desire to speak English had nothing to do with fighting our enemies. How many enemies did we have, anyway? I honestly didn’t know. The truth was, English class was full of smart, quiet girls. Girls I pretended not to notice. And if I spoke English, I could better understand song lyrics that I heard illegally on Voice of America broadcasts.

Illegal, yes. Many things were illegal in Romania—including my thoughts and my notebook. But I was convinced I could keep everything hidden. After all, blankets of gloom are thick and heavy. Good for covering things, right?

I proceeded down the dark hallway to the office.

I was an idiot.

I just didn't know it yet.

## 2

### DOI

I entered the school office. The old, brittle secretary glanced at me, then looked to her lap. No eye contact. She pointed a shriveled finger toward the director's office.

My stomach curled, tighter.

A windowless box. Smoke-stained ceiling. The stale, suspended tang of moldy paper. Hanging above the director's plain, blocky desk was a portrait in a golden frame. Identical portraits decorated all of Romania—classrooms, train stations, stores, hospitals, and even the front of books.

Him.

Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Our beloved leader. Our hero. Maverick of the grand Communist Party of Romania and vampire to the necks of millions. Illegal metaphor? Absolutely.

The new portrait depicted our hero with blushing cheeks and wavy, thick brown hair. He and his wife, Heroine Mother Elena, had guided the country of Romania for twenty-four years. I didn't linger on the picture that showed a much younger version of our leader. Instead, my eyes pulled to the stranger seated below the portrait.

Mid-thirties. Unbroken line of an eyebrow. More scalp than hair. Hands each the size of a tennis racket and shoulders extending well beyond the width of the chair.

“Close the door,” instructed the man.

I closed the wooden door but did not sit. I was not told to.

The stranger peeled through a file in front of him. A photo clipped to the upper edge of the folder showed a young man with messy dark hair and pale eyes. And that’s when the floor of my stomach collapsed.

Sitting a meter away was not just a hulking man with one eyebrow and paddles for hands.

No.

This man was executioner, black rider, and spy. He was an agent of the Securitate, Romania’s fearsome secret police. Within his grasp sat a file and a photo.

Of me.

“They say there’s one Secu per every fifty Romanians,” my sister Cici once warned. “There are twenty-three million Romanians. Do the math. Securitate agents, they’re everywhere.”

We called them “the blue-eyed boys.” Nickname aside, they were generally easy to spot. In Romania, if your family was lucky enough to afford a car and could wait five years until one became available, you knew what you were getting. There was only one brand of car—Dacia. They came in a few colors like white, blue, or green. But the secret police, they drove black Dacias. A young man in our apartment block drove a black Dacia. I watched him from our balcony. I was intrigued from afar.

The man in front of me drove a black Dacia. I was certain of it. But I was not intrigued.

I was scared.

The agent leaned back, bullying the metal chair he sat upon. His eyes drilled silent holes through me, splitting the walls of my confidence. He waited, and waited, allowing the holes to fill with fear.

His weight suddenly shifted. The front legs of the chair clapped to the floor. He leaned across the desk, exhaling the dead nicotine that

lived on his pasty, yellow tongue. His words still haunt me.

“You’re Cristian Florescu,” he said. “And I know what you’ve done.”

# 3

## TREI

**H**e knew what I had done.  
What had I done?

The truth was, most Romanians broke the rules some-way or another. There were so many to break. And so many to report that you had broken them.

A songwriter wrote negative lyrics about life in Romania. He was committed to an insane asylum.

A college student was discovered with an unregistered typewriter. He was sent to prison.

Complaining aloud could get you arrested as a “political agitator.” But I hadn’t complained aloud. I did most things quietly. Secretly. So what had this agent discovered?

Was it my homemade radio antenna? The jokes I composed? Was it the travel guide?

I bought English language stuff on the sly, through a neighborhood trader named Starfish. Reading English contraband bolstered my vocabulary. My last purchase was a handful of pages torn from a travel guide printed in England. Foreign travel guides and maps were often confiscated from visitors. Reading those pages, I learned why:

*Abysmal conditions in Romania.*

*Nicolae Ceaușescu. Ruthless leader. Megalomaniac.  
Everyone under surveillance.*

*Worst human suffering of any country in the Eastern Bloc.*

And this one—

*Romanian people are intelligent, handsome, and welcoming,  
but forbidden to interact with foreigners. Imagine a madhouse  
where the lunatics are running the asylum and the workers  
are punished for their sanity. Best to avoid Romania. Visit  
Hungary or Bulgaria instead, where conditions are better.*

The note about surveillance—it was true. Everyone was a possible target for surveillance. She, Mother Elena Ceaușescu, even decreed that balconies of apartments must remain fully visible. The Communist Party had a right to see everything at all times. Everything was owned by the Party. And the Ceaușescus owned the Party.

“Nice for them. They don’t have to live in a block of cement,” I once sneered.

“Shh. Don’t ever say that aloud,” gasped my mother.

I never said it again, but I wrote about it in my notebook.

My notebook. Wait. Was this about my notebook?

The agent motioned for me to sit. I sat.

“Do you know why you are here?” he asked.

“No, Comrade Lieutenant.”

“Comrade Major.”

I swallowed. “No, Comrade Major, I don’t know why I’m here.”

“Let me enlighten you then. You have an impressive stamp collection. You sold a vintage Romanian stamp. The transaction was with a foreigner and you accepted foreign currency. You are now guilty of



illegal trafficking and will be prosecuted.”

A chill flashed across the back of my neck. My brain began to tick:

The old stamp.

The U.S. dollar bill.

That was two months ago. How long had they known about it?

“I didn’t sell the stamp,” I said. “I gave it to him. I didn’t even find the—”

I stopped. It was illegal in Romania to say the word “dollar.”

“I didn’t find the . . . currency . . . until several days later when I opened the album. He must have slipped it in without me seeing.”

“How did you come to interact with an American teenager in the first place? Interaction with foreigners is illegal. You must report any contact with foreigners immediately. You are aware of that.”

“Yes, Comrade Major. But my mother cleans the apartments of two U.S. diplomats. That is on record.”

But there were things that were *off* record. At least I had thought so. I had met the son of the U.S. diplomat while waiting for my mother. We became friendly. We traded stamps. We talked. I glimpsed a peek at his notebook—and decided to start a notebook of my own.

“Your mother cleans the apartments of U.S. diplomats. How did she get that job?”

“I think . . . through a friend?” I honestly couldn’t remember. “I met the American while waiting for my mother. I often walk her home. My mother has a hard time seeing in the dark. It’s frightening for her.”

“You’re claiming you engaged in illegal currency activity with an American teenager because your mother is afraid of the dark? Your mother’s handicap has nothing to do with your crime. But punishment *will* extend to your entire family.”

A crime? My entire family?

But I had never accepted the dollar. It just . . . appeared.

How did he even know about it?

The pleading refrains of my mother and sister appeared in chorus.  
*Don't tell anyone—anything.*

*Remember, Cristian, you never know who's listening.*

*Please, don't draw attention to our family.*

I stared at the agent in front of me. A shivery sweat glazed my palms and an invisible moth flapped in my windpipe. In Romania, the Securitate carried more power than the military. This man could destroy us. He could put our family under increased surveillance. He could ruin my opportunity to attend university. He could have my parents fired. Or worse.

The agent leaned forward, placing his massive flesh rackets on the desk.

"I can see you've absorbed the severity of the situation. I'm told you're a strong student, talented, an observer among your peers. I'm feeling generous today."

He was letting me off with a warning. I exhaled with gratitude.

*"Mulțumesc. I—"*

"You're thanking me? You haven't heard my proposal yet. It's simple and, as I said, very generous of me. You will continue to meet your mother and walk her home. You will continue your interactions with the son of the American diplomat. And you will report details of the diplomat's home and family to me."

It was not a proposal. It was an order, and one that compromised all principles of decency. I'd be a rat, a *turnător*, secretly informing on the private lives of others.

I could never tell my family. Constant deception. I should refuse. But if I refused, my family would suffer. I was sure of that. And then, amidst the silence, the agent made his final move.

"Say, how is your *bunu*?"

*Șahmat.* Checkmate. The simple mention weakened me.

He knew about my grandfather. Bunu was a light, full of wisdom

and philosophy. Bunu knew of my interest in poetry and literature. He encouraged it. Quietly.

“They steal our power by making us believe we don’t have any,” said Bunu. “But words and creative phrases—they have power, Cristian. Explore that power in your mind.”

The stamp collection was Bunu’s treasure. It had been our secret project for years.

We had other secrets. Like Bunu’s leukemia. It stormed upon him so quickly.

“Don’t tell anyone,” begged our perpetually nervous mother.

We didn’t have to. Anyone could see that an energetic, healthy man had suddenly turned gray and shriveled. He lifted the frying pan and his wrist snapped.

Paddle Hands cleared his throat. “It’s a generous proposal. We’ll work together. You give me information and I give you medicine for Bunu. He won’t suffer.”

And that’s how it began.

I was Cristian Florescu. Code name “OSCAR.”

A seventeen-year-old spy.

An informer.

## || OFFICIAL RECRUITMENT REPORT OF "OSCAR" ||

Ministry of the Interior  
Department of State Security  
Directorate III, Service 330

TOP SECRET  
[15 Oct. 1989]

For the informative supervision of American diplomat Nicholas Van Dorn (target name: "VAIDA"), we were referred by Source "FRITZI" to Cristian Florescu (17), student at MF3 High School. Florescu's mother works as housekeeper to Van Dorn and has access to the family. Florescu was described to us as intelligent, quietly observant, with strong facility for the English language. He also has access to Van Dorn's apartment and family. Approached Florescu on school grounds and used guise of illegal stamp trading as basis for recruitment. Florescu appeared wary but agreed to provide information as OSCAR when medication for his grandfather was presented as an option. OSCAR will be used to:

- interact with Van Dorn's son, Dan (16)
- determine schedule patterns of the Van Dorn family
- determine who frequents the residence
- provide detailed mapping and layout of the Van Dorn residence
- ascertain general attitudes of the Van Dorns toward Romania

## 4

### PATRU

**G**uilt walks on all fours.  
It creeps, encircles, and climbs. It presses its thumbs to  
your throat.

And it waits.

I left school, grateful for the two-kilometer walk to our apartment block. But with each step I took, guilt and fear transformed into anger.

What sort of human being preys on teenagers and uses a sick grandfather as a bargaining chip? Why didn't I refuse and tell him to drive his black Dacia straight to hell? Why did I give in so quickly?

The agent had a file. Who informed on me? I threw a quick glance over my shoulder into the shadows. Was I being followed?

I didn't yet know the truth: many of us were being followed.

Night pooled with a scattering of clouds. The sky slung black and empty of light. Tall, ashen buildings towered together on each side of the street, lording over me. Living in Bucharest was like living inside a black-and-white photo. Life in cold monochrome. You knew that color existed somewhere beyond the city's palette of cement and charcoal, but you couldn't get there—beyond the gray. Even my guilt tasted gray, like I had swallowed a fistful of soot.

Perhaps it wasn't as evil as it felt? I would be spying on an American family only, not fellow Romanians. Romanian spy novels depicted the Securitate as defenders against evil Western forces. But if the stories

were realistic, the agents were predictable. Maybe I could outwit them.

Yes, that's actually what I thought. I could beat the Securitate.

But how could I manage the guilt? It wouldn't dissolve overnight. My family would know something was wrong.

I could fool my parents. My father was always gone, working. In recent years he felt more like a shadow than a man. Mama was always distracted and worried, constantly making lists. I think she actually made lists of things to worry about. But I wouldn't be able to fool Bunu. And I certainly couldn't fool my older sister, Cici.

So, I invented a story about exams.

University exams were highly competitive. Thirty students would compete for four spots to study education. Seventy students for just one spot in medicine.

"Philosophy," nodded Bunu. "Soul nourishment. Sit for a spot in philosophy. You see, communism is a state of mind," he would lecture, tapping at his temple. "The State controls the amount of food we eat, our electricity, our transportation, the information we receive. But with philosophy, we control our own minds. What if the internal landscape was ours to build and paint?"

Bunu spoke often of vibrant what-ifs. I pondered them in my notebook. How could we paint or sketch creatively? If the West was a box of colorful crayons, my life was a case of dull pencil leads.

My family knew I wanted to go to university. I'd pretend I was upset because the available spots for philosophy had been cut in half. Cici would roll her eyes.

"You take it all too seriously, Cristi," she would say. "Many Romanians have advanced degrees and no use for them now. It can be dangerous to be considered an intellectual. I wish you'd let it go."

I thought my story would work. I'd pretend to be worried, say I was busy studying for exams. They wouldn't ask questions.

But Bunu always asked questions.

What if he figured it out? He would never understand how I could become an informer. A traitor. I was worse than the cancer that was eating him.

And then I heard the footsteps.

My question was answered.

I *was* being followed.

## 5

### CINCI

I took a breath, listening closely. I risked a glance over my shoulder. A shadowy figure lingered nearby. A girl. Carrying a large stick tucked beneath her arm. And then her quiet voice emerged, saying hi.

*“Bună.”*

*“Bună.”* I nodded.

She stepped closer and suddenly, we fell into step.

My pulse tapped.

Liliana Pavel. The girl with the hair hiding her eyes. The girl I wanted to “coincidentally” catch up with after school. I had created a grand plan with precision timing, but it evaporated after the meeting with Agent Paddle Hands.

Liliana lived in Luca’s building and also studied English. She was quiet, smart, a mystery beneath brown bangs with a clever sense of humor. When my responses carried an irony that Comrade Instructor didn’t catch, Liliana did. Her efforts to hide a smile, they gave her away.

Most students loitered in groups, but Liliana often wandered somewhere to read. Her folders were covered with hand-drawn flowers and zodiac signs. Sometimes—the way she looked at me—it felt like she could read my mind. And I liked it.

Our apartment blocks faced each other at the tail of a dead-end



street. Liliana's father managed a grocery supply—an extremely desirable job in a city where most people were starving.

Unlike some chattering girls, Liliana didn't speak to just anyone and everyone. When we were younger, she once paid attention to me. I was standing amidst a group on the street and out of the blue she walked up to me and gave me a piece of *Gumela*.

"It's for you," she said. My buddies snickered.

I was secretly elated but didn't want my friends to know.

"It's just gray gum. It turns to sawdust in your mouth," I had said with a shrug.

I was an idiot back then too.

I still remember the sad look on her face. It had taken until now, two years later, for her to approach me again. Should I apologize for being a jerk about the gum? Nah, she probably didn't remember.

We walked in silence, the darkness punctuated by the occasional tap of the stick Liliana carried. She pointed the stick, gesturing.

"What's the English word for these?"

"Streetlights," I said. "But guess what, in other countries I think they actually work."

She laughed.

The streetlights in Bucharest weren't illuminated. Too costly. Romania was rich in resources, but for several years, our "hero" exported all of our resources to repay the country's debts. As a result, electricity and food were rationed.

We passed a long, snaking line of people in front of a State-controlled shop. They stood, huddled against the cold, clutching their ration cards and waiting for some scrap of food that no other country wanted.

"Russia gets all of our meat. Isn't that unfair?" Luca once asked. "We get nothing but the patriots."

The feet of slaughtered pigs and chickens were sometimes available

in the shops. We called them “patriots” because they were the only part of the animal that remained in Romania. Dark humor, it entertained us.

I pointed toward the shop. “Daily ration of delicious patriots, right?”

“Patriots . . . and that *Gumela* you love so much,” said Liliana.

She looked at me, serious, then broke out laughing.

I laughed too and shook my head. “Sorry, I was a jerk.”

She gave me a wordless nod. And then a smile.

I tried not to stare but stole glances as we walked. Her purple scarf, it wasn’t something you could buy. Did she knit it herself? Should I ask? I knew that beneath the scarf was the necklace she always wore—a brown suede cord with a silver charm. Her hair fell in soft, loose waves, hanging just above her shoulders.

Liliana looked at the food line, grimacing. Over the past few years, the feeling of darkness had grown beyond electricity. To me, the darkness felt poisonous, leeching into everything. Did she feel it too?

She flashed a look over her shoulder and spoke below her breath. “My father said that Bucharest used to be called ‘Little Paris.’ There were trees everywhere, lots of birds, and even Belle Époque architecture. Do you remember what the city used to look like?” she whispered.

“I remember some parts. My *bunu* used to have a house. He said that Bucharest was once a luxury stop on the Orient Express.”

“Really?”

I nodded.

It was happening. I was walking home with Liliana Pavel. We were having a conversation. If I could speak freely, I’d say, “Yeah, Bunu said that after visiting North Korea, Ceaușescu decided to bulldoze our city to build ‘the House of the People’ and cement apartment blocks. Our beloved leader destroyed churches, schools, and over thirty thousand private homes, including Bunu’s. What do you think of that?”

But I couldn't speak freely.

No one could.

"I wish our neighborhood had more trees," said Liliana. "I miss the birds."

Trees appeared in parks and on large boulevards where they could be shared by all. Families, like our family of five, were herded into one-bedroom, ashtray-sized flats. I looked at the cement apartment blocks we passed. Some weren't even finished. They had no doors, no elevators, no stair railings. Similar concrete hulks loomed around the city, gray staircases to nowhere. Concrete walls gave birth to concrete faces.

But no one discussed it.

*Everyone will live together! Everything is collectivized, shared by the Party!* was the mantra. When Ceaușescu spoke the words, he sliced the air with his hand. The *Aplaudacii*, his faithful supporters, clapped and clapped. Those applauding men, did they shiver when a cold wind whisked through their hollow hearts and abandoned souls? I searched for English words to describe the *Aplaudacii*. I put them in my notebook: Bootlicker. Butt-kisser. Fawner.

Liliana grabbed my arm, yanking me from my thoughts.

"Cristian! Oh no!"

## 6

### ŞASE

Stray dogs stalked a young girl across the street.  
“Don’t run!” I called out. I grabbed the stick from Liliana.  
A scream tore through the darkness.

I was too late.

The animals lunged at the girl, growling wild and guttural. She frantically swiveled her torso, holding her small fists protectively in front of her neck. Teeth landed, found anchor, and ripped. The sound, it still lives in my ears.

I ran and pressed in front of her, trying to block the dogs.

“*Culcat*,” I ordered, extending the stick for the gnashing dogs to bite, speaking low to subdue them. Others rushed to join our circle, stamping their feet. The dogs, eventually outnumbered by the group, ran off to search for easier prey. Frantic chatter ensued, arguments about the strays.

“If we don’t kill them, they’ll kill *us*!” wailed a woman.

“It’s not their fault,” snapped Liliana.

Stray dogs. They were everywhere. And Liliana was right. It wasn’t their fault.

When the regime bulldozed the city, dogs were lost and left to the streets. Starving and wild, the poor creatures drifted and hunted in packs. The month prior, our teacher’s baby was mauled to death in her stroller. Some people, like Liliana, carried sticks for protection.

The young girl's coat now hung in shreds. Her wool mitten lay on the ground, splashed in blood.

"Were you bitten?" Liliana asked.

"I don't care about a bite," sobbed the girl. "My mother stood in line for months to get me a coat. Now it's ruined. What if she's angry?"

"She'll understand. We'll walk you home," said Liliana. She looked to me. I nodded.

Liliana's hand grazed the torn edge of my jacket. "They got you too," she whispered. "You okay?"

Her touch on my jacket. Her concern. Suddenly, the dogs, my coat, and the meeting with the agent—it all faded into the background.

"I'm fine. You okay?" I asked. She nodded.

We said nothing after leaving the girl at her building. I wondered if Liliana's thoughts mirrored mine. Being eaten by wild dogs—did kids in other countries have to worry about that?

We turned onto our street and I recognized the bowlegged silhouette.

Starfish.

He was a few years older and wore black-market Levi's, Adidas, and concert T-shirts from the West. Sometimes he wore black boots with silver studs. It wasn't illegal to wear clothing from the West, but it was difficult to get. And very expensive. And very cool.

When people asked Starfish where he got his clothes, he shrugged and said, "I know someone." I tried to find an English word to describe Starfish and found this one: operator.

He lived in my building. We called him Starfish because he had lost an eye and the thick stitches pinching his eye socket closed left a scar shaped like a crooked star. Beside him trotted our community block dogs, Fetița and Turbatu. Liliana's building fed Fetița. We fed Turbatu. But for some reason, the dogs loved Starfish best.

We stopped in front of our apartment blocks. Mine on the right.

Hers on the left.

"Video night," whispered Starfish. "Saturday. My place. You in?"

"We have school," replied Liliana.

"You have school during the day," said Starfish. "This is tomorrow night. Are you coming?"

I couldn't see Liliana's face through the darkness. I took a chance.

"Yeah, we're coming," I said.

"Okay, I'll add you to the list. Ask your pretty sister."

"Ask her yourself," I told him.

"Bring your money. Five *lei* each," said Starfish. He walked off, disappearing through a seam of black with the dogs.

I had never seen Liliana at a video night. Maybe her parents knew someone with their own video-cassette player? A video player wasn't illegal, like a typewriter. But it was expensive and hard to get. The cheapest video player cost thirty-five thousand *lei*, half the price of a car. Most families needed a Dacia more than a video player.

"You don't have to go tomorrow," I told her.

"Okay. But . . . what if I want to go?" she said. "Can I go with you?"

Did she really just say that? I tried to search her expression through the shadows. "Sure. Meet me outside at nine o'clock."

We stood, feeling others nearby, but unable to see them. I was alone with Liliana, in a private wrapper of darkness.

"Cristian," she suddenly whispered. "Do you ever wonder . . . if any of it's real?"

"If what's real?"

"The things we see in videos—in American movies."

It was an odd question. Or maybe it felt odd because I had wondered the same thing but never had the courage to say it out loud. But it also felt . . . suspicious somehow. Too honest.

And then I was angry again. Not at her—at myself.

For months I'd been trying to talk to Liliana Pavel. We were finally alone, talking, agreeing to see each other on Saturday night and instead of being elated, I was suspicious?

Bunu was right. Communism is a state of mind.

But video nights were an escape. Gathering secretly to watch American movies dubbed into Romanian—it felt dangerous and exciting, like winning a forbidden prize. The worlds we saw depicted in the movies were oceans away. And the incredible lives we saw on-screen were all make believe.

They were, weren't they?

# 7

## ŞAPTE

**O**cean fish! No meal without fish!

The electricity in our building was on.

The television health advisory for ocean fish cracked behind closed doors. Since meat wasn't available, we were advised to eat ocean fish. But we didn't have fresh fish, just fish bones to make watery soup. Did that count? I paid little attention to the television. The English travel guide summed it up correctly:

*Romania has one TV channel. And one brand of TV set. The State broadcasts only two hours of bland television per day, mainly propaganda and salutes to Ceauşescu.*

I trudged up the concrete stairs to our top-floor apartment. Life in an apartment block felt like living in a cement chest of drawers. Each floor equally divided into boxes of families. I climbed the steps, slapped with the smell of kerosene and unwanted information.

First floor—A hungry baby crying.

Second floor—A drunken man screaming at his wife.

Third floor—A chain pulling to flush a toilet.

Fourth floor—A grandpa with leukemia coughing.

Just as you could be certain of lack of privacy, you could also be certain that the building administrator reported to the Securitate.



After all, the Party had a right to know *everything*.

*Everything* was owned by the Party.

And the Party kept track—of *everything*.

“Bugs, bugs all around,” lamented Bunu. “Philips inside and outside.”

Philips were listening devices and rumored to be everywhere: hidden in walls, telephones, ashtrays. So all families followed the same mantra:

*At home we speak in whispers.*

The constant threat of surveillance clawed at our mother. Her hands shook. Her eyes darted. Her figure resembled the cigarettes she smoked. I looked up English words and phrases to describe her and wrote them in my notebook: Jittery. Distressed. Flustered. Freaked out.

Being around Mama was like living with a grenade. On the rare occasion the pin was pulled, she’d explode, say awful things, and then cry afterward. In our family photo, our mother peered in a different direction, as if she saw something no one else did. She constantly begged us to whisper, to keep everything secret.

I should have listened to her.

But back then, I felt so clever. Didn’t realize I had confused intellect with arrogance. Serious mistake. And the first of many. But I *was* wise enough to whisper.

Our small apartment box housed four “whisperers” and Bunu.

Bunu refused to whisper. If the librarian thought I was a bad influence, she needed to meet my true hero, Bunu. I admired his bravery. I also admired his ingenuity. Because of Bunu, we had an illegal sofa wedged in our small alcove of a kitchen.

“I don’t care if it’s against the rules,” announced Bunu when he moved in. “Five people in this tiny space? I need a place to sleep and the kitchen is the warmest.”

With a sofa in the kitchen, we had less than a foot of clearance to

stand at the two-burner stove and the tiny cast-iron sink, or listen to the radio.

With the exception of the kitchen sofa and Cici's Ileana sewing machine, our communist apartment was the same as everyone's. The living area consisted of an oval table with chairs, a narrow buffet cabinet, and a sofa that folded open. Before Bunu moved in, my mother and sister slept in the bedroom and I slept with my father on the folding sofa. When Bunu arrived, he argued that the arrangements were all wrong.

"Couples should sleep together. Gabriel and Mioara, take the bedroom. Cicilia has her own schedule for sewing, so she will take the folding sofa. I will sleep in the kitchen."

"If Cici's getting the sofa, where will I sleep?" I asked.

"Ahh," said Bunu, wagging a finger. "A young man needs his own space for things, doesn't he?"

I did but hoped Bunu wouldn't elaborate and embarrass me. He didn't. Instead, he negotiated with my parents and that's when I got my own "space." Next to the front door, every apartment had a closet. One narrow crack of a closet for the entire apartment.

"If we're creative, we can reorganize so Cristi has his own room."

My own room. Yes, that means I lived in a closet.

Crouched in a closet, is more like it.

I noted the arrangement in my notebook:

- *One sick, yet feisty grandfather on an illegal sofa in the kitchen.*
- *Closet contents moved and unlawfully covered on Mother Elena's balcony.*
- *One teenager camped out in a closet making radio antennas, writing illegal jokes, thinking about Liliana Pavel, and hiding a secret notebook of reports and opinions about*

*Romania.*

The transgressions made me think of the Securitate agent. These were the type of things I'd probably have to report about the American family. Things I myself was guilty of.

Yes, I was guilty.

And walking up the stairs that day, I suddenly realized—  
I knew who had informed on me.

## 8

### OPT

“**Y**ou’re late,” whispered my mother. “Your jacket. Cristian, what happened?”

“A pack of dogs attacked a little girl. We walked her home,” I replied.

“*We?*” said Cici, turning from her sewing machine. “Who is *we*?”

I ignored her query. I stepped to the kitchen to check on Bunu and hear the daily joke.

“How are you today, Bunu?”

I didn’t have to ask. Bunu was a strange mix of gray and green. His voice was a murmur.

“I’m doing very well,” he lied. “In fact, I’ve had some good news from Bulă.” A grin crept across his face.

Joking about the regime was illegal and could ferry you straight to Securitate headquarters. But people told jokes anyway. In a country with no freedom of speech, each joke felt like a tiny revolution. Some jokes were relayed through a fictional character named Bulă.

My grandfather waved me forward for the joke. The blue veins in Bunu’s hand now lived above the skin instead of beneath it.

I leaned in.

“Good news.” He smiled. “Bulă says Romania is repairing the country’s tanks—both of them.”

Our laughter was momentary. The ration of breath left Bunu

coughing, hacking so deeply my parents came running. The cough, it sounded painful and evil, like wild dogs were living inside Bunu, barking and tearing through his innards. How did this happen? Bunu had been so fit and healthy.

“Did you take the iodine tablets? All of them?” asked my father.

“Gabriel,” Bunu wheezed. “What’s happening to me . . . it’s not from Chernobyl.”

“Cristian, go to the wardrobe. Quickly! Count the cartons of Kents,” instructed Mother as she bent a trembling knee to my grandfather.

Kents.

Kents were Western cigarettes.

Kents were used as currency. For bribes. For trade. For the black market.

We needed Kents for a lot of things: seeing a doctor, gratuities for our schoolteachers, bribing the apartment administrator. If you’re sick and Kentless, you’re out of luck. But use your Kents wisely. Do you really need stitches—or that toe? Save your Kents for what really matters. I once opted to go Kentless for a filling. Instead of using Novocain, the dentist put his knee on my chest while he drilled and wrenched. The socket became infected and my face was swollen for a month. My psyche is still swollen. Definitely bribe the dentist.

How many Kents did kids in other countries need for the dentist or for their teachers? Did others buy Kents in a hotel gift shop like we did? I had written those questions in my notebook.

Merchandise had value. We had Romanian *lei*, but what could you do with Romanian currency when there was nothing in the local shops to buy? The shelves were always empty, but the apartments of doctors and dentists probably looked like a well-stocked store.

I headed to the wardrobe in my parents’ room, but I already had the count. A recent notation in my notebook reported our family bribe

inventory—three cartons of Kents, two yellow packages of Alvorada coffee, one bar of Fa soap, and one bottle of Queen Anne whisky. Russian vodka was worth something, but we didn't have any. We traded our vodka for an X-ray last year when my father had pneumonia and was coughing up blood.

"You should have drunk the vodka," Bunu told my father. "Better than medicine."

Even my sister dabbled in the black market. Cici worked at a textile factory. After hours, she made clothes and mended things for others. She had a particular talent for copying designs from the West German Neckermann catalogs. On occasion, Cici traded her sewing for black market contraband. She had a locked box hidden under her folding bed that contained a host of unusual and banned items.

Bunu's coughing ceased. And then the retching began.

The sound, it was excruciating. A heaving of jagged glass.

I stood in my parents' room, thumping my forehead against the wardrobe. Bunu's suffering, it made my own chest heave and ache. The thought of losing Bunu terrified me.

But it was temporary.

I'd give the agent the information he wanted.

The agent would give me medicine to cure Bunu.

I had made the right decision. Hadn't I?

I was smart. A great pretender. What if I turned the tables? What if I secretly spied on the agent, somehow gathered information that put me a step ahead? I'd know the game and outplay him.

That's right, I thought I could outwit Paddle Hands.

The very idea—was it blazing ignorance or blazing courage?

In hindsight, a bit of both.

Ignorant courage, blazing.

# 9

## NOUĂ

The shadows followed me into the closet, onto my bed of rugs, and across the night. But I made it through school on Saturday without thinking of agents, spying, or Bunu.

I thought of video night.

What films had some thick-fingered truck driver smuggled across West Germany, through Austria and Hungary, into Romania? We never knew when videos might arrive. Most illegal movies from the West were dubbed into Romanian by the same woman. No one knew her name, but more than twenty million people knew her voice. She brought us into a secret, forbidden world of inspiration.

“So, see you tonight?” Liliana asked that day at school.

“Yeah, meet you at nine,” I told her.

It was happening. Liliana Pavel was going to video night.

With me.

I arrived home from school and saw Mirel, a Roma boy in my building, standing on the sidewalk.

Roma families lived on the first floor, in ground-level apartments. Without moving his head, Mirel gestured with his eyes. I nodded to him, as if in greeting, but sending a private acknowledgement.

The Reporters.

The second floor and upper apartments had balconies, like ours. And on the balconies perched the “Reporters”—women who watched

all comings and goings and chattered constantly.

I listened closely. One of the reporters was gossiping. About me. Her voice carried from above.

“Quiet, but he speaks English, you know. Handsome if he’d comb his hair.”

I recognized her voice without looking—the woman with the drooping face. Unlike the other reporters who wore stiff lines of age and exhaustion, this woman wasn’t old. Her baby had been born prematurely and died in a hospital incubator when Ceaușescu turned off the electricity one night. Within a matter of days, her young features drooped twenty years. Cici always wanted to help her. I wanted to write a poem about her. The woman with the fallen face.

The electricity was on when I arrived home, so I opted for the elevator to our fourth floor. The fickle elevator doors rattled shut, presenting a new display of communist poetry inscribed on the metal:

### VIAȚĂ DE RAHAT

Life is like shite.

I laughed. Most of the time it was. But not tonight.

My parents were still at work and Bunu was snoring in the kitchen. Cici was sitting at her sewing machine, creating a blouse from an old curtain.

“Starfish hopes you’ll be at video night,” I whispered. “I told him he’d have to ask you himself.”

“I can’t,” she replied over her shoulder. “I’m going to the Popescus’. Their son has a suit that needs altering.”

Their son, he probably also had eyes for Cici. My twenty-year-old sister was tall and pretty, with long legs, black hair, and gray eyes like mine. People said we looked alike. To me, she resembled an exotic doll, the kind that’s collectible, not the kind that’s dragged around. Cici



mended clothes for fellow workers and neighbors. She doted on the elderly people in our building and they adored her.

I did too.

Pretty girls like Cici generally had an attitude. They used their beauty as a strategy. But Cici didn't. My sister was suspicious and watchful, but she was also fun and kind. She'd wedge into the kitchen with me and together, we'd illegally listen to music I'd hotwired from Voice of America. She'd beg me to translate the song lyrics and then she'd whisper-sing all the wrong words. She had a hard time understanding English and it made me laugh. And when I laughed, Cici laughed.

And when Cici laughed—really laughed—it felt like the sun was singing. Blue sky, pure joy uncorked. I imagined that's what freedom felt like. You wanted it to go on forever.

But today Cici wasn't laughing. She sat motionless at her sewing machine and her shoulders began to tremble.

"Cici?"

She turned slowly to face me. Her eyes were rings of red, her cheeks stamped with splotches from crying.

"Cici, what—"

She quickly shook her head.

And put a finger to her lips.

# 10

## ZECE

“Cici, what’s wrong?” I whispered.

She raised a hand to stop me. She grabbed her pillow from the sofa and put it over the telephone. She then placed a book on top of the pillow.

Rumors claimed that Romanian telephones were all constructed with built-in listening devices. When whispering wasn’t enough, we put a pillow over the phone, just to be sure. We’d usually put the radio on as well, but ours was malfunctioning.

Cici sat back down. I pulled a chair from the table so she could whisper in my ear.

But she didn’t whisper. She looped her arms around my neck. And cried. What had upset her? She finally raised her face to mine, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh, *Pui*,” she whispered.

*Pui*. Little chick. It was her nickname for me. I looked at my sister’s tear-streaked face and took a guess. “Examination at the factory?”

She paused, awkward and averting her eyes, then nodded and returned to my shoulder, crying.

I didn’t know what to say or how to make it better, so I just let her cry—as she probably did during the examination with the “baby police.” Women were periodically checked for pregnancy at their place of work. The makeshift gynecological exams by medical inspectors

were disgusting and humiliating, not to mention unsanitary.

Ceaușescu wanted to increase the population, to breed more workers. Population growth meant economic growth. If you were childless, you were taxed.

Everyone knew Ceaușescu's decrees:

*The fetus is the property of the entire society!*

*Heroic women give children to the homeland!*

*Anyone who avoids having children is a deserter!*

Mama had only managed to have two children. She felt guilty about it.

"Fertility under state control? That's an abuse of human rights!" Bunu would wail. "How can families take care of multiple children with no electricity and so little food? Cristian, there is no happy ending here."

Bunu was right. Some infants were put in orphanages where families were assured they'd be cared for and raised properly as good comrades. Would they? Were conditions in the orphanages better than the cement apartment blocks? I pondered those questions in my secret notebook.

"Oh, *Pui*." Cici drew a breath, gathering strength. She wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Stop. You have nothing to be sorry for."

What could I say to my sister? What could I say to my own mother who had to suffer the same indignity? Their bodies were owned by the State. I couldn't promise that things would get better. In the last few years, they had gotten worse. I couldn't intervene or help. But I wanted to take the pain away. So I leaned in to her ear.

“Hey, have you heard? Bulă says Romania is repairing the country’s tanks—both of them.”

Cici looked at me with her gray-blue eyes. She paused, as if suspended. And then she laughed, the laugh I loved, and swatted my shoulder.

Slowly, her smile faded. She pulled a deep breath. “Promise me you’ll never change. Promise, *Pui*. We have to stay close.”

She stared at me with such a desperate, imploring look. My stomach cramped with guilt. If Cici knew that I had become an informer?

She’d hate me.

She’d never speak to me again.

But what choice did I have?

I swallowed. I think I managed a small smile.

“Of course,” I whispered. “I promise.”

Deceit. Treachery. Hypocrisy.

I lied to my sister. The person I loved most.

But at the time, I didn’t blame myself for any of it.

I blamed Him.