

The image features two identical cream-colored gowns, each presented within a silver-colored rectangular frame. The gowns are displayed against a background of a window with light-colored, sheer curtains. The window looks out onto a building with a prominent dome, possibly a cathedral or a grand historical structure. The gowns themselves have a classic, elegant design with a V-neckline. The neckline is adorned with delicate floral embroidery in a light color, featuring small flowers and leaves. The sleeves are also decorated with similar floral patterns. At the bottom of each gown, there is a wide band of intricate floral embroidery, showing larger flowers and leafy sprigs. The overall aesthetic is soft and romantic, typical of late 19th or early 20th-century fashion.

*Grandpa's Night
Gowns*



“Laudetur Jesus Christus. This is Radio Vatican.”

Every evening grandpa tuned into the Vatican radio station. First there was a wistful-sounding musical introduction (I think it was a Glockenspiel), then Vasilica Marginean would start reading the news.

Wearing his home-spun night gown, his slippers, and his round-rimmed glasses, Grandpa would be seated at his desk on King Carol II's armchair. The chair was

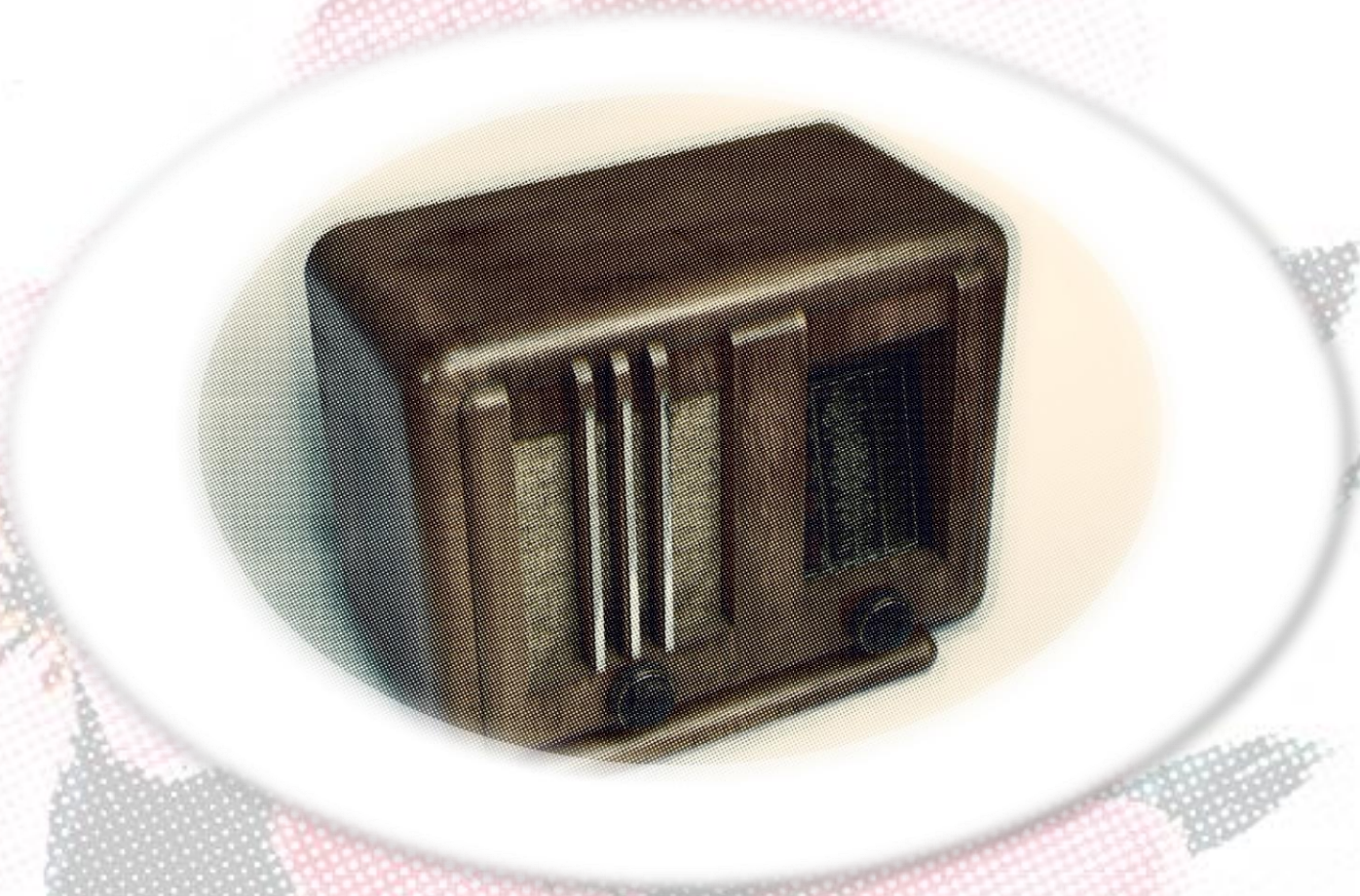
known to us as such because of King Carol's having sat on it in the 1930s on some festive occasion. This was when grandpa was still the regional director of the youth organization patronized by the King. King Carol's armchair looked truly royal: it was high-backed and covered in tapestry showing a hunting party. Woven into the fabric were representations of two light-brown dogs, one larger and one smaller; they had large, flabby ears and big, soft-brown eyes which made them look serene. I thought they were at peace with the world. The armchair would squeak and squeal every time grandpa changed his position, and this, together with the soft murmur of Vasilica's voice on the radio made for a lovely evening entertainment.

Vasilica Marginean had been one of grandpa's students in the early 1940s, when grandpa was a Uniate priest, a philosophy professor, and the principal of St. Basil the Great's Boy School in Blaj. Blaj was a small town in Transylvania, known as "Little Rome." Its chief fame, my mother told me years later, had resided in the fact that it had been the seat of the Bishopric of the Uniate Church. This in turn was an arm of the Roman-Catholic Church outlawed by the Romanian government in the late 1940s, so Vasilica fled the country and went to Rome.

Mother also said that Vasilica wasn't the man's real name. It was Vasile, that is, Basil; only she had known him when she lived in Blaj with my grandpa and grandma, they were great friends, and she was allowed to call him by his nickname. Vasilica used to come to Bethany and sit on the swing with Mother. Bethany was the name grandma had given to her summer kitchen, and the swing was suspended from its ceiling. Her flower garden, which had been designed and was cared for by a Czech gardener, was called the Garden of Gethsemane. So Mother and Vasilica swayed on the swing in Bethany of the Gethsemane Garden in Blaj at 14, Inocentiu Micu Klein Square. And on August 15 they would go in procession to the top of the hill, singing "Maria, Maria, I beseech you to speak to us/We will do, we will do whatever you ask of us//Ave, ave, ave Maria//Ave, ave, ave Maria."

On Radio Vatican Vasilica read news which couldn't be had in Romania and which I mostly didn't understand. I never suspected that grandpa ran the risk of being denounced by a neighbor or personal enemy, or by a close friend, and taken to prison. We just listened to Radio Vatican, it was a daily occurrence, and that was how it was.

I had to be done with my homework and evening piano practice, my apple eaten, and my night gown on by the time grandpa would get ready to turn the radio on. The radio itself was a wonderful contraption purchased in the 1930s: a large box the color of maple wood with, on its left, a built-in speaker protected with fabric which was fastened to the box by three nicked rods; a dialing scale on the right; and two round knobs at the bottom of the box, one on each side. One of these was the volume control; the other was used to switch radio stations. My grandpa was the Grand Master of Radio and I wasn't allowed to touch it.



Grandpa's night gown was only one of the several grandma had had made for him between the two world wars. Most of these had disappeared by the time we were listening together to Radio Vatican, but two had survived. They were of homespun silk, long and flowing, and were embroidered around the neck, at the cuffs, and around the hemline. One was white, with red-yellow-and-blue stitching (these were the colors on the national flag, so grandpa was being patriotic even in his sleep); the other, of a pale yellow with matching stitching. To preserve its hue, grandma boiled tea leaves and washed it with hand-made soap in the resulting liquid.

That night, before we sat down to listen to Radio Vatican, Grandma joined us. She wore her usual indoor outfit, which consisted of a pair of voluminous, pink "Death of Passion" underwear (thus called on account of their below-the-knee length and passion-killing thickness) and one of grandpa's black, sleeveless cotton tops. Her hair, not a speck of gray in it, was pulled back and fastened in a ponytail. When thus adorned and going through various house chores, she was in the habit of singing at the top of her lungs old, heart-breaking songs from between the two wars which were known as "romances."



There was a particularly mournful one; it went like this: "All roses shed their petals/On the day we parted/The woods were crying, the zephyrs were crying/The tranquil lake was crying as well (these two lines were to be sung twice)//Alas, you didn't understand me/And didn't want to understand/And when we'll get to know each other/We'll be so aged, we'll be so old (twice)." No one sang them anymore, except for a middle-

aged lady called Ioana Radu on the radio at mid-day.

But this time grandma had a nobler scope in mind.

She said to grandpa:

"Dionysus," (for so Classic a name he bore, bestowed on him by his peasant father and mother at the close of the nineteenth century) "this is the 1960s. You need to give up these night gowns. No one's wearing them anymore. I am going to buy you pajamas. You've got to become a modern man."

"Mother," he said (for he called her Mother occasionally, in remembrance of times past, when she used to be the mother of my mother, which she wasn't anymore because now she was being my grandmother). "Mother, they're fine. They're commodious (grandpa had an educated speech). I don't want pajamas."

"Today in church Louisa said her husband is not wearing night gowns anymore. She said they're ludicrous. She said they're outdated. You look like an old peasant in them."

Louisa was grandma's bosom friend. She lived nearby, visited us every day after church, wore incredible hats, and had a fine mustache. She was a sweet lady, an accomplished conversationalist, and a very generous person, for every time I went to her house she would offer freshly made cookies and sour-cherry syrup diluted with mineral water.

Meanwhile, Vasilica's voice was droning on over Radio Vatican. It got to the point when I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore, so I switched off the light in the owl-shaped lamp on my night stand and went to sleep without saying the prayer to my Little Guardian Angel.

The next morning after church grandma went, as was her wont, on her rounds to the newspaper stand, the milk-produce shop *Dorna* in Liberty Square, and numerous other commercial establishments in town. Before I left for school that afternoon she came home to cook lunch. She was carrying a large parcel, wrapped in paper and fastened with ordinary rope. She proceeded to untie the rope, opened the parcel, and showed us the result of that morning's expedition: it was a pair of striped pajamas. I had never heard my grandpa say a bad word, but judging by the expression on his face, he might have been doing just that. Mentally.



The night gowns were wrapped in onion skin paper and put away in one of grandma's two huge wardrobes. From that point on, when listening to Radio Vatican grandpa donned his new, striped pajamas. He was a modern man now, but he didn't look pleased. Something special had been taken away from him, and I myself found that our Radio Vatican evenings had lost a major attraction.

I realized the night gowns' fashion impact when I turned seventeen. In those times I had pen-pals in France and one of them, Monique, sent from Albi monthly issues of a girlie magazine called *Mademoiselle Age Tendre*. Sylvie Vartan and Johnny Halliday were in it; so were France Gall, Sheila, Adamo, and other, glamorous French pop singers of the late '60s (though Adamo was from Belgium, I later learned). Every year the magazine organized a Miss Mademoiselle Age Tendre contest, and the girl who won that year was wearing an outfit almost identical to my grandpa's white night gown. I knew that because her picture was on the cover.

"Grandma, where are grandpa's night gowns? May I take a look at them?"

"You've been rummaging through my wardrobes again. I hate that in a girl. It shows disrespect."

Now the truth of the matter is that I was addicted to rummaging through grandma's wardrobes. They contained an infinity of things from before the war, stuff you could never see in Romanian stores in the '60s and '70s. The things she had kept or could save from the confusion of WW II hinted at a world that had been incredibly different from the one we lived in now. It appeared to have been a world of opulence and good taste; it was certainly much more exciting to open her drawers than to browse through the plain-looking stuff they were selling in stores nowadays.

My explorations thus far had disclosed that the wardrobe drawers contained ribbons of different patterns, colors, widths, and lengths; innumerable pairs of real silk stockings, some torn; elbow-length crocheted gloves, white and black; grandpa's old silk ties (he didn't wear these anymore); fur collars, some black, some brown; cream-colored petticoats with embroidered hems; overly-worn silk robes, long and short; a variety of small hats provided with diminutive veils that cast mysterious shadows on your forehead, and elastic bands you could fasten around your chin (I had seen those in old movies on the TV set grandma had bought with Judas'-purse money the year I turned fourteen); a fine parasol of Japanese silk for ladies of modishness to protect their faces with from fierce sun, so they stay soft and white.



There were also scarves; fabric remnants; embroidered Egyptian cotton bed sets; two boxes, covered in cherry-colored velvet, filled with monogrammed handkerchiefs of cotton so fine you could see through it; two wooden cassettes containing buttons grandma had salvaged over the years, and a Schmolli Pasta tin box filled with grandpa's military uniform buttons.



Further rummaging uncovered a fan, decorated with drawings of Japanese girls fanning themselves and sporting kimonos and strange hairdos; two pairs of high-heeled black antelope leather shoes; small, black antelope leather clutches to take to the opera; small binoculars for the same purpose; a large bundle of post cards grandma's sweethearts had sent before and during WW I: "To the lovely Ms. Leontine Petri, c/o Major Popp, Caransebes" (these were fastened together with red ribbon, and I still had to go through them).



But the crown jewel of the lot was grandma's 1917 diary, called a "souvenir book," where her girlfriends from the Teachers' College in Lugoj had written in beautiful, early-twentieth-century longhand little poems and short but profound cogitations to keep and cherish as long as she lived.

Juvenire



August 1888

*de la si la iubitoare
Julia Gajin
Julia Gajin*

Grandma said:

“Don’t you dare stick your nose into my wardrobes. I’ll look for the night gowns.”

This she did. And from the inscrutable depths of the wardrobe on the right she extracted a parcel wrapped in onion skin paper. We unfolded the garments and placed them face-up on one of the beds.

“What do you need them for?”

“Grandma, it’s the fashion now: they are wearing ankle-length flowing dresses and I want to dress like that.”

“You mean to say you want to wear these on the street?”

“Yeah.”

“Dionysus, your granddaughter has gone out of her mind. Come here quick, she wants to wear one of your night gowns. I think all this reading has gone to her head.”

Now the previous year I had been reading Dumas’s *La Dame aux camélias* with a passion; what is more, at the opera I’d seen *La Traviata*, which I knew had been inspired by Dumas’s work. In Verdi’s opera *Violetta* (the main female character, a love-struck courtesan sick with tuberculosis, and a soprano) expired donning dark hair-locks and a night gown just like that. She looked lovely in her flowing accoutrement as she dropped dead front-stage, and I was duly impressed. Night gowns were clearly glamorous and if *Violetta* wore one on the podium, I could wear one as well. She was a soprano, I was a pianist, and we were both artists.

Grandpa rushed into the room. He had his “Better-break-your-legs” robe on, and looked baffled. The “Better-break-your-legs” robe had been purchased for him by grandma in a moment of youthful, yet mindless enthusiasm. It was adorned with multicolored stripes of such vibrancy that you could hardly look at it without being blinded. When she presented it to him, he said: “You would have done better to break your legs.” And that’s how the robe got its Christian name.

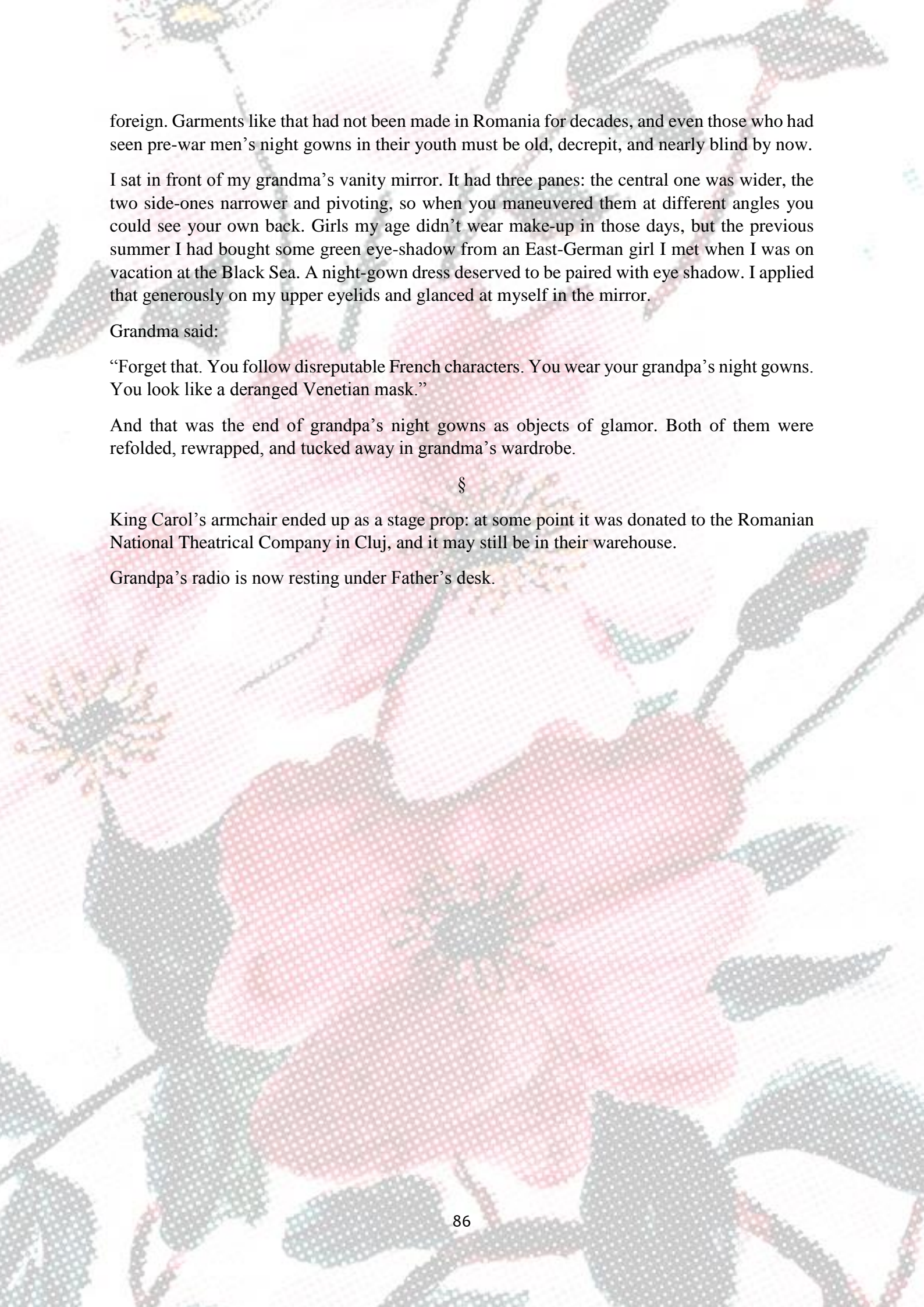
Grandpa said:

“Tsss. Tsss. Hmmm.”

It was his way of staying out of trouble.

I was allowed to give it a try—the wearing of the night gowns, I mean. There was a problem, though: they were slightly translucent, and what one could wear indoors was not what one could wear outside of the house. So I enlisted Doina’s help. Doina was an apprentice seamstress in the shop downstairs and worked under Mrs. Mia. She was plain, and so was her speech. Doina had very short hair, a narrow chin, receding lower lip, and irregular, protruding upper teeth. She was constantly humming some pop song or another when she pressed the garments, and her work uniform was pale orange. I tried to persuade her to make me an underskirt. She wasn’t too enthused with the prospect of me wearing a night gown on the street in full day light. But in the end she acquiesced.

When this was done, I put on the underskirt; the pale-yellow night gown went on top of it. It looked lovely, just like *Violetta*’s. It looked diaphanous, romantic, mysterious, and definitely



foreign. Garments like that had not been made in Romania for decades, and even those who had seen pre-war men's night gowns in their youth must be old, decrepit, and nearly blind by now.

I sat in front of my grandma's vanity mirror. It had three panes: the central one was wider, the two side-ones narrower and pivoting, so when you maneuvered them at different angles you could see your own back. Girls my age didn't wear make-up in those days, but the previous summer I had bought some green eye-shadow from an East-German girl I met when I was on vacation at the Black Sea. A night-gown dress deserved to be paired with eye shadow. I applied that generously on my upper eyelids and glanced at myself in the mirror.

Grandma said:

“Forget that. You follow disreputable French characters. You wear your grandpa's night gowns. You look like a deranged Venetian mask.”

And that was the end of grandpa's night gowns as objects of glamor. Both of them were refolded, rewrapped, and tucked away in grandma's wardrobe.

§

King Carol's armchair ended up as a stage prop: at some point it was donated to the Romanian National Theatrical Company in Cluj, and it may still be in their warehouse.

Grandpa's radio is now resting under Father's desk.