

The Other Love Stories (Celelalte povești de dragoste)

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## Excerpt from the book *The Other Love Stories*

### *Goose Chase*

I was a child, growing up at my grandparents', and one day someone stole the seven geese we had left to roam in the lane. On our street in front of folks' yards there were patches of grass, and the villagers were in the habit of letting their geese or ducks roam free. It wasn't a problem; they didn't get mixed up. Geese and ducks have a herding instinct, if you can call it that with poultry: they loiter in groups by the yard where they have been reared. What's more, maybe because they took into account that some mad goose or some mad duck might nevertheless abandon its group and wander off somewhere else, the peasants used to paint a mark on the wings of their property. Ours had a kind of red comma painted on the right wing, a bit like the famous Nike logo, although at the time I didn't know what the Nike logo looked like, and I doubt my grandparents knew either. But there were also geese that wore a blue cross, others a yellow dot. Or dafter markings, even. One of our neighbours, for example, painted a little fir tree on each of his sixteen geese. With green paint, of course. Another aroused his neighbours' indignation, including my grandmother's, by painting a phallus on the wings of his geese, in brown paint. Grandma was angry because I was only eight and I oughtn't to have seen such a thing, and so she made a complaint to the militia, along with some other neighbours. And the man then had to pluck the feathers of those eight geese emblazoned with a brown phallus on their left wing, and in its stead he painted a square, also in brown, on their right wing. That neighbour hated us, because a square made no sense and this annoyed him. But he hadn't been able to come up with any other idea in his haste, because the militiaman wanted to witness the whole operation, the plucking of the shameful

feathers and the repainting of the birds, and it all happened within the space of about half an hour. And so the neighbour didn't have time to find any idea cleverer than a square, especially given that he was under threat of a hefty fine, even though there was no law banning the painting of phalluses on geese. I know this because the neighbour, as he was plucking the feathers, said he wanted to see a copy of that law, and the militiaman explained to him, calmly at first, then ever more angrily, that in our village he was the law. And in the end he even started swearing and waving his truncheon at him menacingly.

Grandfather swore in his turn when he saw that our geese with the Nike mark were nowhere to be found. And he began to go from house to house, looking for the geese. I followed him, more out of curiosity than anything else, although my grandfather let me tag along because he imagined that I, at the age of eight, had keener eyes and could spot things that he, at the age of sixty, was unable to. In the end, it turned out to be a good thing that he took me along. Because, while he was in a neighbour's yard, I remained in the lane, bouncing up and down the rather deflated ball I'd brought from home so as not to grow bored during the search. And as my grandfather was talking to the neighbour in the yard, a gap-toothed, hare-lipped friend of mine came up. I told him our geese had been stolen and he said:

"I fink I know who shtole them. They were on the corner of the shtreet," he said pointing to the place. "And that gypshy who nicked our ball that time when we were playing football on the pitch by the railway shtation turned up," he added. "Honest. He was holding a shwitch and I shaw him driving the geesh up there to the water tower. I don't know if they were yoursh, but they had marks and I even thought, what the devil, gypshies don't mark their geesh."

I quickly went into the yard after my grandfather to call him outside. Grandfather told me to leave him in peace because he had things to discuss with the man. Then I explained to him that I had picked up a lead and he abruptly broke off his discussion with the man and went outside. And my gap-toothed, hare-lipped friend told my grandfather the same story, which

greatly angered him. From my friend's description he realised that he knew that gypsy: he was the son of somebody or other, I can't remember now who.

The water tower gave on to the street that led to the place where the gypsies lived, up on the hill. No one had the courage to go into their area, because back then they somehow lived in another world. Not even the militia paid them any mind. The village militiaman, the one who had sworn at the neighbour who painted phalluses on his geese and threatened him with his truncheon, always used to say that the gypsies weren't his problem, that they should form their own militia if that's what they wanted, he wasn't going to get involved. But my grandfather wasn't afraid and this was because he had many friends among the gypsies, what with him being a ticket inspector on the train and all. Chief of the train even, as he used to say. And over the years he had let many of the gypsies in the village ride the train for free along various routes. They respected him, and when they saw him they would say: "Long life to you, chief, sir!" They respected him because he had let them travel without a ticket in the past, but also because they still had need of him, inasmuch as there were still a few years until he retired. Once, when a neighbour's cow vanished, a neighbour who was a friend of his, grandfather had gone into the gypsies' area all by himself and come back leading the cow by a rope, only two hours later. The gypsies respected my grandfather.

Now he was swearing, because it was a matter of our geese, not a neighbour's cow. And he told me to go home, because he was going to go and fetch the geese. But I didn't want to. Grandfather got angry with me too, and said he would give me two smacks on the arse. But I, because it was something that had worked for me before, went up to him and hugged him, like this, from the side. I clasped my arms around his belly and begged him to take me with him. My grandfather was fond of me, and so he said only this:

"Listen, I'll take you, tadpole. But don't you budge from my side, or else I'll smack your arse ten times, not two! And don't you say a word, don't you get to talking with the gypsies..."

The truth is that my grandfather never smacked me, not even once, let alone twice or ten times, as he would boast. But he would constantly threaten me, and, I've no idea why, sometimes I would even be afraid. I think now that it was maybe because of his voice. Grandfather had a powerful voice and he always seemed like he was going to do everything he said he was going to do.

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We entered the gypsy area. Rickety houses, which up until then I had only seen from afar. It somehow smelled odd even in the street, a pungent smell of oldness and damp. I was, I must admit, amazed at what I saw and I was thinking about how I would boast to all my friends that I had been down the gypsies' street and about how I would tell them all the things they had never seen. At the same time, I was proud of my grandfather, because the other children's grandparents or parents would never for the life of them have had the courage to go there – let alone hand in hand with their children or grandchildren.

Somewhere in front of us, on the right, we saw a few men and women gathered in a yard. I thought it was there that we were going, because my grandfather kept looking at them as we drew closer. But at the very house before my grandfather stopped in front of an old fence, whose laths were largely rotten, broken or missing, and unfastened the latch of the little gate. He went into the yard, dragging me behind him. In the yard, instead of a dog, there was a rather skinny pig, which was rooting with its snout under the door-case. The door was crooked, hanging from a single hinge, and the pig kept thrusting its snout under the door-case and the door was jerking as though about to fall off at any moment. My grandfather aimed at kick at the pig, which squealed, looked at him, but didn't budge. And then my grandfather gave it another kick. The pig moved aside, squealing again, and I felt like laughing, because there was something comical about that pig. It seemed to be looking at my grandfather angrily from where it had gone, six feet away.

Then my grandfather knocked at that door which was barely hanging from its hinge, and at one point I even thought it was going to fall off. It didn't fall off; it opened. And in the doorway there appeared a gypsy with wisps of white hair poking out from under his hat, and he said:

"Well..."

And my grandfather greeted him.

"Long life to you," he said.

"Ah," went the old gypsy. "Long life to you, chief, sir!"

Then he fell silent and looked at grandfather, and grandfather seemed somewhat embarrassed. He didn't know how to begin.

"Well?" went the gypsy.

"Er," said my grandfather, then, "won't you come out so that we can talk?"

The gypsy looked toward the yard next-door, in which could be seen men and women, somehow nodded his head, took off his hat and straightened it, then put it back on his head and looked at grandfather one more.

"I'll come out," he said.

Grandfather stood aside, the old gypsy came out and pulled the door shut behind him, after which he pointed to a log laid on the ground. Grandfather sat down, and I sat down beside him. And the old gypsy looked around him, seeking something with his gaze, and he saw the upright log for chopping wood with an axe beside it. And on the log, as well as on the axe-head, there were traces of blood, but the old gypsy went over and fetched the log. He placed in front of ours, and sat right down on top of the blood.

"Well," said he, "what's it to be, chief, sir? 'Cause you ain't just here to pass the time of day, eh?"

"No," my grandfather shook his head. "I have chores to do at home."

"Well?"

"Look here," my grandfather scratched the top of his head, "someone told me something about your lad."

"Well?"

"I have seven or so geese," began my grandfather. "And today I couldn't find them."

The old gypsy abruptly frowned. He put his hand on his head, on his hat, and took it off.

"Someone said that he saw your lad bringing them this way."

The old gypsy stood up. He went like this, with his hands, as though to say "what the hell to do", and in one hand, as I said, he was holding his hat. Then he flung his hat onto the ground, into the dust. And the skinny pig went up to the hat, snuffling around it with its snout. And the old gypsy gave the pig a kick in the belly, but with a fury, and the pig went off, suffering and squealing like blazes. After that the man went into the house.

I looked at my grandfather; I pulled his sleeve to make him look at me.

"What is it?" I asked him. "Why has he gone into the house?"

"Shut up," my grandfather said.

And no sooner had he said that than the door which was barely hanging from its hinge moved again, and from behind it emerged the old gypsy, dragging by his coat that gypsy who had nicked our ball that time when we were playing football on the pitch by the station. They came to a halt in front of us, and the old gypsy furiously whacked the young gypsy across the back of the head.

"Ow, dada!" he howled. "Why you clouting me?"

"You fucking halfwit," his father said, "them geese you pinched was the chief's! Them you took?"

And he whacked him over the head again and kicked his behind. I was starting to get frightened, and so I squeezed my grandfather tightly by the hand, then I felt my grandfather squeeze my hand and I was reassured.

The old gypsy kept on hitting his son, and his son kept bawling and saying: "Stop hitting me, dada!" At one point, between two blows, the lad looked at me with so much hatred that it froze the soul in me and once again I squeezed my grandfather's hand, and he squeezed mine back and I was reassured. In the end, the old gypsy calmed down or else he grew weary, what is

for sure is that he gave the young gypsy one more clout across the nape and sent him into the house. Then he wiped the sweat from his brow, looked around him, spat, and bent down to pick up his hat. And then he came over to us and sat down on the blood-smearred stump once more.

“Well,” he said, “I didn’t know, chief, sir. That’s it. What can I do now?”

“Then,” said my grandfather, “give them back to me and we’ll forget it.”

The gypsy put his hat on, somehow disheartened.

“I’ll give you them,” he muttered. “There’s only five.”

“Only five? I just told you that I have seven.”

“That’s as many as you had,” said the old gypsy. “On my life, that’s as many as you had.”

“Well, then?”

“Well, then... I cut two, ’cause I didn’t know they was yours, chief, sir. Look,” he pointed down at the stump on which he was sitting, “I cut them.”

The fresh blood had trickled down the log, and the old gypsy was pointing at it with his finger, by way of proof, and we looked, following his finger.

“Two?” asked my grandfather, somehow amazed.

“But how was I to know, damn it!” said the old gypsy, and then he looked towards the house: “I could wring his neck, so I could!” Then to us: “I didn’t know, chief, sir. The woman made us fried meat and soup, it’s still a-cooking on the stove, so it is.”

“From two?” my grandfather repeated, just as amazed.

The old gypsy waved his hands again.

“If they was...”

Grandfather sighed.

“Well,” he said, “I’ll take back the other five. And we’ll sort it out somehow with the other two.”

I had begun to rejoice somehow, especially given that from the face of the man in front of us it was plain that he was sorry and I was convinced that the whole affair would sort itself out somehow. Except that, just as I had begun to rejoice, from the

neighbouring yard, the one where all the people were, some screams were heard. And we all looked in that direction. My grandfather rose a little way and looked over the old gypsy's head. I looked to the side of the old gypsy. And the old gypsy turned his head.

Into the other yard two burly gypsies were dragging a third, who had been soundly thrashed. It was plain even from a distance. They were about a hundred feet away, but it was plain how soundly he had been thrashed. And then, the two who were carrying him let him fall in the dust. One of them bent down and ripped the man's shirt off. And the other produced a whip, of the kind used to drive horses, and started lashing the fallen gypsy's back. I grew very frightened at that moment. And because leaning sideways I had had to let go of my grandfather's hand, I quickly sought it and squeezed it. Then my grandfather said to me:

"Listen, what are you looking at? Haven't you got anything else to look at? Go on, look at that pig instead."

The pig was standing quietly next to our log, with its snout raised, sniffing the air. The old gypsy stood up and said to my grandfather:

"Well, come hither a little way, for it be none of our business."

And he dragged the blood-smeared log over to the wall of the house.

"Hmm," said my grandfather, "if you just give us the geese, we'll be on our way. And we'll speak later about reckoning up for the other two."

"Sit, chief, sir," said the old gypsy, somehow gently. "For you've not come at a good time. Now's not a time to be going into the lane a-driving a gaggle of geese."

Then grandfather stood up too and pulled me over to the wall, against which he leaned. I leaned too.

"Do you have a cigarette, chief, sir?" the old gypsy asked my grandfather, as soon as he had sat back down on his log.

"I do," said grandfather.

And he pulled out a packet of Mărășești, extracting with two fingers a cigarette, which he gave to the old gypsy. Then he

thrust one between his own lips. My grandfather didn't smoke. Or rather he smoked very rarely. He used to keep a packet of Mărășești on him, and he would smoke one of the cigarettes now and then, but very rarely. When it was the case. And, as I said, it wasn't very often the case. Then, after he had given a cigarette to the man sitting on the log, he pulled a box of matches from his pocket, and lit his Mărășești. Then he held the lighted match to the old gypsy's Mărășești. And they both began to smoke.

"But what's all that there?" asked grandfather, pointing at the yard next door.

Whence could be heard the cracks of the whip and the howls of the one whipped.

"Well, our folk," said the old gypsy.

I leaned forward a little and again looked into the yard next door. The fallen man was still being whipped on the back and howling.

"Not my business," he went on. "His kin are giving him a licking. If he's daft, that's what he deserves," he added.

Grandfather pulled my head towards him.

"What are you doing? Haven't you got anything better to look at? Look at the pig," he said.

I looked at the pig. It had come up to the old gypsy, who gave it a kick in the rump.

"Scram," he told the pig and spat at it. "Scram, damn thee!"

Then he took another puff on his cigarette, and the pig went away.

"But what happened?" insisted grandfather.

"If he were a gadgie," said the old gypsy. "There's a bairn here, chief, sir, so I can't say. He was tried."

"Tell me," said grandfather. "The boy's old enough."

"Well, what can I say? If he couldn't keep his pelenghero in his pants! Had to have some minge, and so off a-fucking the gadgie did go."

"Aha," went grandfather, but I understood nothing. "And they tried him, did they? Isn't a man allowed to get a hankering for..."

And he made a sign.

“Well, that he is! Said the old gypsy. “But not with our married women...”

“Aha,” said grandfather, and I began to understand, vaguely, how things stood. “And they caught him?”

“Worse,” said the old gypsy. “If he’s daft! He got pissed on a few bottles of mol and got a-talking. Said she was seventeen years old. Didn’t say which. Well, we’ve four married women of seventeen, none others. Them four there.”

The gypsy pointed with his finger. Grandfather leaned forward. I leaned forward too. In the doorway there were, indeed, four gypsy women, who were looking at the man on the ground. They weren’t weeping; they weren’t afraid. They were just standing there. And the one on the ground was no longer howling, he was just lying there and it was plain, even from a hundred feet away, that he was covered in blood.

“Not one of them said it was her. And now the women’s kinfolk and his kinfolk they’re beating him so that he’ll tell. Me, I’d tell, ’cause I won’t sacrifice me own hide for the sake of some minge. But he’s daft. They’ll beat him ’till he tells.

“What will happen to him if I doesn’t tell? How long will they beat him?”

“Till he tells.”

“What if he won’t tell? They’ll beat him to death...”

“Well, his misfortune. If he’s daft and won’t tell.”

“And what’ll happen to her if they find out who she is?”

“Well!” went the old gypsy and waved his hand, like this. “Eh,” he added. “We have a law. Her husband hangs her by his own hand.”

“Aha,” went grandfather.

“It’s none of our business,” said the old gypsy and tossed away his Mărășești, trampling it with his worn-out shoe. “But you can’t be leaving now with them geese.”

The old gypsy sucked his gums and nodded.

“Don’t know why the devil he don’t tell. But it’s none of our business, is it?”

“No,” agreed my grandfather.

“We have to reckon up for them two geese.”

“Then,” said grandfather, “I’ll put it to you it like this: you’ll send your lad to work two days in my field for each goose. Potato picking.”

The old gypsy again took his hat in his hand. He scratched his head.

“He’s lazy...”

“Lazy or no, I’m telling you this is how we’ll make our peace,” my grandfather shrugged.

“Four days?” asked the gypsy.

“Yes.”

“Got another cigarette?”

The old man took out the packet of Mărășești again. He extracted a cigarette with two fingers and handed it to the old gypsy. Then he took the box of matches from his pocket, lit one, and held it to the cigarette between the other’s lips.

I leaned forward again. The two burly men had lifted the fallen gypsy off the ground. Now they were dragging him towards the house. They stood him up against the wall. But the gypsy slid down and fell on his rump. Then he fell sideways, scraping the wall, next to the feet of the four women who were standing in the doorway. One of the burly gypsies kicked him in the guts, and the other kicked him furiously right in the face. I closed my eyes for a moment, waiting to hear his cries, but I heard nothing. Then I opened them and saw that the first burly gypsy, the one who had kicked him in the guts, had pulled out a knife. And he said something to the women, waving the knife back and forth in front of their faces. They took fright and shielded their faces somewhat, but they made no answer. Then, the burly gypsy tossed the knife in the air and caught it by the handle, blade down. And he leaned towards the gypsy fallen at the women’s feet.

“Look over there!” my grandfather said. “What the hell are you doing? Look at that pig, how daft it is.”

He pulled me by the coat toward him. The pig was sprawled on the ground next to the log, rubbing its back against it. I was quite frightened and I found no fun at all in watching it.

But I went on watching it, in silence, because my grandfather wouldn't let me look into the yard next door.

The old gypsy said no more. And he smoked his Mărășești staring at the ground. But now and then he would suck his gums, and spit. At one point he started to cough, with a rattle in his throat, and I looked at him. His Adam's apple was quivering oddly, it would move up his throat, come back down, then move up again as he coughed. As though it were a ball sliding up and down under the old skin: up-down-up-down. As though it were alive, in fact. A mouse trapped under a carpet. And after he had done coughing, he asked grandfather for another cigarette, and he gave him one, making exactly the same gestures as before. And the old gypsy smoked the third cigarette in silence. But now and then he would turn his head and gaze toward the other yard. Then, after he tossed away the third cigarette, he stood up and said to my grandfather:

"I think ye can leave now, chief, sir. Let me give you the geese."

He stood up and my grandfather followed him to the coop. I wanted to come too. But my grandfather barred my way with his hand.

"You stay here," he said. "Wait here with the pig and I'll be back straightaway."

But the pig had vanished somewhere. The door of the house was wide open and I suspected that the pig had gone into the house, because there was nowhere else it could be. And then I took a step forward, moving away from the wall, and I looked into the neighbouring yard.

But there was no one there. At least, no one standing. There was only the thrashed gypsy, no one else. He was lying stretched out in front of the door. The others had left. I took a few steps forward, going over to the fence by the neighbouring yard. The thrashed gypsy's face was bloodied, I could see plainly now. And not only his face. His upper body was all furrowed with red lines; there was clotted blood all over his body. I couldn't get a closer look because the geese driven by my grandfather were honking, and he shouted:

“What the devil are you doing there!? I told you to stay with the pig by the house.”

“But the pig’s gone,” I said.

Grandfather looked and saw for himself that the pig was no longer in the yard. Behind grandfather came the old gypsy. Grandfather was holding a switch and driving the geese, and they were honking. They were unruly and wouldn’t form a line to go through the gate. And so I went to one side and helped grandfather to drive them properly.

“Just you wait and see what a smacked arse I’m going to give you for not listening,” my grandfather said.

The old gypsy opened the gate and the geese went out into the lane. I went out after them, but grandfather stopped in front of the gate and shook the old gypsy’s hand.

“So it’s settled, four days, as we agreed,” said grandfather.

The old gypsy nodded.

“I’m sorry, chief, sir,” he said. “Don’t be angry, I didn’t know they was yours.”

“Alright, no great harm done,” said grandfather. “Let’s forget it.”

“Well, long life to you, chief, sir,” said the old gypsy.

Grandfather saluted him, raising two fingers to his temple. Then he began to drive the five geese along the lane. I walked in silence alongside, now on one side, now on the other, so that our geese wouldn’t stray off. Then we left the gypsies’ area, and before us appeared the water tower. And it was not until then that my grandfather spoke.

“What’s up, tadpole?” he said.

That’s what he used to call me, tadpole.

*Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth*