

JULIJA SUPUT

THE RETURN HOME

"Are you going home for vacation?" a flight attendant asks, bending toward me, offering a glass of water. Puzzled, I look at her, shake my head.

"Work," I mumble. I take a plastic glass from the tray she balances on one hand with the dexterity of a circus juggler. As I move the book I was reading, Homer's *Iliad*, to make room for the glass, she glides away.

Her question floats in my head, though. "Can I pass for Korean?" I wonder, touching my face, my high cheek bones. I play with the idea that in Korea where I am heading for a couple of days of work, I could walk the streets and blend in, be considered a native. "Why not?" I wonder. Then I look at my colleague sleeping in the window seat. He is Korean, and we definitely do not look anything alike. However, the possibility of a new identity germinates in my mind. I soon forget Achilles and his wounded pride and my determination to finish reading the book during the flight. I turn the light above my head off and close my eyes.

But I don't think about a Korean identity. Instead, memories of my past swirl in my head, and I think about how I ended up on this plane, boarding it with an American passport. I think how, when somebody in California where I have been living for the last ten years, detecting my foreign accent, asks me where I am from, I say, "Croatia." In response to my interlocutor's baffled look, I explain that Croatia was a part of the former Yugoslavia. Few know about Croatia but many are familiar with the Yugoslav civil war. I quickly add that I was lucky; I and my family were not harmed in that war, at least not physically. But I did suffer loss, too. I lost my Yugoslav identity.

My childhood memories are a collage of happy images in which, year after year, I am a part of every school celebration of our Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and our President Marshall Tito. I am his pioneer, his follower, and I feel special while I recite poems dedicated to him and to our country, dressed in the pioneer's uniform: white blouse, blue skirt, red kerchief tied around the collar of my shirt, and a blue cap. My mother makes

sure that the cap does not slide off my head and secures it with hairpins. My performance is rewarded with loud applause. As I exit the stage, I glance at the audience and, in the back, I see my mother, her eyes shining with tears.

After the ceremony is over and the tribute to our grand nation has been paid, I play hide-and-seek in front of the school with my schoolmates, while my mother chats for a while with other mothers and listens to the praise for my performance. Everybody is proud and happy. I don't understand exactly why but later I will learn about the greatness of our President Tito who said no to the Soviet Union. Yes, we are a communist country because we care for our citizens, but we are a nonaligned nation, not a satellite nation of the Soviet Union as the rest of the East European countries are. We do not even geographically consider ourselves Eastern Europe. We are South Slavs as the name of our country clearly indicates.

I learn about the geographical and political structure of my country in school. It has six republics and two official alphabets, Latin and Cyrillic, and three official languages, Serbo-Croatian or Croat-Serbian, Slovenian, and Macedonian, and we are all Yugoslavs. I grow up in my neighborhood feeling happy and safe. I live with my mother and two brothers in a little apartment much like all the other children I know except that most of them have also a father, absent from my life. But since I don't know what it means to have a father, I don't miss him. I have everything else. I deem my mother the most beautiful and the best mother of all mothers I know. I am an excellent student and the teachers predict a bright future for me.

In the late 1960s, I am about thirteen when I travel for the first time to play in a tennis tournament in Subotica, a city in Serbia, close to the Hungarian border. My mother accompanies me. She wants me to meet some relatives from my father's side. They don't live in a small apartment as we do, but in a big house, furnished with antique furniture. Oil paintings decorate the walls and I think how real the lemons and apples on one painting seem to be. Other paintings are of some people and they are not interesting to me. Later I find out that the faces from the paintings are all my father's family.

My father's uncle and aunt are old, their hair silver, their movements elegant and stiff, and I feel intimidated. They complain about my father, the black sheep in the otherwise successful family. The aunt sighs as she complains about our President Tito who took away everything they had, and left them with so little. I look at her and at the carved massive furniture I have never seen before, and I don't understand what she means by "everything,"