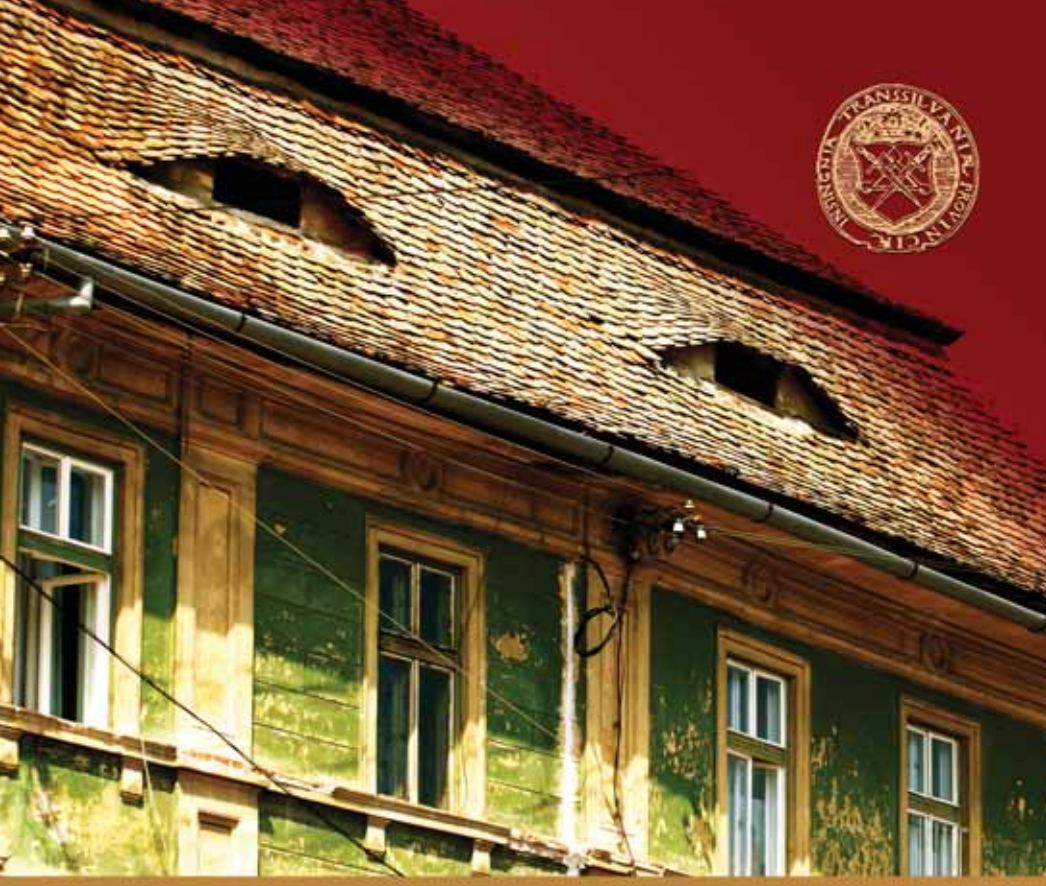

Out of the TRANSYLVANIA NIGHT

Aura Imbarus

Aura's courage shows the degree to which we are all willing to live lives centered on freedom, hope, and an authentic sense of self. Truly a love story!

—Nadia Comaneci

About the Cover:

The heavy-lidded, lens-shaped skylights known as "the eyes of Sibiu," dating back to the 14th century, are a familiar sight in Transylvania. Once used to allow fresh air into attics where food was stored, under Ceaușescu's regime the "eyes" were used to watch and spy on Romanians.

The "eyes" tower over the famous landmark, Liar's Bridge (built in 1859), the first iron-cast bridge in Romania, built to connect the upper town to the lower town. Legend has it that if you told a lie while standing on the bridge, it would collapse.

The emblem is Sibiu's coat of arms, displaying the two swords used by the founders of the city to mark the place where the city was built some eight centuries ago.

Disclaimer: This is a true story and the characters are real, as are the events. However, in some cases, names, descriptions, and locations have been changed. Some incidents have been altered and or combined for storytelling purposes. In some cases, time has been condensed for narrative purposes, but the overall chronology is an accurate depiction of the author's experience.

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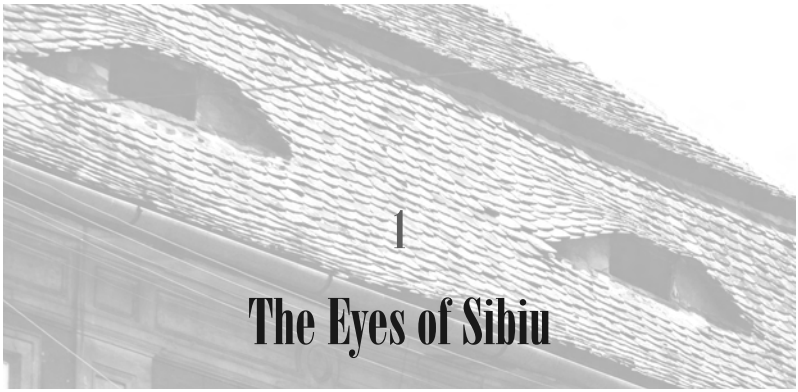


1

The Eyes of Sibiu

THE TREES ON MY STREET HAD GROWN MICROPHONES, AMONG THE ten million microphones that bloomed in the whole of Romania—one for every two and a third people. The sense of constant scrutiny pervaded us like a ghost of old Vlad Draculea, Vlad the Impaler, whose castle still stood on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains from my town of Sibiu.

Perhaps that was why, on the gray morning of December 21, 1989, I had no sense that everything, literally everything, was about to change. The fortunes of my family had gone through considerable changes in the past, especially after the Communists took over, but in my eighteen years of life, *change* had come to mean little more than the plunge from one Five Year Plan to the next. Other kinds of change were not encouraged, at least not by the government. Other kinds of change were what the microphones were listening for.

As for me, on that morning, all I wanted to do was eke out a little Christmas—a holiday that had officially ceased to exist over forty years before. My parents and I were getting ready to go shopping in the Piata Mare and Piata Mica—plazas great and small—and Balcescu Street. The word "shopping" meant both more and

less than it says. It did not mean "go out and buy what you want." It did not even mean "go out and buy what you can afford." But it did mean "go out and get in line early, or get nothing." As a result, my mom had taken a day off from her job as a lab technician in a sweets factory, and Dad would be leaving afterward for his job as an electronics technician at the Sibiu Airport. I was going because this was my first day of winter break from school, and I wanted to find a pretty new dress to cheer my *buni,* my father's mother, on the coming illicit holiday. I also wanted to look nice myself that day, because an interesting "someone" might be out shopping, and I hoped to draw an admiring gaze.

But should I risk wearing my red faux Coco Chanel jacket? I admired the garment made of material smuggled in from our German relatives. Perhaps it would be wiser to play it safe with the black sweater Buni had knitted for me. She and I had worked out the design together, and she'd 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 toxic mold, entering houses, covering our bodies, taking over our 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?"

"Coming," I answered.

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

Even under a Communist regime that frowned upon anything that made an individual stand out, including personal appearance, 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,* with their dusty shelves and rusty metal hangers offering garments that looked 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. On the black market—another special meaning of the word "shopping"—I constantly sought out fabrics, accessories, zippers, buckles, thread, buttons, and lining, purchasing these treasures with money I'd earned tutoring during the last four years of high school. 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. Because I was a straight-A student, my little "stipend" allowed for a few nice things—if we could find them.

"Aura, sweetheart . . . just 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'll just wear my black sweater with my green wool pants. I don't think it's so chilly outside."

This minor decision might have saved my life.

The ice crunched beneath my boots as I trudged with my parents across the slick walkways. Our house grew smaller behind us, and the bare chestnut trees, 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. Through the familiar streets we plodded, past houses with faded and flaking paint, their dingy bricks chipped. Ghostly slanted chimneys loomed, as if ready to collapse on our heads. Even at 6:30 AM 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, in local factories. The reek of sweat, government vodka, and homemade moonshine made my nostrils sting. If my fellow citizens looked at me at all, their expressions were sulky. Most averted their eyes. Dad nudged my elbow to hurry me along.

As we passed the railroad station, 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 noxious vapors that 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. The houses became increasingly decayed; carbon dust 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 sidewalks along the dirty streets. This city could be a truly enchanting 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 might not have been special, but in my city of Sibiu in Transylvania, I stood out—which wasn't exactly a good thing.

As if reading my thoughts, my father glanced at my neck and recoiled. "Aura! Dear God!" He turned to my mother. "Do you see what she's wearing?" Then, to me in a lower voice, "Are you *crazy*?" He looked around. For the moment the streets around us were not crowded, but there were always the microphones, and the people peering out of their dingy windows.

I felt the blood rush into my cheeks as if they'd been pinched. I'd hoped that for once I could wear my jeweled Byzantine cross set with diamonds, a cross no longer than the end of my thumb. I'd received it from Buni when I passed my entrance exam to Octavian Goga High School. It was a family heirloom, passed down in secrecy through generations to avoid having it confiscated by the many oppressive governments that had 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 sitting in a box, never being able to publicly enjoy 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 you act, Aura!"

"OK. I will. I promise." I tucked in my white gold cross, so cold, a 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 murmured something to her companion, most likely criticizing my attire, which defied the government-mandated drabness. Clothing that exhibited any semblance of individuality was forbidden because individuality threatened the Communist agenda. I suspected I was already on a blacklist somewhere, and the whispers of the women sent a chill up my spine. Dad was right. Spies were always listening, watching, checking every piece of mail. Every other neighbor became a secret agent and informant for the *securitate*.

As long 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 Draculea—Dracula's prototype—had somehow infected the soul of our President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Romania, Tovarasul Nicolae Ceauşescu. *Tovarasul* meant "comrade of comrades," the one most equal among equals—in other words, dictator.

No hint of morning sun penetrated 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. I had heard other people wheezing and hacking up phlegm behind the closed doors we passed. During winter the temperature in all public places couldn't exceed 16° Celsius (61° Fahrenheit). The government rationed gas and allowed each family a mere twenty kilowatts of electricity per month. The temperature in our homes during our long winters never reached anything close to comfortable. Mom and I both suffered from bronchitis and asthma due to the cold temperature at home, at school, and at work.

As we neared the town squares, the number of people on the street steadily increased, building to numbers greater than usual—the only clue that revealed any holiday expectations. An outside observer would have assumed we were on a grim march of some kind. There were no decorations, no carols playing from speakers, no gypsy music, no color anywhere. Throughout the year, no one exhibited purpose, no hope for the future, no desire. Yet at Christmas, so many seemed to reach deep down in their souls to rekindle a reason to live. In their homes they sang covertly and danced around small fir trees, snitched from forests guarded by government rangers. For the miners who toiled in dank, black holes in the earth 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.

I searched the faces of young men for the one I most wanted to

see, but I saw no one I knew that day, though I glimpsed wary animation, 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, or the five years before that.

We turned left onto Karl Marx Street with its state-run markets. We always hit them early, before everything was gone. The basic staples of survival—bread, milk, sugar, butter, potatoes, and meat—had become increasingly scarce during the current Five Year Plan, and lines stretched ever longer. Only last week, my parents had awakened at 3:00 AM to stand in line until 6:00 AM 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. Each month, the state allowed each individual to buy no more than ten eggs, 500 grams (just over one pound) of meat, one liter of cooking oil, and half a kilo of sugar. Provided they were available at all.

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 beelined over to the produce section, only to find a display of nearly rotten apples. Though Ceauşescu 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 had 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 beside *bucuresti*

salami, consisting of soy, bone meal, and pork lard, and, the pièce de résistance, *tacâmuri de pui,* chicken wings, gizzards, and claws.

"Pfhh!" Mom snorted.

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, so we were told, although my uncles in Germany had a different story.

Mom and I 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 checkout queue stretched for what looked like a half-hour wait, we left with nothing. Time to move to the other shopping area, the one no one spoke about but everyone depended on. There we would meet one of Mom's underground connections, made through 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 chocolates from Switzerland, Germany, France, or Belgium. Currency, gold, and other jewelry were traded only on the black market, so authorities couldn't track them. Everyone was supposed to declare the jewelry among his or her possessions. The diamonds on the beautiful cross I wore exceeded the limit 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 looked down on all who entered. Originally a grain market in the early 1400s, later the site of beheadings, hangings, and cages for "crazy people," the square gave rise to a unique architecture. Its buildings featured attic windows that peeped out of the 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 of them to a single stretch of tiled roof, were always watching you. With Ceaușescu in power, it was especially disturbing and eerie. You had no idea what or who was hiding behind those 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 and Teacher's Scotch whiskey, or Ballantine's Scotch—the "currency" that would purchase what you really wanted. To get medical care, you had to bribe nurses, doctors, dentists, even 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 acquire a permit or approval, or to avoid fines. You bribed the *militia* (police) to get out of trouble—real, pending, or imaginary. You bribed your auto shop to get your car fixed, if you were lucky enough to have a car. You bribed the manager at your grocery store to share the good news when they were "getting something," like fresh meat, sugar, oil, or any other "delicatessens." Even if you shopped in approved department stores, you had to bribe managers to buy the occasional imported appliance, clothing, or other goods. Romanians were forbidden to possess foreign currency, particularly US dollars and German deutsche marks. People went to jail for transactions of merely forty US dollars.

We were looking for a "Gigi Kent," part of the underground world. 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. He was a god to anyone in a hurry for American cigarettes.

There was another possible side to this sort of god, however. Like policemen, postmen, security officers—anyone likely to encounter many people in the course of a day's work—black market operators were potentially valuable to the machinery of state operations. So while Gigis could be true underground traders, they could also be strands of the authority's web. Anyone who tried to buy, say, $500 worth of cigarettes from Gigi Kent risked getting into instant, big trouble. He or she could be arrested and held by the police or securitate and intimidated during the night. By the next morning that "customer" would very likely agree to become an informant. If the police determined that the new informant was well connected or had a sizable social network, he would be "invited" back to the securitate, and there, in some petty bureaucrat's office, 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 in the future.

Despite all this, we kept moving toward the square to connect with our new Gigi Kent. I was eager to see if this particular contact carried chocolate—which I craved like an addict—but I was also nervous. We carried no bundles or shopping bags of groceries as camouflage. I feared 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.

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, pouting 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 again. I kept thinking about the Gigi Kent's failure to appear. Selling things was his job, even if illicit. Why didn't he come? Did he know something we did not? Or was I just tense in general? I wanted an ordinary shopping day. Soon enough I'd be applying to college and taking exams; the coming year would be very hard. *An Armageddon year,* I told myself.

I pulled my sweater tighter around myself.

As we neared the smaller square, two men 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. . ."

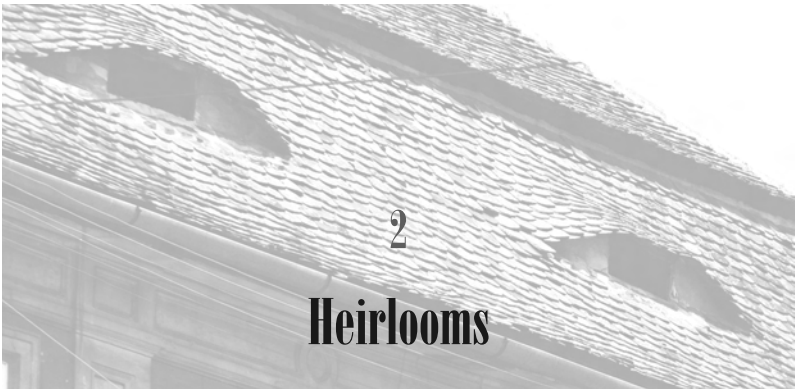
We were approaching the entrance to the Piata Mica, where a thirteenth century Council Tower separated the large square from this smaller one. I looked up at one of the slanted roofs and its "eye." Snow covered the lid, and icicles hung from it like hoary, defeated eyelashes. It seemed to me that "Old Frosty Man," an imagined gift-giving figure enthroned in the Communist coup against Saint Nicholas, must have had such an eye.

Snow began to fall, 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 . . .

A series of loud pops erupted, then intensified into volleys of gunfire. Echoes rebounded, the bullets seeming to come from everywhere at once. People screamed and scattered, the peace of the previous moment turning to helter-skelter, pandemonium. Bullets zinged past my ears. Children clung to their parents, who hustled them away or crouched to shelter them.

I stared into the square, where dark figures lay in white snow stained scarlet. A woman stood stiff with shock, looking at the sky. It seemed to me that the shooting came from the rooftop eyes. . . .

My father's arm crashed against my back and drove me onto the ice and cobblestones in the street.



2

Heirlooms

STEADY RIFLE VOLLEYS AND RANDOM GUNFIRE SENT BULLETS WHISTLING above me. Ricochets shrilled off the light posts and the bare tree trunks. I tried to flatten myself against the snow and ice, the rough cobbles of the street gouging into my face. I breathed in snow, freezing my nose and lips. For a moment, time froze the hourglass, each grain as slow-moving as a glacier.

I didn't dare raise my head, even to see if the snipers were advancing. All along Piata Mica, adults and children screamed, shrieked, shouted out prayers, swore, 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, hysterical. My breath escaped in white puffs, revealing my position. 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 in that direction. My mother's hand had found mine, though her face was still buried in snow.

Gunshots still crackled in the air. Sirens blared in the distance, and frenzied people rushed away from the Piata Mare. 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 elbows digging a path. My father said, "Crawl, Aura!" He spoke my name through clenched teeth. "Rica, hurry!"

Mom and I obeyed instantly. Shards of ice and grit covered by the snow ground into my knees and elbows as we scuttled along. Creeping along the sidewalk, pressing against the walls of 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 us? Why were they hiding themselves in the attics? Why were they firing at us?

That was when I realized that if I'd worn my red jacket, I would have been an ideal target and 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. Communist 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 in the direction of the still relentless gunfire. An explosion shook the earth, and then another.

Some survival instinct took over in me, 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!

Book Group Discussion Questions

- In many ways, Aura is one of those driven, unsinkable characters. What forged this trait in her? What role did Grandpa, Buni, Fanel, and Rica each play in nurturing this trait? What evidence supports the idea that indomitability is innate in Aura? What were the vulnerable chinks in her unstoppable nature? How are you like or unlike Aura?
- Did Aura make the "right" decision to leave Romania? Would you have made that decision in her situation? To what extent should we live for our families? To what extent for ourselves?
- *Out of the Transylvania Night* unfolds on many levels, exposing the Romanian political, economic, cultural, and social strata as seen through the eyes of a young woman. How did you respond to the author's depiction of growing up under Communism? What kind of images did you find effective in conveying these strands?
- How did Aura pit herself against the system? How did her stance help her? How did it hinder her?
- Think about the haunting "eyes" of Sibiu: Did they represent only Communist tyranny? How did their gaze affect Aura as a teenager? To what extent did they keep "watching" her in later years? Have you ever had a similar experience?
- In the very first chapters of the book, Aura fantasizes about a "someone" to whom she felt attracted, and it sustained her in some ways. Was this early fascination with Michael merely a crush?
- How did Michael feel about this character trait when he wanted her help with the jazz festival? When she "proposed"? Later on?
- Aura seemed attuned to extrasensory perceptions while in Transylvania, but in America the trait didn't manifest in the dramatic ways of her youth. What do you think accounts for this shift?

- What was the nature of Aura's hunger? What did Aura really want? What did she need?
- Discuss the irony of Aura's "pieces of paper": marriage certificate, immigration papers, certificates/credentials, divorce decree.
- In what ways did adaptation to a new environment and acculturation strengthen Aura's and Michael's bond? In what ways did it pull them apart? How do you think their relationship would have evolved if they'd stayed in Romania?
- Aura's ability to reinvent herself under duress certainly seems formidable. How did she reinvent herself after the shock of losing Buni? Following her split with Michael? After the "eternal night" that followed the loss of her mother?
- How did the heirloom jewels contribute to Aura's journey?
- What inner qualities allowed Aura and Michael to rediscover their love for each other?
- What expectations of freedom proved to be a hindrance in Aura's life? What moments brought Aura her greatest freedom? How do you imagine you would have behaved in a similar situation?
- How do love, belonging, and responsibility fit into Aura's sense of freedom? What kind of "freedom" did Aura gain at the end of her journey?
- How do you define the American Dream? In what ways has your definition of it changed over the years?