Conversation Pieces
Volume 42

Three Songs for Roxy

by
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For Christopher, as they all are and will be.

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A note on language: I used words and phrases from the *Kalderash* dialect, a subset of *Vlax Romani*. While the *Kalderash* may be found world-wide, they are just one of the families of the *Rrom* people. If you'd like to learn more about the *Rrom* people today, the International Romani Union (http://internationalromaniunion.org/home-en/) is a good place to start.

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Part One: Free Bird

Káko Fatlip's third wedding was the day after my sister Roxy's twenty-first birthday. So she begged and pleaded with our parents to let us drive to Florida together instead of both of us going with the caravan.

Mamo wanted to say no; our mother wanted us all together when we traveled. But right after we returned from the wedding, Tate had a *chav* from San Bernardino coming to look over Roxy. Mamo and Tate said he was coming to meet both of us, but he wasn't, and we all knew it. Besides, Roxy had a talent for whining, especially when she had an indisputable point: it could be the last time I spend any time with Kizzy before one of us becomes a *bori*, and then we'd be planning her wedding, and then she'd be pregnant and it'd never be the same.

Really, Roxy just wanted to spend a few days drinking and dancing inside the honky tonks in Large Head and Sweet Tea before everyone started arriving and we had to spend a week in ankle-skimming *tsóxa* playing good gypsy girls in front of the whole family.

Tate and Mamo knew it, too. But Roxy and I were really close, and our parents considered me as good a chaperone as any brother or father. So, Tate changed the oil and rotated the tires on the blue pickup, and I was off to get Roxy and then to Florida.

It was a two-hour drive south and into the Klamath to the fire station. Roxy'd been working as a wildfire lookout since May, and we'd spoken only a few times, although she emailed

me nearly every night, short bits of nothing, about the stars or the boredom, the heat or the rain.

Roxy was waiting for me by the trail head. She'd cropped her hair, and was brown from the sun and sharply thin, but when she threw herself into my arms, she felt fit and taut as a working dog.

"*Rovli*!" she yelled and kissed me. I hated when she used my nickname, "Stick." But I knew how she meant it, with love. She dragged me by my arm and introduced me to the other hotshots. "This is my sister, Kizzy," she said. Each one had a name like a superhero and shook my hand vigorously, even though they had to look up. Maybe because they had to look up.

"Are you a model?" one asked. Another asked me if I played basketball.

"Neither," I answered. As always, it sounded like a bit of an apology.

Afterward, Roxy shot me secret sister signals about this one or that, whooping a hand over her mouth at the handsome ones, tipping her wrist behind the ones that couldn't hold their liquor.

We ate a dinner of ham and eggs and talked excitedly, as if we weren't about to spend three days and nights on the road together, driving straight through/. Roxy admired my shoes and my sweater—both new, both from my job at Macy's, bought on sale and with my associate discount—and I ran a hand through her spiky hair. It looked wet but felt dry. "It fits better under the helmet," she explained.

As we helped with the dishes, the hotshots grunted and seemed like they would genuinely miss my sister whom they described to me as a "natural" and "a lot of fun." They seemed not to know what to make of me, so they made conversation telling me kind things about Roxy. They'd miss her, they said, and knowing Roxy, I believed them. They all made a show of helping us into the truck, and we let them.

Roxy waved at her co-workers and jumped into the driver's seat. She swung her legs for leverage as she adjusted the driver's seat. "I'll drive us out of here," she said. "I know this country backwards now."

There was nothing to it, really, just a mile back onto the gravel road, then the old macadam, then asphalt, then the highway. But Roxy bounced behind the wheel, so I returned to the passenger's seat.

"Where shall we go?" Roxy asked. "Toronto? Acapulco? New York City?" and smacked the seat between us. "I feel good. I feel lucky, *baXtali,*" she said, adjusting the rear view mirror and shoving the truck into gear. "*Po drom*," she said, pumping a fist as the wheels kicked up black dirt. "Let's go."

Mamo had strong ideas about *baXt*, luck. Finding a coin minted in one of our birth years was lucky. Picking up a rock with a hole in it was lucky. Seeing a butterfly was lucky. Carrying a packet of salt in your purse was lucky. Catching a falling leaf was lucky. Listing lucky things was lucky.

Feeling lucky was lucky.

And, as my mother would sit and watch natural disasters unfold on the television, footage of the hills outside Austin on fire, earthquakes cracking the Washington monument, major river floods in the Upper Midwest, and hurricanes pounding the Gulf, she would reiterate how I, her foundling daughter, was the luckiest of all.

"We could be any of those places," she'd say. "But we aren't." She'd reach out to touch me or stroke my hair, and if she couldn't reach me, just hold her palm in my direction. "Our road luck finds us here."

Meaning that instead of chasing *baXt po drom*, luck on the road, like the rest of the Gypsies, Mamo and Tate and Roxy—and, by choice, Mamo's brother Marko, his wife Gracie, and grandma Olive Dei—were tied here. In one place.

To the trailers rusting a ring into the ground behind the façade, propped against the converted mother-in-law house that Mamo and Aunt Gracie split right down the middle as an *ofisa*—one-half for Mamo's life coaching business and one-half for Gracie's fortune-telling parlor.

My family didn't want to take the chance that if my people came looking for me, when they inevitably realized their mistake in leaving me behind, they wouldn't be able to find me on the road like *Rrom* find each other.

"If you'd been *gadjo*," Dei told me, "we wouldn't care. They throw away everything. But your people lent you to us for a reason. They saw how we are for our children, and that's why they trust us with something so precious and beautiful."

It was love that kept them there, a few blocks from where they found me. There were other reasons, equally important but less primary: no one knew exactly what I was or what I would become. My insides were not exactly as expected, and my family couldn't risk me becoming sick or hurt. It took a complex, carefully-cultivated relationship with Stanley Levowitz, MD's superstitious and co-dependent wife Elizabeth Denny Peabody Levowitz, involving the best of both Mamo and Gracie's trade delivered to Elizabeth weekly, that got me medical care well under the radar of universities, research labs, and the government. *BaXtali*, Mamo said of Elizabeth's addiction to spiritual advisement and Stanley's deep embarrassment for his wife's mental frailties; he wouldn't tell if we didn't. So far, he hadn't.

I was also a complicated victory for Mamo. She wanted her children to have an education, stability, choices, easier with a permanent address. That meant less traveling, no matter how you did the math.

And I was a perfect excuse, a reasonable explanation, a water-tight alibi to put down roots that made her look good no matter which way it was told. She wanted her daughters to straddle worlds, between *Rrom* and *gadjo*. And if luck would

have it that one of her daughters was between two worlds, that was how it should be.

And so, anytime we got to travel was doubly exciting, fraught with danger and intrigue. That was why Mamo had wanted the whole family to travel together instead of letting us two girls go alone. But Mamo knew Roxy was right when she said this would be the last time we could be together like this. Even if Roxy didn't marry this *chav*—although Tate was pulling hard for him, from a real *Rrom baro* California family—she'd marry the next one, or the one after that. And even though Mamo hated the idea of me outside the perimeter of the five miles around the trailers and suspected that we were aiming to do some carousing or some such no good, she maintained the delicate veneer of deniability and approved the trip.

Roxy drove into the deep orange like she could outrun twilight. I crossed my arms and stared meaningfully at the speedometer, like the dutiful big sister. Roxy, like the naughty little sister, ignored my staring.

"I've got music," Roxy said, like that was what we'd been talking about, and reached behind the seat where she'd stashed her tote bag. She held onto the wheel with one hand and steered with the other, bouncing the truck like a boat close to shipwreck. I grabbed the wheel as Roxy pulled out a CD and shoved it into the stereo. "A friend made me this CD."

I started to curse out my sister and her driving, but Free Bird started and she turned up the volume to preemptively drown me out. "I love this song," she shouted and sang along loudly: "When I cleave your face tomorrow, will you dismember me?"

It had the desired effect. I stopped staring at the speed and laughed at my sister. To reciprocate, she slowed down the truck a bit. "And Candace Bergen cannot cha-a-a-ange." Roxy

slapped the steering wheel and held her face in a wolf howl as she sang.

But we grew silent when the song slid into its five-minute outro, and then into a love song I didn't recognize. I glanced at my sister and scratched my little finger. "A friend made this for you?"

Roxy didn't answer that, but she clicked the volume down a few bars, just low enough to talk. "So," she said. "What do you know about the *chav* from Barstow Tate's importing to sniff at us?"

I couldn't tell if I had made my finger itch by scratching it, or if I had just noticed that it was itching. I licked my finger and wiped it on my pants. "I don't know much."

"Tate will have one of us married off yet." She glanced at me, as if there was a question which one of us it would be. "I don't want—" Then she glanced at me again. "Are you scratching?"

"No," I said. "Maybe. No. Definitely not." I was. "Do you have any lotion on you?"

"In my bag," Roxy answered, and started to turn around to get behind her seat.

I grabbed her arm. "I'll get it." I pulled the bag onto my knees. Inside was a tumble of papers and a scarf that let out puffs of perfume when I moved it. Toward the bottom was a tube of cocoa butter. I rubbed some onto my hands. It stung.

It was starting. I wanted to scream.

The next exit had a truck stop and diner at the bottom of the off-ramp. Roxy flicked the directional signal. We pulled up to the pumps, and in the fluorescent light my hand looked as pink as the ham we had for dinner.

"Fuck," Roxy said. She looked at me briefly, concerned for my feelings, and then said it again.

"I can probably make it," I said.

"Fuck." Roxy sighed a few times. "No. You'll be miserable, and I will be miserable that you are miserable." She

leaned down to her bag, gathered at my feet. "You want to call Mamo, or should I?"

I looked at my hands. "I can take a bus home."

"Don't be stupid, *Rovli*." Roxy sighed again, then put on a brave face. "Go get ice. I'll call Mamo." She reached for me, but I had the door open, feet on the ground. "It's OK, Kiz. It really is."

"No," I said. "It isn't."

Roxy pulled her phone from the depths of her bag. "It will be."

Some stories aren't meant to be told. The more they get told, the more they change from what they once were, worn down and smooth like pieces of sea glass too beautiful to have ever been broken bottles. In the telling, mundane stories become colorful, colorful becomes fantastic, fantastic becomes legend, and legend becomes myth. Some stories aren't meant to be beautiful or mythic, they are meant to be true—*chachi paramicha*—and so those are better not told.

Mamo can tell me every detail up to and after finding me. It was too humid for Seattle, and the rains wouldn't come. Lake Union smelled like swamp gas instead of salt and fish. She was seven months pregnant with Roxy, who had settled right on her bladder. She and Tate had made it out of the trailer and into the truck when she had to go to the bathroom. She wouldn't make it back to the *trela*, and Gracie had a client in the office. So she waddled next door to the empty lot to squat. The lot was empty, had been empty for years, with green, plenty of private areas to let loose behind the support beams that held up the Interstate.

Mamo ran toward a beam, but then she saw me and called for Tate. After that, she said, her memories are fuzzy, like she was very drunk or dreaming. I was lying on a rock under a tree, she said, sleeping soundly and shimmering as if I were

wet. My legs were too long, stiff and loose like bell clappers when she picked me up. But I opened my eyes and wrapped my arms around her like I was much older than the three months she estimated I had to be, and from that moment, she says, I was theirs.

She doesn't remember whether she even went and peed.

I once asked Uncle Marko, who had the best memory in the family, for details. "I don't know, Kizzy. When they brought you home, you didn't look like anything."

"Like anything?"

"Like an infant, I guess. But you seemed, blurry. You were so quiet. And long. That was odd. I don't know. It took a few days before you seemed real." Then he shook his head.

I often waded through the blackberry brambles, looking for clues. The lot is still empty, the weeping maple thick and fragrant, the rock carpeted with a quilt of moss and mold and mushrooms thickly obscuring anything that could have told me anything.

I peeled for the first time when I was five. It started on my hands and feet. We hadn't yet developed our affiliation with Elizabeth Denny Peabody Levowitz, so Mamo was left to her own diagnostic devices. She immediately ruled out a burn or chicken pox; she knew those well. She hit the internet for articles about allergies, rashes, and eczema, as long scales of silvery skin peeled away from me in sheets to reveal shiny pink beneath. My mother soaked me in oatmeal baths, rubbed olive oil into my skin, put me in the sun, protected me from the sun, and decided, after looking long and hard at hundreds of photos of skin diseases, that I had plaque psoriasis.

Tate watched me rub my back against the garden wall like a molting snake against rock, and said, "She doesn't have soreitis, Mala. She's—" He didn't finish his sentence because he caught me looking at him, stopped cold in the middle of a scratch.

He'd say this same thing many times throughout my life. "She's…" and usually end by saying "…my girl" and hug me

in his hairy arms. And that moment, he said, "She's fine," and went over and picked me up, flipped me onto my tummy and rubbed at my itchy skin with his beard until I laughed with relief.

Later, I knew what he'd been going to say, each time. *Alien. She's an alien, Mala, doing whatever aliens do*. But he never said it. Not once when I could hear, and probably not ever.

He loved me. But also, there is no real Romany word for alien. There are only a few words for anyone not Rrom—*gadjo*, white person, *rakli*, non-gypsy kid, *streyino*, stranger. *Djuli*, American. But I've never heard a word that means someone not entirely—or at all—human.

My psoriasis, whether or not it was psoriasis, was one of my more convincingly human quirks. It was as if I was built by someone who'd read about humans, but never actually seen one. My growth spurts left me nearly seven feet tall. I had pores but never a blemish or a pimple. My hair was naturally shiny but all one flat color, like a cheap dye job. My toes and fingers were all the same length. And I had no lines across my palms.

This most disturbed my Aunt Gracie the most. Mamo respected Aunt Gracie's profession not because there was any credence to it, above and beyond the cultural tradition of it, the encyclopedic knowledge of human nature one had to have to be successful, and the fact that Gracie could literally itemize the long gold earrings she wore and the thousands of scarves she draped and tied all over her half of the *ofisa*. But, Mamo said, her *phen* had started to believe her own shit.

Dei tried to put the whole issue of my palms to bed one family dinner, looking up suddenly after one bite of her meatloaf and announcing that my palms were blank canvases upon which only I would carve the story of my life. "And we should all respect that," she finished, looking at Gracie.

A bag of ice was two dollars, and it'd last me until we got back home. I could lay my hand in it, then my arm, then my other hand and arm, and spare Roxy my fidgeting and moaning during the trip back to Seattle. I also bought Roxy two extra-big packs of peanut butter cups and a liter of iced tea, part as apology and part to keep her awake enough to drive.

By the pumps, Roxy was talking quietly into her phone and something about the way she slid her foot back and forth over a loose rock and shielded her face told me she wasn't speaking to our parents and not to ask questions. Her short hair stood up in electrified little spikes that made her look extra pretty and a little sad.

I slid over in the passenger seat and arranged the candy and tea on her seat, each one at a right angle to the other. I waited for her to be done.

When she opened the door, she glanced at the seat and smiled. "Thank you," she said, then placed them between our seats. She passed me the phone as she climbed in. "Call Mamo. I haven't yet."

I waited until we'd merged going north and dialed home. Mamo answered, the television blaring as it did every evening until Dei fell asleep, and she knew immediately as soon as I said hello.

"None of us will go," she said. "We will stay here. It's a bad omen anyway."

"Ma," I said, "I'll be fine. You all should go. And take Roxy down too. I'm fine; it's nothing different," and I was fine and it wasn't any different. I'd itch and peel, and then it would be over. My skin would be sensitive to lotion or perfume, and then it'd be another day. I didn't need care or an audience, and in fact would hide in my part of the trailer beneath a soft fleece blanket until it was done. Then I'd shake out the sheets and the blankets, and it'd be done. Until it happened again.

"We'll discuss it when you get home," she said, and after a bunch of kisses to Roxy and back and forth with everyone home, I hung up and opened the sack of ice at my feet. The cold felt great, and I watched the headlights of the cars heading south.

I would have fallen asleep but Roxy started singing again. "I've got to be traveling on now…" She turned to me, as if waiting for me to join in again, but when I didn't, she tapped her ear as if it were clogged. "Crap," she said. "That song. It gets in there, yeah?"

"It's called an ear worm." I leaned over and turned up the stereo, then pushed the back button until I heard the opening notes. "The only cure," I explained, and we sang and drove into the night.

Not too long after the first time I peeled, Mamo started telling Roxy and me the story of Lallah Pombo. She never told it the same way twice, yet it was always the same.

"There was and was not," she'd say, "in the long ago days, a gypsy family who found a young girl. They called her Lallah Pombo and took her back to their caravan, which never traveled. They raised Lallah and loved Lallah and Lallah was their very own. They all lived in peace and abundance and sang and danced for the sun and the moon and the rain, who together had raised them and loved them and made them their own.

"One day, the rain didn't come, even though the sun and the moon did. This happened for a long time. They sang for the rain, and they noticed Lallah couldn't sing on key. They danced for the rain, and they saw that Lallah couldn't keep a beat. They berated her and called her useless, but the only rain they saw came from Lallah's eyes."

Always, around this point in the story, Roxy knew nothing in the story was going to be about her, so she stopped listening and fell asleep.

Mamo would continue: "So, Lallah ran away to find the rain. She wandered to the city and she sat among scholars and merchants and laborers and adventurers, but no one knew where the rain lived. She wandered from village to village to city to city, and the only rain came from her eyes.

"One day, she reached the end of the world, at the shore of a great sea. The sun and the moon both shone down, and she knew she had found the rain. The rain appeared to her and asked why the gypsies sent her.

"I am useless, she answered. I cannot sing, and I cannot dance, and I have nothing else to give my people.

"The rain patted her shoulders and soaked her hair and spread across the lands. But first he told her, You have found me and are not useless. You will go home and you will tell the stories of what you have seen. Then your people will travel, and sing and dance the stories for everyone all over the world. And wherever you go, I will follow and the land will give you all that you need."

One night, Mamo tucked us in and told us the story. Roxy was asleep by the middle, as she always was, but when Mamo was finished, she tucked a stuffed elephant toy under Roxy's heavy arm, and a stuffed unicorn toy under mine.

Roxy rolled onto her new elephant and snored quietly. Mamo watched as I turned the unicorn around and around in my hands. "Do you know what it is?" she asked. "It's a magical animal. A unicorn. Very special. Just like you." Then she flicked off the lamp, kissed me, then Roxy, and left our trailer.

I lay in the dark, that night, for a long time. Then I pulled out a flashlight and my sewing box. I ripped the unicorn's horn off and carefully pinned the wound closed with tiny safety pins from a sewing kit.

Mamo never commented when she saw me lugging it around the next day, her Lallah Pombo and a plain old stuffed horse.

She never stopped telling the story.