

What you are about to read is my translation of a Serbian national fairy tale titled *Destiny*. The original story, of an unknown author, was published by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in “Srpske narodne pripovijetke” (1870) in Vienna.

Destiny was a mythical figure whose task was to assign people their destinies. His choices left people with very little agency over their lives, but upon closer look, *Destiny* also had little agency in the decisions he was making.

Additionally, the story branches off into a few smaller narratives, which seem unrelated to the main topic. Randomness is integrated both in the message of the story and into its structure.

Destiny

Two brothers lived together in a house—one did all the work, while the other only wasted time—drinking and eating all day long. God gave them everything: cattle, horses, sheep, pigs and much more.

One day, the working brother thought to himself:

“Why do I work for my lazy brother? I would be better off working for myself. He should figure it out on his own!”

And so, one day he addressed his brother:

“Brother, it is unfair, I am doing all the work and you don’t help me, you only drink and eat. I think we should divide all that we own between us.”

The other brother tried talking him out of it:

“Don’t do that, brother, we are doing well, both of us; everything that’s mine is yours, and vice versa. I’m content with everything you do.”

The working brother stayed by his opinion, so the lazy brother proceeded to say:

“If that’s what you desire, do so and divide our property as you see fit.”

And so the working brother did, he divided everything equally. The lazy one gathered his cowboy for cattle, hostler for horses, shepherd for sheep, goatherd for goats, swineherd for pigs and blacksmith for tools, and told them:

“My wellbeing is in your hands and the hands of God.”

And continued to live his life as he used to.

The working brother moved away and continued to do everything like before, always trying hard, taking care of the property and the crops, monitoring diligently, but to no avail—in fact, only disasters ensued, worsening by day. He’d almost lost everything he’d owned, leaving him even barefoot. Then, he told himself:

“I am going to visit my brother and see how he is doing.”

As he was traveling, he encountered a flock of sheep in a meadow. It had no shepherd, but a beautiful girl, who was spinning golden wool. He greeted her and asked to whom the sheep belonged, to what she responded:

“To the one I belong to, to him belong the sheep, as well.”

And he asked:

“And to whom do you belong?”

She replied:

“I am your brother’s luck.”

Then, he got angry and said:

“And where is my luck?”

“Your luck is far away from you.”

“But can I find it?”

He asked, and she answered:

“You should go looking for her.”

Once he had heard those words and having seen how healthy and big the flock was, he hurried to see his brother. Once his lazy, well-off brother saw him, he became sad and cried:

“Where have you been all this time?”

Then he saw that he was naked and barefoot, and gave him shoes and some money. After that, and after having enjoyed themselves for a couple of days, the working brother stood up and headed back home.

The instant he returned, he prepared for a new journey—he took some bread in his pockets, a cane in his hand and off he went looking for his luck.

After some days on the road, he reached a big forest. As he was passing through, he came across an old woman with grey hair, sleeping by a bush. He dabbed her with his cane, she barely opened her bleary eyes, but got up, and then she said:

“You should thank God I fell asleep, otherwise you wouldn’t have even gotten those new shoes.”

To what he said:

“And how do you know that?”

She said:

“I am your luck.”

He started protesting:

“You’re my luck, God forbid? What did I do to deserve you?”

But she replied:

“I was given to you by Destiny.”

He asked:

“Where is this Destiny?”

She responded:

“Go look for him.”

And in a split second vanished. He went on to look for Destiny. As he traveled he found himself in a village with a big inn and a big fire, and he thought to himself:

“This looks like a place of fun and celebration.”

And so he went inside. Once there, he saw a big pot simmering on the fire: dinner was being cooked and by it stood the owner of the inn. He called hello to him:

“Good evening!”

The owner instructed him to take a seat by his side and tell him where he was coming from. The working brother told him everything as it was before the separation and how afterwards he became poor, leading him to go on a quest to find Destiny and find out why he must live in poverty. He then asked the owner why he was making so much food, to what the owner replied:

“Eh, my dear friend, I have everything, but my friends can’t seem to ever have enough, as if a dragon lives within them. You’ll see, as soon as we start eating tonight.”

And as soon as they sat down, the food was grabbed away, and the huge pot emptied almost instantly. After dinner, a waitress came and took all the leftover bones and threw them into the fire. That puzzled the man, until he saw two old ghosts appearing, dry and lifeless, sucking onto the bones. He asked the owner:

“What is that by the fire, my good man?”

The owner answered:

“Those are, my friend, my mother and father, it seems that they’re shackled to this world, they don’t want to die.”

The next day, as the man was preparing to leave the inn, the owner asked him:

“Would you please talk to Destiny about me too, and ask what kind of plight this is, that I can never fully feed my friends and that my parents won’t die?”

He promised he’d ask, then said goodbye and went looking for Destiny. So he traveled and after a long time he reached another village where he asked a few locals if he could spend the night there. They took him in and wanted to know where he was headed. He told them his story. Then they told him:

“Oh my dear, since you’re already going there, can you ask why our cattle is infertile and why they walk backwards?”

He promised he’d ask Destiny, and the next day he continued. As he was walking, he came to a long body of water and began yelling:

“Oh, water, water, take me over!”

And the water asked:

“Where do you go?”

And he told her where he was going. She took him over and then said:

“Please, my dear brother, ask Destiny why I don’t have any yield.”

He promised to the water that he’d ask and went further on. He was walking a long time when he reached a forest and met a man living by himself. He called good day and asked if he knew where he could find Destiny. The lone man replied:

“Go over this mountain and you’ll walk straight to his castle, but when you find yourself in front of Destiny, don’t say a thing and just do everything as he does, as long as he doesn’t ask you a question.”

The man thanked the recluse and headed for the mountain. Once he found himself in Destiny’s castle, he had little something to see: the castle resembled lodgings of a tsar, with many rushing servants and Destiny sitting alone at the head of the table, eating supper. As the working brother saw this, he too, sat at the table and ate. After dinner, Destiny went to sleep; the man did as well. Around midnight, a thunder broke out and a voice called from it:

“Oh Destiny! Oh, Destiny! This many people were born today, give them what you desire.”

Then Destiny stood up, opened a chest filled with money and began throwing golden coins around the room, crying:

“As it was for me today, shall be for them forever.”

When the next day dawned, the castle had disappeared and was replaced by a middle-sized house, still however considerably wealthy. In the evening, Destiny sat to

eat, the man sat with him, and nobody said a word. After dinner, they went to sleep. Around midnight a thunder broke out and a voice cried from it:

“Oh, Destiny! Oh, Destiny! This many people were born today, give them what you desire.”

Destiny stood up, opened the chest with money, this time not full of golden coins, but of silver ones. Destiny began throwing money around the room, saying:

“As it was for me today, shall be for them forever.”

As the next day dawned, the house was gone and replaced by a smaller one, and so Destiny did every night as he did the first two, until the house became only a tiny hut, when Destiny grabbed a shovel and began digging. The man dug too, and so they did for hours. In the evening, Destiny took a piece of bread, split it in two and gave one piece to the man. They ate and after dinner they went to sleep. Around midnight, there was a thunder again and a voice coming from it:

“Oh, Destiny! Oh, Destiny! Today there were this many souls born, give them what you please.”

Then Destiny stood up, opened the chest and spilled some useless trinkets and a few coins here and there:

“As it is for me today, it shall be for them forever.”

As the next day dawned, the hut became the grandiose castle of the first day. Then Destiny asked the man:

“Why have you come?”

He explained everything as it was. Then Destiny said:

“You have seen how I’ve thrown gold around on the first night and all that has happened afterwards. As it was for me the night somebody was born, will be for them forever. You were born on the night of the poor, and you will be poor for your lifetime. Your brother was born on a lucky night and he shall be lucky forever. However, since you’ve tried so hard, I can tell you how to help yourself. Your brother has a daughter Milica; she is as lucky as her father. When you go back, take Milica to yourself, and for everything you earn say it’s hers.”

The man then thanked Destiny and said:

“In this village is a rich man who has everything, but is unhappy, because his friends can never get full: for only one meal they ate an entire pot of food and still didn’t have enough. Yet, the mother and the father of this man, it’s as if they’re chained to this world, old and blackened, and skinny like corpses, but cannot die. He was begging me, Destiny, when I slept over at his inn, to ask you what that’s all about.”

Then Destiny told him:

“It is because he doesn’t respect his mother and father, he has been giving them bones from the furnace, he should put them at the head of the table, he should give them the first glass of rakija and the first glass of wine, they wouldn’t eat as half as much what the others ate, and their souls would finally say goodbye.”

Then he asked Destiny:

“In this other village, when I was sleeping in his house, the host complained that his cattle gave no yield, and only went backwards; he begged me to ask you why that was so.”

And Destiny said:

“It’s because on his family holiday he slaughters the worst cattle he has, and if he’d slaughter the best, the cattle would simply flourish.”

Then he asked about the water:

“Why is it so that the water has no yield?”

Destiny replied:

“Because she has never drowned a man; but don’t make jokes about it yet, do not tell her what I’ve just told you until she takes you over, because if you do, she’ll drown you right away.”

He thanked Destiny and went his way home. As he reached the water, she asked him:

“What did Destiny say?”

And he said:

“Take me over, and I’ll let you know.”

Once she had taken him to the other side, he ran, and when he was far enough, he looked back and cried:

“Oh, water! Oh, water! You’ve never drowned a man, that why you have no yield!”

As the water heard this, she spilled on her sides, trying to get him, and he ran and barely escaped.

When he came to that village where the cattle were infertile, the locals could barely wait:

“What is it brother, for God’s sake! Did you talk to Destiny?”

The man answered:

“I did and Destiny said: when you’re celebrating your family holiday, you always slaughter your worst cattle, but if you would slaughter your best you would have countless cattle.”

As he had heard this, the local man said:

“Stay here, brother, my family holiday is in three days, and if all this is true, I shall present you with an apple.”

The man stayed until the holiday. As the holiday dawned, the host killed the best ox and the cattle’s numbers started increasing immediately. When that happened, the host gave the man 5 oxen. He thanked him and went on. When he came to the other village, the man with the friends who couldn’t get full greeted him:

“How is it going brother? For God’s sake, what is Destiny saying?”

And the man replied:

“Destiny said: you don’t respect your mother and your father, you give them food behind the furnace; if you’d put them at the head of the table and offered them the first glass of rakija and the first glass of wine, your friends wouldn’t ever eat so much, and you father and mother would die.”

When the man heard so, his wife immediately washed and combed her mother and father in law, gave them new clothes, and at dinner time, the host put them at the head of the table and gave them the first glass of rakija and the first glass of wine. From that moment on, his friends couldn’t eat half as much as they did before and the next day his parents went the way of all flesh.

Then the inn owner gave him two oxen, and the man thanked him and went home. As he had reached his hometown, the fellow villagers began asking:

“Whose are those oxen?”

And he told everyone:

“Brothers, it is Milica’s, my niece’s.”

As soon as he got home, he went to his brother, and begged him:

“Please, brother, give me Milica, to be mine. You see I have nobody by my side.”

And his brother replied:

“Good, brother, Milica shall be yours.”

He took Milica and brought her home. After that he earned plenty and crops grew, but for everything he said it was Milica’s. One day he went out to watch the wheat, and the wheat was beautiful, couldn’t have been more beautiful. All of a sudden, a passenger came along and asked:

“Whose is this wheat?”

And he made a mistake and said:

“Mine.”

The moment he had said it, the wheat burst into flames, and he ran after the man crying:

“Stop, brother, it is not mine, it is Milica’s, my niece’s.”

And so the wheat was put out, and he stayed lucky with Milica.