

Red Christmas

By Laura Kuhlmann – Rockville, Maryland

Their eyes are glued to the TV, lips parted as they watch Ceaușescu raise his arm and swing it back and forth, to the steady cadence of his speech. His voice rising, his hair in disarray.

“I do not recognize this tribunal, I only answer to the Grand National Assembly.” He repeats it over and over again. He repeats it as two men grab him from behind the bench and tie his arms behind his back.

He only stops when his wife starts yelling: “Take your hands off me, you animals!”

(...)

The camera cuts to a grey courtyard. One black and one white silhouette lean against a concrete wall. Firecracker noises erupt from the TV speaker. The cameraman follows the captain, still holding his rifle, as he approaches the two people, now crumpled at the foot of the wall. The image zooms in on Ceaușescu—his eyes open, his shirt, showing through the unbuttoned winter coat, soaked red.

“Daria,” Ana yells, “go to your room. Now.”

Daria sprints to her bedroom and slams the door behind her. (...)

Through the door, she can hear Ana’s sobs, and Varvara’s phlegmy voice:

“You must go home, Ana. He’ll be back from Târgoviște. This big burden is off his shoulders now. He’ll need you. And plus, what about your child? Once he’s born everything will be better between you two, you’ll see.”

Ana’s sobs grow louder. “I don’t know if I can take him anymore.”

“Now listen here.” Varvara clears her throat, and her voice turns harsh. “Your family, your country is not something you discard when you think you’re tired. My son did his duty to this country and by God he will do his duty to this family. And so will you.”

The sobbing intensifies.

“This is a new beginning,” Varvara says in a softer voice. “For this country, for our family. You’ll see. Everything will be different.”

Daria grabs the wood chair sitting next to the door and drags it across the carpet, toward the window. She pulls the drapes apart and climbs on the chair. Her forehead rests against the cool glass, as below her streetlights come to life. Rain pummels the building. This year, there had been no snow. (...) Daria tilts her head to study the small hole that has appeared in the wall, just outside her window. The little pockmark is full of rainwater, oozing out and dripping down the concrete.

“Beginning.” Her grandmother’s words echo in her head. Does this mean it’s now safe to go outside? Daria touches her palm to the glass and pushes against it with all her strength. The invisible barrier holds firm, no matter how hard she presses. The bed of her tiny nails are blue from the cold, so Daria pulls the sleeve of her scratchy wool sweater over her hand. The imprint of her fingers lingers on the glass—an incriminating ghost.