

The *Duba*

Lupoaia, Transylvania. February 13, 1951.

Sometime after midnight, a black, windowless van, with its lights extinguished, stopped in front of our house. Four men hurried out. Two of them entered the courtyard and headed straight for the door, while the other two jumped over the fence; one stationed himself beside the back window of our bedroom, on the garden side, and the other at the front window, overlooking the road. When they were all in position, the first man tried the door handle. He turned to the second man, shook his head and peered through the window. Too dark to see inside, he shook his head again. The second man took a step forward and knocked on the door three times.

“Flonta Pavel, open up,” he commanded.

They waited for half a minute. The man knocked louder.

“Flonta Pavel, we know you are in there.”

I was asleep in the same room as my young parents. The loud knocks on the door woke me up and, as if having a bad dream, I started crying. Mama rushed over and took me in her arms. In the dark I saw the shadow of my father grabbing clothes, opening the window and closing it again.

“They’re everywhere,” he whispered.

“God help us,” Mama crossed herself.

“Open immediately, otherwise we’ll break down the door. We know you are in there, Flonta Pavel. We want to talk to you.”

My father nodded to Mama. She put me on the bed and went to open the door. Terrified at being left alone, I started crying again. My father took me in his arms and tried to calm me down. For a moment I felt safer against his rough work-worn, familiar skin, which smelled of straw, cow dung and *pălinca*, the potent plum brandy he distilled. Mama, barefoot and dishevelled in her thick hemp shirt and petticoat, opened the door and two plain clothes men burst into the house. The first took hold of her arm and dragged her into the room, while the second pushed her from behind. Mama started crying, which made me scream all the more. Then the first Securitate man yelled so loudly that I froze and stopped crying. The darkness made him look huge.

“Get some light, woman, and mind the boy,” he ordered. Then he turned to my father and, in a calmer voice, said: “You are coming with us.”

Just like that. “You are coming with us” was a new phrase repeated thousands and thousands of times all over the country, mainly in the dead of night. It was synonymous with torture, pain, and even death. After hearing those words, some – the newly-created enemies of the people – never came back.

Mama lit the lamp and took me in her arms. The first Securitate man had big hands and big teeth, whiter than sugar cubes. He leered menacingly at Mama with eyes black as charcoal in the low light of the small crowded room.

“Why?” my father asked.

“You are a *chiabur*,” the man said curtly.

Chiabur meant rich peasant or, in the new language of the regime, ‘enemy of the people’. A few months earlier, my father had been declared a *chiabur* because he had a *cazan*, a small distillery, where he employed two people for two or three months a year. He knew that to argue with these men would only aggravate his situation. Since the previous spring, rumours had circulated in the villages around Lupoiaia that the Securitate dragged people from their beds at night and took them to town in the dreaded *duba*, the black windowless van. Now those rumours had become reality and he could do nothing to save himself.

“May I get dressed?” he asked, accepting his fate.

“Hurry up,” barked the first Securitate man, who seemed to be in charge.

“Where are you taking him?” Mama cried.

“It’s no business of yours.”

Mama’s sobs grew louder.

“Shut up, woman,” the man yelled.

Mama screamed, taking him by surprise. “Where are you taking him? He hasn’t done anything wrong!”

The Securitate man jumped at her and slapped her so hard that she fell onto the bed. As she fell, she lost her grip on me. I rolled over the doona and slammed my forehead against the hard wall. I wanted to cry but no sound came out of me.

“Shut up, you devil’s bitch! You want to wake the whole neighbourhood?”

The Securitate wanted to do a clean job, unseen and unheard. The Party that wanted to create the new man didn’t want to be seen using old fascist methods.

But that was not the way to treat a determined woman. Mama screamed harder. “Help! They are killing us! They are taking Pavelea away!”

The first man grabbed a pillow and smothered her face. As she struggled, he shouted at my father, “Tell her to stop! Tell her!”

The second man, his bulk creating ominous shadows in the crowded room, shoved my father towards the bed, where Mama was suffocating. “Tell her!” he shouted. “You want more trouble?”

With a trembling voice and tears in his eyes, my father tried to calm Mama down. “Nuța, don’t worry darling, I’ll come back today, you’ll see. Be a good girl.”

The Securitate man let go of Mama. She threw the pillow at him. Her shouts were louder than before. “Tell them you didn’t do anything wrong! Tell them to leave us alone!”

The first man kicked her hard in the stomach. She groaned, crouched down to the ground, writhing in pain, buried her face in her knees and stayed in that position to defend herself from the beast. He kept kicking her again and again, hatred shining in

his eyes.

My father threw himself between the man's boot and Mama's body. "Stop it! Assassin! You'll kill her!" he yelled, grabbing the man's foot.

They subdued my father and tied his hands behind his back. All the while he was crying out Mama's name. I couldn't understand what was happening to my parents. I only knew that when someone did bad things, punishment followed. But Mama had not done anything bad to anybody. How could these people be so cruel? I had seen that kind of hatred in Ghiona's eyes, when he beat his wife and chased her naked in the courtyard with a knife in his hand. But everybody knew that he was a crazy man beyond repair after coming home from the Russian front.

My father yelled at me to go and get my grandparents. I climbed out of bed fast, slipped between the second Securitate man's hands, and raced through the night to my grandparents' house. Grandma Saveta came running behind me, followed by Grandpa Toderea. I wanted to be a *zmeu* – the demon capable of stealing the moon and the sun from the sky – or some other creature, powerful enough to blow these ugly Securitate men into little pieces. I wanted to save my parents. When we arrived, the men were pushing my father into the *duba*. Mama was lying in a pool of blood, with her head against the foot of the bed. Her now crooked nose and badly bruised lips were covered in blood, which was still trickling down her chin onto her neck and shirt. One hand was on the floor, palm opened up and fingers curled, the other pressing on her belly. Her underskirt was soaked in blood. When Grandma saw her, she began to wring her old bony hands, until the paper-thin skin turned white for lack of blood. Then she started to chant that terrible melody for the dead, intoned when the funeral cart starts moving from the courtyard to the cemetery. Grandpa, mumbling and sighing, his distraught eyes fixed on his daughter, asked Grandma to help him lift Mama onto the bed.

As soon as they heard the *duba* leaving, the women from the neighbourhood came in. They already knew what had happened: they had seen my father being taken away. Ana, a neighbour, went

back to her house and returned with chicken broth for Mama; the smell made my mouth water. Norca ran down Hurupa to Moaşa Stela's house and they both came dishevelled and puffing. Mama did not talk to anyone. Moaşa Stela, the midwife, asked Grandma for clean clothes and, when they changed Mama into a crisp white petticoat, Grandpa took me into the other room. When we returned, there was silence in the small room where Mama lay in bed. Grandma crouched on the floor, her face in her hands, her body rocking back and forth. Grandpa helped her get up. Her face was shattered and her hands were trembling. She said something to Grandpa.

“Not even the unborn are safe. What has the world come to? May God protect us,” he replied, gazing at the ceiling.

The women stared at him and then they looked at me without saying a word. They stayed with us throughout the night and came back every now and then during the day.

Modru, our next door neighbour, went up to Râturi late in the afternoon to see if my father was coming home on the train from Oradea. He wasn't. Were these Securitate men, whom I wanted to blow into little pieces, going to kill my father? I heard the women on our porch talking about this. People coming from the Tinca market had said that was what the Securitate did to the *chiaburs* taken away in a *duba*, in the middle of the night. Was I going to be like my cousin Viorica, whose father died on the Russian front? Auntie Puica, her mother, remarried and left her to be raised by her grandparents. People started calling her the orphan; and some children didn't want to play with her anymore.

I didn't want my father to die. I didn't want Mama to marry again. I didn't want to be called the orphan and have children not want to play with me anymore. I asked Mama about this and she assured me that my father was going to return. No doubt about that at all. He must have missed the train. Sometimes these things happen. She cried when she told me this. Then she wiped her face with her hands and said that I was her precious treasure, behaving so bravely with the Securitate people. Grandma and Grandpa told her they were so proud of me. The next day, they told me, my

father was going to come home with the evening train.

I waited and waited for evening to come. I went into the garden and down to Valea Ștefani and there sat on a mound, from where I could see the Râturi and beyond, as far as Holod, waiting for my father to come; but he never did. I started crying, because I did not know whom to believe anymore: Mama and my grandparents or the people coming from the Tinca market who said that the *chiaburs*, taken away in a *duba* in the middle of the night, were killed by the Securitate. I cried because I couldn't become a *zmeu*, or some big, ugly creature and blow the Securitate people into tiny pieces and free my father from their clutches.