

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AND
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF SALT TO THE SEA

RUTA SEPETYS

I

MUST

betray

YOU

*Trust no one.
Tell no one.
Spies are everywhere.*



ALSO BY RUTA SEPETYS

Between Shades of Gray

Out of the Easy

Salt to the Sea

The Fountains of Silence

I
MUST
betray
YOU

RUTA SEPETYS

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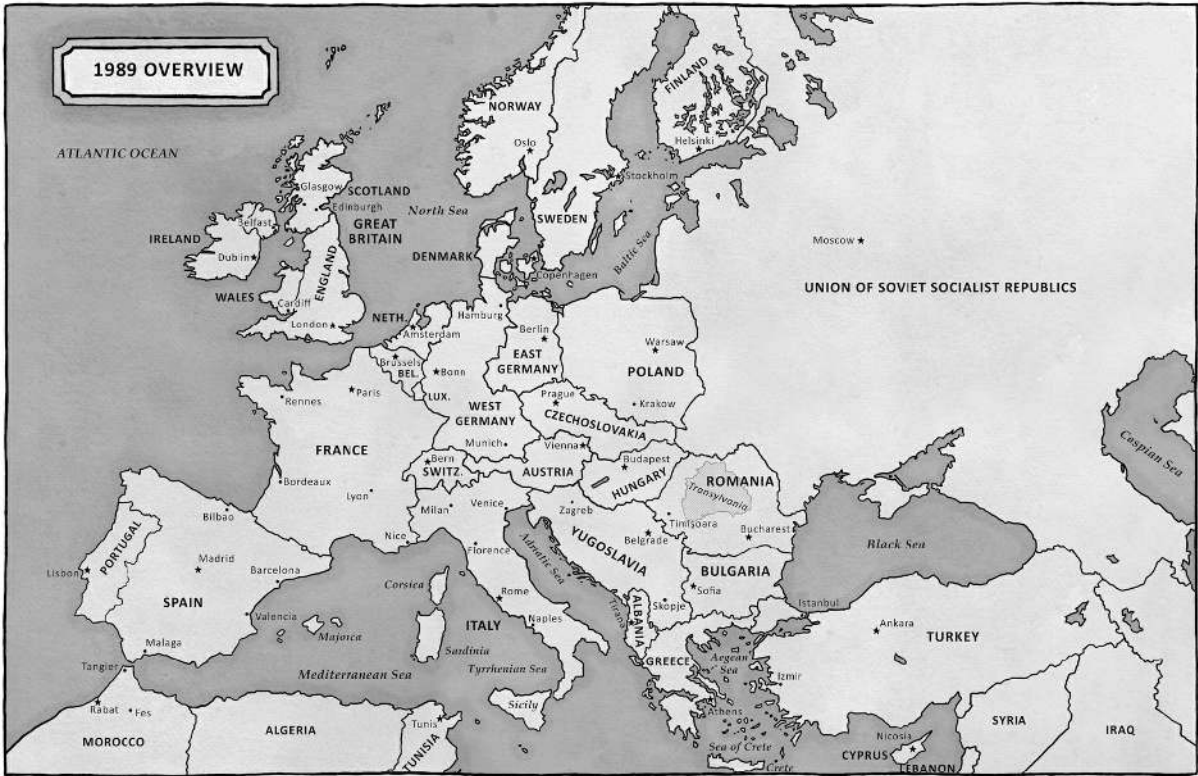
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In memory of the brave Romanian students.

December 21, 1989



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

He knew what I had done.
What had I done?

The truth was, most Romanians broke the rules someway 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—”