

# **THE SIXTH STRING**

**A Novel**

**John Owens**

**The Sixth String**  
**A novel**

Copyright© 2013 by John Owens Communications

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations and dialogue in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

For Maggie

*Soul,  
turn orange coloured.  
Soul,  
turn the colour of love.*

- Federico Garcia Lorca

# THE SIXTH STRING

## CODA

*I must write this story, perhaps because there is something not in my bloodlines which compels me, perhaps because I think of things now that I haven't thought about in years.*

*Perhaps because I simply like fashioning words on the page, watching the ink spill out as my hand races across the paper.*

*Perhaps because it makes me return to Jerez de la Frontera where, as a youth, I learned the guitar and Spanish and learned both well and, where, as it turns out, I was the happiest. Until now.*

*I write this story for the man I killed and for the man I wanted to kill.*

*I write for the men who tried to kill me.*

*I write for the women who loved some part or all of me and I them.*

*I write for the mercies I have been shown, before, after and even during my time in that place.*

*I write for the sixth string which my people, centuries ago, may or may not have added to an Arabic lute to create the guitar.*

*And I write for that guitar—my blessing, my passport, my alibi and my curse.*

## CHAPTER ONE

Funny about the things you remember and the things you don't. The small things you recall; the big things you try to forget.

What actually happened and what you think, across distance and time, happened.

What it meant then. What it means now.

What things are connected and what things only seem so.

What things you shaped and what things shaped you.

I don't have much of an answer for any of these questions and so can make no claim to know the truth in my own heart and mind, let alone in the hearts and minds of others.

But I well realize now how important memories are, not only as pleasant or ghastly pictures at an exhibition but as clues, maybe as a map laying out how you will respond to events, to the actions of others, to sensations and sights both natural and unnatural. How sad, you say, to remove surprise by knowing how you will be affected. Bullshit! It is a comfort, a joy to know what gives joy, to know what to look for. The sadness is only in not looking for that truth of joy.

The writing down of things seems to make them true. For a time. How the Nazis could record! Almost as well as they could kill. Directives, observations, measurements, memoranda, registrations, train schedules. There were many more documents but I saw them burn a lot of their paper, turn it to ash. Just as they did the people.

The good doctor himself had volumes of books with charts and columns he would scribble in after his search for his truth inside the bodies of his subjects. There were also drawings of those subjects after he had finished with them.

Some of those drawings were mine.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have lost my family—all dead or disappeared from me. Sometimes I miss them; most times I don't. It would be easy to blame that place for the erasure of my ties but I do not. In truth, from my childhood, I cannot ever remember hearing “your family is the most important thing” or some such sentiment and believing it was true.

I have lost my tribe or, rather, they lost me. If I chanced upon their remnants today, tomorrow, what would I say of them or to them? Should I claim them as my long-lost people? Should I want to learn their stories again and cherish them as mine? Should I want to again use their language as mine?

I know that, bound as we are only by our random births, then fashioned together by our obscure tongue, by our songs, by our caravans, by our omens and taboos, I would not clasp them to my bosom.

For the foggy record, my name is Nicholae and I was born in 1915 or 1916 in Hungary, or perhaps Romania. The vagueness of either the year or the country of my origin has never bothered me. Knowing for sure did not and will not change a thing.

I'm certain my father once told me where I was born but I forgot, just as children routinely lose facts of no immediate relevance to them. And now I can't ask him or my mother.

I know for certain I have a birthday but it has never been observed, by me or by anyone. I have a date of birth—several of them in fact—corresponding to the many faked documents I have carried over the years. My Red Cross passport says 'May 24, 1915' but I must question its accuracy. The odds are pretty slender that this date I made up, is, in truth, my actual birthday.

If I'm being honest, I have, from time to time, wondered about the exact day and time of my birth. I remember my father saying it was early summer and there was a war going on which doesn't really narrow it down for me. Sometimes I wish my twin brother, Hanzi, was still alive. He might somehow know. But he isn't, so I don't.

There are no records of birthdays, no family diaries, no certificates of citizenship or marriages or deaths, for it is not the Gypsy way to collect or write such things down, to write anything down, for that matter.

So it's all left up to memory and stories told over and over around the fire.

But memory, I have found, is a very strange thing. Like rage or love, it cannot be willfully directed. Thoughts and pictures invade my brain now, then, always. And never in sequence. I know this because I tried to order them. I had the time to try in that place. I would pick a year and a season—spring, 1929, for example—and squeeze my eyes shut and try to force recollection. But it was hopeless.

Remembrance comes or it stays away of its own accord and perhaps for good reason.

And then there's the fact that no two people remember the same event in the same way.

\*\*\*\*\*

My earliest memories are not of places but of passing by places. My remembrance is of motion, the movement of the *vardos* as they slowly rumbled and swayed along back roads and highways, their wheels turning noisily, heavily, accompanied by the clopping of our horses' hooves, hard on asphalt, muted when they were on gravel.

Sometimes our caravan would meet another. There was always, it seemed to me, some unease as the two columns camped together, each with their sunbursts of wagons radiating out from their own central fires, their doors to the flames. And then some contact—a joke, a batted eyelash—would soften our ancient and mutual suspicion, even of our own kind.

The children of the two tribes were usually first to join together through their games in the forests, by the rivers where we camped. I suppose I loved my brothers and sisters but I did truly love more the single night of connection when strangers came into my life—no history between us, and no future either.

When the children were settled into the thick folds in the wagons, exhausted from their playing in the night, I would strain to remain awake, to be the very last child sent to the *vardo*. Once, I hid on the ground under the wagon among the blankets and bedrolls used by the men and the older boys. I watched, my eyes dancing from the fire to the strange and known adult faces laughing around it. There were stories and songs to share. Accordions and violins came out and our sad or fevered music lasted until I fell asleep.

At these times of unplanned encounters, there were few tales of the ancestral past, whatever that may be. Mainly, hard information was exchanged about the road ahead, the road behind. I would listen, would then gain a glimmer of what to expect at the next city or town.

\*\*\*\*\*

I can't recall if I chose music or if it was the other way around.

I do remember, from the earliest age, trying to extract sounds from objects, smashing away at pots and pans, cutting lengths of branches to drum on tree trunks, the sides of our wagons, anything that could take a pounding. One day, out of frustration perhaps, my father pushed an old violin under my chin. Maybe I was five, perhaps six.

Oh, the noise I made! Dogs would howl and horses whinny at the scrapes and shrieks I first produced. Old women would pray for deliverance and the other children fled when I raised my threadbare bow.

It was my mother's bitter laughter which made me want to persist.

“You are a tinsmith, not a musician!”

There were a couple of violin players among our tribe. Although I was not of their immediate families, they took turns teaching me the techniques and the order of notes, if only, I presume, to sweeten my cacophony when they realized I would not quit. The first and continuing thing these old men did was hit me every time I picked up the bow with my left hand as I was inclined to do. Never a major blow but enough of a cuff on the ear to make me think about it.

So I did think about it and decided that I would not change. It was they who finally relented. They



reversed the strings and rigged up a mirror so I could watch their hands through my way of looking at things. That didn't work out well and so I gave up and trained my right to bow.

Some day, I vowed to myself, I would have my own violin and I would string it as I pleased.

Because our tribe always stayed together, my tutors were near and I would happily spend hour after hour with them.

I do remember the joy I felt when I learned to piece together the notes into a song I could recognize.

I do remember the joy I felt when, as I was extracting those notes, I at last did not wince at their harshness or dissonance.

I do remember the joy I felt when my bow hand did not tremble or the violin did not quiver with nervousness against my chin.

I do remember the joy I felt when I stood by the campfire and delivered my first solo performance.

I do remember the joy I felt when a magic thing happened at the moment of my first note, drawn sweet and pure, and each successive note the same, and I was astonished for it seemed that something else, not me and yet me, was commanding the strings.

I do remember the joy I felt when I heard whistling and applause as I finished that piece in front of my tribe and that none whistled louder or clapped longer than my father.

I do not, however, remember the names of my teachers—the two kindly and patient old men who would praise me when I did well and who had no reluctance to scold me when I played like shit.

\*\*\*\*\*

As it turned out, I was able to pick up foreign words as easily as I absorbed new musical notes.

“Did you know that you learned to speak early, before Hanzi, even before the girls?” my mother remarked upon hearing me mimic a few words of a language in a new country, I don't recall which one.

I have no idea where my facility with languages came from. I had only to hear a few words, see the speaker gesticulate and piece together the meaning and the sense of what had been said. Whatever the country, I would watch groups of people in conversation—in shops, standing around bus stops, loitering outside taverns. I would watch the way their jaws moved, their mouths made shapes and listen to them, so that I learned to imitate their tongues and could guess at their meaning.

This interest in foreign tongues and, for that matter, my fascination with music set me apart from the others of my family. I felt it then; I *know* it now. I know that, at an early age, there was a gulf which grew between me and Hanzi, my twin, and soon, between me and my family. I did not cause

this distance. They did not cause this distance. But the authorship really doesn't matter, only the fact of it.

There were times—perhaps many times—in my youth when I did feel lonely when I was alone. I would close my eyes and wish I could be as the others, laughing at the same jokes, concerned about the same activities of my—their—caravan, obeying the same rules and doing exactly what was expected of me. But there were other times—many more other times—when I was gladdened to be standing on the other side of the chasm.

Hanzi had no interest in music or in being with strangers. Well, maybe he did, but I chose first—or was chosen first—so he had to find something else.

He chose or was drawn to the horses, our quiet, gentle and strong horses which pulled the *vardos*. From the earliest age that I can recall, he would be with them, calm with them, stroking and brushing them, watering them, studying their eyes, liquid and completely without fear. They came to him when he whistled; I never could summon them.

I remember now that he picked up my violin once and I punched him in the shoulder as hard as I could. That was our rule. Never in the face or stomach or back. And no kicking.

We would pound each other in the shoulder a lot. It was the punctuation of our childhood, the ending of every dispute, the punishment for every wrong. I know that I hit him more than he hit me. He never was aggrieved as much as me, was always more compliant and placid where, so often, I railed.

How shall I look at this? That I was intent on justice over acquiescence, defiance over surrender? Or that I was merely a selfish little shit? On balance, I would vote the latter, though for many, many years, I thought the former.

I do remember hating the rules and laws which we all had to live by, whereas Hanzi shrugged and did as our customs dictated.

Everything we did as children had a lesson to it, not one that naturally occurred to us like touching a burning stick, but always a greater moral supplied to us by our mother. My mother governed and was governed by a slew of rules and commandments. There were taboos to obey, not casually, but deeply and unequivocally. As nonsensical as I came to believe they were—and at a fairly young age—my mother was humourlessly passionate about their observance.

My mother and we children were always washing. We could not shake a hand or touch someone until we had washed in the morning; we could not touch another after we blew our noses unless we first washed. Our cleansing rites extended to the cutting board on which the food was prepared, not only after the all the stew ingredients were chopped or peeled or skinned but between each different food, lest they contaminate each other, even though they were about to be joined in the stew pot.

Another water ritual was the time in summer when we camped near a stream or river. Mother was the supervisor, dividing up the tribe along the riverbank, sending the men farthest up stream, then the

very young and very old women, then children and the horses. Some women were sent to the farthest point downstream. Their numbers changed but there was always a secluded place for the *marime*, as my mother called them—the unclean. Much later, I understood that these women were unclean because they were either menstruating or pregnant.

The same descending order was duplicated for the washing of clothes.

Always the water. It is funny—or perhaps not—that most times when we were addressed by the *gadje*, they usually began with ‘you dirty Gypsy’, the way you say ‘devout Catholic’ or ‘white Russian’, when, in fact, we are the cleanest people I have ever known.

I was also taught that cats were unclean because they licked themselves and buried their shit with their paws. Dogs were unclean for the same reason unless they were guarding you at which point they magically became clean even though their habit of happily using their tongues to explore themselves had not changed. These many years later, I still loathe cats and have never kept a dog.

Thanks to my mother, our tribe never traveled alone. We were continually surrounded by evil spirits who haunted the forests, the very wagons in which we rode.

Every one of us would be told and retold of the demons. That’s not exactly true. We knew nothing of their shape or history. We were only schooled in the many ways we could ward them off. In this, my mother had absolute conviction that her potions, her amulets and her incantations were keeping us all safe.

One day, I swear innocently, I did give my mother pause.

“Mama, why do the demons want to hurt us?” I had asked. “Why aren’t there any good spirits?”

Mother became angry and she stammered. I recall that.

“Because...just because...that is what they do. Their *only* purpose is to harm the Roma.”

I cannot say where my father stood on this business of demons although I know I once asked him.

My father was a blacksmith, and, by all accounts, a very good one, able to work in metal, creating or repairing well, everything from pots and drinking cups to horses’ shoes.

He was working at the forge and anvil he would set up when we had settled for a while. He was making a horseshoe, pounding the orange-hot steel with his heavy mallet.

Tap, tap. Bang! Tap, tap. Bang!

He would lift it up with black tongs to examine it. Then, tap, tap, bang! Until he was satisfied that he had made the perfect arc, the perfect sides.

For a child, this ceremony of hot iron was endlessly fascinating. Best of all was the plunge into the

grey water, the angry hiss and sudden steam as the orange winked out.

I asked him then about the demons and about Jesus too, I think.

He again held up his tongs wrapped around the cooling horseshoe.

“If I keep making these as well as I do, there will be no harm from any damned spirit and Jesus will have no choice but to bless us,” he said, then he spit on the shoe and it sizzled as the heat from inside the iron came again to the surface.

I did not have any idea, that day, what he meant and can only guess now.

\*\*\*\*\*

I was filled with pride and excitement when Hanzi and I were first sent out of the *vardo* at night to sleep with my father and my older brother under our wagon. I thought it was a sort of initiation rite, some passage to manhood. I have, of course, ruined that memory with the later realization that we were cast out of the wagon to make room for more children who were coming at a steady rate.

But that first night outside I couldn't sleep, lay on my belly with my chin propped in my hands and stared at the fire as it consumed itself. Sometimes there would be a pop and sizzle from the wet wood but then, as I drowsed, the flames died down leaving only embers and the sweet smell of wood smoke.

I remember enjoying the maleness of the situation, the snoring, the garlic gases and belches, the sheer size of my father as he turned under the mountain of blankets. I remember Hanzi and me wriggling and jostling under our shared blanket. I punched him once on the shoulder and my father reached around and cuffed me.

Each time we were about to become a larger family, my mother positioned herself—or her clothes—at the lowermost part of a stream. How large a family, in truth, I cannot say. Fifteen or sixteen children, but I don't know for certain. The numbers changed—up and down.

I also don't know what my mother thought about her prolific production of offspring but once I recall her surveying her family huddled around the fire after the evening meal.

“They say we steal their babies,” she snorted, as she swept her hand over us children. “Just think how foolish *that* is. We have enough of our own. *More* than enough.”

I came to recognize when another little brother or sister was about to show up. My father would do the cooking and, though our food was simple, he managed to do a pretty terrible job of preparing it, the end result nowhere close to the taste of the meals my mother produced.

My swelling mother would appear one day with her hair undone. The tight braids wrapped and pinned about her head were loosed and her long tresses, still with the memory of those braids, would cascade down onto her shoulders in symmetrical waves. I hardly recognized her for her face, like every woman's face, was softened by the swirling frame of hair.

My mother had not become free or casual about her appearance. I found out that her loosened hair was a bid to convince those pesky demons not to wrap the umbilical cord around the baby's neck and so strangle it.

On the day or night—usually the night—of the birth, mother would disappear along with several other women to a tent specially set up at a distance from the wagons. In the forests, she would bring life, life that I wasn't allowed, no one was allowed, to see until the baptism.

The swaddled baby was placed on a small blanket, its wriggling form oddly visible under its covers. My father cut his hand with a knife and sprinkled drops of blood on the cloth, saying: "This is my son."

"What is my brother's name?" I asked.

"We cannot speak it until the baptism," my mother whispered to me, "lest the evil spirits learn it."

The baptism would take place on the banks of a river or stream. My new sibling would be immersed and invariably would cry. One such ceremony was in early winter for I remember the banks were white with snow and the water frozen. My father broke the thin ice with his boot and my mother quickly dipped the newborn who became hysterical from the shock of the cold. I had to look away.

"Might as well prepare him early for Roma life," my father said to me.

By the coal stove in the *vardo*, my mother massaged the shivering child with oil until he calmed down and regained a human sort of colour and then she gently tied a necklace around his skinny, wrinkled neck. This talisman was a squared piece of flattened silver with three wavy horizontal lines.

I too wore a talisman around my neck until I was a young man. It was a flat, round stone with the image of a half moon etched onto it. Someone, perhaps my father, had carefully bored a hole through the stone so that it could hang by a leather thong. I replaced the thong many times over the years before I settled on a sterling silver chain. That was in Munich. Shortly after, when I was sent to Dachau, they confiscated it. Some could say—my mother among them—that I was now unprotected and should therefore not be surprised at the evil which befell me.

But the fact is the evil began when I was forced onto the truck and I had the talisman then.

I wager that, somewhere in the world, my amulet exists still. It may be in unnoticed service around the throat of the one who stole it or it may have been returned to the ground. It may lie in a drawer, a long-forgotten memento. Perhaps it rests forever on a stream bottom where it sank at the end of child's careless throw. In the moving water, I think sometimes, the image of the half moon would become fainter and fainter until it was polished away.

While my mother believed in omens with all her heart, the exact time, nature and victim heralded by the various bad signs were unfathomable to her—to all Roma. She was unwavering, though, that some kind of evil was surely approaching.

Once, unafraid, I was gazing at an owl in the branches near one of our encampments. I had drawn close enough to see the bird's yellow eyes, to see the ruffling of its short neck feathers as its head swiveled all but independent of its body.

Then my mother was upon me from behind, grabbing my ear and wrenching it, twisting me away from the creature which had transfixed me.

The owl cried. I cried.

“Death! Death is coming!” my mother shrieked.

I did not argue, of course but I couldn't help thinking as I was led away that the owl was still on the branch, still in the world, an omen still, whether we could see it or not.

And, of course, someone did die. It was weeks later but connected in causality by my mother who loudly reminded me and everyone in the family of my unflinching gaze upon the harbinger bird of death.

It was my uncle this time. I was eight or nine and he was quite an old man. I can't say for sure what made him die and must confess, from time to time, I have thought that, perhaps, I *had* been the cause, as my mother claimed. In my head and in argument, I can deny superstition but, say what you want, facts are facts, at least to a nine-year old boy. I gazed upon the owl; my uncle died.

My uncle shivered and sweated and coughed. I watched him suffer; we all watched. And not only from my tribe. Distant relatives and friends from other tribes turned up from distant places; I didn't exactly know how.

There were signals and fixed points where messages were passed though, as far as I knew, no one could write and no one could read. I wasn't with my clan long enough to learn their code but it worked.

The mood was sombre for days. They took my uncle from his *vardo* and set him up under a canopy where, as custom dictated, all his friends and relatives came up to him and begged his forgiveness for the bad things they confessed to having done to him.

He was insensible at this point, giving no sign he heard the lengthy list of sins committed against him by his good friends and loving relatives and so provided no absolution. If he had been aware, I imagine the shock at hearing the torrent of confessed crimes and betrayals by his close family and friends would have killed him.

My mother took us twins aside and asked if we had ever transgressed against my uncle.

“No,” I instantly replied, as did Hanzi.

“Are you sure?” she demanded.

“Yes,” we answered in unison. I glanced at Hanzi, urging him with my eyes to confess but the little shit did not. Someone had to come clean.

“Well...actually,” I began, “I took his pocketknife once and broke the tip off the blade on a rock.”

“You must tell him,” my mother said firmly.

“Why?”

“So he does not return from the dead to haunt you and make trouble for the rest of us.”

“He’d come back from the dead over a broken knife?” I asked.

“Tell him!” she hissed, her face contorted.

Shaking, I approached the old man who wasn’t really there and, with my mother’s eyes upon me and nothing rehearsed to say, I bent down to his ear.

“It was an old knife,” I whispered. “And you did beat both of us for breaking it, so I think we’re even.”

My mother was beaming with pride as I left my uncle’s deathbed.

“Don’t you feel better?” she asked.

“Much, *much* better.”

I felt even better when I cornered Hanzi and punched him as hard as I could on the shoulder for it was he who had taken the knife and broken it.

Our encampment had grown to more than four times its normal size. For days, I could hear the intermittent crying and wails.

Barely breathing, my uncle was taken away and washed then dressed in his best clothes. I saw the washing, saw his emaciated body, his white, loose flesh. I heard his moans as each movement, no matter how gentle, did greatly pain him.

I wished him dead.

“Can’t they wait until he passes away?” I cried to my father.

“We cannot touch him then.”

When the female crying in the camp turned to prolonged wails one night, I knew my uncle had died. I remember the mourning time as not being very enjoyable, for me, anyway—selfish little shit

that I am—because I was not allowed to eat or play.

My mother was the centre of activity, covering mirrors, emptying vessels of water, and directing the preparation of the feast to follow the burial. It was she who made certain that all the children had at least one piece of white clothing, even a shred of white material, for the funeral. It was she who welcomed the relatives arriving too late to witness the death.

And it was she who collected my uncle's things—some clothes, his coffee cup and that old pocketknife—to place in his rough coffin so that he was equipped for his trip to wherever he was going. It was she who plugged my uncle's nostrils with beeswax so that he would not be inhabited by evil spirits on that journey. And it was she who prayed to Sara-la-kali or Black Sara, as my mother sometimes called her, the strange saint who would light my uncle's way.

Among the living, there was no washing or combing of the hair and the men did not shave. I discovered much later that the Jews did the same thing as us around death.

In that place, of course, Jew and Gypsy did not often wash or comb or shave much either, though not as an article of faith, although there was much to mourn.

A few kilometres from our encampment there was a town and a graveyard to which we journeyed with my uncle's coffin. That was the time when I had my part to act out. Flanked by my two old music teachers, and just ahead of my grieving aunt, I had to play the violin at the front of the procession.

Walking and playing the violin at the same time is not all that easy but I remember doing well—as judged by the hair tousling I received afterward. I also remember enjoying the attention of the townspeople who stopped to gawk as we travelers entered their town, a large and solemn parade of red and white, wreathed in pain and the sad music I made.

The priest met us at the cemetery. He seemed annoyed by all the lamentation for which we are famous. Anxious to be rid of us, his words were short, plain and without emotion. I do, however, often recall the part about ashes to ashes, dust to dust, although, in truth, that is more likely because of the many reminders I have had since.

As they lowered the coffin into the ground, our people tossed handfuls of dirt and coins and paper notes from different countries. I recall staring with fascination at the many currencies the foreign mourners had brought so my uncle had some spending money on his journey, although I did wonder what kind of commerce was conducted in the afterlife. I recall trying my best to ignore the pine box as it was swallowed by the earth.

Our band returned to the campsite, a little less subdued than the trip out, probably lightened by the prospect of nourishment after our days of fasting.

Before the feast that night, my mother was again active, collecting everything my uncle had owned. She burned his remaining clothes, bent his spoon and fork and smashed his wine goblet and shaving mirror. She directed my father to shoot his dog, which he did. I cried at that because he was a good dog, always eager to play, always with a wagging tail.



My mother then gathered her children and told us that under no circumstances were we ever to say our uncle's name aloud again.

In one evening, every trace of my uncle was gone. Our tracks were covered and no demon would find us. So my uncle passed from this earth and from our collective consciousness, as if he had never lived.

Tshurka. My uncle's name was Tshurka.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Once you break a taboo, you cannot unbreak it," my mother announced to a collection of her children. "It lies in ruins for you until you die."

"You can't be forgiven?" I heard myself ask, continuing my tiresome tradition of arguing reflexively.

"Not if you knew what you were doing."

"Well, that's just stupid," was my incisive judgment.

"This is *all* you have, this is *all* you are," my mother declared.

"It's not much then, is it?" I had asked and felt my mother's hand stinging on my cheek, the one, the only time she would strike me.

Years later, I did learn that Gypsies do forgive trespasses, that the unclean can become clean again so long as penance was done, contrition was sincere. My mother omitted that detail.

Years later, in that place and several others, I learned authorities also very much admire the imposition of arbitrary, hard, and permanent dictates. Forgiveness and mercy simply complicate things when you are in the business of penning and murdering large numbers of humans.

My mother may have taught me the rules for Roma survival, but it was my father who taught me the tricks of it—where to be in a lightning storm, how to stay dry when it rains, where and how to snare game, how to pull carrots, search for wild leeks, which mushrooms would nurture you and which ones would kill you. Right down to the surest method of murdering a resting fly. From above and slightly behind, if you want to know. Its eyes, its suspicion, are not sharp in that direction. I have done it many times and it is always the same.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Nanosh, you will come with me this time," my mother instructed me, as she usually did, without the slightest room for debate or escape.

Nanosh was my secret name, known to and spoken aloud only by my mother when we were alone together.

I stuck my tongue out at Hanzi when no one was looking. He was to stay in camp, tending the horses and I, I alone had been selected to accompany my mother. He punched me in the shoulder, even though he was pretty much useless away from the company of our horses.

My mother was transformed in front of me, changed into something dark, dramatic and forceful. The make-up was the most prominent feature, applied heavily, inexpertly maybe, as though it were a mask. On the streets of the town, she was completely sure of herself as her skirts swished and her jewelry jangled and she addressed the passersby in a loud voice.

“Come and see what the future holds for you. You, sir! Are you interested in knowing what lies in store?”

As it turns out, not many people walking down a street are suddenly struck by the urge to have their fortune told. With each refusal—some polite, some crude—my mother would trail after the pedestrian, pleading, and cajoling but only up to a point. Then she would loudly threaten to curse them. This did bring a few people back. They would give her small coins just to not be saddled with a Gypsy hex.

But some would only hesitate, then walk on, and it was at them my mother would hurl invective and promises of calamity. The grim intricacy of her curses was always commensurate with the rudeness of the rejection.

“May your nice suit become infested with hungry lice which then burrow into your cold heart!”

“May your nose stuck in the air fill with rain, rot and turn black, and fall off your face!”

Most times, however, my mother would find a prosperous area of the town and go door-to-door, choosing the mid-day when wives were home and husbands at work.

Before we stopped at our first house, she told me that my name was “Nicholae Dubjek”.

“Why? That is not my name,” I protested. “Why can’t I be just Nicholae?”

“The *gadje* need to hear two names.”

My job was to stand before her, her hands on my shoulders as the doors were opened. I was instructed to look up at the housewife, make my eyes as big and hopeful as I could.

Believe me, I can make these eyes of mine very big and very hopeful. Immodestly perhaps, I can say there are scores of women on two continents who would tell you precisely that.

As a mother and child at the door, we would, at first, meet with much rejection. Many doors slammed, many insults.

“How dare you use a child for your confidence tricks! Be gone before I call the police!”

“It’s not a hard thing to say ‘no, thank you’, is it, madam?” I remember asking.

After a time in the area, my mother would build up a small but consistent clientele. I would return with her to these regulars, a passport no longer but a prop, a point of conversation. There was much hair tousling back then, many words of praise at my cuteness and self-possession and, best of all, many treats to collect to later share with my brothers and sisters—although, in truth, they had done absolutely nothing to earn them beyond not being there.

In the light of ordinary houses, I saw how out of place this exotic woman, my mother, appeared. But I learned that half the illusion was created by the atmosphere she would set. She would close the parlour curtains, turn on the lamps and drape them with scarlet scarves such that the room was bathed in deep red.

I would peek from the hallways and kitchens, and listen to my mother crooning with a softness so distant from the barking she reserved for her brood.

“Give me your hand, dear,” and she would caress and study, kneading the palm into softness and relaxation, gently running her fingers over the lines and bumps. “See, this is your love line. How deep, how long and straight it is! And these lines are for wealth, much wealth. Oh, but here, this mound, it speaks of illness unless you take care.”

It didn’t take me long to capture the logic of her different readings. Although all my mother’s predictions were sunny, she would often warn of temporary tribulation and danger as if, for some, the coming rosy days of love and money—always love and money—needed a down payment in pain.

“They are convinced that misery and misfortune will follow them,” my mother explained. “For only a few coins more, I can protect them with a talisman.”

“Are their hands very different, mama?”

“No. But their eyes are. Some want only to hear of simple joy. Others are troubled by the ease that such good fortune will come to them. They are satisfied only when they have had to work for it, suffer a little.”

It wasn’t always palmistry. Sometimes tarot, sometimes crystal ball gazing, sometimes tea leaves.

“See. See the shape of the leaves. It is...a...a...”

“A boat! It looks like a boat,” the customer announced.

“Exactly what I was about to say!” my mother quickly agreed. “You will have an exciting journey on the sea, full of adventure and romance.”

Light would return to the parlour, and my mother would return to seeming out of place amid the

ordinary condition around her. But the new addition to the room was the positively giddy expression on the customer's face.

"Why do you not predict robbery or murder or sickness or poverty in the tarot?" I asked. "I have seen the hangman and the skeleton in the cards."

"Would you, my son, pay good money for bad news? My talent —the talent of all in this profession—is to tell them what they want to hear. And besides, everyone remembers what comes true and forgets what does not."

"Mama, won't you look into my palm and tell me what will happen to me?"

"Never, my son, never. You must find out for yourself."

"But if it works for the *gadje*, why not for the Roma?"

"Have I ever said it worked?"

After some years of being her child escort, my mother retired me and the job passed to Arben, several years younger than me and judged to be, by then, more appealing to her clients. Arben? Please. Spare me. He was without charm or presence.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You can learn to read and write," my father said to me when I was perhaps ten years old.

"You did not," I pointed out, and was ashamed for causing the pained look in my father's eyes.

"Perhaps it was not needed then but...but the world is changing very quickly and I fear it will not turn out well for the Roma unless we change with it. The *gadje* have never liked us, but now, they are more organized in their hatred. They have written down our names, our children's names, where we travel, how long we are gone. They are setting up camps for us. We cannot stay in parks or fields as easily. Before, even when I was young, everyone was a farmer. The cities were small and easily avoided. Now, there are the factories, electricity, telephones, and automobiles. Everything goes faster except us in our wagons."

Now sadness was in his eyes.

"And our young people," he continued, "they see the things that everyone now has. They leave their tribes, go to school, take jobs, and even buy a house. Then where are they? Do they think they will be accepted because they seek the same things as their new neighbours? Do they think they can wash centuries of wandering from their hearts? And centuries of hate from the eyes of their new neighbours? I do not envy them."

"What about Milosh and Hanzhi?" I asked, ignoring the general, concentrating on the specific. "Why don't they have to go to school?"

My father explained that Milosh, his oldest boy, would be a blacksmith like his father. Indeed, Milosh, rather smugly I thought, enjoyed his special position of learning the trade beside his—our—father.

“And Hanzi?” I asked, invoking my twin, for I always believed he should suffer the same fate as me.

“He, he will be a fine horseman; there is always a need for a good horseman for training, for buying and selling.”

“And what about me?”

My father smiled and tousled my hair.

“What about you? You have the violin. You can learn things. Anything you want to learn you will.”

I was angry, I confess, at being told my future, at having to attend school. But, one winter—it must have been in Bucharest for the language was well-known to me—I did enroll at a school, a Catholic school, for there were black-robed nuns and priests in charge of classes and there were crosses everywhere.

I wasn't there long.

Away from the tribe, I was terrified. The other children stared at me; some called me names. Mind you, their epithets were no worse than I had heard on the streets of any town we had visited, but harder to handle here because I was imprisoned in a desk in a row in a classroom and could neither fight nor flee. Rather, I squirmed in my seat at the back of the room, drummed with my pencil and stared out the window at the huge snowflakes of an early storm randomly bumping into the glass, falling on the stone sill.

I could understand absolutely nothing of what was said in the classroom and would simply ape what the rest of the children were doing. Pretending to listen when the teacher spoke, pretending to read as they read, pretending to write in my notebook when they did.

In truth, it was the first time I had held a pencil in my hand. I watched a boy next to me as he wrapped his fingers around the tube and made marks on the white paper. I did the same and it felt and looked wonderful, I thought. Soon I was trying to copy the windowpanes and the ledge and the snow and buildings outside. Over and over again, I would stare at the glass then quickly return my eyes to the paper lest I forgot what they had seen and captured in my mind. All I had to do was translate it through the carbon onto the paper.

Simple, yes? Simple, no, as it turns out.

I had diverted my stream of imitation. I was completely engrossed in my drawing when I heard the

teacher shout.

“You! Dirty Gypsy boy! What are you doing back there?”

“Nothing.”

“I will give you nothing!” thundered the priest as he moved his bulk—surprisingly quickly, I remember—between the rows of desks.

I have also always remembered the sound of his skirts swishing against the desks, the children’s heads turning to watch, their eyes gleeful with the prospect of my punishment. Then, the book swung sideways slamming against the side of my head, pain like no other I had ever felt inside my skull, exploding in my ear, knocking me from my chair to the tile floor. The teacher above me now, his face reddened with rage, spittle flying from his mouth as he screamed at me.

For my sin of distraction, I was made to kneel on the hard floor in the corner with my arms outstretched, palms upraised, each holding a heavy book. When my arms sagged, the priest would fetch me a stinging blow on my backside with a slender cane accompanied by choice homilies about concentration and perseverance.

Such a momentous and cruel event, you may think, to be so branded in my brain. Not really. It is a vivid memory, but this holy punishment did not work, for I have spent a lifetime being distracted.

I also decided right then and there that education was not for me and did not return to that school or any other.

I could not tell my hopeful father that I wasn’t going back. Each morning, I would allegedly set out for the school with books I had stolen that first day. And each night, I would pretend to read by the lamplight just to see the contented expression on his face.

In between, I would fuck around all day at construction sites, at museums, in stores and restaurants until I was driven away. Soon, I had filled my notebook with my primitive sketches. Bucharest was a pretty big city and there was a lot to do and draw. Certainly enough to keep me occupied for the winter.

I never dreamt of showing my father—or anyone else—the drawings I made.

Then spring came and we were on the move again.

\*\*\*\*\*

It strikes me now, though it did not then, that the Roma are remarkable for their capacity to withstand all manner of shit. Perhaps it is a fact in the blood, perhaps it results from the centuries of contempt flung at them—us—and the tradition of mischief and crimes committed by us and against us that make the Roma endure together. And it does not seem to matter much how destitute, how lonely the wandering was, everybody stayed together. Our tribe lost or gained members through death or

birth, sometimes through marriage but never by desertion. Oh, you could be exiled from your clan. But that happened rarely. Only once in my sixteen years with them did I witness a banishment.

Mine.

\*\*\*\*\*

My father had a whistle he could make with his fingers positioned just so in his mouth. It was startlingly loud if you were near it and audible over great distances when you weren't. It would bring the horses in if they had been off grazing, bring the children in for mealtime if they were off playing.

I hated to be whistled at. If I were on my way back to camp when he made that piercing sound, I would linger. I would be the last child to return for the evening meal, no matter how hungry I was.

Later on, there were other sorts of camps in which I was summoned by a harsh whistle. I would still take my time responding even though I knew there was likely a beating in my near-future.

\*\*\*\*\*

I was, I think, eleven or twelve years old when we met the *vardos* from Spain. Immediately, you could see they differed from ours. Our wagons had been painstakingly decorated with beads and bits of glass laid out in intricate, ordered patterns. Theirs were wildly painted in bright and bold colours.

“Who are they, father?” I asked.

“Gitanos. They do not belong here.”

“They do not belong anywhere,” spat my mother. “They are not Roma as we are. A mixed race, a mongrel breed of Jews, Moors and Spaniards. I met them when I was a child and they are scum!”

Ah, but what happy scum! There, in the forests of Moldavia, I think it was, they made the first overtures but were rebuffed by my tribe. They did not seem angry or unhappy at the snub. They shrugged and went about setting up their camp, laughing and chattering. But, apart from their *vardos* and their musical language that easily rose and fell, I could see no great difference between them and us. They were on the open road as were we. Their fires were as our fires, their food, our food, taken from the same surroundings.

But after our separate meals, my people were sullen, quieted by suspicion and dislike, irritable and steadfast, as if our hard resistance would drive their impurity away.

Then the music began wafting out of their camp. I had heard many stringed instruments but none such as these. The sound of their guitar chords struck me like a hammer. Soft, playful, then a flourish as the players strummed. The rest of my tribe had also pricked up their ears but soon hung their heads and went back to grumbling.

Our people did not play music that night and turned in early. I feigned sleep as I slid under the

covers. I kept sliding until I had wriggled my way out the back of our wagon. In the dark forest, I circled our camp and made my way until I was crouched by a brightly painted wheel of a Gitano *vardo*.

As I approached, the music grew louder, more distinct. It had become faster, more intricate. But, to my great surprise, I saw it was only a single player making this music. His fingers were a blur, racing up and down the neck of the instrument, striking chords that seem to hang in the air while his hand was ahead to the next and the next, casual, precise and lightning quick, then a sharp but warm strum when all the strings resonated as one. It may have been the chill in the air but I remember shivering.

The hand on my shoulder startled me, much more than the same touch in daylight. Instantly, I knew it meant no harm and thus fear was transformed to comfort in the night.

“Come with me, boy,” said the woman’s husky voice in a kind of Rom tongue, an approximation of my language. “You cannot only listen in the dark to our music.”

The dark woman took my hand and led me out of the sheltering shadows and into the firelight. I trembled as their music abruptly stopped and there was silence.

“Welcome, young man!” the guitar player shouted, extending his arm towards me. “Sit!” he instructed, and I did.

“Of all your people, you alone will join us? You have courage.”

I felt anything but brave as I took a place among them by their fire, but didn’t mind his characterization of me. Who doesn’t like to be thought of as courageous? I didn’t say a word but happily sunk into their circle around the blaze, amid the laughter and smiles and jokes that did start to melt my frozen apprehension.

“We have welcomed you,” said the guitar player. “And now you must welcome flamenco!”

Their raucous sounds stilled as the guitar player hunched over his instrument and began playing again. It was a lament, complicated, slow, each note separate, encased by the silence of the night, save for the crackling of the logs on the fire. The trickle of sadness and longing soon swelled then soared and swooped, the sounds between the chords now the squeak and shriek of the strings as he bent and pinned them.

The song did not end, only changed back to slowness as a single female voice joined it. A foreign language with no harsh tone about it. Such a delicate pain coming from the two of them, the voice and the instrument. An accordion then wistfully chimed in, building and sharing the sadness. With each pump and pull of the accordion, its player would sway back and forth as he drew then forced air through the bellows. In the background, a murmuring chorus of singers added a sweetness where every word seemed to float and end in a soft ‘a’. I watched as all the Gitanos around the fire began gently swaying. And then I moved with them, feeling part of a hypnotic wave, feeling like a solitary reed among many other solitary reeds, now supporting each other and waving together in the wind.



A man's voice, deep and assured, grew into the song. Calm, calming, the near-basso singer projected more loudly and the woman's lamentation lost its regret, took on a peacefulness, something like resignation.

A woman—the woman who had startled me from my hiding place—rose and stepped onto a wide board. She twirled slowly in place, her long arms rising around her body until they joined above her head. I stared at the twisting shadows of her loose skirt, her billowing white blouse.

The tempo had changed—I cannot say when—but after a plateau of serenity, the beat imperceptibly quickened, for now there *was* a beat, a percussive thing, a tambourine and clop-clopping as if horses were passing by. Another guitar came in. Then another. Filling out the sound, adding a top and a bottom.

With the faster beat, a man joined the woman on the plank and the two bodies revolved around each other, close but not touching, locked in their graceful rotation, circling with shyness and reserve then joining, hands on each other, still twirling but fused now. Sharp stamping on the wood, first him then her. A fierceness, as joy turned to lust.

Soon, the entire crowd, young and old, perhaps forty people in all, had ceased to be the audience, had become part of the ensemble. Some were clapping but not as ordinary applause. Syncopated and deliberate. Some in double time, some on the offbeat, some loud and sharp, some muffled from deeply cupped hands.

Then sharp whistles, yips and cheers, inserted into every possible nook and cranny of the song, decorating it as the pounding of the dancers' feet became louder and faster.

It was years later, in Spain, when I learned that there was no randomness to the song I'd heard. Every sound—from a human or an instrument—came in and went away as they had been proscribed, centuries ago, to come in and go away. It did not diminish the effect on me—not then, not now. Whether performed in the deep forest of my childhood or on the broad-tiled floors of the *cantantes* in Jerez, there has always been a tear on my cheek, a laugh in my throat, when I feel the accumulated impact of those songs. I cannot see how any genuine human could feel differently.

I can't say how long the song lasted, most of the night it seemed. The performance ended abruptly, the dancers locked in a frozen, hard embrace after the incomprehensible speed of the crescendo.

And then there was silence.

I wanted to clap; my hands were poised to do so, but the guitar player, the first guitar player, leaned over his instrument. He began again with only a slight phrase, the phrase that had started the song—a coda of sadness—which trailed off, then came rushing back with a triumphant flourish.

Only then did come the thunderous wave of appreciation, cheering, stomping, laughing, and pounding their hands on their thighs—proof and congratulations for the beautiful thing they had created together.

I watched their faces, all sweaty now, the beads of perspiration glistening like tiny jewels on their dark copper skin.

The unit disassembled as they drank and joked and wiped the sweat from their faces.

“Boy! Can you play or do you only work in tin?” the first guitar player loudly asked.

“I play...some...the violin.”

“We would be honoured if you would play for us.”

They had no violin among them.

“I will come right back.”

With stealth I retrieved my instrument, waking no one under my family’s wagon, though my father did roll over.

I do not remember what I played, only how near I was to pissing my pants. It must have been a song I had learned much earlier and was able to, at first, automatically reproduce. I know that I hated the song as I played it, that it was forlorn and small against the exuberant tide of flamenco which had just rolled over me.

Severed from the Gitano group now, I felt so alone. That isolation hurt me for I remember taking that wound into the strings before my eyes as I drew the bow across them. I finished to silence, a pause, as if the audience was considering it or suspicious that the song had been incomplete, that I had more to offer them. But I didn’t. I wanted to cry.

Only then did they clap. There were even sporadic cheers and whistles and I thought I should be satisfied by their reaction. But, in truth, I wanted their approval to be louder, more enthusiastic. I wanted to be sure their response was in appreciation of the song I had played and not out of pity for a young boy near to tears.

“We have given you a song,” the guitar player announced. “And you have returned the favour. I, Carlos, declare it to be a fair exchange. The trade of all true Gitanos!”

The guitar player put his arm over my thin shoulders and clasped me to him boisterously. Then he stared into my eyes.

“You, my young friend, have the *duende*,” he said.

I did not, of course, understand, but it was then that I cried. And fled their circle.

I burrowed as stealthily as I could into my blankets under my family’s *vardo* amid the snores and exhalations of the men.

“You played well, my son. I am proud,” my father whispered and, with those words, caused more tears. I have never forgotten the tears of that night. Perhaps because, for the first time, they were not tears of aloneness or pain, but tears of joy.

The morning was crisp when I awakened. My breath hung above me in mist as I came to consciousness. I rolled over and saw that the Gitanos were gone, leaving only the faint wisps of their fire’s smoke.

“Just as well,” my mother snorted. “That demon music kept me up for most of the night!”