

NIKOLINA KULIDŽAN

BECOMING AMERICAN

My wipers on medium speed, I drive north on Highway 1 through the gloom that is Monterey Bay in July. The fields of artichokes stretch both east and west of the highway and the farm workers in bright yellow raincoats and red baskets strapped to their backs provide the only color in the gray, foggy landscape.

I navigate towards Elkhorn Slough Visitor Center more by instinct than by memory, singing along to Bruce Springsteen's rendition of "Old Dan Tucker." Of all the American music on my iPod, Springsteen's remake of the old folk songs seemed the most American, which is why I chose it as the soundtrack for this drive.

I follow the curvy, tree-lined street, hopeful that the entrance to the park will be obvious. A handful of protestors holding handmade signs and waving American flags make the gate hard to miss. "Sam Farr is a socialist," "Proud to be an American," and "Protect our borders," are among their messages. I slow down to read more of their posters but the cars start piling up behind me and I follow the parking attendant's instructions through the gate.

A persistent drizzle welcomes me as I walk out and I can't help but question the wisdom of an outdoor ceremony. Far worse has been endured to become an American citizen, I remind myself as I walk across the parking lot.

"Hey," I hear a loud, familiar voice. "Is there a 'Speak now or forever hold your peace' part to this ceremony?"

I turn around to see Andrei, my now-retired boss and a dear friend.

"I don't think so," I say and smile.

"Well, that is unfortunate. These fools don't know what they are doing." When we hug I know home is here too.

My relationship with America has always been a tumultuous one. Even as a teenager for whom a McDonald's milkshake was the epitome of gastronomical joy, I had somehow gathered that I was supposed to despise such blatant foreign encroachment on our Serbian soil and soul. So I did. But when my mom asked me if I was interested in spending my senior year of high school in the U.S., I didn't hesitate.

Although in my teens my future wasn't the highest of my concerns, one had to be blind not to notice the miserable way most people lived in Serbia. Middle-aged professionals sold smuggled gas and cigarettes on the streets, the elderly dug through the dumpsters and slept on the streets, the city buses were too packed to close their doors, and the students and teachers were too busy protesting various social injustices to spend any time in the classrooms. For those who knew how to capitalize on the state of near-anarchy, the times were ripe. For the rest, they were hopeless. On some instinctual level, I must have known that if I stayed in Serbia, I would join the latter group.

On top of that, there was also the fact that I had already been uprooted once when my family fled the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina several years earlier. Since then, I had become more like a moss, anchored to the ground with tiny threads, than like an oak, with strong, deep roots that don't survive transplanting. In some ways, Serbia was as much a new ground as the U.S. would be and since I had taken there well enough, I figured I could take elsewhere too.

That is why, in the summer of 1998, I bid my family and friends a farewell and traveled half-way across the world to try my luck. While the professed reason for my year-long visit to the States was to perfect my English, both my family and I knew that I would do my best to find a way to stay there. I can only guess how my parents felt sending the younger of their two children into the big, wide world, uncertain what it was they were sending her into or if she would ever return.

When I first arrived in Utah, I was too busy adjusting to a new life to ponder the fairness of the fact that I had to travel so far in search of a prosperous and dignified existence, which seemed reserved for only a small fraction of the world's population. Instead, I busied myself getting straight A's and surfing the web for a college scholarship, in hopes of one day becoming a part of the fortunate minority. Only occasionally, a vague pang of guilt