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Call Of The Owl

Lengthening shadows trailed the slow-moving line of caravans and wagons as they climbed the steep rise to the outer edges of the taiga. By then the blood red of the late fall tundra had bleached into lifelessness. Up on the plateau the ground had hardened. Birch trees stood starkly bare and white against the dense conifers that created shelter from fast-sweeping winds and the deepening cold. Winter was about to invade the desolate arctic vastness with killer force. The soft ground was covered with an icy crust that gave way under the weight of the passing wagons and caravans.

To camp for the night, the Lovara chose a marshy clearing encircled on three sides by dense forest and bordered on the north by a swift river. Night was falling like a heavy curtain across the fading glow of the early afternoon sun as the caravans positioned themselves in the shape of a semi-circle open to the river.

A subtle but distinct physical separation from the rest of the tribe had gradually evolved between Azra and the rest of the *kumpania*, like the distance that will develop between a dying horse and its herd. Azra's caravan was securely positioned in the lineup, but with empty space on both sides. The Lovara walked close to one another. They spoke in whispers, careful to stay out of earshot of Azra's only child. "Her time has come," they said. "Azra is dying."

Observing their suddenly secretive behavior, Dosha guessed their thoughts and words. Eyes flashing belligerence, she walked up to them and stated out loud: "My mother is not about to die."

Dzumila threw them damning glances, "Hush," she said, stepping close to Dosha, "Azra could hear."

The *rom* and *romni* scattered to prepare for the night. The children fed and watered the goats and geese before walking to the edge of the forest to gather firewood. The *rom* fed and watered their horses, never losing sight of Dosha, who insisted on looking after her own two horses.

Suddenly the stallion snorted, spun around, and stood tense as a bow. Several voices shouted, "Watch out!"

Like a dark, spread-out sail, a silent shape came billowing from the gloomy height of a fir at the edge of the tree line. The stallion's head snapped up. With dilated nostrils, ears pointed forward, the white of its eyes showing in fear, he followed the steep drop of an owl. A few hands above ground, the silvery bird broke flight and hovered for a second or two in place. Eyes gleaming, it swiveled its head from side to side before it flew on with a powerful upswing of its widespread wings, skimming the marshy surface. Reaching the river, the arctic owl slowly, with deliberate control, descended as if to land, its dark claws briefly touching the rushing water. Instead it drew its legs back toward its body with the same slow control and headed downstream in soundless flight, searching for prey.

"*Mulesko chiriklo*," Dosha whispered, "the bird of death!" She watched the last glimpses of the snow owl's flight reflected in the sudden stillness of her stallion's eye. All eyes were on her. "It's passing us by," she said, "this time." She defiantly looked up into the circle of eyes. In awkward silence, adults and children alike returned to their chores.

The *rom* now started to tie their haltered horses by their lead ropes in circles around some of the bigger nearby trees. This left their hind legs free to strike out should wolves get hungry and move in for an attack. It also prevented them from bolting, should sounds or movements frighten them. Dosha tied her own horses to a tree closer to her caravan.

In the middle of that night the owl returned. Its piercing call woke Dosha from a deep sleep. The haunting screech pressed down on her breath like a choking hand. Gasping for air, she sat upright and opened her eyes. The darkness around her was absolute, as was the absence of noise: not even the dogs were moving about the encampment. Only her mother's raspy breathing reached her from the other

side of the caravan. Dosha wondered whether the owl's cry had been a dream. She moved from her own *dunha* over to where her mother lay. There, sitting cross-legged on the floor, awaiting dawn, she listened to Azra's fading life.

At daybreak Dosha left her mother's side to do chores. Closing the caravan door behind her, she fed her two horses and led them to the river to drink. But afterward, instead of harnessing them to the caravan, she tied them again to the tree. Having done that, she walked over to where Dzumila stood talking to the men. Some *rom* had trapped small forest creatures which lay by their feet. The *romni* had lit the fires and were preparing the first meal of the day.

They turned to look at her, Dzumila and the men, their dark eyes collectively focused upon her as if they had been expecting her. Dosha felt the ground beneath her feet start to shift like dunes on a stormy day. "My mother's time has come," she said. The circle of dark faces and questioning eyes fused and started to spin.

"You must," she ordered in a loud voice, "pitch a death tent by the path that has led us to this clearing." Her voice reverberated like an echo. "My mother must die and be buried along the road we've traveled, like any" - she lowered her tone - "true nomad."

Dosha felt her legs starting to give way. One of the *rom* held out an arm as if to catch her should she fall. She straightened up, turned, and walked alone back to her caravan. She sat down in front of the closed door.

Wrapped in eerie stillness, she closed her eyes and waited for the violent storm of her emotions to subside. When she reopened them, the world around her had moved solidly back into place. A short distance away, the *rom* were using stiletto Gypsy knives to cut birch saplings. The women emerged from their caravans and wagons bearing heavy blankets. Together they erected a tent without walls, a sheltering canopy close to the path that had led them here. Their movements were slow, their faces dark.

The tragedy of Azra's birth, when one life was exchanged for another, and the curse it had brought down upon the Khantchisti were about to come full circle. Never would the power of superstition that Azra exerted be greater than at these moments close to her end. For now, the Lovara believed, the spirit or *mulo* of Sanija, the one who in life had

been a powerful sorceress, was about to return to reclaim the infant she had left behind. She would hold her people to account for the quality of Azra's life.

Angar, as the *rom baro*, the leader of their *kumpania*, at once sent messengers on horseback to alert as many of Azra's closest kin as were traveling close by. Dzumila and four *romni* entered Azra's caravan with a body-size wash-basin filled with warm, salted water. They pulled back the dying Azra's *dunha*, undressed her, and bathed her. She was barely breathing by the time they dressed her in a bright red blouse and five of her finest, most colorful skirts.

Then the somber-faced *romni* stood by her side and waited. They waited until the sun, high in the sky, passed from east to west, marking a dead moment in time, the mysterious hour of noon. The time had come for Dzumila to remove Azra's *dunhas*, the fine featherbeds she had always valued, and for the four *romni* to place the motionless Azra onto a stretcher made of birch and canvas. With slow steps they carried her to the center of the death tent, where candles were burning. Here they gently placed the dying Azra on top of her *dunhas*. This would be the last time Azra would feel the touch of her loved ones, for now that death was near, her dying body was turning *mahrime*, unclean to the touch.

Fires were lit, small ones inside, larger stick fires outside. The whole *kumpania* gathered around the death tent to eat and drink. The *rom* sat down in circles to play cards and talk about horses. The *romni* moved about as usual, serving their men and children food and drink, until they too sat down to eat and talk about their everyday concerns: the conserving and storing of food, the need to find brides first thing next spring, before the *kumpania* headed back north. All kept their voices low. They were careful not to show too much emotion, so as to keep panic at bay and ease Azra's slow transition into the other world. Those around her feared that one whose life force had been weak would return as a *mulo* – a spirit – of great strength and take revenge on her kin for a life not fully lived.

Azra's death throes proved long and agonizing. Attacks of coughing wracked her emaciated body, until there seemed to be not enough life force left in her either to keep

the spirit from escaping her battered body or to expel it and end her agony. Forbidden to touch her dying mother, Dosha picked up Angar's *rom baro* chair, the one made of twisted branches, with both her hands. Hoping to use it as a conduit, she tried to transfer some of her own vitality into her mother in a last attempt to hold off, for just a few moments more, the impending loss.

To everyone's surprise, Azra grabbed on to the other leg of the chair with one hand and pulled herself up. Her eyes flew open and for a moment fastened on her daughter. But just as quickly she relaxed her hold on the chair, and her frail hand slid away as she fell back. Dosha lowered her eyes and rose to her feet. Still holding the chair, she turned and gently placed it onto the stick fire just outside. For a moment she remained standing there, her face bathed in the flickering reflections of fire, and watched the chair burn. "*Akana mukav tut le Devlesa,*" she whispered, lifting her face to the dimly moonlit sky. "I now leave you to the will of God.

"Diana," she prayed, half-walking, half-running away from the death tent, "goddess of the nomads, help my mother's spirit free itself from her tormented body.

"Forgive me, Diana" — she continued to flee, still praying — "for leaving my mother in the hands of my tribe for these last few moments." She knew that she had to leave with an image of her mother still alive in order to face a future without her. *Or else, she thought, her image will mingle with the masses of all the nameless dead spread across those killer fields that never let go of her.*

An arctic chill was in the air and the moon was shrouded in gray when she returned to their caravan. She doused the fire still burning within their pot-bellied stove, but lit a candle and placed it on a shelf by the open door. An unbearable fatigue hollowed out her mind and body, as she sat down, cross-legged facing the open door and the night outside. It was as if instead of transferring her own life force to her mother, she had absorbed the heavy burden her mother had dragged along all of her life.

Images of stories told by fellow Lovara arose in her mind - of thousands of German soldiers trapped in the drifting snows of the Russian plains. After days of marching they had lain down at last, she had been told, surrendering to the

sleep forced upon them by snow and ice, never to wake up again. *If only, she thought, I could die like that, just bed down in snow and ice, never to awake again.*

That's when, for the first time Jano, the Gadje-fied Lovara, walked up the steps and sat down, partially blocking the entrance to her caravan. In the flickering light of the lone candle, his face and dark curly hair were a contrast of black and light. *He has the face, she thought, of a Christ suffering on a Gadje cross. Only his is the face of one of us.*

"Why do they leave you alone like this?" The warmth in his voice penetrated her numbness.

"I am supposed to follow in my grandfather Khantchi's footsteps. Like him, I must be strong. They would not have told you, but my mother was the carrier of a curse," Dosha said, fighting back the tears that suddenly rose to her eyes. "Because of her, her own mother - my grandmother Sanija - had to die."

"They still talk about Sanija in Moscow," Jano said. "She is still famous among the singers and the dancers, both in Moscow and in Saint Pete. They remember her as the *romni* with the flaming hair."

"Here, if they hear you speak about the dead, they'll chase you away," she said. Only in rare circumstances, and then only to clarify mysteries, did nomadic Gypsies mention the lives of their dead.

Silence surrounded them, except for the *detlene* - the black wind of winter called forth by the spirits of dead Gypsy children - that howled and blew through the cracks of her caravan. She wondered whether the Gadje-fied Gypsy knew about the origin of the *detlene*. It blew out the candle, leaving them in the dark.

Suddenly the loud lamentations and wails of the Lovara rose and mingled with the rushing of the winds. The Gypsy dogs started their nocturnal baying as the wailing of the mourners turned into rhythmic chants.

"My mother's spirit will soon pass into the world of the *mulo*," said Dosha standing up. "The curse has died."

Jano respectfully rose as she walked past. He watched her disappear behind the dark wall of the forest, toward the tree where her horses were tied. She must have untied them both, because he heard all of them walk off into the night.

But he would not leave her be alone. *Not tonight*, he

thought as he followed her, *even if they end up chasing me away.*

Fires were kept burning through the night: their rising flames fingering the darkness. The Lovara believe that death does not fully enter a person's body for three days, and that during that time the spirit of the deceased lingers among its own. Although Azra's face was turning waxen, her dark hair still looked alive. The *romni* rushed to cover all mirrors in their caravans, lest her spirit would use it as a shelter and linger. The *rom* led all the horses, goats and dogs to a small clearing hidden from the death site, to prevent the departing spirit from possessing one of them and start haunting and taking revenge on the living left behind.

Once these tasks were done, the Lovara gathered close and cried out words of love and reassurance to this lingering spirit as it prepared to embark on its last trek across the river of shades to enter the land of the dead -- a happier world. One after the other, one at a time, they asked for forgiveness for any harm done or offense given.

The night gave way to a gray winter's day, and caravans of kin and friends started to arrive into the marshy clearing that was about to turn into a Lovari burial site. The newly arrived caravans positioned themselves in an arc within the arc of those already there. A killer frost the night before had turned the clearing hard as stone. The newcomers unhitched their horses, fed and watered them, then followed Angar a short distance away from the mourning site, where they too tied their horses in defensive circles around several free-standing trees.

By the third day of the wake, more than thirty caravans were bivouacked near the makeshift death tent. Among the last to arrive was an oversized caravan decorated with gilded images of horses, twirling vines, and scenes of Gypsy life painted against a background of lacquered red. Instead of the usual single harnessed horse, it was pulled by a magnificent pair of brown-and-white paints. Dzumila hoped and prayed that it was Khantchi, arriving for the wake of his seventh daughter, but it was the caravan of his sister Patrina instead, the *phuri dai*, their tribal mother and queen of the Lovara. *I suppose, Dosh*a consoled herself, *it's because he was too far away.*

Angar had told Dzumila that one of the messengers he

had sent out when Azra lay dying had returned with news that her father had been in contact with Djemo, his former son-in-law, way up north, between the Kola Peninsula and the Finnish border. Djemo, the messenger had informed Angar, was running an unofficial collective farm that also served as winter quarters for a small traveling circus.

Patrina's caravan, as well as twenty others making up her large *kumpania*, drew up on the other side of the path that bordered the death tent, away from the other mourners. The *rom* tied their horses, however, among the other horses. Young unmarried girls, with loose hair falling down their backs, kept small children in line and lit fires for cooking, setting up tripods for pots and pans.

A group of young men now detached themselves from these latest arrivals and slowly approached the mourners, who had not touched food, nor washed, nor combed their hair since the closing of Azra's eyes. Men with bloodshot eyes kept on drowning their loudly proclaimed pain in home-brewed vodka. The children were clamoring for food other than the dry bread and cold meat they'd been fed. The woman's combined wailing rose and fell. Jovarka's high-pitched voice rang out above the others'. "We've lost the one we loved most in life. . . ." Jovarka, who had been part of Azra's life since the days of war, improvised a song about the life and fate of the Lovari *romni* whose sun had been eclipsed at birth. "Hers was the beautiful and tragic face of *romanija* . . ." Her haunting voice slithered though the relentless wailing and clamoring like a snake through high grass. "Azraaaaa . . ."

The young men from Patrina's *kumpania*, their loose pants stuck into dusty but fine leather boots, carried a rolled-up rug and spread it across the frozen path toward the candle-lit death tent. The tent itself was packed with mourners, both men and women. Four *romni* had, without touching Azra, lifted her up by picking up the four corners of her *dunha*, and placed her into an open casket made of branches. They had covered her chest with a yellow shroud and remained standing on either side of the casket, shielding her body.

Dzumila stood up. All songs, all laments ceased. The mourners fell silent as she approached her departed sister. Protected from pollution by the dead through her powers

as sorceress and *drabarni*, healer of the sick, she started her own prayer. Chanting ancient words, she lovingly closed her younger sister's eyes. For a moment she stood still, and then she pulled out one of Azra's hands from underneath the shroud. Her face a map of pain, Dzumila proceeded to break her sister's little finger. Tears were running down her cheeks as she tied a piece of gold with a red ribbon to the broken knuckle. "To pay your passage," she intoned, "across the river of shades into the happier world of the dead."

At once the *borja*, the young brides of Patrina's *kumpania*, who had stood waiting on the other side of the path, approached carrying an ornate armchair made of twisted and interwoven tree branches and placed it in front of the body, now fully prepared for burial. The young brides were dressed in the colorful skirts of their tribe, and their hair was tied back with scarves, indicating their married status. They in turn were followed by the tiny *phuri dai*, Patrina, who, with the help of a silver-headed cane, walked slowly but erect from her camped caravan toward the assembled mourners. Whatever hair was not covered by her head scarf had turned a steely gray, and her weathered skin clung to her sharp features like ancient papyrus. Long, gold earrings dropped past her shoulders down to her frail chest, which was wrapped in many layers of Orenburg shawls, woven of the finest angora wool, to keep her warm.

For a moment, as Patrina seated herself on the ornate chair, the wailing that had resumed, stopped. Once again the Lovara were paying tribute to their wise female leader, tribal mother and advisor to thousands of traveling families. Children were the first to gather around Patrina, albeit at a respectful distance. Adults stepped aside to keep open a view of the shrouded body.

The old woman sat still, as if the short walk had taxed her frail body and she had to catch her breath. Her dark eyes, by contrast, were intense and piercing. She took in every detail of her surroundings.

"Dosha!" she uttered. "Where is Azra's only child?"

At once Dzumila, who had been standing beside her dead sister's head, walked over to her aunt, took Patrina's tiny, bony hand into her own, and brought it to her lips.

"The girl," she said "left her mother's side shortly before she died. She has not come near since. She's out there,"

Dzumila said, pointing to the far edge of the woods. "She walked into the night to be with her stallion and that other horse of hers. I believe she doesn't want to see her mother's face in death, that she needs her mother's image kept alive. Nor does she want to leave her horses, especially her stallion, in anybody else's care, since they're all that is left to her now. So instead of joining the mourning, I'm told she's keeping an eye on all the other horses as well. She keeps adding oats to their feedbags and watering them, all day and into the night, with no fire nearby.

"The girl," Dzumila whispered, leaning toward the old woman's ear, "does not fear the *mulo*. Worse, she appears to feel safe within their midst. It is rumored that when times are perilous, it is the *mulo* she calls upon for help. There are no witnesses to these instances, but many within the tribe think she has the sight. They tell me she has the power of a sorceress, though she's only fifteen years of age."

Patrina pensively waved a hand in the direction of the *borja* who had brought her chair and now stood clumped together close by. One from among them hurried to their queen with a stubby little pipe, already lit, and placed it into Patrina's eager hand. The old woman closed her eyes, drew deeply from the smoldering pipe, and as she exhaled wispy white smoke, she let her body relax deep into the ornate chair. She released her grip on her shawls, exposing her array of heavy gold coin necklaces.

"And who," Patrina asked, "is watching over her? Who is watching over Dosha?"

Dzumila then told Patrina about Jano, the Gadjeified Lovara. "He says he used to be an actor and a musician at the Teatr Roman in Moscow — you know the one that's famous among the new rulers of Russia? He's the one keeping watch over the girl. Always at a respectful distance, of course," Dzumila assured the *phuri dai*. "For, although he comes from the city, he is Lovara, he knows the rules."

Patrina lifted her sharp eyes to the edge of the forest beyond the death tent, where she saw neither human nor horse. In her mind's eye she conjured up the image of Dosha when she was still a little girl, back in Poland behind enemy lines -- the way they had dressed her to look like a little Polish peasant girl. They had braided her reddish-blond hair into two tresses with ribbons at the end. Larkin, the

half-Gypsy and her adopted son, the one who could read and write, had told her the girl looked so *Gadje* that nobody would ever suspect her of working for Gypsy spies. He had given Azra rolled-up messages to braid into Doshá's hair, so that she could carry them out of the forest to where the partisan groups operated in populated areas.

Patrina herself had impressed upon the child that, if asked by *Gadje*, she should say her name was Ana. The name, like her looks and dress, could have been Polish or German and was meant to safeguard her little grand niece from capture and evil. "In reality," Patrina remembered telling the little girl, "Ana is the name of the beautiful queen of the Good Fairies, the *Kelshalyi*. They live in a secluded palace high in the mountains. Nobody can reach them there."

Of all the children, Gypsy or Russian, whom the partisans had trained to act as runners, Doshá had proven to be the best -- except for one day when something went badly wrong and she did not return from her run. The *kump-ania* had searched for her as extensively as they could, all through the forest. Their search efforts had been highly dangerous but had proven useless. At the end of the day it was one of the Gypsy dogs, zigzagging in and out of the forest, who caught their attention with his anxious barking. Patrina had followed the dog out of the forest, and found the child lying as if lifeless in a pile of leaves by the side of the road, only a mile from the towers of a concentration camp. Patrina had bent down and placed her cheek close to the little girl's mouth. Her breath was faint, but she was alive.

Back in their forest encampment, Azra examined her child's body carefully. She found no signs of sexual assault, although bruises covered Doshá's body. She had been kicked and beaten. Mercifully, the little girl had no memory of what happened, except for "that dream -- a very strange dream," she kept whispering. Nobody insisted on further details, believing that the dream offered protection from the memory of the trauma she had lived through.

Doshá recovered from the ordeal, but the incident sent her mother even deeper into her world of inner darkness. More and more, Azra refused to allow the girl to leave her side. *Azra kept her only child buried alive*, Patrina thought. *And out of superstition we went along. We sacrificed the girl.*

"The dark sadness of Azra's life is lifted now," Patrina said, watching a pale winter sun start to emerge from beyond the taiga to the East. The time had come to place Azra onto a bier and carry her to a grave dug at some distance alongside the trail.

As violins, tambourines, and cymbals struck up the slow and deeply emotional funeral march, Dosha decided to return to her people. She tied her stallion and her other horse loosely to a tree and slowly walked toward the procession that had started to form. She could hear friends and kin, who had answered the call to attend, start up the chorus of funeral chants. Their voices rose in intuitive harmony, blending with the instruments, as if they shared the same soul, as if none of them had ever been apart.

The mourners walked in scattered groups, holding on to each other as they followed the band, some leading their children, others helping along crippled elders. Amid a distinct break in the procession, Dosha noticed a tiny old woman walking slowly, apart from the rest. That's when Dosha recognized her great-aunt and adoptive grandmother, Patrina. She had not seen her since the Gypsy partisans had broken into separate *kumpaniyi* eight years before in Poland, after the defeat of the German army.

In a sudden rush of joy she started to run toward the old woman, shouting, "*Mami, mami!*"

Patrina turned in the direction of the voice. With narrowed eyes she watched a breathtakingly beautiful girl, with masses of fiery red hair wildly waving about her light-skinned face, running toward her. The strong arctic wind pasted Dosha's skirts to her strong, young body, tall by Lovari standards. Patrina froze in place. It was as if a cold hand had plunged into her chest and grabbed her heart. For there stood the specter of her beloved sister-in-law Sanija, returned to life. The approaching girl was closely followed by a tall and slender young man dressed in the ill-fitting garment of a *Gadje*. He wore no hat and his dark, curly hair fell down to his shoulders; the wind blew it away from his dark Gypsy face.

"*Mami!*" Dosha swept the tiny elder up into her arms. "It's me, Dosha!" Looking lovingly into Patrina's eyes, she paused. "My mother never did find the promised happi-

ness on the other side of the war," Dosha said as she gently placed the old woman back onto her feet.

Patrina's piercing gaze remained on the girl's face. "Azra was doomed from birth," she said. "There was to be no happiness for her in this life, except in her love for you. How she loved you!" And with that she took both of the girl's hands into her own.

The music had stopped as the Lovara of the Khantchisti clan watched the reunion between the *phuri dai* of all the Lovara and the orphaned girl. Soon the music struck up again, dragging like heavy footsteps, reflecting the somber occasion.

Dosha was swept up in the communal mood. As they approached the grave site, women came to hug and embrace her like someone just returned from exile. But unlike them, Dosha could not break the seal to her grief and cry — not even when the mourners started to drop earth and mementos they believed would soften the separation of Azra's spirit from the living. Not even when Dosha herself took a gold chain from her neck, kissed it, and dropped it into the grave.

Jano had joined the men and the drinking. Their hoarse voices, evoking the gods, cried out: "Why her? Why not us? Why not me?" They poured some of the vodka they had been drinking into the grave as it continued to fill up with earth and mementos for Azra's ultimate journey ahead. They sang and recited beautiful Gypsy poems, some of which were composed for just that day and would be forgotten by the end of it — forgotten like the name of the deceased and the location of the grave.

All along, the men and women of the Khantchisti kept talking to the spirit that they believed still lingered all through the *pomana*, the abundant funeral meal prepared by the *borja*, the young brides, back at the encampment. This was the first good food the Lovara had eaten in days, and it was plentiful - goose and chicken served in aspic and cooked nettles and cabbage and potatoes - the first signs of the return of joy into their lives.

Throughout the burial and the ensuing feast, Dosha held on to Patrina's tiny hand, breakable as a chicken bone, as if it alone had the power to pull her out of the cocoon of isolation that her mother's illness had so tightly woven

around her. She held on to this link to safety until it was time to burn Azra's caravan, her *urdon*, and feed all her belongings to the purifying flames. For only fire can destroy the last links to the living and prevent the return of the dreaded *mulo*, the ghost of the departed.

Night had fallen when the *rom* pulled Azra's caravan onto a knoll at the edge of the clearing. They circled the painted home with burning torches, and then they tossed them inside to set the caravan ablaze. Dosha let go of Patrina's hand and approached the fast-spreading fire that burned through the outer shell of the *urdon*, until all that was left was its skeleton, glowing like the grid of a cage inhabited by flames. Dosha's past was engulfed in fire. The force of the blaze sent the roaring *urdon* rolling down the knoll toward the swift river at the bottom of the clearing, where it slowly sank in the water, broke apart, and was swept away.

Dosha tried to conjure up her mother's face, without the deep lines that illness and suffering had left behind. But her mother's features had started to dissipate, as did the memory of her presence, growing as weak as her life force had been. Her mother's face was so unlike that other face -- the mirror image of herself, the grandmother whom she knew only from the photograph that Dzumila always kept on a wooden ledge in her *urdon* next to where she slept. Dosha shook her head. How strange to sense the face of her mother already starting to fade, yet to remember so clearly the face that had appeared to her only once, an image in a dream on that momentous day when the Germans had captured her.

That morning, she had just returned from a partisan hideout near a village. Once back in the forest, she walked along a lumber road instead of sticking to the dense underbrush as she'd been told to do. She heard the motor of a truck she could not yet see. The lumbering road was curvy, so, hoping to avoid detection, she dove into the forest toward thicker underbrush. But the truck had caught up with her. With a backward glance she saw three Nazi soldiers jump out of its cab and make straight for her. Cowering in fear behind a bush, she remembered hands grabbing her by her hair and pulling her to her feet. They shouted German words at her that she couldn't understand, except for "*Partisanen*." With fuming expressions, they were slapping her face. A boot came up toward her . . .

When she woke she found herself flat on her back on a flatbed wagon. She tried to open her eyes, but her lids were caked shut with dried blood. Opening them a tiny crack, she realized that there were others, some sitting, huddled, some seemingly lifeless on the floor of the wagon. She crawled to the edge of the flatbed, stuck her head beyond the rim, and caught a glimpse of what she took to be a concentration camp, bounded by a high wire fence.

She was losing strength. She was barely able to pull her head back onto the wooden planks, where it fell onto the floor of the flatbed. Her mind struggled to remain in its state of semi-consciousness, only to sink back into the dark inertness she had just escaped, where her grandmother, Sanija, stepped into her vision, as clear as life.

"You must not linger here." Dosha's floating mind tried hard to capture the words by trailing the movements of Sanija's lips. *"Return to your body lying there amidst the others. They are on their way to death."* Sanija's voice grew strong and immediate: *"You must will your body to roll off the side of this wagon. Now!"* she commanded. *"And crawl silently into that forest by the side of this road!"* — Where Dosha woke once again with the dog sniffing her face and Patrina staring into her eyes.

For a moment Dosha remained atop the knoll as her mother's burning *vurdon* was engulfed by the river, mesmerized. Crests of smoke lingered where the burning caravan finally sank and disappeared. Within the curls of wispy smoke the diaphanous images of Azra and Sanija intertwined themselves, whirling together in a tender dance high and higher into the nightly sky.

For a moment Dosha felt a surge of joy and hope. Her mother's *mulo*, the spirit her people feared would return and take revenge for a life not lived, was pacified at last. It would not return. In death Azra was reunited with the mother she had missed all her life. But no fire would ever burn their ties to the one they had left behind. *They'll be by my side forever*, Dosha thought. *They will guide me on the road ahead.*

The other mourners had long since returned to their wagons and fires, leaving only Dosha and Jano standing by the river. The night felt hollow, a vast emptiness magnified by the rush of the river.

"What now?" Jano asked. "Who will you travel with now?"

"Patrina," Dosha said. "She's my great-aunt. If I were to travel with Dzumila, it would only keep reminding her of my mother's death. She has always thought of my mother as her child, her only child. I still have my father as well, although I haven't seen him since the end of the war."

"What happened?"

"He's living with a *Gadji*," she said, "way up North. One of our messengers just told us."

Dosha wondered whether Jano, a city Gypsy, knew of the seriousness of what was considered among nomadic Gypsies a betrayal of the tribe, taking a *Gadji* for wife or mate. She could barely make out his face in the falling darkness. Racing clouds chased each other across the sliver of a moon, so that the faint beams of moonlight came and went. Jano's eyes were lowered, and he remained silent. She was getting used to his quiet presence.

"Why are you really here?" she asked.

When he did not answer, Dosha shrugged in annoyance and started to walk toward the circle of fires, where adults and children alike could be seen moving about. The Lovara were getting ready to bed down for the night.

Jano turned and fell into step alongside her, his eyes shooting discreet glances. He knew that she was fifteen, an age when most Gypsy girls are already married and often with child. She was tall, a striking beauty with eyes that seemed too knowing for one so young. But even a city Gypsy knew that for a nomad, safety lies in knowing the dangers of life as early as possible.

"I'm like Khantchi," he said at last, "fleeing authorities. Worse, like your father, I have crossed the forbidden line and become involved with a *Gadji*. Only this one," he added, "happens to be the daughter of a high-ranking Soviet apparatchik.

"A big Russian woman," he continued after a pause. "She thinks of us *tzigani* as wild and romantic. She considers her Russian compatriots pigs, wallowing in abuse, of their women, of those in their service."

In the faint moonlight, Jano searched Dosha's eyes for a reaction, even though he knew that in looking a Lovari virgin straight in the face, he was crossing another forbidden

line. She seemed not to care, although her expression remained inscrutable. How could he explain to this girl, whom the *Gadje* would still consider a child, that this Bolshevik woman had given herself to him without restraint, believing that she would share his romanticized stage version of Gypsy life forever?

"Worst of all, she started to divulge all sorts of official secrets concerning the future of us Gypsies," he said. "She described, in detail, their plans to throw the Red net right across the paths of those of us still roaming free — haul us into their Soviet cages just like everybody else. And when she felt me starting to withdraw, and it became clear I had no intention of staying with her, she turned against me. I was about to be denounced and shipped off to some *gulag*."

The circle of fires threw light and warmth their way. Dosha stopped on the path, reading Jano's face.

"Now that I have spent some time living the life of my ancestors," he continued, "I am ashamed of what I've done. Sooner or later they'll track me down, and I'd be putting your whole tribe in danger. The problem is, I have never learned to survive on the open road alone."

Living in close quarters, surrounded by a world hostile to most Roma, Dosha had not been spared either the realities of life between a man and a woman, or the lure of deceptive *Gadje* claims of offering Gypsies a better life. She had no choice but to grow up fast. And Dzumila had warned her, early on, that many *rom* fooled around with *Gadje* women. Some even married them, despite the threat of expulsion from the clans. What Dosha couldn't fathom was that Jano, who spoke like a Lovara and looked like one, would be afraid to travel the road alone.

She studied the Gadjefied Gypsy's face and demeanor with much care and decided that she, too, would confess her fears. "Now that my mother is dead," she said, "I don't think it will take my father long to come and claim me. I'm his only daughter and of marriageable age. To increase his own power in the tribe, he would insist on my marrying a Lovara of high standing in the tribe, whether I wanted to or not. Only Khantchi could prevent him from starting such marriage negotiations, which would be in his interest, not mine.

"But as usual," she added with bitter disappointment,

"Khantchi is nowhere to be seen. I know our customs and our laws," she went on. "I know well the power struggle that will follow when either he or Patrina die. I'll become a trump card for anybody who wants to become the future leader of traveling Lovara, here in Russia and abroad."

Without a further word, she turned away from Jano and walked ahead to where the various *kumpaniyi* had stationed themselves. The Lovara were busy packing for the next day's journey: they were ready to leave this sight of mourning. Women and young girls were carrying *dunhas* that had been left out to air, back into the caravans. They placed the cooking tripods, pots, and pans, into wooden boxes which they attached to the underbellies of the wagons. Wash was being taken off lines strung between the caravans, before the lines themselves were brought down. Dogs scavenged for leftover food by the fires. The men were tending to the horses that had been brought back into the vicinity of their owners. Dosha noticed her own stallion attached by a lead to Patrina's gilded caravan. Sitting by a fire in front, Patrina beckoned Dosha to come and join her.

Dosha turned once more to Jano, who still followed close behind. "If only I could take my horse and leave all this behind for a while," she said, "just until I'm healed."

A shaggy black-and-white dog came toward them in a low crouching walk. Dosha noticed Jano tense up. She looked at him, surprised. "We don't have dogs in the city," he said, embarrassed.

"That particular dog is more attached to me than to the pack," Dosha said, "I found him in the woods when he was only a pup." *He is stalking Janos as he would an outsider, she thought, not one of us.*

"You could leave with me," that outsider said.

"As friends?" she asked, looking up.

Jano looked straight into her eyes. She noticed that his features contained none of the quick grasp, the restless impatience and diffidence of a Lovari leader.

"However you would like it," he whispered. "Only," he added, "it'll have to look like an elopement. Otherwise, between the Bolsheviks pursuing me because I know too much, and the Lovara intent on punishing the abductor of a virgin of royal blood, I'd have no place left to hide."

Dosha watched as Patrina talked to two men of her

kumpania; she was pointing in Dosha's direction. Soon, Dosha realized, her conversation with the stranger would have to come to an abrupt end. Eloping was an accepted way for Lovara to marry. If they pretended to elope, they could actually kill two birds with one stone.

"All right," she agreed, speaking softly. "An elopement will avoid a marriage arranged by my father. And if we go north, it may help take you out of Bolshevik reach.

Speaking more firmly, she added one proviso: "But the marriage has to remain a pretense."

To marry was every Gypsy girl's fondest dream. But for Dosha, who had witnessed her parents' loveless marriage, that dream had turned into a nightmare.

Patrina's men were almost upon them when Dosha whispered in parting, "Watch the road we'll take tomorrow. Watch it carefully. At the first fork, the different *kumpaniyi* will separate back to the trails they were traveling before. Take note of that fork in the road, get off right there, or else walk back to it after everyone's asleep. Then wait for me."

Dosha followed Patrina's men back to the *phuri dai's* gilded caravan, where she was to spend the night.

Before the morning light had fully broken, the *rom* hitched their horses back onto their caravans, ready to leave their grief behind and return to the concerns of the living.

Soon the raging *detlene*, merging with the black wind of the High North, would sweep away all evidence that the Lovara had ever crossed that way. Only pieces of broken birch, a symbol of sorrow, tied with long grasses at eye level along the edge of the taiga would tell any *rom* who followed that a burial ceremony had taken place there, and which direction the mourners had then taken.