

## NIKOLINA KULIDŽAN

### *MARGARITAS AND GUACAMOLE*

By 8:15 a.m., Jelena is wondering what might have happened. We've been officemates for two years and it's not like me to be late to work without calling. By 8:30, she is worried. By 9:00, she is calling my cell phone at three-minute intervals. The phone is off. At 9:30, she dials my fiancé. Twelve hundred miles away, he is the last person to have seen me. Alarmed by her call, he tells her that he spoke to me around eleven the night before and that I was still driving from the airport. He hasn't heard from me since. By 10:00, Jelena is in tears.

That's when she starts a full-blown investigation. First, she calls every hospital on the Monterey Peninsula, and when she finds no record of my name, she dials the police and reports me as missing. She then summons our friend Sandro and together they go to meet a detective at the house where I am renting a basement apartment from a man whom Jelena has heard me refer to as mentally ill and in the habit of talking to himself in two distinct voices. When questioned by the detective, my landlord states that he believes he saw my car arrive late the night before and leave early this morning. The unopened suitcase they find in my room corroborates his account. The detective seems pleased, but Jelena is still suspicious. She eyes the landlord, plotting how to invite herself into his house. She imagines me tied to a chair, my mouth taped, my face red from struggle. She grows more and more upset.

Just about that time (it was getting close to noon) less than two miles away, I am walking out of a workshop on task-based instruction, trying to decide whether to go out for lunch or return to my office to check email. I decide in favor of a leisurely meal and am switching my phone on to see if any of my friends might want to join me, when I realize I have five messages. This would have been unusual at any time, but on a Monday morning it's alarming. I overcome my usual inclination to ignore voicemail, only to hear my fiancé's teary voice telling me to call him back and then some other stuff I don't quite understand. By the time I get to Sandro's message I am very

confused. But I gather that Jelena and he are at my house, along with a police officer, interrogating my landlord about my whereabouts.

I call Sandro right away. I am laughing my ass off as I explain to him that I was in a workshop and that I had told Jelena about it. When we meet for lunch fifteen minutes later, I fully intend to tease Jelena about her forgetfulness but her eyes are bloodshot and she looks exhausted so I save the teasing for later. She keeps touching me as if to assure herself that I really am alive. I feel bad to have caused my friend such grief, but a part of me feels very happy. It's a relief to know that someone would notice if you disappeared.

Now let me clarify something: I am a Bosnian Serb. Jelena is a Croat from Croatia. Sandro is a Bosnian Muslim (or to be more politically correct, a Bosniak). Or at least, those would be the shorthand labels we'd use to define ourselves. The reality, of course, is messier. One of my grandparents was a Croat and I am from Herzegovina not Bosnia. Jelena's mother is actually Macedonian, and Jelena attended college in my hometown. Sandro's parents were so determined to avoid ethnic categorizations that they gave their first-born son an Italian name, and I didn't really know what his ethnicity was until I asked him about it when I started writing this essay.

We were each born into a multicultural utopia, a place where relationships were forged based on character, sensibility, sense of humor, and shared interests rather than some misguided notion of ethnic identity. We each saw that utopia dissolve into chaos and madness, our lives suddenly shaped by animosities we never held, our paths veering off to unknown terrain. We each traveled great emotional and physical distances, to meet at an unlikely place, a picturesque coastal town in central California, where we unwittingly recreated the paradise we were born into, becoming not only each other's friends but a family.

So what had happened in between?

Mine was a charmed childhood. My parents were loving and present, my older brother the right balance of protective and tough, my hometown tucked into a valley, sun-filled and safe. I was a teacher's pet, yet my peers didn't seem to resent me for it. My family spent a month each summer at the Adriatic, the weeks melting away while I chased around with my cousins, dived off wharfs, picked wild blackberries, and napped in a hammock.

At the age of nine, there were still challenges to overcome and at the