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When I was little, I hoped to find my way back to my mother. Back then, the path was clear. It was right in front of me, next to her—a haven of water, shade, and comfort. She was my salvation. Yet, the ground around her was dry. Dead. Deep cracks in the earth, dust everywhere. Still, I thought I could reach her. I took a step forward, my vision blurred. I closed my eyes for a few small seconds, not wanting to lose her, and the ground became even drier, even more cracked. But she didn't seem to notice. She waited for me, sinking deeper into the cracks. Still, I believed I could reach her arms. My dream was to lay my head in her lap and have her stroke my hair. It's been 16 years since then, and I still haven't reached her. Where are you, mom?

When I was little, adults were more open in their behaviour toward me than they are now. Back then, they didn't wear masks on their faces, their language was different, even their gestures—nothing fake. I was surrounded by adults and mean people for a long time. Back then, those who were racist told me to my face. No one hesitated to say they didn't want to play with me because of my skin colour. Because of my black eyes, my ethnicity. "Go away, you're a gypsy!" "Look at her, she's an orphan!" They probably thought I didn't understand enough, so what did it matter if I heard them? Even if my mind didn't grasp all the words, my heart did. Though young, my heart had already matured. What my mind couldn't perceive, my heart heard. Everyone was my enemy. My life was destined to be filled with tears. I was 4 years old, but God had already taken everything from me. He had already taken my childhood, my brother, my family. "I've lost everything. Maybe in another life..."

I'm writing this article for everyone who has been or is in my situation, but it's more than that. It's a hand extended to the child within me. I'm sorry, little one! We all have the right

to love, to a family. It was stolen from you, but somewhere, someday, you'll find everything you need. Because that's how life works...

The first time I blamed someone for my misfortune was when I was 11, and I blamed my mother. Everyone around me said it was her fault, so it had to be... right? Who else? And if that wasn't the case, I needed someone to blame. When we're deeply sad or upset, we always look for someone to blame. I knew I was a victim, and in my suffering, I didn't realize that someone else was a victim, too. As naive as I was, I made the decision to distance myself from her, whether she sought me out or not. For years, I thought I had healed, that I had removed what was bad. Through her, God was punishing me.

So, what was the emptiness in my soul? The last tear on my cheek? My greatest shame? No one knew, but secretly, very deeply hidden, somewhere, in the night, years later in life, my younger self would emerge. Not to play, just to cry once more. For her mother.

The bravest thing I ever did was, after so many years, to reconnect with her. I hoped she would heal me. She told me her life story, and in that moment, I realized that, in this world, there is someone God hates more than me.

Interview Conducted by the Daughter

Daughter: How was your life before you had children, when you were just a small child?

Mother: My mother was extremely strict, just like my father. I didn't have a childhood from the start. Well, to know what girls of ten or twelve know today, what it's like to go and sleep over at a friend's? I wasn't even allowed outside the house. We lived in a house, and every day, as soon as the sun came up, I had to water the entire garden, take care of the house... I have eleven siblings, and I had to take care of all of them. Wash their diapers, look after them. My parents wouldn't even let me leave the yard.

Daughter: If it was so strict, how did you get pregnant? How did you meet your first children's father?

Mother: I wanted to escape. I ran away from home, and for a year or two, no one in my family knew where I was or what I was doing. I stayed with my first child's father at his family's place. They were horrible to me. Stingy and violent. Once, when I was pregnant with your older brother, Ionuț, his father tried to kill me with an ax when I wasn't paying attention. He hit me on the head, but I was lucky that, by reflex, I extended my arm, and he didn't manage to hit me hard. They didn't want to help me with anything. I didn't have much luck with the mother-in-law either. If I went to work, she didn't want to take care of you and your siblings until I got back.

Daughter: Why didn't you return to your family?

Mother: I tried, but neither my mother nor my father wanted to take care of you unless I paid them, and I couldn't really afford that. If I didn't have money, my mother would throw my kids in my arms and tell me to figure it out.

Daughter: How young were you when you had your first child?

Mother: Fifteen, sixteen years old. Then I had your other brother, I think two years later, and then you.

Daughter: Did you get support from their father?

Mother: No! He was under his parents' control. Afterward, he left. All I know is that he went to Spain, ended up in prison, and died there. That's what I was told.

Daughter: How did you manage afterward? Did you go anywhere for help?

Mother: Yes, I entered a program called "Mother and Child." It was a place where single, helpless mothers went and stayed with their children. They had staff there, so when I had to go to work, I left you there, and the rest of the time, I stayed with you. But I left because the other women looked at me with disdain and didn't treat me well because of my ethnicity. I went back, but nothing changed, so after that, I decided to put you and your brother, Ionuț, in foster care, but in maternal assistance. I never abandoned you.

After that conversation, I went home. That day, I began to understand her a little better. In her situation, who knows, maybe I would have ended up worse. But that doesn't mean I forgive her entirely. That is my right, my choice.

I have shed many tears too, and my younger self didn't deserve what she went through. Sometimes, when I was 7 and had to meet my mom at the monthly mandatory visits, my only meeting was with disappointment. Many times, I waited for two hours only for her not to show up. I would sit in the halls of Child Protection, crying, asking where my mother was. I would come home, and hours later, she'd call to apologize; she hadn't come because she hadn't woken up or because she forgot. But why couldn't I forget? How can a mother forget her child?

When I was very young, I hoped to find my way back to my mother. Back then, the path was clear. It was right in front of me, next to her—a haven of water, shade, and comfort. She was my salvation. Yet, the ground around her was dry. Dead. Deep cracks in the earth, dust everywhere. Still, I thought I could reach her. I took a step forward, my vision blurred. I closed my eyes for a few small seconds, not wanting to lose her, and the ground became even drier, even more cracked. But she didn't seem to notice. She waited for me, sinking

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At the end of this article, I want to thank the Universe for helping me get where I am in life. I never thought someone like me would ever make it to university, especially a university where I can finally study my native language, Romani. When I can master the language well, I'll go to my mother and tell her in Romani that I love her, and finally, after all these years, I can learn to be her daughter. I am also thankful for this project, which has helped me get closer to my mother and ask her the important questions from my heart, and it has helped me finally come closer to her.

Reflections and Lessons

My mother's experiences are a clear example of systemic discrimination and the difficulties that young Romani mothers face in our society. Her story highlights the pain and confusion that come from a lack of support and marginalization. Especially, the lack of understanding and protection of Romani cultural characteristics contributed to her sufferings and to the generational trauma.

This story not only sheds light on my mother's struggles and battles, but it also serves as a lesson for society. It shows how we have failed to protect and understand Romani children and their families and how systemic discrimination continues to take its toll on the Romani people. In the end, healing begins when we dare to ask the right questions, share our stories, and open our hearts to the truth.

This is not just my journey; it's also a cry for help and justice for all those children like me who have been lost in the cracks of this world. Let us find our mothers, find our way back to love, and help others on their journey of healing.

The story of my mother and me is a testament to human resilience and the constant search for understanding and healing. It is a call for a more empathetic and inclusive society that protects and supports all families, regardless of ethnicity or social status.

According to a 2021 report by the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children, and Adoptions (ANDPDCA), approximately 4,000 Romani children are in the special protection system in Romania. This number represents a significant percentage of the total children in state care, reflecting the over-representation of Romani children in these institutions. This statistic underscores the need for interventions and policies that specifically address the challenges faced by Romani children, including preserving their cultural identity and combating systemic discrimination.

There is an urgent need for more Romani foster parents to provide culturally respectful care for Romani children in state care. These children have not only emotional and educational needs but also specific cultural needs that are often overlooked. Without access to an environment that offers adequate cultural support, these children risk losing their identity and connection to their community.

To address these needs, it is essential that the child protection system integrates activities and programs that promote Romani culture and language. Developing training programs for foster parents that include specific Romani cultural education would be beneficial, so they can support the cultural identity of the children they care for. Additionally, organizing cultural activities and access to linguistic resources is essential for these children to maintain a connection with their roots.

Another important aspect is access to Romani mentors, who can serve as positive role models and guide these children through the unique challenges they face. Mentorship can provide emotional support and strengthen their sense of belonging to the Romani community, helping them navigate their complex experiences.

Through all these measures, we can ensure a more inclusive and respectful environment for the cultural identity of Romani children in state care, contributing to their overall well-being and reducing transgenerational trauma. It is our responsibility as a society to protect and promote cultural diversity in all aspects of life, including the child protection system.

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Keywords and phrases used by the writer

"Where are you, mother?"; "When I was little"; "Clear path"; "My dream"; "Racism"; "Gypsy"; "Victim"; "Pain"; "Soul"; "Healing"; "Confrontation"; "Blessing"; "Trauma"; "Reconciliation"; "Marginalization"; "Support"; "Lack of resources"; "Suffering"; "Transgenerational cycle"