

## Old photographs

Every few weeks my mother rearranges the family pictures around the house. She also moves the beds and the rugs, and she places every movable desk in front of a different window. Then she calls me. My father builds a new garage in every house we buy, but it's never about the garage. He takes his favourite photos of us to the shops, enlarges and frames them, setting them between the tools and around the car crane. Lately he turned a summer shed into a writer's hut where he spends his time drafting letters to the presidents of the world. He tells them about the rotten state of forgetting to which he has been condemned since we emigrated to America.

Since we moved into Thelma's basement on 17 November 1989, the snowy evening when we first landed in America, I must have moved again at least fifteen times. Whenever I go home I argue with my parents about not wanting to build a house in their back yard with my brother and my sister and our husbands. And I clean my parents' house, changing all the pictures around the walls. Then I call my mother at work to hurry up and come see the new arrangement. My brother chose a career in the US Army, my sister still wants to be a travelling nurse, and I have lived in America, Ireland, England, and on the French-Swiss border, writing poems about wanting to be rooted to one place that I will never leave.

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My father's prize photograph is the one in which he reenacted his protest against Ceaușescu and the communist regime in România in 1983, when he left us to God's will and the secret police, the Securitate. He posed for us on Helen Street with an American car, on which he placed our Dacia's number-plate, 2GL 666. On top of the car, at the front, there is a black placard on which he painted, in big white capital letters, this text: *CĂLĂULE, NU TE VREM CONDUCĂTOR: CRIMINAL, WE DON'T WANT YOU TO LEAD US*. At the back of the car there is a similar placard reading, in translation, *ARMY, JUSTICE, POLICE, WHAT DO YOU DEFEND, THE CEAUȘESCU DYNASTY OR THE RIGHTS AND THE LIBERTY OF MAN?* He is wearing the same black suit he had on when he demonstrated in 1983, was released from prison in the general amnesty of 1988, and wore on the train between Tecuci and Rome at the end of 1989 when we were expelled from the country with death threats, as we began our exile to Michigan. On his chest he has pinned a piece of paper on which is typed: *I Fight for Human Rights*. And he is holding on to a gargantuan portrait of Ceaușescu that he has decorated with black ribbons and the Romanian flag, to symbolize the death of the tyrant's reign. Every time I introduce my father to my friends he wants to talk about this, and when he knows there is a chance of meeting someone new he takes a small print of this picture with him as his passport to show that he is not just any old immigrant.

In my mother's bedroom there is now a black-and-white photo of my sister and me dressed up for a children's show in nursery school: the show at the village hall, where I recited my first poem on stage and sang a song about mushrooms dancing with their red-and-white polka-dot hats in

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the forest. On top of my head I have a big, peony-like white bow, which I try to balance while smiling widely at the camera. My sister has a hat which looks like a mushroom cap. This photograph, like all the others, is *forced* on the walls on West River Drive: it looks the kind of old print which makes you think your life (the version in which you are in the present together with the version from the old pictures) is invented. I remember being young and putting our photographs on the walls of the house we built with my parents, room by room, picture by picture, golden frames matching brass curtain rods. My sister and I were allowed to choose them and chose places for them, just where we wanted, so our nursery school picture hung above the bookcase in the hallway, where everyone could see it when they looked at the books.

Our portraits were first taken off the walls when the secret police came to search the house just after my father's protest. I was home with my grandmother, who was summoned by my father before he left, to 'spend a little bit of time' with me while mother was in the hospital after giving complicated birth to my brother; my father said he had to 'take a trip for a couple of days'. My sister was away at the gymnastics school. When the Securitate plucked the family portraits from the walls and threw them over the blankets and pillows they had pulled from the dressers and the beds, I was twelve years old.

Sometimes when I go home now to Michigan to visit my parents, I take out the Romanian photo albums from the bottom of the stack which mum keeps in the living-room cupboards. The cover of my parents' album is red, my sister's and mine are green. Though all the pictures are black and white, I remember the colours of our clothes and

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the dusty green or the sandy green of holidays. I also see now how different from each other's our lives have been. The pictures and the icons, though moving from the walls to a pile of things and then on to various other walls, have turned into stores of riches that nourish us when we feel out of place. They are passageways back in time. I call them 'our first inheritance'.

Our 'second inheritance' is eighteen volumes, amounting to nearly one thousand five hundred pages, which I have seen recently at the National Council for the Study of the Archives of the Securitate (CNSAS) in București; I was granted access to these files *after* I finished the present book. These are some of the secret files from the penal and informative dossiers kept by the communist government on my father from 1961 until we emigrated to the United States at the end of 1989, just a few weeks before the Revolution. They document his lifetime of political dissidence and his three incarcerations, one of which I witnessed. I do not appear in my father's dossiers, or in the photo showing the buried typewriter on which my parents typed anti-communist propaganda, or in the log of interrogations. But my heart beats between the lines of the reports; I am just at the edge, a ghost. The story I am telling here is the one with me in it, the story of the last penal dossier. It doesn't include anything of what I have done in the twenty years since we left România, from October 1989 until July 2010, when I was given access to the secret files and I sat with my mother in the archives looking at our lives as if other people had lived them. In this book I want only to talk about my childhood, a childhood in which a typewriter was buried, unearthed, buried, and unearthed again by two people who had children for whom they wanted a better future. So this story starts in the 1970s a few years

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after I was born, about the time when I began to have memories and my father's code name was already long established as 'Andronic', a name we learned about only last summer.