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**WHERE WE
CAME FROM**

“T ell me about the Gypsies, Grandma...”

“The Gypsies?”

“When you were a little girl...”

“When I was a little girl in Romania,” she began.

At bedtime, when I was a little boy, my grandmother would tell me her stories. Told and retold, each began the same way. “When I was a little girl in Romania” was Grandma’s “once upon a time.”

My grandmother could not read or write. Her voice was her pen, memories the color of her ink. By the light of my bedside lamp, she skillfully wove family fact into fable, unwittingly planting my soul in the Romania of her past. Here, in the dark, long gone voices spoke, faded fiddlers made music for the vanished dances of my grandmother’s girlhood and the Gypsies came down from the hills.

“People were afraid they would steal children, but they never did,” she said.

“When the winter was over they came, the *Tziganes*, the Gypsies. They came into the town with their big copper pots, and they banged those pots with big copper spoons. We came out of our houses with our own pots, the ones we used for jam and food, the ones that got holes or got damaged during the year. The Gypsy men they repaired the pots.

“You should have seen them. They wore vests like the cowboys. And the women. What beauties. Hair black as night. Long braids they had, with shiny beads. Did I ever tell you about my hair? The color of wheat in the sun! Clara with the long gold braids. That’s what they called me.”

Grey was the color of my grandmother's hair. It was hard to think of her as ever having been blonde, no less young. Every morning she would come out of her bedroom, making her way to the kitchen in her nightgown with a single grey braid hanging down her back. She looked like Pocahontas, only old and from Europe.

"My thin hair," she would say, pinning that braid back into a tight bun, time-honored insignia of the old women of East Flatbush, of whom there seemed to be legions. One by one, families had fled to an exotic place called "the suburbs," turning our neighborhood into a reservoir for grandparents.

The Italians, from what I had heard, came mostly from Sicily or Calabria, from towns and villages like Catanzaro and Cosenza or Aragona and Messina, names that tinkled on the tongue like chimes in the wind. The Jews, mostly from Russia or Poland, came from places that sounded as complex and eccentric as the traveled history of the Jews themselves. Minsk and Pinsk. Gdynia and Gdansk. Bialystoker, Kiev, and Warsaw. From regions they came that might as well have been makebelieve. Silesia and Galicia. And Carpathia. Fairy tale kingdoms where, as it turned out, there would be no happy endings. Latvia and Lithuania.

Nobody, it seemed, came from Romania. Except for us, and no one knew what to make of us. We were neither Slavic nor genuinely Eastern European, as many thought. We were Balkan. We were Latinate. We were Judaic...and we were more.

Before Romania, there was Dacia where kings and noblemen reigned over soil so fertile and warriors so splendid that mighty Rome took note. It is said that among the Roman soldiers who came and conquered and Latinized, there were Jews. We were present at the creation.

We were there when the Turks swept up from the East to seize the land. Hundreds of years of Ottoman rule ended in a bloody war for independence but left an enduring legacy. Constantinople spiced future Romania's foods, domed its rooftops, and arched its doorways. We Romanians hung carpets on our walls, savored the aromatic buds of Turkish coffee, and elevated the baking of eggplant to an art form. Even Romanian, least known of the Romance languages and a gift of the Romans, would forever pulse with Turkish words and cadences.

Over the years before and after the Turks, others would raid this rich and beautiful country, from the Bulgars, Avars, and Mongols who helped forge Romanian identity, to the Soviets who suppressed it and, it has been said, ran off with the royal jewels.

We, the Jews of Romania, were there through it all. We even had our own unofficial anthem: *Romania Romania*, a cabaret tune of syrupy Yiddish lyrics and toetapping Romanian peasant verse. In our house, we listened to that old song on a scratchy 78, and our hearts sang...

*O Romania, Romania, Romania, Ro-may-nya – Ro-may-nya
Was once a land, so sweet, and so fine there
What your heart desires, you can find there
A mamaliga, a pastrami
A carnati and a little glass of wine...*

At bedtime, when I was a little boy, my grandmother would sing to me. Her voice was neither soothing nor sweet. Yet in songs molded of memory, it drew warmth from the house where she was born in the faraway village of Stefanesti. In Romanian, she sang of the flute player who made music out of tin and air. In Yiddish, she sang lullabies steeped in the nights of the distant East. To my dark room, her songs brought light and longing for all that was so well remembered...

I have for you a bride, is she a Romanian, nice figure.

She will cook for you a delicious mamaliga.
