

## Luck and Three Gypsy Folktales

The following folktales were collected in Seattle, Washington, in 1971. They were volunteered by Lola, a Gypsy woman in her seventies. Lola was Machvanka, a woman born into the California Machvaia Roma group. My first “informant” and, for a number of years, my dearest friend, Lola was the first child in her family born in the United States; she declared herself American, “one-hundred percent.” For the pleasure of her company, I often stopped by her apartment—which, toward the end of her life, was a short two blocks away from mine. I found her a woman of considerable charm and persuasion, with a tendency to make abrupt and forceful decisions. By the end of our first day together, for example, Lola announced she was adopting me as her personal chauffeur and “best friend.” After that, despite the unorthodox situation of a *gadje*’ friend and against unwritten Roma law, she proceeded to take me, the stranger and outsider, to all the local ritual events. Divorce is properly the business of the Roma court and she often mentioned the rebellion of her American-style divorce as evidence that she was, like me, a modern woman. We were, as she said, two women alone, both divorced, who needed each other.

For several years, anxious to impress me with our similarities as modern American women, she refused to answer questions about her childhood or the old days. My interest in Machvaia tradition, she assured me, was annoying and old fashioned. Once, she pointed out that the *law Romanes* forbids sharing information about Gypsy life with outsiders. I could appreciate that the Gypsies’ history of abuse had fostered a legacy of secretiveness and suspicion. But the Lola I knew was not a person overly concerned with these laws, and her excuse for refusing to answer my questions didn’t strike me as convincing.

A more cogent reason for her reluctance may have been the threat to good luck entailed by mentioning people and issues that are dead.

Although Machvaia say luck is fate and destiny, something like the blood you are born with, they also believe the future can, and indeed must, be acted upon to a better advantage. Luck was always Lola's focus, looking for good luck, avoiding bad luck, fostering new luck.<sup>1</sup> The past, she claimed, was mostly bad, sad memories that had no bearing on the moment. In order to institute a good luck moment, Lola habitually ignored my requests and refused to discuss anything as arcane as "the horse and wagon days."

I finally stopped asking questions or expecting Lola to make other than passing reference to the past. That's why I was stunned when she called and somewhat summarily announced, "I have something to tell you. Some of the old stories. Bring that machine [my tape recorder]." I could hardly credit what I was hearing; my first thought was that something had happened to change her mind and make her willing to risk a little bad luck. I suspect her folktale offering was a bit of a bribe. I had just returned from California fieldwork with her relatives, and she probably wanted me to know that I needn't have traveled so far; she, too, possessed a valuable cache of information.

I was, of course, at her door within the next few minutes, had plugged my tape recorder into an available socket, and was doing my best not to appear too anxious and expectant. While telling me these tales, Lola's voice lowered to a basso range and she stood up very straight and proud in what I presumed to be the formal oratorical fashion. We were in the kitchen, I in jeans at the chrome and plastic table, she in front of the stove, abundantly perfumed, wearing one of her handmade nylon house dresses, longish, sleeveless, and resplendent with oversized flowers.

### "The Mother"

This is a true story, *chachi paramicha*, true. My mother told me when I was little.

There were four brothers. Their mother filled the cooking pot up, a big pot, big enough for fifty people even, and fed them first. She would eat what was left over, bones, scraps, or nothing. The brothers would eat and eat. But they were always hungry.

So two brothers, the oldest and one other, thought about this. They went into the woods, deep woods, many, many trees, to find their luck. They met The God, an old man with a cane and a white beard. They told him their problem. "Old man," the brother said, "Why do we eat all the food and it's never enough?"

The old man said, "Put your mother to eat first and you will have enough."

So they went home and their mother was fixing a very little pot with food. And they put her to eat first. Then they felt full after they ate what was left in that little pot, and they have never been hungry since.

### **"The Daughter"**

This is a true story. My mother told me.

It's about two brothers. One was lucky. He had a big farm with lots of wheat. He was rich. The other was not so lucky. He was poor. But he had one daughter.

The rich brother was nice and he gave wheatland to the poor brother. But the poor brother destroyed it because he was unlucky.

The poor one went to look for somebody to tell him something, to help. He went to the forest and found an old, old man. Maybe a saint. He said, "We are two brothers and my brother gets richer and richer. But I get poorer and poorer. I do everything. I work hard. What's wrong with me?"

The old man answered: "When your brother was born, your people were playing with twenty dollar gold pieces. When you were born, they were playing with rocks."

"What can I do?"

"Put the gifts in your daughter Yelena's name."

So the rich brother gave the poor some of his property, some rich wheat land. And the unlucky brother put it in his daughter's name. If anybody asked, he was to tell them the wheat belonged to Yelena. "If you don't, it will burn."

But the poor man got puffed up. When the people asked him, he said "It's mine."

So the fire started, and the man called out: "This wheat is Yelena's." And the fire stopped.

### **"The Wife"**

This is a true story that my mother or my mother's sister told me.

There were two brothers. One was born when they had gold money to play with; that was the lucky one. The other was no good. He was born when his family were playing with rocks. The unlucky brother asked the lucky brother, "How come you got everything?" And the lucky brother told him why. "What should I do?" Unlucky asked. The lucky brother told him, "Go look for your luck."

So he walked around the forest, the highway. He walked a long time and when it got dark, he got sleepy. He went inside a pigsty and fell asleep. When he woke up in the morning, he felt something in his shirt. It was heavy and he thought it was a snake.

So he went home to his rich brother and asked him this:

"Brother, will you put a red scarf around your arm and take this snake out of my shirt?"

But the brother wouldn't do that, saying "I'd rather be without a brother than without a hand."

The unlucky brother went to his sister and he said, "Sister, will you wrap a red scarf around your arm and take this snake out?"

But she refused, saying, "I'd rather be without a brother than without a hand."

So he went to his mother and asked her the same thing.

But she said "No. I'd rather be without a son than without a hand."

But when he went to his girlfriend, she was different.

Girlfriend: "I'm afraid to do it, but I love you so much, I'm going to try."

So she tied a red scarf for protection around her arm and pulled out gold, more and more gold. Until there was a stack of gold.

Then the poor brother saw that he was lucky. He said, "All you guys don't mean good for me. You aren't my family any more." He married the girlfriend that helped him. She was lucky for him. He got smart. He got rich.

They say that's a true story. But I don't know. But how would they say that if they didn't know something?

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Lola learned these folktales sometime before 1910, shortly after her family arrived in the New World. All the children in the camp, including the cousins, would sit by a fire after supper. (The men had their own fire and the younger women were busy with chores.) That's when Stanya—Lola's mother—told them stories, scary fairy tales, amazing adventures that kept them in suspense. "It was like a movie we could see so real before our eyes. We didn't mind hearing the same one over and over." The tales come from Serbia, a place Machvaia seem to have been settled, more or less, for some time and where the Roma faced less discrimination than they did in many other parts of the Balkans (Crowe 1994:207). The stories come from a time of traveling, a time when the people lived in wagons and tents and the men traded horses while the women told fortunes.

Lola affirmed the validity of her narratives and their source with the following convention: "This is *chachi paramicha*, a true story. My mother told me when I was little." By categorizing these tales as *chachi paramicha*, Lola distinguished them from *xoxani paramicha*, make-believe fairy tales about flying carpets, giants, and magical tests of strength. Rena M. Cotton (Groppe) has written about other possible genres: *hira*, tales of reputation, and *svata*, "folk truths" that are related to the young and designed to instruct them in the ways of Gypsies (1954:261–65).

Lola's *paramicha* seem to have overtones of *svata* (folk truths).<sup>2</sup> At any rate, what she meant by "true" is open to speculation. To me, her life seemed rife with fabulous events, some of which she described, without surprise, as "miracles." Nevertheless, in her telling of "The Wife" Lola admits the fragility of her own belief. She begins by asserting that the tale is true, then qualifies this judgment at the end: "But I don't know. But how would they say that if they didn't know something?" Gypsies, particularly fortune-telling Gypsies, are keenly aware of the relativity of belief. For the past millennium, they have moved from one country to another and lived in the context of alien beliefs. When I asked Lola's daughter, Katy, about the Romanes word for truth, Katy hesitated, thought a bit as she tends to do, and then responded with a worldly, "'True' and 'Truth.' 'True' is only what is true for you. Everyone has a different opinion."

When I read the preceding folktales over the phone to Lola's remaining children and some of the grandchildren—hardly an ideal situation, I admit—I was assured that they were unfamiliar. Even when I read the tales in person and asked for comments, the consensus was that the stories were, on the whole, woefully out of date. What seemed to bother my audience most was the unfamiliar country setting—the wheat, the woods, the pigsty.

In these Serbian Machvaia folktales, wheat and wheatland, pigs, snakes, twenty dollar gold coins, stacks of gold and food are the items that connote good luck when treated in a certain fashion. Even today, dreams of lucky snakes and stacks of gold hold their own as omens of luck to come. But now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, pigs and wheat no longer suggest wealth, whereas apartment buildings—the wealthier families own them—diamond jewelry, gambling and winning, lavish feasts and weddings, and cash money all do. Perhaps that is why the responses of my third- and fourth-generation listeners

were often politely lukewarm or sarcastic. Consider the reaction of Cholly, the twelve-year-old grandson of Lola's nephew: "What's this stuff about pigs and wheat? Must have been the old pioneers in their covered wagons."

Back at the turn of the century, besides the clothes and gold carried in their pillow-bags, the Machvaia immigrating to America brought agrarian peasant values regarding land ownership and use. In middle-age, Stanya acquired a farm with pigs, goats, and chickens in the San Diego area. Stanya's brother, the original Machvaia pioneer, sold his farms in Serbia and bought some wheat farms in North Dakota. Stanya's brother-in-law eventually acquired a tomato farm in Sacramento, where Lola's older children remember being required to help during the harvesting.

The next generation had little interest in farming, however, and by the 1940s nearly all the farms had been sold or lost. In part, this trend reflects overall changes in the country's economy: the small farms and country roads that crisscrossed America have faded rapidly over the last century. Before, Lola told me, food and clothes could be traded for, or were free. But now, with the cash economy, "Money wants to drive everybody crazy." I was there when she learned that the hall her son had rented for a Saint Day cost him \$500 in cash. After huffily plumping the pillows on her sofa (which didn't need plumping), she called him to demand that he give her money back. It seems he had "borrowed" several hundred to invest in the commodity market and then claimed the price of sugar went down. "The money just disappeared? How could that happen? Everybody likes sugar."

Another reason for the abandonment of Machvaia family farms may be that keeping track of titles, insurance, and property deeds and paying water bills on time are matters requiring a fair degree of literacy; in addition, such regularity of habit wars against the people's preferred spontaneity: paperwork is not a Machvaia forte. Also, the rising fame of fortune-tellers as successful breadwinners whose men form a leisure class of wealthy playboys (for such, the Machvaia believe, is their reputation among the American Roma) didn't accord well with a rural lifestyle. Farming went out of fashion. Today's Machvaia are city people. Cities are where a Gypsy psychic reader can find a multitude of prospective clients.

So, can folktales that are no longer told or understood,<sup>3</sup> that have lost their environmental contexts and much meaningful imagery, that

lack many variants for comparison, and that I, as an anthropologist-to-be, didn't fully investigate at the time—when I asked Lola what they meant, she gave me a look of furious annoyance—provide information about a particular society or answer the difficult question of why an item of folklore exists now, or why it may have existed in the past? Are the tales representative, as Dundes writes, of “a people's image of themselves . . . a mirror of their culture” (1980:viii)? Is it possible to extrapolate from then to now?

Here, I will treat those aspects of Machvaia culture that inform the themes of these particular tales, the general cultural assumptions that are shared by the teller and the audience and that illuminate the material. Presuming that Machvaia social structure, beliefs, and values are still much the same, and using my acquaintance with the inimitable Lola—whose life spanned most of the last century—as a makeshift bridge, I will follow Dundes's prescription and suggest how “folkloristic patterning acts as a critical cultural force in shaping opinion and prejudice [and] furnishes a socially sanctioned outlet for cultural pressure points and individual anxieties” (1980:x). I will deal briefly with what appears most altered during this last century in terms of the tensions evident in the tales, those changes that might account for the disappearance and rejection of these folktales by my often youthful audience. Finally, I will return to the narrator Lola and what the folktales have taught me about my *BaXtali* friend.

## The Folktales and Lola's Luck

Somewhat in the manner of Joseph Campbell's hero and his journey, the tales begin with an unlucky Machvano going to find his luck. Demonstrating the folly of some behaviors and advocating others—do this and you will prosper, do that and you will not—the tales might be considered morality tales in the sense that good and evil actions usually lead to good and bad luck. Neglecting a mother's needs, for example, or playing with rocks will result in poverty and unhappiness. Paying attention to whatever someone older, wiser, and/or more saintly advises is likely to point one in the direction of good luck.

In each case, the agent of luck is a woman and the hero learns that his luck depends upon how he treats the women—mother, daughter, wife—in his life. Ostensibly, the tales are primarily addressed to the boys and young males who may be listening, and the lesson, of

course, is that when they are men and “the boss” of women they should be considerate of their mother’s needs, not too proud to acknowledge the power of a female (even if she is their daughter), and willing to abandon everything familiar and dear for the good luck of a courageous good luck wife. They are “how to” tales<sup>4</sup> that suggest how behavior—specifically, treatment of women—might be altered in order to make good luck and to prosper. Machvaia women are the breadwinners, responsible for earning the household income, and they are famous among Roma for their success as fortune tellers. Machvaia men are dependent on their wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law to provide both home and money. Women can live alone; men cannot. An old saying among Machvaia, “The woman makes the man,” certainly predicts narrative scenarios in which women are germinal to a man’s luck.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Stanya (Lola’s mother) narrated these stories, and in 1971, when Lola retold them, Machvaia were in no way unisex; men and women were considered of a different kind, nature, temperament, luck inheritance, and understanding. Formally separated into same-sex groups for purposes of work and play, social contact was restricted, and women expected to be a mystery to men, even as men were to women. These tales were apparently intended to clarify and sweeten that mystery and to instruct the naïve and inexperienced in the necessary interdependence of the sexes.

So what could the stories have meant to Lola? What might she have learned from stories that portray women as the ultimate source of good luck? Did Lola the child listen and picture herself as the pivotal force in her family-to-be? As I have noted above, luck was central to Lola’s self-concept; even when things weren’t going well and she was low on funds, Lola always described herself as lucky and refused to admit otherwise. The other Machvaia still called her a Lucky Woman—a *BaXtali*—based on her many years of wealth and fame while married. Once when we were traveling on the freeway and I had her attention, I asked her why, when she was no longer rich, the people still called her “Lola the Lucky”? Dismayed that I had brought up such an unlucky topic—her current financial situation—and vocally substantiating what she preferred to deny, she told me, “Hush. I’m going to make it again. I have the feeling.”

Optimism is one means to luck and Lola maintained a fearsomely optimistic good luck attitude. Enterprise and effort also procure luck and Lola was always busy shopping, sewing, cleaning, cooking, dancing, telling fortunes, celebrating. In addition, giving makes luck—and Lola was generous to a fault: she gave advice and good news to whomever would listen, as well as a constant windfall of gifts to relatives and visitors. But, as the tales suggest, luck may also be found as a result of changing one's behavior. During the years I was in Seattle, Lola looked for her luck *po drom* (on the road) in the manner of the poor man in each of the folktales. She tried her business luck in six different locations, moving all her belongings, painting and repainting, cleaning with Lysol, buying new draperies, and burning incense in all the rooms to drive out the bad luck ghosts. The three tales touch on less tangible changes that may bring luck, addressing such attitudinal and behavioral issues as generosity, humility, and gender roles.

### “The Mother,” Then and Now

At the time that Lola told these folktales, sharing topped the list of Machvaia virtues and food, the most elemental resource at a household's disposal, must always be shared. The ethic of sharing extended from family to community, even, at times, to outsiders. Hunger was still a very real memory for Lola and many other adults. In “The Mother,” sharing and shortage are two sides of the same coin.

The four brothers in the tale are not described as deliberately withholding food—that would be a shame subject to sanction by God and the Ancestors. Unheeding and unaware of the mother's need, the brothers eat all the food, large amounts or small, in an inconsiderate, if not greedy, fashion. In failing to notice their mother's plight, the brothers give evidence of their lack of respect, caring, and that positive personality trait much admired in males, the soft heart. They aren't “feeling sorry,” which Katy, one of Lola's middle daughters, says is tantamount to love.

What can be expected of sons in this society? The structure of family roles formally invests authority according to gender (females subservient to males) and age (the younger obeying the older). As they become adults, sons gain considerable authority by virtue of being men, both within the family and in terms of the other Roma. The obligation

of a son regarding his mother becomes somewhat ambiguous. (Females normally marry out.) Indeed, the main claim a mother has on her grown son's cooperation and concern is based on affection.

The affection of the mother for her son, on the other hand, is conceived as inborn, boundless, unending—and one of life's few certainties. Not unlike the story, I have often observed that a mother, as nurturer/provider, will treat her sons indulgently, pleasing them in every way she can. As often as not (and to varying degrees), her unappreciative sons, grown or not, will tend to take her generosity for granted. "The Mother" dramatizes this contrast of attitude and behavior. In a way, Stanya—the narrator who first told Lola the story, and herself the mother of three sons—campaigns for good treatment in this tale. In order to achieve some measure of satisfaction, the four brothers must learn the empathy so critical to family and social life, becoming sensitive to the feelings and needs of others. At the end of the story, the sons offer their mother food, perhaps a metaphor for love and consideration. Serving her first shows the respectful affection that gratifies their needs and fills their hearts.

I recently read this story to Lola's daughter Katy when we were headed for a death memorial in Sacramento. While I read, Katy kept nodding her pink-blond head in approval. "Yes, the mother is always for the children," she said. Machvano Steve, Katy's husband, was driving. He joined in, agreeing there is no human bond stronger than that between the mother and her children, a bond so universally powerful that it is even believed to be characteristic of American outsiders as well. "You understand," Katy poked my arm with one manicured hand and, with the other, dangled her cigarette out the car window. "You have children."

Of the three tales Lola told me, this one seems to evoke the most emotion in Lola's descendants. The message of always being good to the mother seems to have lost none of its potency. Steve assured me that he had helped his mother every way he could. "She died when I was young," he said. "The angels wanted her." But a major change relative to the folktales under scrutiny has been the preeminence of women as the principal wage earners in the last several decades. When Stanya told this tale, although the woman had the primary responsibility for making money, both husband and wife were involved. Then, for most of the last century, the woman was dependent on the man to set her up

in the psychic/fortune-telling business and to find a means to advertise that business. Today, the men have become entirely dependent on their women's earning capacity and many young women have learned to do everything themselves: get a business site, advertise, pay the bills. Today, mothers are the main support of their unmarried sons.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the central conflict of the tale turns on the disparity between male and female roles, women being inclined to give their sons "everything" and their sons tending to lack consideration. But in the current cash economy, men need the service of women as income perhaps more than ever, and unmarried men seem less likely to abuse the mother who is the household breadwinner—who else will buy them a car?—or to mind whose name the money is in as long as they get to spend it (cf. "The Daughter"). Nevertheless, some tension remains between the roles of "mother" and "son" and the subsequent actions that are deemed desirable. Mothers still want their sons to succeed in the ideal male role as soft-hearted, given to generosity at public events, display spending, and charities, but in the twentieth century tensions about the proper allocation of generosity became more prominent than the importance of generosity alone.

In "The Mother"—as in many tales—the action is motivated by a "lack": in this case, a shortage of food (see Propp 1968). Such a theme had relevance to Lola's time. But sharing and shortage are not critical issues now. No longer threatened by "starvation," the *Machvaia* in America currently tend to over- rather than under-eat. Whereas a voluptuous size was once admired and associated with big luck, now the people talk about going on diets. These days, the incontinent spending of the men is a more pressing problem than obtaining and sharing food. The use of income from the women's readings is often disputed: women tend to focus on the needs of their families; men, on personal enjoyment and/or the public generosity of sponsoring ritual events and charities of various kinds. (A folktale today regarding sons and mothers would likely deal with the tension between private and public delegation of the family's income.) Perhaps the disparity between the needs of the immediate family and desire of the men to build reputation has always been a pressure point, but it is one that may well have grown since the success of the women as breadwinners. The 1970s and '80s saw a cultural flowering of ceremonial events; engagements, weddings, saint feasts, baptisms, and death com-

memorations became competitively lavish. During the past decade, a more conservative attitude toward money has obtained. As the people became more invested in paying their bills on time and protecting their fortune-telling territories from other Roma, and perhaps since women have asserted more control over the family's income, public rituals have lost some of their splendor, and generosity of this kind as the means to reputation has waned.

### "The Daughter," Then and Now

In this tale, the bad luck of the protagonist stems from being born during a period of deprivation and/or a period of unlucky activity; he was born when "the people were playing with rocks." Because the deeds of the living will affect their descendants and the main thrust of good and bad luck is believed to travel, like karma, through bloodline, bad luck became his unfortunate birthright. As a consequence, the poor brother has to go look for his luck.

Ideally, the Machvaia extended family is a cooperative and corporate financial unit sharing expenses, income, property. In Lola's time, whatever material wealth one member possessed was ideally available to all the others. A consequence of this sharing is that relatives have a mutual investment in the welfare, the behavior, and luck of each family member. In this story, for example, the rich brother is generous in the appropriate Machvaia way and gives the wealth of productive wheatland to his poor brother.

The conflict in the tale turns on the matter of public ownership. And the luck is only effective when the daughter is publicly acknowledged by the father as proprietor of the wheat. But why this condition when, according to the ethic of sharing and the necessity that pools family resources, all the Machvaia know that whatever Yelena owns could automatically be accessed, without controversy, by her father?

One sentence in the text attracted my eye: "But the poor man got puffed up." I hear the word *puchardo*—puffed up with unjustified pride—often. Gossip derides pretentious people, those who brag and show off, who don't know how to offer respect and consideration for others. The ideal for both men and women is to be rich, good hearted, generous, and *proste*, a term that connotes an attitude of humility and compassion for others. Such a person behaves in a manner readily understood and appreciated.

Perhaps “The Daughter” isn’t about building the daughter up, but rather about knocking the father off his high horse. In a society where, by virtue of his gender, the oldest male is final authority in all matters pertaining to his family, responsible for their welfare, virtue, and deportment (he must answer to Roma law on the latter), there is always the possibility of “the boss” losing his sense of proportion. In the past, when the people were traveling and the environment was often physically hazardous, quick decisions were essential and a man’s reputation depended upon his ability to convey command over his women. His economic power related to the number of daughters he had telling fortunes (and who would, eventually, bring a brideprice), and the number of horses he owned. In the sixties, the people no longer traveled. But daughters were still an income source, and, even yet, men ate first, went through the door first, told women when to speak, when they would go home, and were concerned to give the impression in public that they made all the family decisions. At ceremonials, some of the oldest men would usually insist their aging wives stand behind them and attentively serve them while they ate. However, unchallenged greatness at home can affect a man’s character and public life adversely. Hubris can be a handicap when a family depends upon the combined effort and support of all members. Unless the father in the tale can temper the puffed-up aspects of his behavior and humbly admit to the world at large that “This wheat is Yelena’s,” he has no luck. Indeed the whole family, including the daughter, benefits when the unlucky man becomes lucky. One message of this tale is that luck can be found anywhere, in anything. The trick is to learn to recognize and preserve it without becoming grandiosely concerned about one’s public image.

But this story also reiterates the continuing belief that women constitute men’s luck. Lola may have chosen to tell this story because it resonated with her own experience. From the time she was old enough to toddle to the door, Lola was the child her parents sent to ask for food. She said, “I was youngest and the prettiest. The farm people were good, good hearted. They’d tell me to take this, I’ve got too much. Apples, chickens, biscuits that the ladies were baking.” Lola didn’t remember much about her father; he died when she was eight. But I surmise that, unlike the father in the folktale, Lola’s was not too “puffed up” and proud. He sent little Lola, his daughter, to the farmer’s door to beg for food. He didn’t make the mistake of the poorer brother in the folktale; he knew Lola was his, and the family’s, good luck.

When I read “The Daughter” to several of Lola’s grandchildren, the consensus was that yes, the daughter was the father’s luck. Because the women earn the money, provide domestic service, bear the children—children are the whole point of Gypsy life—this belief reflects the normal and average household situation. But Lola also told me that only when the wife and the husband work together will the family have good luck. And, of course, that is also true. (It is also another, less apparent, message of these three folktales.) It was certainly her experience. As long as she and her previous husband worked together—she told fortunes, he ran a used car agency and spent any money he made on himself—and entertained together and were good to each other, they were increasingly rich and happy. But when her husband began to abuse her, she fell in love with another man, got a divorce, and the “bad times” commenced.

Of the three folktales, this one seems the least relevant to the present time. In fact my audience had nothing to say or to add regarding the hero’s difficulty learning the story’s most obvious lesson, which is to give recognition to the good luck of the daughter. Since Stanya and Lola told the tale, male overweening and arbitrary pride has become, particularly during these past decades, less of a problem. Today’s young men are more democratic, less authoritarian, young women more outspoken, and a masculine ego that depends on female submission is found only in a few very traditional families. Today’s young women largely conceptualize themselves as both able and autonomous, and young men’s self concept need not rest on dominance or mastery of women. In part, television watching may have altered ideas about the capabilities and roles of women and men; owing to the explicitness seen on the television screen, the opposite sex becomes less mysterious on a daily basis. In addition, television may have provided new information concerning what can be construed as “manly.”

Economic realities and concerns have shifted as well. In “The Daughter,” the rich brother willingly shares with the poor brother. This was still the expressed ideal in the 1970s, when Lola told the story. Today, communal sharing throughout the extended family has become more often the exception. Adaptation to the money economy requires a careful inventory of need by each household member in order to meet daily expenses. Nowadays, a man or woman who owns property keeps it secret, ostensibly to prevent the ill will of jealous people from eroding good luck (in Machvaia belief, wishes and will

have power), but also to protect property wealth from being accessed by desperately needy relatives.

Furthermore, renting a house or apartment in California requires an impeccable credit rating, as well as the supportive recommendation of former landlords. While Lola usually tossed her bills under her sofa cushion and paid them only on the rare occasions when a creditor called to express a personal interest in her family's welfare, today's Machvaia must be more circumspect. Whenever business fell off, Lola moved and looked for luck elsewhere. In negotiating the hazards of urban life in the twentieth century, moving to find new luck became more complex and difficult. It is also interesting to note that the real estate I know about is listed in one of the children's names because their parents, despite the best of intentions, tend to lack good credit. Money is harder to make, the people tell me, since Americans began advertising on television as psychics. The generosity with money that sponsors ritual events and social cohesion is still admired and sought, but difficult to facilitate. Much Machvaia paperwork still skirts legality. To literally take to heart the humbling lesson of this tale—that it is better publicly to declare Yelena as the source of good luck—would be foolhardy. Although Yelena is indeed the legal owner in terms of American law, the people know it isn't so and, to avoid legal penalties and complications, advertising the fact must be avoided.

### "The Wife," Then and Now

This folktale begins when a younger brother, who is unlucky, obeys his older brother—who is presumably wiser by virtue of age and authority—and goes to look for his luck. Unlike the previous tales, he doesn't have to learn to be caring ("The Mother") or humble ("The Daughter"). Instead, taking action in what he hopes will be the lucky direction, he walks through the forest, the highway, everywhere, and ends up—is it ever so accidentally?—in a pigsty. There, with the help of his girlfriend, he finds good fortune in his very own shirt.

The beginning of this transformation combines the magic travel of sleep (what happens in dreams has a concrete reality to Machvaia) and contact with a pigsty. Although today my friends inform me that a pigsty is considered an unclean place that ought to be avoided, it must be remembered that when Stanya told this tale a century ago in Serbia and rural America, pigs also connoted food or wealth.

When the hero begs his kinsmen for help, they refuse. Despite the protection of a red scarf, they say they cannot help. The reason for their refusal is identical, "I'd rather be without a (son, brother) than without an arm." My first thought was that losing an arm was a surprisingly heavy penalty given that, in Machvaia visions and dreams, snakes are ordinarily good luck. Snakes are frequent agents of transformation, important powers relating to the advent or loss of luck. (A phallic snake refers us back to the Gypsies' Indic origins; in India, Nagas are sacred snake gods and the lingam of Siva is worshipped in effigy.) Only the hero's girlfriend is brave enough to help him. And, voilà! The snake turns into gold! Instead of losing an arm, the heroine finds good luck.

This turn of events suggests that dealing with the snake is an appropriate role for the girlfriend, and the snake's arousal may well be a metaphor for the hero's budding sexuality. One message of the folktale certainly relates to the universality of the incest taboo: parents are forbidden to deal directly with their children's sexuality. And sex between siblings is also generally forbidden. These messages are underlined by the repeated warning line: "I'd rather be without a (son, brother) than without an arm."

Another message addresses the hero's coming of age and happiness (luck) with marriage. The red scarf protects his girlfriend, transforms the snake into gold, and introduces the wedding ritual as a referent. (During wedding rituals, both the bride and groom wear red scarves. In fact, marriage is an institution described as providing happiness and protection from several dangers, including that of sexual desire that hasn't been appropriately channeled in a socially responsible direction.) In Gypsy lore, both snakes and penises are usually regarded as symbolic of good fortune. Luck, then, comes to the couple in "The Wife" as a result of the socially responsible employment of the male's sexual energy in a relation to the appropriate (Machvaia) female partner.

In the final section of the tale, there is more to be considered. Machvaia parents arrange marriages when their children are teenagers, hoping to prevent their running away with someone unsuitable. Marriage is legalized by brideprice and brides usually go to live with the new husband's family. Brides are believed to bring a windfall of incoming luck; the entire extended family and bloodline rejoice

when they get a new daughter-in-law. In the normal run of events, even today, it would be highly irregular for a Machvaia family to be unaware or unsympathetic regarding a son's pubescent sexual needs and to fail to arrange for his marriage. But in this folktale, the son takes the lead. He divorces his parents, rejects the authority of his father and the elders, and refuses to share his wife's earnings. He apparently denies his mother the benefit of his wife's company and domestic help, as well as the support and delight of grandchildren. He goes against the *laws Romanes*, which stipulate that the natal family always comes first in terms of duty, loyalty and affection.

Practically speaking, these sorts of actions are very difficult to pull off. Everything is learned in the context of family and, even today, when a young couple runs away, the pair usually returns within the week to the shelter of their respective families. A young couple, particularly a century ago when the groom might be only fourteen, would hardly have the requisite experience to survive alone. The question is how, in the folktale, was the hero enabled to reject the authority and support of his family?

The tension here is between natal family obligations and maximizing luck. Rereading my fieldnotes and remembering similar situations—initially, they are called “runaways”—I realized that even the natal family can become the source of disastrous luck. In fact, about ten to fifteen percent of the mature men I know are said to have “gone on the wife's side”: they are described as being more involved with their wives' families than with their own. A young husband may realize that sticking out the crises in his own family of birth will only create more bad luck: sometimes the natal family is “no good” or “crazy.” Sometimes the natal family has no fortune-telling territory and the wife's family does. Or sometimes the natal family can't afford brideprice, and another family, lacking a son and heir, will adopt a poor young man by giving him a daughter as his wife in exchange for years of loyalty and service. The last message of this folktale seems to be “if your wife is lucky for you and your family isn't, go live with her family.” It is interesting to note that Stanya's husband, Lola's father, did precisely this. He left his family in Serbia and followed his wife, her brother, her sisters, and her parents to the United States.

But other interpretations also exist. At various times during the 1990s, I questioned Lola's children and grandchildren as follows:

“What do you think this story [“The Wife”] means?” The following are some of their responses, along with my reactions to them:

Pahkooshay (Lola’s cousin): “What does it mean? Even your family is no good.” (His brother recently refused to give him money to help pay for his daughter’s wedding.)

Mara (Lola’s niece): “That’s true life. Marry this one. No money. She doesn’t make a cent [telling fortunes] and that’s not good luck. So marry another.” (It’s true that a woman’s money-making ability is crucial to her good luck.)

Katy (Lola’s most fastidious daughter): “Well, that’s to show you could find luck any place, even a pigsty. Ugh! The last place I’d look or sleep. But somebody else can try it. Not me. I like a Beautyrest.” (When Katy was a child, she sometimes spent the summer on the pig farm of her beloved grandmother. She says her grandmother hired someone to care for the pigs and never went near them.)

Djordji Baro (Lola’s grandson): “Somehow he had to get some money because he was running out of everything. And his rich brother wouldn’t help him. When he visited, the rich one hid his money and his jewelry. All he had was a red scarf from his grandmother. So this girl was crazy for him. Even though his family didn’t like her. She was from a poor *uitsa* [group and kind]. But she turned out lucky for him. They got rich. They got lucky. I don’t think it’s that easy. Really.” (I believe this is an imaginative projection of Djordji’s current problems with his family.)

For Machvaia in the twenty-first century, the means to luck is still much the same as it was in previous centuries and as it is dramatized in the folktales. Men create their good luck by being caring, attentive, and kind to mother, daughter, wife and by paying attention to the nature of male-female relationships. Women become good luck by offering boundless generosity (“The Mother”), being provident with property and money (“The Daughter”), and acting boldly and courageously on behalf of the men they love (“The Wife”). The essential moral messages about how luck can be made and kept and how men and women should behave with each other remain pertinent to the culture of today. But the details of the story, the turns of the plots, the points of friction are somewhat different.

Since Lola’s death in 1975, certain ambiguities, the conflicting interests and pressure points of the folktales, have lost urgency. As

mentioned, men and women are no longer enticing mysteries to each other, and one of the main reasons for telling the tales—to educate the young regarding the opposite sex—is less crucial. The news that women are men's luck is no longer news (if it ever was). Women have higher social, domestic, and economic status and are less subject to the abuse and dominion of men. Also, excessive hubris in men is no longer necessary or desirable, thus negating the conflict between those male values once considered ideal or fiercely macho and the expectation of soft-hearted behavior. Further, hunger is only experienced by those who choose to diet, and the ethic of sharing loses force as each new household becomes more adept at money management and independent of support from extended family. Although the rule that luck only comes when the husband and wife work well together still obtains, many older adults live in their own apartments (as Lola did) and take care of themselves.

On the other hand, perhaps these tales were forward-looking all along, rather than outdated remnants of the past. After all, I see now that their narrator was a woman before her time. Without a husband or father to tell her what to do, Lola did those things women were not allowed, like living by herself in her own apartment. She claimed to have her “own mind” when, to Machvaia in the '70s, a woman with her own mind was a radical notion. Like the young woman in “The Wife,” she did things the other women were afraid to try. At a time that women seldom ventured out alone, she traveled all over the city by bus—“my son isn't much good at driving me in his car”—and liked to shop for herself, buying gifts for all the local families. These behaviors are certainly some of the reasons she considered herself “American, one-hundred percent” and could insist she was modern and not old-fashioned. It seems that the Lola I knew believed and behaved much as women, old and young, do now.

Only in retrospect, in the process of analyzing these stories, have I realized that their telling opened a new level of confidence and trust between us; it moved our relationship to a greater level of awareness and intimacy. With these tales, Lola revealed some of the legacy underlying her much advertised modernity, aspects of herself I couldn't have known about, beliefs and ideas that had shaped her identity and her life and that she now hoped I was ready to understand. With this gift she acknowledged her “old days” as important,

not trivial, and as valuable to us both, the teller and the listener. With this gift she was accepting me as someone willing to cherish the past and who, in addition to being her friend and fellow divorcee, was trying to become a teacher and an anthropologist.

As a child, Lola must have heard many stories. Between the pleasure of ceremonials and parties, stories were, she admitted, what the people had for entertainment. Did the theme of these particular folktales—how to find good luck (Lola's prevailing concern, when I knew her)—make them her favorites? Are these, then, the ones she remembered best? Perhaps the reason she chose to tell me "The Mother," "The Daughter," "The Wife" (my titles) had relevance to my new situation as the outsider woman, the *Djuhli*, living with Machvaia. She may have thought I needed to know what my role would or could include should I try to become a Machvanka. If the latter was salient to her recounting choices, it shows that she knew me and what my aspirations in the future would be better than I did at that moment.

And yet the stories are not prescriptive: they raise issues to be debated, not descriptions to be adhered to, and deal more with changing behavior than dictating tradition. At the beginning of the three folktales, the improvident hero must leave his family and everything he knows behind and go out in the world to look for his luck. As Michawi has written, changing and realizing one's destiny may require overthrowing tradition, disobeying authority, risking censure. Luck is not programmed by rote. Luck requires "heroic action in accordance with individual will [and] entails a capacity for isolation and separation of the self from the collective identity" (1989:30). As she herself described, Lola repeatedly went out "to look for her luck *po drom* [on the road]." Her life might be said to epitomize the hero's search in the tales she told. Did folktales like these act as a critical cultural force and set her in the revolutionary direction? Did they help her conceive a self that was independent enough to resist convention and make her harbinger of what was to come? Did these stories about how to find good luck preview her future, as well as those of her descendants?

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## Notes

1. According to Rena Cotten Gropper, who studied the Roma in the New York area for many decades and whose research antedates mine by twenty years, the Machvaia Roma may look for luck, but the Kalderasha Roma are more concerned about the possibility of spoiling luck (personal correspondence).

2. Gropper has written that “crediting the source of a story helps label its type. Among the Kalderasha Roma, it also establishes legitimate ownership of the fairy tales. Among both groups, knowing the source allows the listener to assess the worthiness of the truth tale” (personal correspondence).

3. The impact of televised stories on oral tradition was apparent even in the late 1960s, when I began my fieldwork. Lola particularly enjoyed sharing the movies she watched each evening, often calling to explain I had just missed “the story of the world.” Occasionally, I would think I recognized a movie I had seen or a story I knew. But Lola’s account invariably presented a puzzle; she was obviously seeing the narrative through her culture, not mine, and I was not yet able to appreciate the difference. In her version, for example, the story of Moses—one of her favorites—was about a man who had inherited a mountain of luck through fortuitous bloodlines, enough to make him God’s favorite. How I wish I had made the effort to record some of Lola’s television stories! At the time, however, a new supply of cassette tapes seemed an unwarranted luxury.

4. Compare the conclusions of Martin Lovelace in his recent article “Jack and His Masters: Real Worlds and Tale Worlds in Newfoundland Folktales.” Lovelace argues that some Newfoundland tales are “lessons in life as seen from the perspective of a subordinated social class”; they instruct young working men about how to behave in the workplace (2001:149).

5. I asked Katy’s son—a man whose wife had left him, taking their children—how he was getting along. He told me he wasn’t worried about the future; “I can always go home to my mother.” (That phrase has stuck with the strength of *Krazy Glue* in my mind. Porky, Katy’s son, was apparently in no rush to assert his independence. I, on the other hand, considered it my job as a mother to raise my teenage son to future self-sufficiency.)

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