

Passing – A Roma Girl Living on the Borders of Belonging

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Si man parni morti,
Tha' mo ilo si kalo.
Phabardo anglal o "anti-gypsism",
Mo ilo is Romano.

I don't know how to explain my heart to you – what it means to carry the weight of it, while recognising my white skin as a privilege. I don't know how to explain the full weight of the word antigypsyism, but I can tell you a story or two – of how my heart didn't break completely under the pressure of assimilation.

The only place where I can begin is my street – the green gates to our yard.

If heaven is real, I think to me its gates would look similar to those.

Behind those gates, there was my whole family: great-grandparents, grandma, mom, dad, aunties and uncles. I belonged in that yard, under the cherry tree, veiled in the cigarette smoke of my uncle. But when I stepped outside onto our street, I learned I did not belong there. Pointed looks from the neon-bright skirts made me dizzy – "i chaj e Sumnakajaki."

I didn't know who Sumnakaj was. And when I learned that it was my mother, I was confused.

Her name was written differently on the school papers.

She never wore gold – she had sold it a long time ago.

I didn't understand at that time.

My mom didn't let me in front of the house too often. Back then she said the horses and dogs were too dangerous – so I stayed inside the green gates, where I belonged.

But the gates don't stay closed forever.

They opened early, Monday to Friday, so we could go to school.

I learned many new, beautiful things in school – as well as not-so-beautiful ones.

I learned that I did not belong.

The school knew where I came from every morning – the street full of loud, long skirts was dirty to them.

Dirty. Poor. Social cases. A problem.

I learned to feel shame.

Then I learned that, like my mother, I carry new names given by others – “lazy crow.”

I was confused again. My school shirt was impeccably white – my mom always made sure of it – and she also pushed me to always work ten times harder. Most times, it was not enough in their eyes.

It felt like a losing battle.

So, I never told my mom.

I belonged in her prayers, and that was enough at the time.

I pushed, and pushed, and I burned in my heart.

I burned most when, one night after our grandpa’s funeral, my mom asked:

“Voi știți că noi suntem țigani?”

(“Do you know that we are Gypsies?”)

The first time I heard her say that, I was already old enough to understand.

Anti-Roma sentiment has many silent faces, such as success being measured by how much you can distance yourself from your own people.

It teaches us that to be accepted, we must forget who we are – that passing is the only way to live a “better life.” That speaking Romani is dangerous. That being Roma is a shameful secret to be managed, not a story to be told.

I was praised for being “different” from the others – but what they really meant was that I was less Roma in the way that made them uncomfortable. The price of that praise was silence.

But I’ve chosen to reclaim what was meant to be erased. I learned the Romani language, I’ve studied my people’s history, and I carry it under the pressure of passing.

Antigypsyism pushes us into one narrative. But I choose a different story – my own.

I am Roma.

And I am not a problem to be solved.