

Velina
English 242
Creative Prompt #2
Roma Narrative Assignment*



Image: Eugenia Maximova, Kitchen Stories from the Balkans

I wrote this as part of an American Literature course I took in my senior year at the American University in Bulgaria. The assignment was related to the Harlem Renaissance, which started in the early 1900s in the USA when artists like Langston Hughes and Zola Neale Hurston dared to write, for the first time, about what it was to be black and discriminated against. We were supposed to translate this into our Bulgarian reality and come up with a short excerpt describing a Roma child's first encounter with racism.

****I have left the heading above the way it appeared on my assignment sheet out of sentiment for the course, the time I spent at the American University and my amazing literature and creative writing professor, Michael Harris Cohen.***

City for a Dime

By Velina Derilova

I was a gifted kid. I first knew I was smart by the laughter, by the mirth I caused, usually over dinner, when all seven of us munched away, in the old, beaten-down kitchen of our one-story house in the Smolyan Roma ghetto. I knew it because whenever my father, a lean fellow with a slightly hunched back and bad skin, clapped his hands to get everyone's attention it was about *me*. It was time for me to *perform*. I didn't particularly enjoy it. I didn't hate it either. The clap signaled I had to do my trick, my thing. My dad used to raise a dirty glass and proclaim festively that Kosta, his bright little rascal, was going to entertain the family. He would look at me tenderly with his black watery eyes and smile revealing multiple tooth gaps. "C'mon, Kosta, let's hear you!" Then he would nod at my mom, a short, heavy woman, with a tired look on her face. She would rise automatically, go into the small hall, and come back with a shabby piece of paper. My dad would clear his throat pretentiously and wait for my siblings, all four of them older than me, to get quiet.

"Cu-ba," he would read awkwardly.

"Havana," I'd reply.

"Fi-n-land," he would go on.

"Helsinki," I'd say.

"Ca-na-da?"

"Ottawa."

"Ec-ua-dor?"

"Quito."

"N-epa-l?"

"Kathmandu."

The list would go on and on, for so long that everyone would start laughing and turning in their seats, amused by my rare talent. Had I been older, it would have occurred to me that they were having such fun because they had seen nothing like it, not in the Roma ghetto anyway, and thought I was something of a genius. But I was six and figured that being the youngest meant you had to serve as the family's clown. Since every clown had his trick, I thought, mine was my memory.

My dad's awareness of his son's extraordinary capacity grew every day and soon his Roma heart began throbbing with the idea of making money. He started going around the ghetto, telling people that his little Kosta could do something no one else could. He said he would let them see what it was if they paid. Initially, the money he would charge them was insignificant and there were at least five or six people a day who would come to see my show. My dad would call my name, take me away from whatever game I happened to be playing, and putting his hands on my shoulders possessively would command me to show so-and-so what I could do. He would read from the same sorry piece of paper and look at my little audience with one eye, relishing in their disbelief. I never failed to impress and soon the word was spread that little Kosta was the ghetto's big deal. As my popularity grew, my dad started demanding more money in order to let people see me. It worked for a while, but then suddenly the interest decreased and he needed a new plan.

One Sunday afternoon, he brought two white men to the ghetto. They were tall, clean and well-dressed, but I didn't like them, I didn't like their faces. They had canny eyes and looked at me smugly as I approached at my father's beckoning. He pulled the piece of paper from his right pocket and told the men to brace themselves for they would witness something they'd never seen before. They crossed their arms and gave me condescending looks. I felt a lump in my throat and wanted to run away. There was something about them that made me want to hide. My dad read the first country from the list but I said nothing. He looked at me nervously and read it again. I was silent. "C'mon now, Kosta, show our guests what you can do." I saw a thick shadow of worry cross his face.

I looked at my dad pleadingly, hoping he would send them away. I had done this dozens of times but now I didn't want to. I couldn't really tell why but my mind refused to obey. I'd seen white folks only a couple of times but not that close and I felt, on some level, that they didn't wish me well. Something told me to stay away.

The men looked at each other and sneered. The hand my dad was holding the paper in started shaking and little drops of sweat glistened on his forehead. He looked at them and then at me and then at them again. I felt like a trapped animal, my heart started racing and I could barely hold my tears.

My dad grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. "C'mon, you little devil," he said, his words squeezed through his teeth. The men laughed and said something to each other I couldn't make out. One of them, the bigger one, with a huge mole on his left cheek, took a banknote out of his wallet. He came close to me and rubbed it in my face.

"Come on you, *mangal*! They say you're a smart *mangal*. Are you now?"

I hadn't heard that word before but I instantly felt what it meant. I was low, lower than the lowest thing there was and these men wanted me to know it.

I wanted to break free and, out of despair, spat in the man's face. He was caught by surprise and stepped back, cursing. I used these few seconds and escaped my father's grasp. I knew if he caught me, he would beat me so I ran as fast as I could and didn't look back. I ran along the streets until I was gasping for air and could go no further. I sat behind a woodhouse at the end of the ghetto and cried for a long time.

I thought about that word and tried to figure out why I would be called that. I could not. All I knew was I didn't like it and I didn't like the way those men had looked at me. The huge injustice of name calling would only later become part of my daily life. It would become something I needed to cope with regularly. Back then, though, I only vaguely felt that I had been done wrong; wrong that I did not deserve.

This distant feeling, however, merged with another and it allowed me to start breathing normally again, right there, behind the dilapidated woodhouse in the Smolyan Roma ghetto. I knew I was smart and I knew this was something I needed to use. It was what could get me out. How exactly I did not know, but I sensed it was the only way I could fight it. The only way I could fight that word.