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TRANSPARENT TRACES

By

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Written under the direction of

Kathleen John-Alder

And approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Transparent Traces

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Thesis Director:

Kathleen John-Alder

I have come to believe that every personal story is a landscape story. We frequently forget that our lives are not only our own but a contribution to a web of stories that shape the history of the land. Personal stories of life that make us who we are and our landscapes what they are, often are lost if not documented or passed down to other generations. What stories does the landscape hide and which stories does the landscape reveal? The only way our histories can survive is if we share them. The memories and stories we stow away in our landscapes, come back to us in other circumstances: they reflect us, and we reflect them.

So, what are the stories of life? And how are these stories a metaphor of a landscape? The possibility to trace the stories of a life through the land, the soil, the plants, and the water inspires this exploration. Historians, theorists, artists, and environmentalists have explored the phenomenon of connection between human and landscape. The bond of life and land exists through our strong family ties, like that of a woman who stays constant in our stories like the landscape. Women are the life, strength,

and stability of our legacies. The aspect of deep genealogy is an exploration of oneself in the landscape. What do we find when we explore it? Our discovery of self in the landscape touches on the notion of what we call home and what we come to find as our identity.

Being a participant observer of one's own genealogy delves into the topic of topographies of memory, meaning, loss, and discovery. When we embed ourselves in the land, it creates a different kind of ecology; one that is closer, more intricate, crucial, and not always rational. Creating a family archive allows for the exploration of one's life and the purpose behind it. You discover parts of yourself, when you uncover truths of your family; hidden memories waiting to be recovered through the telling of a story. We create new relationships through this journey, not only with people but with the landscape. A river is a place where these connections come together, with the combination of complex concepts of culture and history. As noted by Irine J. Klaver, there is a notion of the atmosphere of a river or "riversphere" as a concept that contains social, cultural, political and emotional dimensions of life by combining hydrology, biology, and ecology with lived experience.<sup>1</sup> Intertwining environment with the experience of life through storytelling is what enriches the atmosphere of rivers and reveals hidden histories.

My exploration of these thoughts began when I was walking to my maternal Grandmother's house in the Southern Serbian city of Nis, I passed a tributary river to the Nisava that was barely flowing, moving slowly with green muck and miscellaneous trash. The sight of this river prompted me to take a picture before going on my way. I began to think about this river and how its contents are connected to a larger system. I pondered the deeper meaning behind its connectivity: how do collective histories, known and



unknown, forgotten, and erased, all contribute to the circumstances that we have today?

The composition of invisible traces and transparent ones are revealed through the existence of a river. The color of the water, the shape of its bends, the intensity of its flow is inclusive with the course of a life. Visible form of land is harmonious with the occurrences of our daily lives. The riversphere holds our secrets, revealing some and keeping others buried deep in its sediments; rivers hold the truth about us. This fascinates me because it enters a realm of undocumented stories of history. The idea of tracing history along a river prompted me to begin my personal journey of loss and discovery through deep genealogical archival research along the waterways of Serbia.

## **Dedication and Acknowledgments**

Dedicated to the women in my family, near and far. To my Mother, Sonja for her strength and perseverance as a Wife, Mother, and woman. To my Sister, Jelena for her honesty. To my Grandmother, Letica who has endured the most hardship of anyone I know and shared our family's stories with me. To my Aunts Vesna and Slavica for their positivity and level-headedness through the worst of times. To my Cousins, Marija, Tamara, Marija and Jovana for their love from day one. To my Baba Jagoda for taking care of me when I was little and to my Baba Zivadinka for her strength. Lastly, to my Great-Grandmother, Paraskeva who was brave enough to stand up to her abuse. This is dedicated to all women everywhere, who have endured too much and who have taken their lives because of it.

I would like to thank my Father, Ivica; without his courage and determination we would have no story to tell and to my Deda Ljuba, for being a Grandfather to me when I didn't have one. My deepest gratitude goes to my partner Aleksandar Vuckovic and to my classmate and good friend, Mai Thy Bui. Thank you for taking this journey with me.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract of the Thesis .....	ii
Dedication and Acknowledgments .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vi
List of Illustrations .....	ix
The Beginning.....	1
May 1970: I Just Wanted to Wash my Hair.....	5
Paraskeva.....	5
Letica.....	6
May 1974: Under the Leaves of the Cottonwood Tree.....	11
Paraskeva.....	11
June 2, 1974: I am Not a Tree, I am the River.....	13
Letica.....	13
Paraskeva.....	15
Letica.....	18
June 3, 1974: Remember my Beauty Mark .....	18
June 17, 1977: The Odds of a Lightning Strike .....	19
Letica.....	19
Sunday, June 10, 2018: Material Compensation .....	25
Diana .....	25

Monday, June 11, 2018: Two Tickets Home .....	29
Tuesday, June 12, 2018: Red Rooftops .....	31
Tuesday, June 12, 2018: Nis .....	39
Tuesday, June 12, 2018: It's me, Mama .....	50
Wednesday, June 13, 2018: Memories Left to Share .....	63
Friday, June 15, 2018: It's Over, Why are you Crying?.....	70
Saturday, June 16, 2018: Breathe .....	73
Monday, June 18, 2018: Birthday Girl, Do you Matter Anymore? .....	81
Wednesday, June 20, 2018: Let's Run Away Together.....	82
Thursday, June 21, 2018: They Didn't Tell You? .....	84
Saturday, June 23, 2018: Do you Know Where You're Going? .....	88
Sunday, June 24, 2018: The Book Picks You.....	93
Monday, June 25, 2018: A Reason to be Upset .....	100
Tuesday, June 26, 2018: Death Brings You Home.....	108
Sunday, July 1, 2018: Don't be Selfish Your Life Isn't About You .....	133
Wednesday, July 11, 2018: Up the River, Through the Woods .....	137
Thursday, July 12, 2018: Familiar Traces .....	146
Friday, July 13, 2018: New Perspectives, Old Friends.....	148
Sunday, July 15, 2018: What's Your Normal? .....	151
Monday, July 16, 2018: Hidden in the Sands of the Danube .....	154

Tuesday, July 17, 2018: Can You Take a Picture of the Sky?.....	157
Wednesday, July 18, 2018: Nis je Nis .....	160
Thursday, July 19, 2018: Topla Voda.....	163
Saturday, July 28, 2018: Drago Mi Je.....	165
Sunday, July 29, 2018: You're Family Now .....	167
Monday, August 13, 2018: How Long?.....	170
Saturday, August 18, 2018: Downstream .....	171
Sunday, August 19, 2018: Finding Yourself .....	175
Sunday, August 27, 2018: We're Always Saying Goodbye .....	180
Wednesday, August 29, 2018: What is Home Anymore? .....	181
Tuesday, December 25, 2018: Six Months Gone .....	183
Sunday, January 6, 2018: Family Memories .....	185
Saturday, January 12, 2018: You're Serbian Now! .....	186
Wednesday, January 16, 2018: The Youngest has it the Hardest.....	187
Friday, January 18, 2018: Toliko Za Sada.....	189
Bibliography .....	191

## List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Map of Serbia: Home and Places Traveled. Map by Author. ....	4
Figure 2: Stove in the Randjelovic Home of Mokliste, Serbia. Photo by Author. ....	5
Figure 3: White House of the Randjelovic Family. Photo by Author. ....	6
Figure 4: Stool. Photo by Author. ....	8
Figure 5: Ivica and Vesna as Children in Mokliste. Photo by Letica Randjelovic. ....	9
Figure 6: Closed Door. Photo by Author. ....	10
Figure 7: Ceva's Sink. Photo by Author. ....	14
Figure 8: Mulberry Tree from the Front Door. Photo by Author. ....	15
Figure 9: Old Mirror and Decorations in the Mokliste Home. Photo by Author. ....	16
Figure 10: Road Downhill: From Mokliste to the Nisava. Photo by Author. ....	17
Figure 11: White Scarf. Photo by Author. ....	18
Figure 12: Sky Opening Over Village Crop Fields. Photo by Author. ....	23
Figure 13: Waiting. Photos by Author. ....	24
Figure 14: Mama's Closet. Photo by Author. ....	26
Figure 15: Mama After Arriving in America on the Banks of the Raritan River, New Brunswick. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic. ....	30
Figure 16: Red Rooftops. Photo by Author. ....	34
Figure 17: Belgrade Bus Station. Photo by Author. ....	36
Figure 18: Hidden Beauty of Belgrade. Photos by Author. ....	38
Figure 19: Serbian Landscape Through a Bus Window. Photo by Author. ....	39
Figure 20: Our Apartment Building and Baba's Mailbox. Photos by Author. ....	40
Figure 21: Family Origins. Photo by Author. ....	42

Figure 22: Baba Letica. Photo by Author. ....	44
Figure 23: Baba's Apartment. Photos by Author. ....	46
Figure 24: An Old Letter for my Tata from New Jersey. Photo by Author.....	47
Figure 25: Tata's Old Room. Photos by Author.....	48
Figure 26: Mama as a Young Girl with her Mother at their Home in Nis, Serbia. Photo by Vlastimir Stojanovic. ....	51
Figure 27: Tata and me in 1999. Photo by Sonja Randjelovic. ....	61
Figure 28: Rain Against Window in our Apartment. Photo by Author. ....	65
Figure 29: Gabrovacka River in Nis. Photo by Author. ....	67
Figure 30: Portrait of Deda Toma. Photo by Author. ....	69
Figure 31: Knitted Tablecloth. Photo by Author. ....	70
Figure 32: Guided Blessing. Photo by Author.....	74
Figure 33: Mama, Jelena, and Diana in the Valley Manor Apartments Edison, New Jersey. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic.....	75
Figure 34: Jelena Holding my Hand as a Baby in Front of the Raritan River. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic. ....	76
Figure 35: Calming Shadows. Photo by Author. ....	79
Figure 36: On the Other Side of the Nisava. Photo by Author. ....	83
Figure 37: Bringing the Outside In. Photos by Author.....	84
Figure 38: Ivica and Sonja on their Wedding Day. Photo Credit: Sonja Randjelovic.....	86
Figure 39: Jelena with Baba Letica 1993. Photo by Sonja Randjelovic. ....	87
Figure 40: Yugoslavian and American Passports. Photo by Author. ....	88
Figure 41: We Love You Graffiti. Photo by Author.....	90

Figure 42: Knez Mihailova. Photos by Author. ....	91
Figure 43: I Don't Want a Rose, I Want a Revolution. Photo by Author. ....	93
Figure 44: Book Kiosks. Photo by Author.....	94
Figure 45: Kalemegdan Levels. Photo by Author. ....	95
Figure 46: Usce from Kalemegdan. Photo by Author. ....	96
Figure 47: Untold Truth of the Confluence. Photo by Author.....	98
Figure 48: Church of St. Petka, Kalemegdan. Photo by Author.....	99
Figure 49: Documented Emotions. Photo by Aleksandar Vuckovic. ....	101
Figure 50: Reactions to a Changing Landscape. Photo by Author. ....	107
Figure 51: Ljuba, Jagoda, Mama and I in front of the Red Brick House in Edison, New Jersey. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic. ....	110
Figure 52: Ljuba and Jagoda with their Garden in Bela Palanka, Serbia. Photo by Ljubomir Manic. ....	111
Figure 53: Deda Ljuba Holding his Catch of the Day. Photo by Dragisa Manic. ....	112
Figure 54: Ivica's First Picture in America at the Holy Ascension Serbian Orthodox Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Photo by Ljubomir Manic. ....	114
Figure 55: Basement Apartment Circa 1997. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic.....	115
Figure 56: Basement Apartment Circa 2018. Photo by Author.....	115
Figure 57: Flooded Valley Manor Apartment 1999. Photos by Ivica Randjelovic. ....	116
Figure 58: Walking Away from my Tata in Front of our New Apartment Facing Away from the River. Photo by Sonja Randjelovic. ....	117
Figure 59: Belanovac Station and Nisava River, Mokliste, 2018. Photos by Author.....	119
Figure 60: Bowl of Handpicked Fruit. Photo by Author. ....	121



Figure 61: View Downhill with Graveyard in the Distance to the Left. Photo by Author.	
.....	122
Figure 62: The Black and White Puppy. Photos by Author. ....	122
Figure 63: Deda with his Accordion. Photo by Ljubomir Manic. ....	125
Figure 64: Entrance to an Empty Home. Photo by Author. ....	126
Figure 65: Ljuba's Bombonke. Photo by Author. ....	127
Figure 66: Proof in Pictures. Photo by Author. ....	128
Figure 67: The Scent of a Landscape Memory. Photo by Author. ....	130
Figure 68: A Fisherman's Spot on the Lake. Photo by Author. ....	131
Figure 69: Hidden Presence: Jagoda at the House in Palanka. Photo by Ljubomir Manic.	
.....	132
Figure 70: Letica's Museum Apartment. Photo by Author. ....	134
Figure 71: My Bedroom Window in Nis. Photo by Author. ....	135
Figure 72: Bridges Over Raritan. Photos by Author. ....	136
Figure 73: Fisherman on the Nisava. Photo by Author. ....	137
Figure 74: Apartment to Bridge: A Straight Shot to the River. Photos by Author. ....	138
Figure 75: Abandoned Possessions of the Gabrovacka. Photos by Author. ....	139
Figure 76: Morava River and Opanke: Traditional Serbian Dancing Shoes. Photos by Author. ....	140
Figure 77: Oxbow Lake Neglect. Photos by Author. ....	142
Figure 78: Suspension Bridge Ecology. Photos by Author. ....	144
Figure 79: Velika Morava: An Unattainable Cup of Chocolate Milk. Photos by Author.	
.....	145

Figure 80: Railway Tracks and Smederevo Fortress. Photo by Author. ....	146
Figure 81: A Place Called Home. Photos by Author. ....	147
Figure 82: Driving into Belgrade's New Cityscape. Photo by Author.....	148
Figure 83: Kalemegdan and Belgrade's Stari Grad from the Sava River. Photos by Author. ....	149
Figure 84: Stairs in Zemun and Gardos Tower with Engraved Graffiti. Photos by Author. .....	152
Figure 85: Pollution, Swans, and Sunsets. Photos by Author.....	154
Figure 86: Zezelj Bridge 2018. Photo by Author. ....	156
Figure 87: Zezelj Bridge after Bombing 1999. Photo by Darko Dozet. ....	156
Figure 88: Silhouette Against Water, Novi Sad, Serbia. Photo by Author.....	157
Figure 89: Disappointed Angel, Novi Sad. Photo by Author. ....	158
Figure 90: Avala. Photo by Author.....	159
Figure 91: Nis Fortress. Photo by Author.....	162
Figure 92: Religion and Water. Photos by Author. ....	172
Figure 93: Manmade Divisions. Photo by Author. ....	172
Figure 94: Abandoned Artifacts. Photos by Author. ....	173
Figure 95: Golubac Fortress. Photo by Author.....	174
Figure 96: Water Never Forgets. Photos by Author. ....	175
Figure 97: Reflection. Photo by Author.....	177
Figure 98: The Iron Gates. Photos by Author.....	178
Figure 99: Diana Fortress. Photo by Author.....	180
Figure 100: Baba's Dowry. Photo by Author.....	181

Figure 101: Time Difference. Photo by Author.....	183
Figure 102: Map of New Jersey, Middlesex County: Places like Home. Map by Author. .....	190

## **The Beginning**

To understand a person from Serbia, you must understand what cigarettes we used to smoke. Before foreign brands became available at our kiosks, our cigarettes were named after our rivers: Drava, Ibar, Zeta, Morava, and Drina.<sup>2</sup>

Our traditional folklore dances bear the names of our waters too, from Niska Banja to Moravac. What we do, how we live, the way we dance and the things we put into our bodies is our land, it is our water, and our culture. We lived off the river, eating its fish. We fought on its banks, dividing our countries. We lived, and we died on its currents. We are our rivers, our springs, and our lakes. They are the story of our lives, and this is the story of mine.

Starting at the origin of my family lineage, I follow the Nisava river into the Juzna Morava, which connects to the Velika Morava and flows into the Danube. This journey reflects and follows my family lineage and history through Serbia along the river. I follow my family history to compare similarities and connections of my story to that of the flow of water. Just as the origin of the Nisava river begins in Bulgaria, so does my family name, Randjelovic. The starting point of my research and journey will begin in the village Mokliste, where both of my parents' family lines originate. I will start with stories of my Great Grandmother and work my way down family lineages and generations. The town of Bela Palanka is where my Father was born. This town is just about five kilometers (three miles) upstream of the Nisava. He lived in Mokliste until he was about twelve and then he moved to Nis, the city where my Mother was born. Bela Palanka is also where my Great Aunt Jagoda and Great Uncle Ljuba lived. When I was born in America, my Great Aunt and Uncle took care of me and lived in a house in Edison, New

Jersey where I currently reside. I follow the river downstream from Bela Palanka to Nis, where a majority of my family currently lives. Both of my Grandmothers live in Nis as do my Aunts and Cousins. My Mother's side of the family has roots in the city of Nis dating back to the 60s. From there, I follow the rivers to Belgrade, where I have extended family. They played a key role in the journey of my parent's immigration to America.

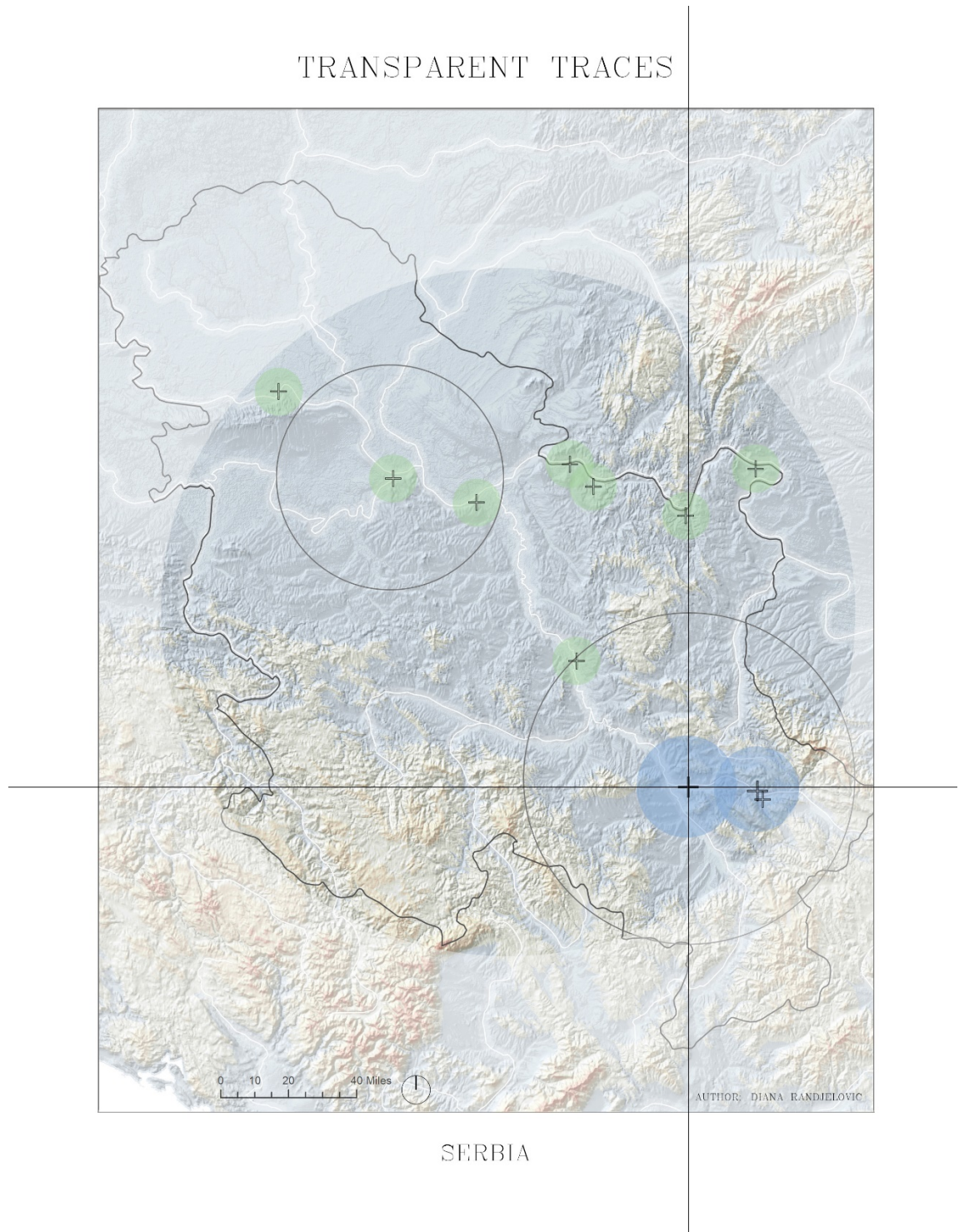
The war in Serbia worsened after my parents arrived in America and they were unable to return to their native towns by the water. My parents settled down in the Valley Manor Apartment complex in Edison, New Jersey. These apartments sit right along the edge of the Raritan river in the shadow of the bridges that take Route 1 into New Brunswick. We lived in a basement apartment that faced the river. In 1999 when Hurricane Floyd hit, our apartment flooded, leaving us with nowhere to live.

Exploring the beauty of story and memory in comparison to the flow of a river lies in movement and the unpredictable chance of what life is and what it means to live in a literal and figurative sense. Water crosses borders, like my family did, like the history of Serbia did, and like I do in this exploration. There is a connection to the untamable aspect of water and a river in that it cannot be contained within a place, but rather it accumulates, collects and travels with us wherever we go. There is also a deeper level of understanding ourselves and nature outside of what we normally see. Moving to America, escaping war, and living by water can shape our lives more than we consciously perceive.

My journey starts with the Nisava river that resides in Southern Serbia. The Nisava flows through the village of Mokliste and the town of Bela Palanka. I document the journey from there, following the Nisava into the major city of Nis. From here, the river flows into the Juzna (Southern) Morava of Serbia where it meets the Zapadna

(West) Morava. Both flow into what makes the Velika (Great) Morava. The rivers of the Morava flow through the organic and natural landscape of Serbia where farmers tend their crops and villages are established nearby. I make stops where possible along village and crop roads on this river and I visit the town of Cuprija that sits right along the bank of the Velika Morava. The Morava flows into the Danube river just off the city of Smederevo. I document and explore the Danube along the coasts of Novi Sad, Belgrade and Smederevo, three major Serbian cities. From the city of Smederevo I follow the Danube downstream through Serbia and explore the Iron Gates, Djerdap National Park, Fortresses, and other historic sites along the river. By tracing the rivers in Serbia, the project explores history and personal reflection in the land. Exploration not only touches upon land and water, but also on the human body and mind.

My research methods and strategy of inquiry are walking, driving, and camping along the river system. I keep a travel log of observations of senses (smells, feels, and noises) and I photograph personal encounters with the water while keeping a personal journal. I gather personal stories and photos from family to create an autobiographical accounting. From family and from my journey along the rivers, I collect material and artifacts I encounter. As a participant observer, I create two maps of my journey to provide a better background of my exploration.



*Figure 1: Map of Serbia: Home and Places Traveled. Map by Author.*

## **May 1970: I Just Wanted to Wash my Hair**

### **Paraskeva**

The metal handle squeaked as I rotated it clockwise, turning the wooden log that held the rope tied to a bucket. The bucket splashed water as it rocked back and forth on its way up. The muddy brown rope wrapped around the log, inching the bucket of cold water from the earth, closer to me. I untied the rope from the bucket of water and lugged it across the yard and up the stairs to the entrance of our white house made of earth and mud.

I made sure not to make too much noise as I put a pot on the stove to boil the water. The rest of the house was awake but Djoka was taking another one of his naps and I do not dare to wake him up. But this was my chance to do this. To quickly wash my hair, to do something for myself, before he wakes up again. Letica made herself useful around the house while the kids played quietly in the other room. Little Ivica is now almost four years old and Vesna is two. A full house, nothing could be more beautiful for a woman, a Mother, a Grandmother, but at the same time, nothing could be more humiliating. I wish they did not have to see this.



*Figure 2: Stove in the Randjelovic Home of Mokliste, Serbia. Photo by Author.*



I carefully untie my white headscarf and place it on the table. My hair, finally visible again, I notice is beginning to gray. I look at my reflection in the mirror above the sink, the only mirror we have. It is the only place where I can see the effects of what he does to me. It is the only object other than water, that can show my reflection. Wearily, I untie my braids when the door to the bedroom next to me swings open. He's awake.

### **Letica**

I was peeling potatoes at the table and peering in on my kids playing quietly in the other room. Things were quiet, for now. I am still getting used to this house that I married into, even though it has been a number of years since I came to live here. I sometimes look out across the front yard to the house in front of this one, the house I grew up in, my old home. Luckily when I married I did not have to go far from home, just across the street. I chuckle about it to myself sometimes.



*Figure 3: White House of the Randjelovic Family. Photo by Author.*

This is my home now, this white house with a well in front, which was convenient. I did not always have to go far to fetch water or carry jugs of water on my back. The house is suitable. You walk into the kitchen right from the door. To the left is our room, where Toma and I sleep with the kids. Well, for now it was just me and the kids, since Toma was in the military. To the right there is a sink right before you enter a bigger room where Toma's parents, Djordje and Paraskeva sleep.

Ceva was getting ready to wash her hair when the bedroom door to the right swung open and Djoka appeared. His eyes still red from his drunken haze scan the room and fixate on the water on the stove. He looks down at Ceva who is in front of him, her body is frozen as she looks at her reflection in the mirror. Her fingers tug at her hair. I feel nervous, but I continue peeling the potatoes hoping that this time won't be like the last. I'm wrong. Djoka's voice erupts and he shouts in his deep, drunken voice,

“A gde je voda za mene, zeno?”

“Where is the water for me, woman?”

Ceva made the mistake of not bringing in water for her husband. Djoka raised his heavy hand and swung it down on Ceva's pale face. The blow sent her body back across the room. Ceva said nothing and I was in no position to say anything either. I dropped the knife and the potatoes and watched as he picked up a stool and threw it across the room at Ceva with an enraged force. The stool made direct contact with her head and she winced and curled up into herself as he advanced on her, grabbing her by the hair. Ceva let out

soft screams and sobs as he began pulling her into the adjacent room. I could stay silent no longer.

“Nemoj Djoka, Nemoj! Pusti je!”

“Don’t Djoka, don’t! Let her be!”



*Figure 4: Stool. Photo by Author.*

He shoved past me, dragging Ceva into our room where the children were playing. They ran out scared and screaming. Vesna grabbed my leg and squeezed it tightly with her small fingers. Ivica, Ico, my son, ran out of the house, barefoot, in fear. It had begun to rain in the meantime, and Ico’s little feet were covered in mud as he ran out across the yard.

“Ico, nemoj! Vрати se sine!”

“Ico, don’t! Come back, son!”



*Figure 5: Ivica and Vesna as Children in Mokliste. Photo by Letica Randjelovic.*

I could hear Ceva's screams and Djoka's pounding fist from behind the door. I tried to get into the room, I did. I pushed my whole weight against the door, pleading for him to let her be. The door, however, was impossible to break through. Djoka had one foot against the bottom of the door and that was enough to keep it shut. With one hand he held her down and with the other he punished her for selfishly only fetching water for herself. I sunk to the bottom of the door my hands pressed against it still, and I began to sob. The screams stopped after a while and the pressure against the door loosened. Before I could get up, the door swung open and Djoka inhaled deeply through his nose and pulled his pants up by his belt. He stepped over me, grabbed a bottle of homemade rakija off the table and left the house.



*Figure 6: Closed Door. Photo by Author.*

Vesna sat patiently on the couch, her little legs hanging over the edge, unable to touch the ground yet. Ivica came back into the house sheepishly, his clothes wet from the rain and his toes covered in mud. Ceva lay across the floor of our bedroom, hiding her face. I grabbed Ico and sat on the couch next to Vesna. I took some of the water that Ceva was preparing to wash her hair with and I wiped the mud off Ico's feet with a towel. Ceva stood up in the meantime and walked back to the mirror. She brushed her fingers through her greasy black hair highlighted with stressful gray strands and tied it back in a low bun. She took a pink towel and dabbed it wet with the water from the stove, using it to wash the blood off of her face. When she was done and only the scars were left, she grabbed her white headscarf off the table and put it back over her hair, tying it tightly under her chin.

I wish I could have helped more. I wish someone else would help, everyone in the village knew what was going on. They were aware that he beat her. That's how things worked, but this day was separate from all the others. He nearly killed her that day.

### **May 1974: Under the Leaves of the Cottonwood Tree**

#### **Paraskeva**

In the mountains of Southern Serbia between the Stara Planina (The Old Mountain) and the Suva Planina (The Dry Mountain) regions, the river of the Nisava flows. In these mountains there is a village called Mokliste, that is my village. By the river there are crop fields and under the leaves of a Cottonwood tree on the banks of the river, sits one of our fields.

By the trunk of the tree there is a small stool that I put there one day, so that when I get tired from working the soil, I can take a rest in the shade. The day was a welcoming and warm spring day and I was sitting on the stool under the tree wearily eating a piece of bread. I was not tired today from tilling the soil or picking the fruit, because I had done neither of these things. I was just tired, and I liked to watch the water of the river flow by. I liked the river. When it rained it was a deep reddish brown, but after it rained it was a murky green. Sometimes the current would be visibly faster, sometimes it would appear still. Regardless of its state, the river made me feel like it was washing away my sins, my pain. I almost felt reborn as I watched it wash away my problems and my abuse.

I nibbled on my bread and dreamed of the river taking me away. Maybe it could take me to a place far away from here where he could not touch me, where he could not hurt me. I rested my head against the trunk of the cottonwood and got lost in the fluidity of the movement of the current. It was always changing, always renewing, and always

moving. I wish that I could have that power. To change, to move like water and to not be tethered to this land like the roots of this tree next to me. I, like this tree, had no choice or say in what the people around us or our environment could do. If one day a man wanted to cut off some branches to stay warm, he could. We do not have the power to stop him. If one day Man wanted to destroy us, he could.

My eyes fixated on the river and wondered what it would be like to be water. My thoughts were interrupted by a familiar neighborly voice.

“Baba Ceva! Sta radis tu?”

“Grandma Ceva! What are you doing there?”

Breaking my concentration from the river I turned to find my neighbor in his field next to mine. I was not expecting someone to interrupt my thoughts. Frazzled and hesitant I told him the first thing that came to my mind. I told him that I was waiting for Toma to come and to help me till the soil and prep it.

“A ha” he said. He looked at me curiously, both of us knowing that what I had just told him was a lie. Toma has been working out of the village for the past seven years in the army. He stared at me for a little while longer, unsure of what to say, knowing everything he knew, he was probably suspicious, maybe even concerned. But of course, there was no reason for him to be! I was just wondering what it would be like to be a river instead of a tree.

“Pa dobro”

“Well okay” he said.

He gave a thin-lipped smile and raised his hand to signal his goodbye.

## **June 2, 1974: I am Not a Tree, I am the River**

### **Letica**

It was early morning. The sun hadn't risen yet and Ceva was pacing around the entrance of the house, eating bread. I watched her walk back and forth from the mirror above the sink to the front door and outside to the top of the stairs and back again. Everyone else was still sleeping, but soon the kids would wake up and then Djoka would too. This time of day was the only real peace us women had. To be able to breathe and think and watch the sun rise. Ceva kept pacing and nibbling on her bread. I wanted to tell her that if she was hungry she should sit and eat instead of walking around, but I said nothing. I just watched her stare at her reflection in the mirror and then walk out of the front door to stare at the Mulberry tree in our front yard and then back inside again to look at her reflection. I have seen her do these things before, but not in such a panicked manner. Again, I wanted to say something to her, but I did not know what I could say, so I said nothing.





*Figure 7: Ceva's Sink. Photo by Author.*

The sun began to peer through the trees and the birds began to sing. Ceva was wearing an old skirt with a white apron over it, this was familiar to me. But today she put on a new shirt that I have not seen before. It looks nice. Her headscarf is also new. It was still white but this one was silkier. She looked nice, maybe dressed for a special occasion. I hesitate to mention it because her nervousness radiated off of her like the rays of the sun that was now rising quickly. I began to shuffle around the kitchen, preparing to make breakfast when Ceva's eyes broke away from her concentrated stare in the mirror. She did not turn to look at me, but she told me that she was going to go for a walk. I finally broke my silence:

“Gde ce ides?”

“Where are you going to go?”

“Samo da se prosetam”

“Just for a walk” she muttered as she swiftly walked out of the front door. She took one last look at the Mulberry tree before disappearing down the street. Once she left it felt like she had never even been there before.



*Figure 8: Mulberry Tree from the Front Door. Photo by Author.*

### **Paraskeva**

The morning was cold as it always was before the sun rose. Every day began to be the same. I had awakened before everyone else to prepare myself for the day. To play my role as a woman in a man's life. I sat out on a stool at the top of the stairs looking out to mountains above me, the houses below me, but most importantly to the tree in front of me. The Mulberry tree right in front of the staircase to our house grew there as if out of spite.

Today when I put the stool out to sit on I noticed a red stain on it. I pretended I didn't see it and I took a piece of bread to eat. I tried to relax but all I could see was the red stain. Letica woke up then and I began to pace to make myself look busy. Letica looked at me in worry but I could not assure her that everything was okay when everything I could see in front of me was tainted red. My reflection in the mirror, the rays of the sun rising, the leaves on the locust tree: all red. While Letica went out to fetch water to start breakfast I changed my clothes, hoping that a fresh white blouse and headscarf would take away the red-tinted world that was drowning my vision.



*Figure 9: Old Mirror and Decorations in the Mokliste Home. Photo by Author.*

The sun was almost above the trees now and I could hear Djoka turning in bed. I had to go. I had to go wash my face, my eyes, my body in the river. It would take away the red. It would wash it all away. As I walked down from our house high in the mountains, a voice called out to me:

“Ceva! Gde ces tako rano?”

“Ceva! Where are you off to so early?”

A curious neighbor. All of them only curious to what I was doing, but not what was happening to me. I told her I was on my way to visit my sister in Klisura, a village just further upstream past Bela Palanka. My pace quickened. I came to a small bridge over a canal, where another neighbor saw me and that's when I started running. No more questions! I will no longer be something you observe! I will not be an object man takes things out on! I do not have roots! I do not have to stay here.



*Figure 10: Road Downhill: From Mokliste to the Nisava. Photo by Author.*

I ran, and I ran all the way down to the river. I ran the three kilometers downhill all the way to the Nisava where the Cottonwood tree sits and where I used to sit too, but I will no longer sit. I slowed my pace down to a fast walk and I walked past the Cottonwood tree and I did not look back. I did not hesitate to finally become what I always was supposed to be. I was finally the river. I put one foot in after another and the cold water felt refreshing. I did not stop walking until the water was over my head and

my feet could no longer touch the soil at the bottom. I did not stop until the current of the river washed over me and cleansed my mind; until it made the red tinted world go black.



*Figure 11: White Scarf. Photo by Author.*

## **Letica**

The sun was now setting, and it was beginning to get dark. My worry was increasing with every hour that Ceva was gone. Where could she have been all day? I talked to a neighbor down the street and she said that she saw Ceva walk by this morning in a hurry and said she was going to visit her sister in Klisura. Another neighbor said they saw her running. I could feel the tension in the air. It was an angry tension rather than a concerned one that was radiating off Djoka. I thought to myself maybe it would even be better if Ceva did not come back. I felt guilty for thinking it but the punishment she would get for being gone all day and neglecting her husband would be too strong for any of us to bear. If she was not dead, she would be if she came back now.

## **June 3, 1974: Remember my Beauty Mark**

The next morning Ceva still had not returned and I barely sleep all night. The events did not affect Djoka's sleeping pattern however. Later in the day a police officer

came by the village. He announced that a woman's body had been found downstream in the Nisava by the village of Crvena Reka. Immediately I knew that it was my Ceva. I tried to ask the policeman if I could see her body to confirm, but he told me that I could not. He asked me first if I could describe what she was wearing the last time I saw her. I told him of the old skirt with the white apron and the new white blouse and headscarf. He nodded at my description.

“Jel ima mladez na desni obraz?”

“Does she have a beauty mark on her right cheek?”

“...ima”

“...yes, she does”

“To je ona”

“That's her” confirmed the policeman.

We had all known what had happened, but no one dared to speak of it. And after that, no one did.

### **June 17, 1977: The Odds of a Lightning Strike**

#### **Letica**

It was a bright and sunny June day. Summer was on the verge of arriving, but it felt like it was already here. It's been three years since Ceva left us and we were beginning to forget what it was like to have her around. Toma is back from the military

and it is nice to have him home with us. Djoka still drinks, but he is almost harmless now. His memory as a man who beats his wife is slowly replaced by the memory of his stamina and tolerance to being able to consume excessive amounts of liquor. No one mentions Ceva; her memory is ignored. I can finally go down to the Nisava and do laundry in peace. I do not think about her bruised face or her floating body being one with the river.

Today was a clear day. The sky was a bright blue and I figured it would be a good day to get some laundry done. The chance of rain was low, so I gathered up the sheets, the pillowcases, some of Toma's clothes from working in the field and a few of my head scarfs. That would be enough for today. I threw them in a basket and made my way down the mountain. The walk down to the river was better, you could see all of the other mountains in the distance.

At the bank of the river I took off my shoes and tied my skirt up higher. I walked knee deep into the bank of the river, letting the cool feel of the water stabilize my body heat. The soil between my toes felt relaxing. I began washing, dipping the garments in and holding onto them tightly so the current did not take them away. The current was not so bad today. With a bar of soap, I scrubbed the sheets and the clothes. I wrung the garments to dispose of the excess water and I draped them over the basket. Before making my way back up the mountain I took the river into my hands and I put the water over my face, cleansing my eyes, my mouth and forehead from the sweat. I splashed some of the river on my shoulders before drying my feet in the grass. At the road I put my shoes back on and trudged home.

At home I hung the damp clothes up on a line in the yard. It was late morning now and the sky still clear. I figured it would be a good time to go to work. The hoe and the cropper were missing from our tools, meaning that Toma was already out in the field. It would be good of me to help him to speed things along. We not only had the crop field by the Nisava but a couple more a kilometer or so further up in the mountains, along with a vineyard. Zivadinka should have a hoe, I remembered. From the bedroom window, I called down to her. Her house sits just below mine.

“Ej! Zivadinko! Imas li motiku? Idem da pomognem Tomu sa njive!”

“Hey! Zivadinko! Do you have a hoe? I’m going to go help Toma in the fields!”

“E-hej! Evo imam ali pozuri sad ce kisa!”

“Hey! I do, but hurry the rain is coming in!”

“Ma kakva kisa! Vidis da je vedro nebo!”

“What rain! It’s a clear sky!”

I get the hoe from Zine and I start on my way to the fields. Ivica decides to accompany me. He is ten years old now and a big help. When we arrive to one of the fields in the mountains, Toma is not there. He was supposed to meet me here, but he is probably still finishing up on the field down by the river. The soil is harder to work down there, and the grass really grew in over the past couple of months due to the spring rain.



This is the first clear day in months. So, I decide to stay in this field with Ico. I know that Toma will come meet me soon.

I begin to till the soil when I notice dark clouds rolling in, covering the sun's light. A drop of rain lands on my chest as I look towards the sky. I look at Ico and I tell him to hurry back up to the village. I tell him the route to take and I tell him to hurry. There is a big storm on its way. He nods his head at me and runs off through the crops. I only have one more row of soil to till. I can get it done before the rain really comes down, or so I thought.

My arms up to my elbows are covered in dirt. I was in the middle of the field when the thunder clapped. The sound was so loud that it felt like it cut me off by my knees and suddenly water fell from the sky like it never did before. The drops from the sky were so heavy and fell so quickly that the field became wet like quicksand. Before I knew it, I was up to my knees in mud. My feet were heavy and hard to move. The water continued to drain from the sky in a heavy downpour when a bolt of lightning ripped through the sky followed by another deafening clap of thunder. I realized I was still holding the hoe in my hand. In fear I threw it as far from my body as I could when another illuminating bolt cut through the sky and made contact with the earth. The ground rumbled with the roar of thunder and I began to cry and scream for my husband.

“TOMA!” I called for his name tirelessly numerous times with no answer in return.

The rain subsided, and the sky opened again, revealing blue clouds and rays of beaming sunlight. Ivica comes to my mind and I hope that he made it home in time. I grab Zivadinka's hoe and run back to the village.



*Figure 12: Sky Opening Over Village Crop Fields. Photo by Author.*

As I near the top of the village and round the bend of the corner shop, I notice that the ground is dry. Dust from the dirt path rises beneath my feet and I realize that the downpour did not happen here. At home, Ivica is dry and waiting for me on the stairs. As I approach he jumps to me and asks where his father is. I tell him that I do not know and that I thought he would be here.

I waited patiently inside as night began to fall. I see the worry overcome my son's face because Toma still has not come home. The night began to grow darker and I could hear the neighbors start to whisper. I cannot wait again for them to bring me bad news again. I must find him myself.



*Figure 13: Waiting. Photos by Author.*

With a couple other men from the village, I set out down the mountain again, this time to the field by the river. The men carry lights as we weed our way through the tall grass. Suddenly, the grass gets lower and the cottonwood tree by the water is split in half. Its bark is black as if it had been set on fire. Under the broken tree next to Ceva's stool, lay the hoe and crop cutter missing from our tools this morning. Three meters from the tools, near the bank of the river, lay Toma's body face down in the freshly cut grass.

I let out a scream in horror of a fate that I had already anticipated to be true. I ran out and threw myself over his body before turning him over to make sure it was truly my dear husband. His body was still warm from the electricity. I pleaded with the men to help bring him back or to help take him to a hospital because he was still warm! We still had a chance to save him! His pulse proved otherwise. No heartbeat answered under the

feel of my fingertips. So there under the leaves of the Cottonwood tree, on the banks of the Nisava river, I lost another part of my family.

I buried Toma Randjelovic in Mokliste next to his mother. I put a gate around both of their graves. Toma's headstone reads:

“Poginu od groma”

“Death by lightning”

For Paraskeva Randjelovic's headstone I only gave the years she's suffered on this earth. I did not have the heart to put why.

### **Sunday, June 10, 2018: Material Compensation**

#### **Diana**

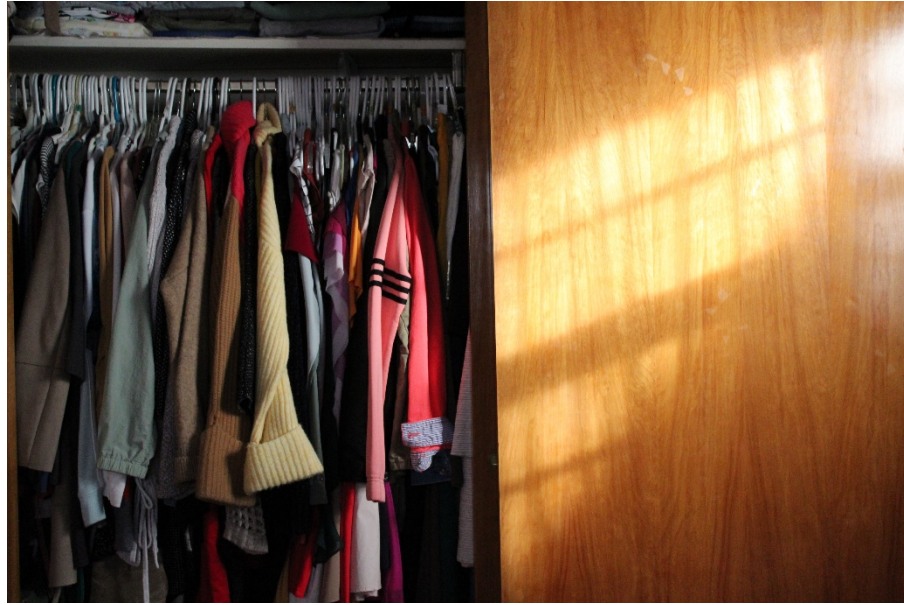
Packing was incredibly stressful for my Mother. She was rediscovering dresses in her closet, that she had accumulated over her twenty-four years living abroad, many of them never worn. The dresses, beautiful in pattern and bright in color, were tokens of long forgotten memories.

“Kad sam ovo kupila?”

“When did I buy this?!” my Mother kept exclaiming from whichever closet (mine or my Sister's) she found a forgotten dress.

She did not have her own wardrobe. Half of my closet was filled with her things, as was my Sister's. I distinctly remember when we moved in, my Mother was pushed out

of her closet by my Dad. He had already taken over the small one in their soon-to-be room, filling it with things that he also rarely wore. Perhaps her excessive buying of unnecessary items was a sort of compensation for never really having a room to call her own since she married my father. Perhaps the move itself created a lack of a place of beginning.



*Figure 14: Mama's Closet. Photo by Author.*

“You’re not going to need that many nice clothes, Mom,” I reluctantly told her. I knew that she had been waiting for this moment to go home and look her best.

“Pa sta ako trebam da idem na neko slavje! Na neku svadbu! Ili ako idem u kafanu!”

“But what if I go to a party! Or a wedding! Or out to the kafana?”

The typical excuse, the “what if,” in my family we were always saving our pretty clothes for special events that never lived up to our expectations or feelings of anticipation. I refrained from commenting and returned to my own packing for a trip that I had done for the past eight years. An unexpected text stopped me.

Tamara Miletic

iMessage

“Diki when are you going to Serbia? When is your flight?”

My cousins and I rarely text. I don’t text with anyone in my family, really. It’s not that we have a bad relationship; quite the opposite, but it’s better to avoid the texting. No texting, no questions, no need to explain myself. I like it better that way, my business is my own, and if I kept quiet, no one could make me feel bad about it.

“Monday at 3 from JFK.” Maybe she just wanted to send my mom off?

“Ok. I’m going with the same flight but just for a couple days.”

Confused and taken aback, I replied, “Ooooh Taso you’re going too? Why didn’t you tell me?” My Cousins from my father’s side of the family moved to New Jersey about five years ago. She, like the rest of the educated youth from Serbia, made a run for it, trying to escape the consequences and aftermath of civil war.<sup>3</sup> It is possible to survive

a war, but not the economy that follows it. Many could not and still cannot. So here we all are, some cowards, some refugees, some runaways, living the dream that is apparently only possible to live if it's lived on the other side of the water in America. My family thought that maybe this would make a difference to all of us. Finally, we would have some blood relatives living in the same place, sadly it didn't make much of a difference. Cape May to Edison is still too far and when you're an American life is so busy, time is scarce, and the responsibilities of living up to the American dream are too important and pressing to find time.

Immigrant life in American however, especially for students coming from abroad consists of trying to scrape together as much cash as possible: working seasonal jobs in tourist locations, to help themselves and those back home; living in Wildwood and working in Cape May at a string of restaurants, hotels, and tourist shops have kept my cousins from spending a summer in Serbia with me for the last couple of years. This is why I was surprised that Tamara was coming to Serbia with us. But, at least we have the memories of the summers before everything changed. We always relive these earlier times when we gather together over multiple glasses of whiskey and hard laughs.

"I bought my ticket yesterday and no one knows but Vesna," Tamara admitted.

"I'm going for a couple of days, I need to relax as well. But I'll call you tomorrow, maybe I'll come up to you and we can all go to the airport together."

I had always missed that first feeling of experiencing what would later become my escape. That feeling of flying to Belgrade and seeing the once American passengers

around me shed their protective facade and assume their natural Serbian skin. The language changed, and smiles emerged. We were home, again. That feeling is like no other. It is impossible to describe the joy that floods me when I see the red rooftops. I guess this is what diaspora means, a feeling of always chasing after and thinking about what is lost or sacrificed while trying to assimilate to another culture and its values.

### **Monday, June 11, 2018: Two Tickets Home**

Tamara pulled up to my house around 10:00 am as I was throwing the last things into my suitcase. She was not just going home with us because she needed to relax, but for a funeral. Cape May and Wildwood are filled with foreign kids, mostly from Ex-Yugo<sup>4</sup>, working as students. Some come and insist that they are cut out for this country and its lifestyle and stay. Others disapprovingly go home. Jobs range: some wait tables; others lifeguard; many drive trucks cross-country. Any job that is usually unwanted by the rest of the population is taken up by hopefuls who come from far away to live the dream. Tamara's friend who died drove trucks cross country. A quick accident and he was gone. Apparently, he was trying to avoid another accident that happened in front of him and he didn't have enough time to slow down. In trying to avoid the accident he created another one, and just like that, his dream was over. His family transported his body home to have a proper funeral.

We arrived at John F. Kennedy airport (JFK) named after a president who also died too young. My Mom's eyes were sad, which I had expected. But her spirit was sad, too, and that I had not anticipated. In 1994, my Mom entered the United States through that same airport. She was twenty-two and she arrived with my Sister who was only two years old. She once told me, she was so unaware. She did not even know how to ask for a



bathroom, but she was full of spirit then. I remember the story she once told me about her arrival. She could not find my Dad anywhere. Instead my Great Uncle Ljuba was waiting at the airport and that's the first person she saw. My father was running around trying to find balloons. He found my Mom in the parking lot where the reunion occurred. They had been separated for a year. JFK was where she arrived with one daughter at age twenty-two, and now it was the place where she was going back, twenty-four years later with another daughter, who was born in the United States, on the verge of being 22 herself.



*Figure 15: Mama After Arriving in America on the Banks of the Raritan River, New Brunswick. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic.*

I was on the verge of turning twenty-two at the time and was having a hard time trying to put myself in my Mother's shoes. To come to a country, not knowing the language or the currency, which didn't matter much because she had none, is a rather brave thing to do. So why was going back home, to her birthplace, to her native tongue, currency, culture and values so hard for her? I could see it in her face and in her

unspoken thoughts. She was not ready to go, and perhaps did not even want to go. It saddened me.

The world is a small place, as cliché as that sounds. At the check-in counter, the woman behind the counter suddenly went off script when she looked at Tamara's passport.

"Do you have a sister?" Confused and tired, Tamara looked at the woman and answered shyly,

".... Yes?"

"Is her name Marija?"

"Yes??"

"I'm your Cousin!"

The woman behind the check in desk at JFK, who worked for Air Serbia turned out to be Tamara's cousin from her Father's side. Joy filled the woman as she realized that she had finally met a long-lost Cousin. We were all amazed. It was hard for Tamara to be happy, though. It was not a happy time. It was a time of mourning, a time to mourn not only a friend and not only a lost life, but the loss of the dream to live a better life.

### **Tuesday, June 12, 2018: Red Rooftops**

Weeks before we boarded the plane, I would notice my Mom tearing up at random moments. She could be sitting and eating dinner and suddenly, her eyes filled with water and her head would sink lower into her bowl of soup to hide them. I could feel myself getting hostile and defensive, and I couldn't help it. Why was my Mom so

unsatisfied, so unhappy, she was, after all, going home? I could see it in her side comments and facial expressions, but mainly her lack of energy was getting to me. Why wasn't she happy? Why wasn't she relieved? Selfishly, I felt mad. This is what she wanted, or what she thought she wanted. I had given it to her. I had made it possible. I had fulfilled my life's purpose. My circumstance as an American finally allowed this to happen. What was wrong?

I felt that the memory of landing in Belgrade and the joy of seeing the red rooftops was being stripped from the happy part of my brain and being transformed into a bad memory. I knew that the Belgrade airport wasn't the best, and the common courtesy of American hospitality was not present in Serbia, but what was I supposed to do? I just wanted her to feel at ease, but the negative tension radiating off her body was infuriating. It did not help that little things kept going wrong. Our suitcases came out last, customs had stopped me because of my new camera. People were rude. Writing about it even now makes me tense and anxious.

Maybe when we finally got out of the airport and smelled the Belgrade air, she would feel better, and I would as well. We passed through customs and there was my Cousin, Tamara waiting for us. The airport was empty. Everyone else had passed through, so only Tamara remained. She was standing there almost the same as when she and my Aunt picked me up the first time I came to Serbia.

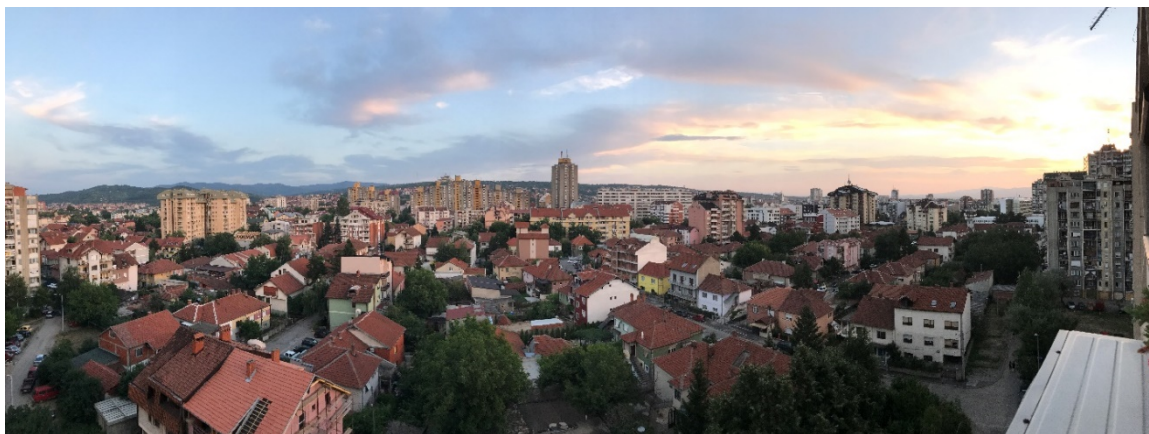
2010 was the first time I saw the country that I had heard so much about growing up. The place that produced my identity. It was weird that I could so strongly identify with a place that I had never seen before, and only experienced through second hand memory. I had come with no preconceived notions or expectations. Only fourteen, I was

thoroughly upset that my parents had forced me to go. It was the summer before high school, and I finally felt like I was starting to find my group of friends and my place in the American side of my life. I was unaware that this was what I was doing at the time, but I was spending more time with my two girlfriends, and with the boys from the block to notice that I was acting differently. My overprotective parents, who never cared to assimilate, were not having it. My father was adamant on buying me a ticket. They would rather have me running around the streets of Serbia than the streets of America, and ever since my struggle to lead a torn life began. From then on, I searched for understanding, and comfort, in other immigrant-American children. I missed the streets, the mountains, and the red rooftops, and I longed for the distinct smell that I came to associate with the Serbian landscape. The thing I missed most, I think, was the freedom that I rediscovered in Serbia.

The American side of my identity was constrained by the feeling of isolation that I carried. All I knew was that I was unable to do certain things because “we have a problem that other people do not have, Diana.” Sometimes I did not mind the problem, because my introverted and shy nature liked having a secret excuse that got me out of doing things I was afraid to go out and do. My usual lie would be that my “strict parents” would not let me. But, I gave up having a real childhood without realizing it. My environment was normal for me, it had taken me years before to realize that my life growing up, and its constraints, was not normal, or at least not normal for most Americans. Once I tasted freedom in Serbia, I began to find my American life dissatisfying. My American behavior changed, and I only noticed it when my mother would point it out. After I returned from summer in Serbia to begin high school in 2010

my mother would directly tell me that she was unsatisfied with my behavior ever since I got back and that it was a mistake to have sent me in the first place. She said that I was not her sweet girl anymore. I returned mean and argumentative, talking back to her whenever she tried to discipline me and worst of all, I had gained weight. I could not tell the difference in my behavior other than the fact that I felt happier.

If only I had known that this feeling of belonging was waiting for me, maybe I wouldn't have been so hostile about going. I traveled with a family friend's sister and her husband. They were making their way to Macedonia and as a minor, they served as my supervisors. I sat on the plane nervously, afraid to fly when Kristina turned to me and said, "You're going to like it. I know you are. You're going to want to go back every year." I don't know what kind of curse she put on me, but I still can't figure out how she was so unbelievably right.



*Figure 16: Red Rooftops. Photo by Author.*

July 26, 2010 was a scorching hot day in Belgrade. Once I landed I realized that I had no recollection of what my family looked like. How would I find them? I had no idea. A sense of nervousness overwhelmed me as this reality sunk in. Kristina had walked out with me through arrivals and in front of us stood a sea of people kept back by a

barrier of retractable belts. I scanned the crowd, of people awaiting those returning from diaspora, holding balloons and signs. Kristina leaned in to me and asked, “What do they look like?” My eyes scanned the crowd when a hand flared out in excitement and a finger pointed directly at me. It was Tamara. My Cousin and my Aunt were standing in front of the ropes full of people and in the matter of seconds, my Teta Vesna was running toward me happily laughing with tears in her eyes, embracing me in a hug. Relief. Tamara was happy and young, about the age then that I am now. She smiled and hugged me.

This time, eight years later, she was alone and looked less full of life, but she still smiled and held up a red post-it note with a heart she had drawn and the words “Welcome Sonja,” my Mother’s name.

Warm and full of second-hand smoke, the Belgrade air washed over me before we entered the A1 shuttle bus that takes us from the airport to the bus station. When I travel in the winter the A1 bus is empty. Now, suitcases fill the floor, and they fly back and forth as the bus weaves through the Belgrade streets. As we travel from the airport to the bus station, lulled by the rocking of the bus, peace washed over me, but the feeling was soon replaced by anxiety. I was suddenly the outcast again. Growing up my nickname was “The American,” as I was the only one in my family to be born in the United States. I felt ridiculed when the nickname was used: as if it were being used against me, as if I had a choice in where I wanted to be born. I hate it. I wasn’t American! I didn’t choose this identity. As I grew older, I began to realize that there was hostility associated with my nickname. It was *supposed* to make me feel like an outsider. Now I was uncomfortable to be the only of three women who was not born in Serbia, even though I

loved the country as much, or perhaps more, than they did. The one thing we did have in common was the freedom we searched for, just in different places.

The bus station in Belgrade has not changed in 24 years, according to my Mother when she looked around. It sure has not changed in the last ten, according to my own. I did not mind this lack of change. The familiarity of it was welcoming to me. Hungry, I knew exactly what I was going to do first. I walked ahead of my Mother and Cousin and into the pekara, the bakery. Serbian food is dominated by heavy meats and cheeses spiced with the taste of peppers. A fresh croissant and pastetika were hot and flakey in my mouth. I tried to enjoy the taste and the warm air while ignoring my Mother. I knew how she was feeling. She hated being here. Everything was old. Everything was dirty. Nothing had changed. It was her home, but it no longer felt like it. When did her identity change? I wondered.



*Figure 17: Belgrade Bus Station. Photo by Author.*

“Dve karte za Nis. Direkto.”

“Two direct tickets to Nis.”

Even though we had arrived in Serbia. We still weren't exactly home. A three-hour bus ride would change that. I was nervous. The bus system in Serbia is poor and ranks as one of the worst public transportation systems in Europe. The three hours bus drive south is always tough. Especially after a thirteen-hour flight. Mama was fed up, as I was, but, at least for myself, I knew that the difficulty of the trip would not feel as bad once I was on the Bulevar.

While waiting for the bus to leave the station, I could not help thinking that growing up is a weird thing, and it's never when you expect it to happen. My realization of adulthood hit me during this trip home. Before my other trips began, when I was a young teenager, others were always making sure I was okay. If I was comfortable and happy. When I started going to Serbia by myself two years back, I began to experience freedom. No human attachments or responsibilities, I made my own choices and did what I wanted to do. Now here I was, full circle, taking care of someone else to make sure they were okay, and I got here quicker than I thought I would. I was running around my Mom trying to ensure she was okay, or that she would be: trying to comfort her and make her experience like the one she imagined in her head for the past twenty-four years. It's not starting a new job or buying yourself a car or moving out that makes you an independent adult. Making jokes, trying to bring a smile to her face, giving up the window seat is what does it. Once you start giving up the window seat, I think that's the test. I let my Mom have the window seat on the bus, but I looked over her shoulder the whole time. Even



though I have already seen this landscape and all its views, there were still new ones to discover and old ones to recollect. We both stared at the view beyond the bus station, above the parking garage, the old buildings chipping paint, the antique signs advertising a hostel, a slightly newer building with a facade of reflective glass windows. My favorite view is the view of Stari Grad, the old town on the water where the Sava meets the Danube over the Brankov Bridge. When I look at the landscape, I see quaint beauty, what did my Mother see?



*Figure 18: Hidden Beauty of Belgrade. Photos by Author.*

The bus engine sputtered to life. Riding out of Belgrade the bus passes under a bridge of Bulevar Oslobođenja, stopping at the Franse D'Eperea bus stop on E-75, another familiar view makes me smile. I like this stop. Under the bridge I get to see all the old and new flyers for concerts that have been posted and left over the years. I get to watch people go home or come home, go to work or go to school. Everyone is circulating

and climbing a unique set of stairs embedded into the hillside of a park that brings you up to the district of Vracar.

Mama looked out of the window for a while and I observed her as she looked over the farm fields, the distant views of villages, occasional gas stations, rest-stops and abandoned buildings. It wasn't long before she pulled the stain-filled dark blue curtain back over the window and turned her head away. She let me rest my head on her shoulder and suddenly, I was a kid again.



*Figure 19: Serbian Landscape Through a Bus Window. Photo by Author.*

### **Tuesday, June 12, 2018: Nis**

The bus stop in Nis is always hard to navigate. It is surrounded by roads that are filled with people. The “veliki pijac” or the “big flea market” engulfs most of the bus stop, down Djuke Dinic road to the front of the Nis Fortress. The elderly sell their fruits and vegetables among other household goods. You can find practically anything in these

makeshift outdoor markets. I called my reliable green taxi to take us from the bus station to the Bulevar, and as we drove past the city center Mama was serious and quiet. When we crossed the Vojvode Misica bridge over the Nisava River my Mother's brows furrowed in sadness, and her lips curled downward holding back the lump in her throat. The third exit in the roundabout put us on Bulevar Nemanjica. Stopping in front of an old twelve story yellow building, we were finally home. Or at least, I was. Bulevar Nemanjica 28. The middle one of three identical buildings. Things were definitely different than she remembered. There was now a makeshift handicap ramp up to the building, and the Bulevar used to be named "Lenjina" before my parents left.



*Figure 20: Our Apartment Building and Baba's Mailbox. Photos by Author.*

Gray mailboxes line the entryway of our apartment building, just past the heavy wooden doors painted white. I pointed to my Grandmother's mailbox and told my Mom, "this one is ours." Mama smiled at me. "I know. That's my handwriting." Excitedly, I looked more closely, and it was true. Randjelovic Letica 54 was written in my Mom's

familiar handwriting. I've walked past that mailbox for eight years and never noticed that a part of my Mom was always hidden here.

The elevators in the building were the same old ones that were always there, only with a few newly added touches since Mama's last time home. The same brown faux wooden interior, but the mirror that my Father had broken when he found out my Aunt was engaged had been replaced. An extra set of closing doors were installed to ensure safety, in addition to a new button keypad that replaced the old one that my Tata had mischievously tampered with as a teenager, turning the button to the ninth-floor upside down.

The ninth floor, apartment 54. Randjelovic, Letica. My Father's Mother lived in this apartment since my Dad was about eleven or twelve years old. Until that time, they had lived in the village of Mokliste, further south along the Nisava River near the small town of Bela Palanka, where my Tata was born. Mokliste is a village high in the mountains that is an hour away by foot from where the bus drops you off at the bottom of the hill. You are left by the side of the road when the bus drives away, picking up dust. When the dust clears, a narrowly paved road and your own two feet are the only things in front of you. Some are lucky enough to have a car. Tata's side of the family is not that lucky. At the edge of the road a yellow sign points toward the direction of the village and in black letters states the name Mokliste.



*Figure 21: Family Origins. Photo by Author.*

When Tata was ten years old, his Father was struck by lightning while cutting grass in an open field. He was killed instantly. My Grandmother, Letica, only told me the story when I asked about him when I was fourteen. Among all the other village stories she constantly repeats to me, this one, she never mentions. It was tucked away in her memory I assume, hiding there hoping not to be recalled. I remember feeling guilty for asking her to remember. She said that when they found his body he was still warm, and she had begged the others who were with her to take him to the hospital because there could still be a chance that he was alive and that he could make it. The other villagers convinced her that he was gone and that it was only the energy of the strike that left him warm and there was no point. She told me that she still wishes they had tried. She also told me that when the lightning struck my Dad was walking along the dirt road to the village about to turn the only corner that had a store. She told me that when he heard the

thunder, he knew that his Father was dead. Tata never told me that story, he never told me much of anything. Neither did Mama. Anything that I knew of their lives before America were bits and pieces of information that I put together myself from their conversations. But this tragic event was important, it left my Grandmother a widow, with two young children and no income. I'm not sure when she stopped going to school as a young girl, but I knew that my Baba Letica was unable to read and write. Once she went to the store and left me a note on the table that read

“Dijana, Baba se vraca.”

“Diana, Grandma is coming back.”

The note was entirely illegible and at first, it looked like a paper full of scribbles. I didn't even realize it was a note left for me, until I noticed the key to the apartment next to it. With no money, no education and no husband, my Grandmother gathered her strength, picked herself up and traveled downstream to Nis. That was in the early 1970's when Nis was beginning to develop into a bigger city. New buildings were being built. My Baba may have had nothing else, but this time she had luck. She was given a job cleaning new buildings and an apartment on Bulevar Lenjina, on the ninth floor, overlooking the city.

Going to my Baba's is always the same. She doesn't hear well and refuses to wear her hearing aid, so I anticipate waiting outside of her door with one hand impatiently ringing the doorbell, the other hand banging on the door, and yelling “Babo! Baba!!” It'll be a while. This time it took about five and a half minutes for her to open the door. Mama



was convinced she had stepped out and went somewhere, or maybe she was in the bathroom. The rest of us, my Teta Vesna, Tamara and I all laughed and reassured her that Bab was in there. You could hear the television blaring. When she finally opened the door, we were greeted with Baba's special welcome back dinner, like always. Appetizers of deviled eggs and deli meats. Soup first, no matter how hot it is outside accompanied with stuffed peppers, chicken, and pita that Baba got up at 4:00 am to make herself while electricity was still cheap. A fresh loaf of bread on the table, although nobody ever eats it and Bab's favorite drink, lemon soda. No matter how much you eat, she never believes you eat enough, and she always gives you something sweet at the end to wash everything down.



*Figure 22: Baba Letica. Photo by Author.*

If there was ever an advocate for village life, it would be my Baba Letica. Even today, at age 78 she still runs up to Mokliste whenever she gets the chance, regardless of the weather. In the summer of 2017, there was a three-week heat wave that lasted the month of August. It was overwhelming, and it made me sick, I was unable to stomach

food and constantly throwing up from dehydration. There was nothing I could do but lay still during the day and wait for the sun to go down. Periodic cold showers would provide temporary relief. During one of the hottest Sunday's, when the temperature hit 104 degrees, Baba Letica decided she would go to Mokliste. I tried to convince her the night before that she could not go, but in the morning, she had already packed her things and set them by the door before waking me up to let me know that she was leaving. I did everything I could to keep her from walking out of the door with two heavy black bags carrying water and other supplies, but she rushed out shouting "my bus is in ten minutes! If you get hungry I took some stuffed peppers out of the freezer for you." I waited for her all day in worry. There was no way for me to call her. When I told my Aunt this story she laughed and told me about the time Baba ran up to Mokliste in the middle of winter after a huge snowfall to dig up potatoes to bring back to the city. The potatoes ended up being frozen, but if she could bring food from the village rather than buying them at the market, she would. The cold snowy trip left Baba in bed for a week because she was so sore and exhausted from the cold trip up the mountain. When we told her, "Baba you could have died!" she simply says, "Well, you have to die from something."

I must admit, I expected Baba Letica to immediately ask about her son, my Dad, when she saw us. I was worried that she would drown my Mother in questions, asking why he still could not come. I knew it would only make my Mother feel guilty and unhappier. Surprisingly, Baba refrained from the question. She seemed so happy that we were there, even if her son could not be. I knew my Father was her life and that his absence had put a hole in her heart that was never quite filled by anything else. My



Grandmother's generation of Serbians still regards the birth of a male child to be the most significant achievement of motherhood.

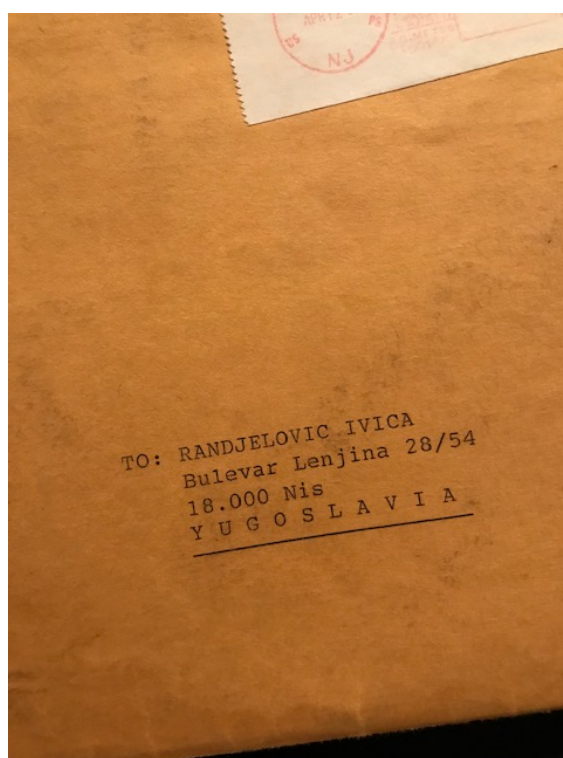
Baba's apartment sometimes gave me an eerie feel when I would take a step back and really look at it. Pictures of my family were everywhere, mostly of Tata. Every room but the kitchen and bathroom were decorated with photos of us. Sometimes it would feel as if it was a shrine, or a memorial, of my Father, almost as if he did not exist anymore. It would make me feel uncomfortable, as if he had died when he left her for America. I know this bothered my Aunt. She would sit there in silence, sternly smoking her cigarette. Sometimes she would throw in a comment asking you if you noticed that her picture is nowhere to be found in the apartment.



*Figure 23: Baba's Apartment. Photos by Author.*

Fate is also a funny thing. I still haven't figured out why we were meant to live a separate life in America, away from our family and our culture. The meaning of that

struggle will hopefully make itself apparent soon. My Dad has been planning to come back home ever since he arrived in America, or so my Mom says. I never asked him if he liked it in America, but I know that he's always loved it in Serbia. In 2005, my Tata even bought an apartment in Nis, in a long-distance transaction from New Jersey. In case we ever wanted to go back, or needed to, we would have a place to go, but in the meantime, it would be an extra means of income for Baba since her pension checks were too low, and the cost of living too high. So, Tata invested in a new apartment overseas, back home. Address? Bulevar Nemanjica 28, eighth floor, Apartment 49, the apartment directly below my Grandmother's.



*Figure 24: An Old Letter for my Tata from New Jersey. Photo by Author.*

Immediately after dinner, Mama and I changed into the first dresses we found in our suitcases. We had to share my Tata's old room. A narrow room they could only fit a

couch, a wardrobe and an old broken lamp that my parents received as a wedding gift. My Tata's old records lined the shelf above the couch with Jelena's old baby toys scattered in between. An old American Barbie doll of mine sits in a shelf corner that I gave to Baba when she visited us in 2004. She constantly talked about how she kept everything the same, holding onto my parent's and Jelena's old possessions since they left. My nine-year-old self, feeling left out, offered up my doll to be kept among the artifacts in her museum apartment.



*Figure 25: Tata's Old Room. Photos by Author.*

I called Prvi, my go-to green taxi to meet us in front of our apartment building. I wore a yellow dress and Mama a white one. Across the street from our apartment there is a 24-hour kiosk, a flower shop and a market. We quickly went to the market to buy coffee and chocolates for Mom's family. You can never go to guests empty handed,

especially after twenty-four years. When we entered, everyone turned to look at us and I felt eyes following me through the store. We stuck out. I guess we were dressed too fancy, or perhaps it was because we were strangers. Everyone there knew each other. Our faces were not familiar. I had never gotten these looks as intensely as I did this trip. I felt uncomfortable, and I hated it. This was my grocery store. I would come here all of the time during summers and winters. I wasn't a stranger and I hated feeling like it.

When the taxi came, and we settled in, Mama signaled me to give the address of her home where she grew up. She had forgotten.

“Kutinska 7. Na Trosarinu.”

No taxi driver ever knew where this address was. This was a hidden street, so I guess I could not blame them.

“Where the railroad is. I'll tell you when to turn left,” I reassured the driver.

We drove down the Bulevar and neared the Trosarina settlement near Cele Kula, the Skull Tower, a historic monument of Nis. I pointed down a narrow walkway behind a strip of shops. I told my Mom, “That's where I get my haircut.” She smiled at me and said “That's where I used to get my haircut when I was your age. I can't believe it's still there.” It made me smile. It was amazing that out of all the hair salons in Nis, I ended up going to the same one as my Mom.

Mama grew up on the Trosarina, an area of Nis that begins at the end of the Bulevar, the street where Tata grew up. The area of the Trosarina was more of a suburban sector of the city to me. More houses, not many apartment buildings. It was a quieter area of the city, even though train tracks divide the houses from the main street. Trains pass by occasionally, but not often. I took the train once to go to Mokliste with Baba last summer. Mama said that the houses by the train tracks were not there when her family came from Mokliste to Nis. All that was there were meadowlands, and their house was built from the ground up by my Grandfather Vlasta and Grandmother Zivadinka, themselves. As we drove up the narrow road winding between oncoming cars and ones parked up on curbs, we passed by a schoolhouse with a colorful fence wrapped around its perimeter. It was Mama's elementary school.

As we neared the house I asked the taxi driver if he could stop somewhere a little further up the street, not directly in front of the house. I let him know that we were planning a surprise when my Mom interrupted and said, "I haven't been home in a very long time."

### **Tuesday, June 12, 2018: It's me, Mama**

The green metal fence enclosing Mama's childhood home was rusty and the gate was difficult to open. The house used to be a green color when my Mom was still a girl and even when I saw it for the first time when I was fourteen. It was painted brown now, after a recent renovation. The house used to have two floors. The first floor was rented out when Mama was young, because of its convenient side entrance. But for a while now the first floor has served as my Uncle's office for his private firm. The space in front of the house is always blocked by his white sprinter van. The right side of the house has a



parking space equipped with a strip of garden that fits right between the car's tires. A larger garden consumed the backyard and was also home to Dunja, Jovana's daughter's, new dog, Deni. A long set of stairs leads you to the second floor and the front door.

Jelena loved these stairs ever since she saw Mama's wedding pictures and video.

Watching Mama descend these very stairs in a big white dress made my Sister swear that she was going to do the same one day. She would probably tell me I'm stupid and deny the truth of that statement, saying that I always make things up, but she did say it and I remember it every time I see the steps, and every time I walk down them.



*Figure 26: Mama as a Young Girl with her Mother at their Home in Nis, Serbia.*

*Photo by Vlastimir Stojanovic.*

Once at the door, there are two doorbells and I am always confused which doorbell to ring, the right one or the left one? Which one is for Baba and which one is for the third floor? Usually the door is already unlocked, and I simply walk in. This time, since they were not expecting us, it was probably better to ring the doorbell.

I rang the bell to the right and waited a few seconds before trying the door. It was open, and I slowly stumbled into the hallway calling, “Baba!” as gently as I could. When you enter there is a pair of white French doors to the left that lead you to the part of the house, where my Baba Zine lives and straight ahead a single door leads you to an outside porch that wraps around the back of the house, leading you up more stairs to my Aunt’s home. Plants take up the corners of the yellow room, taking in the sun. The walls of the entryway are covered in old wallpaper. Shoes are lined up before a wardrobe with a full-length mirror. Under the hooks for the coats hangs my Grandfather’s obituary.

“Baba!” I call out again. I turn to Mama behind me and I tell her to stay back, hidden. The French doors rattle, and I prepare myself, trying to hold my iPhone steady while recording the encounter. The door opens.

“Zdravo.”

“Hello.” I greet my Grandmother. A short woman. She is hunched over, showing her obvious back problems, still wearing all black, embracing her prolonged period of mourning. Her face is full of surprise to see me and she lets out a smile,

“Zdravo, srce moje”

“Hello, my heart”

I embrace her in a hug while asking her how she is. To myself I am relieved that she was not as startled as I anticipated her to be. My family in Serbia always expects me to make an appearance during my breaks from school, and usually my Mom updates them on my times of arrival. This time I did not want to take a chance of them finding out that I would not be coming alone. So, I made sure it was kept a secret. But, still not wanting to give a woman of old age a heart attack from seeing her daughter after twenty-four years, I walked in first, giving the comfort of a familiar face.

Letting go of her embrace, I looked at my Baba and told her, “I have someone with me.” As I stepped out of the way, my Mother, who was waiting on the steps behind the front door, entered the room. My Grandmother’s face dropped, her lips quivered and her voice cracked as she wailed between sobs:

“Sonjo, ti li si? Srce Majkino.”

“Sonja, your Mother’s heart, is that really you?”

“Ja sam, Majko”

“It’s me, Mom,” my Mother whispered through her own tears.

They embraced each other in a hug and cried softly before heading into the living room where they sat on the couch and talked closely to one another. I went back outside to the doorbells and rang the one to the left this time. Wiping tears, I thought: were they



happy tears or sad ones? I don't know if I'll ever be sure, perhaps a mix of both, if that is possible. Footsteps above our heads could be heard shuffling their way down. A door opens, and my Aunt's voice calls out,

“Ti li zvonis?”

“Did you ring the doorbell?” My Aunt Slavica, my Mom's Sister asked. Mama scurried from her place on the couch to the door of the living room and stood back against the wall. I sat in a chair in direct view of the doorway.

“Ja”

“I did,” Baba Zine answered back.

“Sto?”

“Why?” my Aunt questioned

“Imamo gosti”

“We have guests.”

My Teta Slavica's eyes met mine and her eyebrows raised, her mouth ajar. I let out a sob before her eyes turned right and my Mom walked towards her: Sisters reunited. Slavica became stern and her surprise turned into shock. Her mouth closed, and her body began to freeze. She extended one arm, reaching out to grab the door frame while her legs took steps backward.

“Ne, ne, ne.”

“No, no, no.”

My Mother sobbed. She grabbed Slavica into a hug, trying to hold her up, “No!” she exhaled through hyperventilating breathes. My Aunt became pale and weakly held her arms up trying to hug her Sister back. I grabbed an empty water bottle and went to the kitchen sink to fill it with water. Mama led her Sister to a chair. She sat down and drank from the water bottle gently, like a child trying not to spill anything. Both her hands wrapped around the bottle as she sipped the water. I had suddenly become worried that our surprise plan was not as good an idea as we had hoped. Mama and I knew that both Baba Zine and Slavica were sick. Weak hearts, high blood pressure, low iron, among other things. This is what Mama wanted, though. She had wanted to surprise them and that is what I helped her do.

I knew that this was what my Mom’s family had wanted for a long time too: the opportunity to see her. Every time I came to visit, I knew that I was not enough. Every time I left the goodbye was always the same, “Next time bring your Mom” or “next time bring everyone else with you, too.” The conversations my first days back would go as if scripted. The same questions, one after the other. “When are you going to bring them?” “When are they going to sort all of that out?” Questions to a problem that only I could solve. It is a heavy topic to have to talk about and a heavy burden to have to carry. I could only turn twenty-one so fast, and then be old enough to fix a problem that I did not create. When I did turn twenty-one then I could make the problem go away. Or could I? Would

it ever go away? Would the existence of a paper really change the mindset of our lives? The topic of conversation was never how happy they were to see me or if school was going well, or even, was I okay?

Did I even want to do this? Is this really my responsibility? That did not matter. I am just another player in the game. Last summer, my Cousin Marija confided in me how much she missed her Aunt, my Mom. We were really the closest family that either of us had. Marija does not have another Aunt from her Father's side of the family or otherwise. She told me how much she wanted to see my Mom and Jelena too, but mostly just my Mom. I felt guilty then because I had just turned twenty-one and the process was still underway and all we could do was wait to see if everything would be approved in time for next summer, or at all.

Slavica sat sternly in the chair, still clenching the bottle of water. No one knew what to say. What can one even say in a moment like this? Baba Zine sobbed softly to herself.

“Rekla sam da cu samo da dodjem. To sam vam rekla, da samo cu tako da se pojavim jedan dan.”

“I told you that I was just going to come. That's what I said, that I was just going to show up one day,” Mama kept weakly repeating, trying to ease the tension, the shock of disbelief. Slavica stood up, her hair white and pulled back into a low, messy bun. She wore old shorts and a tattered tank top, both garments faded in their daily overuse. The red stains on her white shirt and her greasy hands meant that she was cooking.

“Zoran je doneo visnje od selo. Spremam kolaci. Moram da idem da mu kazem.”

“Zoran brought sour cherries home from the village. I’m making cookies. I have to go tell him what’s happened,” Slavica managed to utter before leaving the room and making her way outside and down to my Uncle’s office on the first-floor. She entered his office shaking and quivering “Zorane!” He looked at her in concern and asked,

“Ko je umreo??”

“Who died?” There could not be another explanation for his wife’s behavior, he knew that death was the only thing that could upset her to this degree.

“Niko nije umreo, dosla mi sestra”

“No one died, my Sister is here.”

“Koja Sestra?”

“Which Sister?” my Uncle asked in confusion. In the Serbian language, cousins are also called brother and sister. Sometimes, it can be confusing and to clarify you say your “birth” sister or brother or your sister from your Aunt or Uncle. As a little girl growing up in America with no extended family and struggling with language barriers, you can imagine my surprise when my Father once told me that I have four other Sisters living in Serbia.

“My Sister! Sonja.” My Aunt yelped.

“Pa sto places onda!?”

“Well then, why are you crying!?” My Uncle Zoran questioned before running upstairs to greet my Mom. He shed no tears, but greeted her with a big, wide-eyed smile. Everyone sat in the living room and conversed on the details of our arrival. When did we leave! When did we get here? Why did you not tell us! The atmosphere that surrounded the dimly lit room was filled with an odd, but joyful remorse. The heaviness of years lost loomed over us.

Slavica finally regained her strength and began to act normally, gossiping about her neighbors and grumbling about her cooking chores. After some conversation she looked at us and said,

“Hocemo li gore kod mene?”

“Do you want to go upstairs to my place?”

My Aunt Slavica and Uncle Zoran used to live in an apartment complex on the other side of the Gabrovacka River in the Trosarina District. They lived up Triglavska Street, just off of Dusana Popovica Avenue on the corner where a settlement of “gypsies” live. Across the street there’s now a brand-new Clinical Center for the city. I remember watching stories about the new hospital center on the news on our “Serbian TV” back in Jersey. My Aunt, Uncle, and Cousins used to live up there up until my Deda Vlasta passed away from cancer in 2005. After that time, I know that my Mom’s family renovated the upstairs-attic of Baba Zine’s home into an apartment. My Cousin Marija got engaged shortly after they made the move and it was not long before she left to live

with her husband, ironically just a few blocks down Dusana Popovica Avenue. My Cousin Jovana lived with my Aunt and Uncle maybe five or six years more before she too got married and moved out and even more ironically ended up living down the street from Marija. Now Slavica and Zoran live upstairs and Baba Zine lives in the main house, Hence the separate doorbells.

We made our way upstairs and after some time my Aunt took her phone and searched for a phone number, “I should tell my daughters who came to visit me” she said with a smile. We waited in silence as the phone rang and Marija answered. Slavica ensued in some small talk, asking her daughter what she was up to. Marija reminded me strongly of my own older Sister, Jelena. She was hot-headed and stressed, her presence can definitely make the atmosphere of the room change. As a Mother she was strict, and sarcasm naturally dripped off her tongue. Marija was helping her daughter Andjela, now nine years old, with her math homework when Slavica called. Trying to decipher a math riddle Marija angrily snapped, “If you cannot help me figure out how seven rabbits can fit into five boxes evenly, then I will have to call you back, Mother.”

“Ali Mare, moram da castim”

“But Mare, I have to celebrate. I must treat you,” Slavica giggled.

“Sta castis?”

“What are you celebrating?” inquired Marija.

“Dosla mi sestra. Tetka ti je tu, i Diana”

“My Sister came. Your Aunt is here. So is Diana.”

I could feel Marija’s excitement radiate through the phone as she squealed,

“Dolazim odma!”

“I’m coming right away!”

On the balcony we watched as the sun began to set while waiting for Marija to arrive. We chatted with the neighbors across the street, who were all happy to see my Mom. I only know that Mama had grown up with them and they have lived across from each other since the beginning, so their faces were familiar to me. Someone from their family always had a head popping out of a window or a hand waving from a door and conversations were always exchanged through the air separating our two balconies.

I remember when I first met them they looked at me in awe saying how much I looked like my Mom. But of course, my Tata’s friends and family always argued that I looked more like him. A part of me always felt like they were trying to find a piece of them in me. A relative of my Father in Bela Palanka once cried at the dinner table while reminiscing him and looking at me. He said that my mannerisms were even like his, quiet eyes always observing, thinking, but not speaking. I hated it. My parents were spoken of like they were dead and only I could bring them back to life.



*Figure 27: Tata and me in 1999. Photo by Sonja Randjelovic.*

I wasn't myself, my own person when people looked at me, I was a representation of them and a representative for them due to their unfortunate situation. It was also never a question about me or for me, but them. How are Mom? Dad? And Jelena! How is Jelena doing? When is she going to come? If she could, do you think she would come? Do you think she would like it here? Why would she! This country is going nowhere. Is it going to be possible to fix everything? Well, next time you come, make sure you bring them. My life had become an hourglass that everyone watched, waiting for the sand to run out when I turned twenty-one.

We saw Marija's car pull up in front of the house and in seconds she was upstairs. She swung the door open and managed to slip her shoes off as she shuffled inside, running into my Mother's arms. Marija has black hair and a space between her two front teeth. She was tall, like her Father and her quick anger and authoritative demeanor still reminded me of Jelena. She hugged my Mother tightly and she let out some tears. Her



body was trembling ever so slightly. Even with all of the emotion, my Mother's family only let it show a little. They were very different from my Father's side who were more emotive people. Mom's side was sterner, more serious.

The kids shuffled in the door after Marija and they shrieked, "Teta Dijana!" They were the only ones who were always happy to see me. I gave them hugs. Andjela was now nine, finishing the second grade and flaunting her long hair that she grew out to be like her Teta Dijana from America. She was a replica of Marija. Danilo was four and a new trouble maker at his preschool, still struggling with his lisp. I introduced them to my Mom and they shyly hugged her. We sat down in the living room and I kept quiet as usual. Thank God my Mom was there this time because it was finally less awkward. I was less comfortable with my Mom's family and especially around the kids. I was hesitant to pronounce a word wrong or to use incorrect grammar. Half embarrassed to mess up and half afraid to say something incorrectly in front of the kids and have them pick up on it. So, I stayed quiet and observed.

Andjela slipped me a note like she always does, and I thanked her. She always drew me something when she knew she was going to see me. It always was a drawing of me and her and sometimes a cat, but always the words "I love you" scribbled all over the page.

Teta Slavica's second daughter, Jovana walked in with her daughter, Dunja who was also a replica of her Mother. They too, were like twins: both with naturally curly blonde hair and bright eyes. Jovana is a very lighthearted soul, always throwing around jokes and belting out laughs. She was calmer, and I related to her the most. Jovana

hugged my Mother while scolding her own, “Why did you tell me! I wanted to be surprised too!”

Over the talks and the laughter, I began to feel like my presence was no longer needed. I had fulfilled my end of the deal. When Marija had told me that all she wanted was to see my Mom again, she went on to explain to me how hard it has been to live without my Mother. I stayed quiet and listened. Sometimes I felt like people haven’t realized how lonely we have lived all these years. I grew up not even knowing how many Cousins I had. They think: America! Life could not possibly be bad for you.

Marija joked with Andjela that her math riddle was not going to be solved tonight and Andja stressed over her incomplete homework. Marija smiled and reminisced, saying that twenty-four years ago she was Andjela’s age when my Mama left to go to America and that night she was so upset that she didn’t do her math homework. When her strict teacher at school asked her why she didn’t finish her homework she told her that she couldn’t because her favorite and only Aunt left for America. Marija looked at Andjela and told her that she can tell her teacher that she didn’t do her math homework because her Baka Sonja had finally come home from America.

### **Wednesday, June 13, 2018: Memories Left to Share**

I woke up that morning to the sound of rain beating against the window. Mama had already woken up and was drinking coffee with Teta Vesna and Baba Letica. Since our apartments and balconies face south, the sun would have been shining through already, making the apartment warm. Instead dark clouds rolled over the mountains and into the valley that is the city of Nis, and rain poured. My Aunt Vesna had been living in our apartment downstairs for the last six years since she and my Uncle split. I never got

the full story of what happened between them, but I know that he had simply lost it since the war. He voluntarily chose to go to war and he left to go to combat on the day of my parents wedding. They say he was never really the same after that, but who could be? His job was to transport weapons and explosives while bombs were falling out of the sky like rain droplets. Imagine that: driving a vehicle that could explode at any second. I would have lost my mind too, but still, it does not justify his behavior with my Aunt. Teta Vesna was a loud and positive woman. She really has soul and it makes me sad that in those six years she had lost her marriage, and her daughters had also moved to America.

As I munched on my breakfast, Vesna told Mama that in our apartment downstairs in the small bedroom, water leaks in when it rains. She explained that somehow water gets in through the bottom of the window, slides down the wall and onto the floor, but only when the rain falls sideways towards the window. Upon hearing this, my Mother made it her sole mission to fix the window herself. I wanted her to enjoy this time back to visit family and explore, to take time for herself. But the feeling of being back has been a shock to her and I guess she needed a project to keep her preoccupied, so I said nothing against the idea. It was better to have her interested in something, than nothing. It was hard to watch her lie in bed all day and ignore the daily calls to life, I guess she had let go of the feeling and idea of living for herself and not for legal status or as a wife or Mother.



*Figure 28: Rain Against Window in our Apartment. Photo by Author.*

The following days were rainy, and it has been the most rain I have seen in all of my summers that I have spent in Serbia. The summer months were usually dry and hot and the nights cool and refreshing. It was a nice change from humid summers in New Jersey. Mama and I shared a small bed in my Tata's old room in Baba's apartment. It was weird at first, we had all gotten so used to having our own space to sleep in America, even though that's not how we started out. In the beginning we all slept in one room and before I was born, it was just one bed. We were even lucky to have that. When you come to America with nothing to "start a better life" some families even sleep on the floor.

The rain had seemed to stop, and Mama and I set out to walk around town and do some furniture shopping. We walked down Bulevar Nemanjica to Zona 3, an old shopping strip where we exchanged our dollars into Serbian Dinars. The exchange rate was almost even: one American dollar was more or less 100 dinars. We walked down the Bulevar, past an influx of pharmacies, small shops, and boutiques before coming to the Park of Saint Sava. Across the street from the park were apartments and the local flea

market, almost always bustling with older people selling and buying fruit and other locally grown produce. The inside of the flea market was a maze of vendors selling anything you can imagine.

The Saint Sava park is consumed with a string of cafes surrounding the Saint Sava Church. My Cousins Marija and Tamara used to work in these cafes when I first came to Serbia. I took my Mom through the park as a shortcut to the Roda Market Center, but as we were making our way through she spotted a jewelry store: Zlatara Stanimirovic. She told me that she had seen advertisements for the store on Facebook because her best friend from high school works there. Sadly, her friend, Danijela, wasn't there and we continued our way to Roda. I realized then that my Mom never really had any friends that were her own. Danijela was the only one I knew of from her past life. From hiding in fear for so many years my Mom had become a homebody very much, as the rest of us were. We didn't enjoy life as much as we should have. We only left the house when necessary, for school and work. We had isolated ourselves so much that the point or purpose of life slowly wore away over the years.

We had crossed the bridge over the Gabrovacka River when it started to rain again. The river the last time I saw it trickled slowly and was full of green muck. Miscellaneous garbage dotted parts of the river stuck in its low and slow flow. It looked a little clearer now, probably due to the rain. The corridor for the river made for a nice view, even if the river didn't.



*Figure 29: Gabrovacka River in Nis. Photo by Author.*

In the Roda Center Mama was awed by the similarities of the supermarket to the ones she was used to in America. She laughed when she saw similar brands of goods that she never saw before in Serbia, when she lived there. Mama used to have to stand in lines to get bread and milk in the morning, and sometimes a banana for my Sister when she was a baby during the war when sanctions were strong. She scoffed at how things have changed always commenting that “Serbs say they don’t have anything but look! They have everything we have.” We got carried away in the snack aisle and bought all Mama’s favorite old chocolates and cookies that she used to love. We ate the cookies as we strolled through Forma Ideale, a furniture store in the center, and picked out beds for the new apartment. Picking out furniture for an empty apartment felt like starting over. I had fun doing it, it was something new and exciting. A new point of beginning, a new line to

trace. I wonder how it felt for my Mom. Having to make decisions alone now and having to start over again from nothing. Coming to a place again where nothing is yours and having to sleep in one bed again.

Later that evening we were drinking coffee again, but in Teta Vesna's new apartment, which was conveniently right next door to ours on the eighth floor. We talked about what we saw that day and the differences in lifestyles, before the conversation turned into Vesna and my Mom talking about us kids and the things we say to them. My Mom mentioned how Jelena always blames them for making the decision to come to America, saying they weren't thinking, and they just made our lives harder. Vesna laughed at the comment and began digging through her bookshelf. She took out a piece of paper, a letter that her eldest daughter Marija wrote to her when she was in elementary school. The letter read "Stupid Mother, why did you not go to college and now we have to be poor. I am going to go to college and become a doctor and make lots of money." We all laughed at the letter, because knowing Marija's personality now, made it humorous. Marija was the first born and very strong-willed. She was the dominant personality, the one who knew what to do and how to do it. She was always right, and no one could tell her otherwise. It must be something about the first-born child but in a way she, Jelena and my other cousin Marija were all exactly alike. They had the wits, the knowledge and the power. Tamara and I were more agreeable with each other than with our older siblings, like how I felt with Jovana. We were more timid and listened and thought thoroughly before we spoke while our older sisters told you like it is before you knew it yourself.

With the letter, Vesna pulled out an old picture. It was a small portrait of her Father, my Grandfather, Deda Toma. It was weird because it was the first time that I had ever seen a good picture of him. It was a photo of him from when he was in the army. He had a mustache and a pair of goggles strapped to his head that made him look like he was a pilot. No one could confirm to me if he was a pilot in the army or not, but they all laughed and said that I looked like him. I stared at the photo of a man with a mustache that could have been anyone and disagreed before taking a photo of the picture and sending it to my Dad over Viber. It was weird to think that this man was my family since he has been gone for so long. There are no memories anyone can share with me about who he was or what he liked to do. His lasting memory is the one of his tragic death.



*Figure 30: Portrait of Deda Toma. Photo by Author.*



**Friday, June 15, 2018: It's Over, Why are you Crying?**

Coming home to Baba's apartment after another rainy furniture shopping trip, Letica had the TV blasting old music and she was looking through various old plastic shopping bags pulling out her knitted treasures that she stored in them. There were small ones that you could use decoratively and bigger ones to use as tablecloths. They were all knitted with white string, some were brown that faded over time. I laughed to myself because one of the big plastic shopping bags she was keeping her work in had the words "Odd Job" written across it with the black logo of the character for the dollar store that existed in New Jersey in the 90s. We must have sent her something in that bag twenty years ago and she kept it. My Mom and I stood in the doorway admiring her pure joy as she showed off her handmade work. She shouted over the music plans for my wedding, asking when we were going to have one and that we need to be ready. She was preparing the knitted treasures for my dowry. Ever since I got into a relationship last summer that's all she has been talking about. I was her youngest grandchild, but none of my older Sisters had brought potential partners around, so the pressure was on me, again.



*Figure 31: Knitted Tablecloth. Photo by Author.*

Letica continued to flaunt her work and tell stories about them. I laughed and loved to record her when she began to do funny things like this so later when I would be back alone in Jersey I could watch them, relive the moment, and laugh again. I pulled out my iPhone and started recording. She immediately noticed and got even more excited, spreading the cloths over the bed and picking them up to show their design. She shouted, “Take pictures! Take them! Of this one and that one!” She then asked me to pick out my own and I chose a square, tan, tablecloth. She then asked me which one should be for Jelena and I told her that I can’t pick for Jelena, she must pick one on her own. Letica’s face dropped and she sadly said that Jelena doesn’t even want to come to Serbia. Which, in a sense was true, but only because she also couldn’t come, and I don’t think that many people can understand that.

The rain ensued for the rest of the afternoon. When it would stop periodically Mama would go into my room in our apartment and try to fix the window with several different construction glues she bought. She was persistent in taking on this project against the rainwater. I just wished it would stop raining. If the rain stopped, she would stop.

That evening Tamara reserved a table for us at Kafana Galija to treat my Mom and celebrate her arrival. Aleksandar finally arrived from Sweden earlier that day and he came for the dinner, too. Kafana Galija was a quaint little authentic Serbian restaurant with a live acoustic band. I sat between my Teta Vesna and Aleksandar and across the table from Mama and Tamara. We ordered drinks to toast to my Mom, welcoming her back home.

“Pa Ujno, Dobrodosla nam opet u Srbiju. Neka si nam ziva, zdrava i srečna.  
Zivili.”

“Well Aunt Sonja, Welcome back to Serbia again. We wish for you to live, be healthy, and happy. Cheers.” said Tamara.

“Ziveli!”

“Cheers!” we all said in unison.

After taking a sip of my drink, from the corner of my eye I saw my Mom’s head sink low into her shoulders and her eyes look down into her lap. From the expression on her face I knew that she was holding back tears. What hurt more was that I knew they were not happy tears. She was still sad, and I could feel her disappointment with being back, even if that’s what she had wanted this whole time. I know that her mind has been in shock because everything was different, but still, everything was the same: nothing had changed like she had anticipated. She had put so much weight on fixing her status that she began to believe that a piece of paper was going to change things, but of course, it wasn’t, because you can’t suddenly change the course of a river by saying its existence is now legal. There is no right way for a river to flow.

My smile faded too, seeing her like this because although I knew better than to believe a piece of paper would fix years of damage, I still hoped it would. I hoped that I could have given that to her. The music from the band in the background, singing traditional classics, was deafening, but only made my thoughts scream louder. Aco nudged me out of my distracted state to ask me if I wanted a rose. An old woman had

walked into the restaurant, selling roses out of a basket. I smiled and whispered back to him,

“You know I hate roses but get one for my Mom.”

He called the old woman over and everyone at the table started to awe, thinking he was going to give the rose to me. I smiled awkwardly at them. Aleksandar turned towards my Mother and handed her a single red rose over the table. The “awes” increased by the cute surprise and it brought my Mom’s smile back. Mission accomplished, but only for now.

### **Saturday, June 16, 2018: Breathe**

The next day it rained all day, but it cleared up just before the evening started. To celebrate being back in town, Aco and I went out with our friends to Zelja Pro: a Kafana on the outskirts of the park Cair in the middle of the city. Lately, they started to lock Kafane once the night started for safety reasons. Once you were in, you were basically there for the night and if you didn’t arrive on time it was hard to get in. Since it rained so much the past couple of days, nights in Nis weren’t cool and refreshing, but humid and the air heavy. Kafane are always fun, though. It’s an excuse to dress up all nice and fancy and drink to the music of classic country/folk songs in the company of good friends. It was nice to get away from my family for a night and drown the pressure of the things expected of me. The conversation for children of immigrants and refugees is usually that your parents came here and had to come here for a reason and that reason was usually

you. If they stayed, it was for a reason, and that reason was usually, you. So, be grateful!  
Make them proud!



*Figure 32: Guided Blessing. Photo by Author.*

But no one really talks about how toxic and demanding this narrative and idea can be to children. If you make one mistake, this is the narrative that is thrown in your face to drown you with guilt. There are no room for mistakes. The pressure that comes with this is an unconscious abuse that manifests itself into depression and anxiety if not other mental health issues. It bothered me that no one was ever ready to have this conversation because the weight of your parents sacrifices hits heavier than anything you're feeling. So, swallow your pain and play your role.

My Sister suddenly kept popping into my head. She and my Father were never very close. She was, however incredibly close to my Mother. I kept my distance as much as I could from all three of them. I didn't like to talk about myself or my problems because compared to theirs, my problems didn't exist. If I spoke about them, the feeling of that pressure to have no room for error only became greater and made me feel guiltier. But Jelena probably felt this and more and now I had taken Mama away from her to a

country she couldn't come to. It's a happy time but I still have two more people in America that can't share that happiness. Jelena had moved out last summer and was living alone in Jersey City. Her life was exceptionally hard, and I knew there was nothing anyone could do about it. The problem that she was given was one she had to fix herself and it wasn't fair, but that was her life. She was angry-texting me, as she almost always was, and I was running out of things to say, as I always do. Her co-worker had pissed her off again and Tata had called her and pushed her over the edge with a demanding comment about her life. He was always pushing her, too. Perhaps more than he pushed me. It was like everything she did was wrong. Any decision she made, any success she celebrated wasn't good enough. And I had stupidly left her with him and took her best friend to another country for three God-damn months. How could I be so selfish?



*Figure 33: Mama, Jelena, and Diana in the Valley Manor Apartments Edison, New Jersey. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic.*

Given, growing up with Jelena, I had experienced her full wrath more than anyone and I, more than anyone had the most reason to never speak to her ever again. She took a lot of her trouble and pressure out on me. She was the oldest and that role is overwhelming enough without any of the other circumstances she had. But, I was scared to lose my Sister, too. If she couldn't vent to me or yell at me or take it out on me, who could she tell? I knew it was better for her to talk, about anything, even if it wasn't the sole thing that was bothering her, than for her to keep it to herself. She never told me directly that she was suicidal but from personal experience of knowing what it's like to feel that way, I could hear it in her rhetoric, in her anger, and even in her mental abuse towards me. Jelena wouldn't get out of my head and my phone kept lighting up in the dark Kafana.



*Figure 34: Jelena Holding my Hand as a Baby in Front of the Raritan River.*

*Photo by Ivica Randjelovic.*

Jelena

iMessage

Jelena

iMessage (2)

I turned my phone over on the table, but I could still see the backlight flash on and off with every new message.

Jelena

iMessage (4)

I put the phone away in my wallet. I felt the walls closing in on me and my body sober. Around me everyone was already out of their head and away from their thoughts, while mine were overflowing, like water spilling over the rim of a glass. There my Sister was, in pain, and here I was, having a good night out. The room began to feel smaller and smaller and I couldn't breathe anymore. I was drowning.

I stood up out of my seat, grabbed my jacket and wallet and ran out of the Kafana as fast as I could. The night was already ending, and they had unlocked the doors. Aleksandar ran behind me shouting my name as I ran into the park and away from the sound of the music. I jumped over large puddles of water in black strappy heels and a black dress, tears running down my cheeks.



“Diana!” Aco shouted behind me as he followed my lead into the park.

I stopped running once the Kafana was out in the distance. I was hyperventilating, and my chest felt like it was closing in on me. I was gasping for air, but the panic attack ensued. Having an attack is like having your head just above the surface of water, and you think that you can stand up because the floor of the river is right below you, but you can't stand up, you're not tall enough and you're not strong enough to keep treading water. You try to catch your breath, but the water keeps rising. Everything feels like you're drowning.

Aleksandar helped me calm my breathing. He sat down on a wet bench and held me in his lap. I continued to hyperventilate until the breaths I was taking got longer and longer and my breathing softened, my heart beat went back down to a normal rate. I stared at the ground, the concrete and grass dotted with cigarette butts. The only thing that calmed me down was focusing on the shadow of my heel on the ground cast by the street lamp. My chest didn't feel tight anymore and I was okay again. Aco and I talked for a little while about why it happened this time before a group of our friends leaving the Kafana walked in our direction.



*Figure 35: Calming Shadows. Photo by Author.*

“Where are we going next!” Pele shouted at us.

I wiped my tears, stood up and smiled. Nikola looked rather annoyed with Pele’s usual drunk enthusiasm. I gave him a hug and we started walking with the rest of the group through the park trying to decide where we should continue our night.

“Ajmo u Manilu!”

“Let’s go to Manila!”

Manila was an after-party club in the city center. A small space playing all the new hits taking over the Balkans. It was tucked just behind the water fountain that sits in front of Hotel Ambassador and right across the square that presents the statue of King

Milan on a horse. Just north of the square sits the Nisava river and the Nis Fortress. We agreed to make the walk to the center. A group of stray dogs began to follow us through the park and we all increased our pace. The concrete through the park was old and full of cracks and potholes, now filled with rainwater. The stray puppies surrounded me as I attempted to hop over a puddle. My foot landed crooked on an uneven part of concrete, I lost my balance and fell into a puddle, splashing up water and scraping my knee. Luckily, Aleksandar flagged a taxi driving by and took me back to his apartment to clean up my knee. We got home around 2:12 am, the same time we would have arrived at Manila on foot from Cair when Aco got a text from Nikola.

Nikola

Text Message (3)

“Good thing you guys didn’t come with us. They closed Manila”

“Someone came with a gun and started shooting.”

“We’re coming home now”

Anxiety and relief filled me with this news. What if I didn’t fall in the water? I wouldn’t have delayed our walk to Manila with the rest of the group and I certainly wouldn’t have gone home. We would have arrived just before the shooting happened. No one was hurt, thankfully, but the chance that I accidentally fell into that puddle of water seemed like an inconvenient occurrence, but I guess I just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

**Monday, June 18, 2018: Birthday Girl, Do you Matter Anymore?**

Monday's are usually what we like to think of as the beginning of a new week. A rebirth: the time to start again and wash the weekend and bad vibes of the past week, away. What do you do when your birthday falls on a Monday? Especially the birthday that changes so much? I had to say goodbye to twenty-one on this Monday and it was a whole different kind of beginning and a completely uncomfortable rebirth. Turning twenty-one is the year that every American kid kind of looks forward to because they are finally able to legally drink. As for me, it was a different kind of coming of age. Not only did I anticipate it, but so did everyone else in my family. Growing up came to feel like it had been my only purpose in life. I was finally legally able to help my parents. I began petitioning for my Mother's case a month before I turned twenty-one. Obviously, the transition was long anticipated. Two days after I turned twenty-one and signed the papers, I ran away to Serbia for three months. That summer I spent my time sitting on the banks of the Nisava with Aleksandar. By the water is where we first met and stayed all night talking, every night. We would sit on the retaining walls or the steps that disappear into the water, eat popcorn or ice cream and tell each other the stories of our lives. That summer was dry and hot that sitting by the water every night was the only way to feel new again. Twenty-one is when I started this journey and when I attached myself to the river. It is the year that things I knew my whole life came to an end: my Mother's status was solved, and I graduated from college. All I knew my whole life was to go to school and to stay quiet about our situation.

What do I do now that it's over? I fulfilled the purpose of my existence, so now what? I get to keep living? But am I needed anymore? Do I matter anymore if I'm not

twenty-one? I felt myself falling into a hole. I already hated celebrating birthdays, but this one, turning twenty-two, I hated the most. I must admit, though, not having to stay quiet anymore, as weird as it was, and as much as I still keep it all a secret, it feels good to have the option to be able to say something if I wanted to. The option is nice, but not many understand even if you tell them.

### **Wednesday, June 20, 2018: Let's Run Away Together**

My mom and I went for a walk around the city scoping out furniture, paint and construction stores in an effort to quickly get the apartment a fresh coat of paint, fix the leaky window and have an actual place to sleep. It was actually a hot day and it didn't rain for once, so after our renovation spree we walked through the center of the city through Pobedina, the pedestrian street filled with shops and cafes that takes you from Dusanova street straight down to the Nisava. As we walked down passing by cafes my Mom points out a specific cafe: Tramvaj. She says,

“Ovde li su stavili Tramvaj? Pre je bio u Dusanovu. Tamo smo se Ivica i ja dogovorili da se uzmemo i da pobegnem od kuće.”

“Is this where they put Tramvaj? It used to be on Dusanova Street. That's where Ivica and I decided that we wanted to be together and I should run away from home.”

I for one couldn't believe that this cafe still existed almost thirty years later. It's funny, last summer it was one of the last places Aleksandar and I went before we returned to our realities. We talked about long distance and neither of us hesitated to

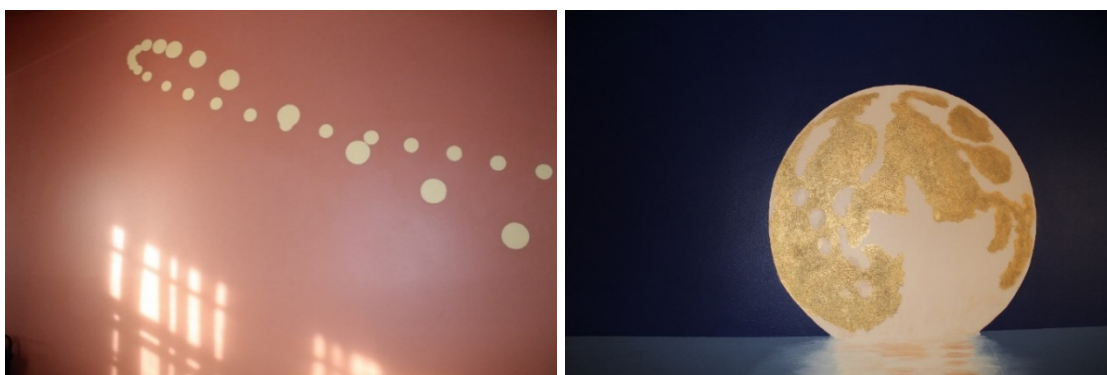
continue the relationship we had started. He was born and lived in Sweden, but his family was also from Nis. His Father's side had been in Sweden for two generations already, but his Mother's side was still in Serbia. Aleksandar's Father came to Nis before the war started to go to college here when he met Olivera, Aco's Mom. It wasn't long before they got married, surprisingly in the same church my parents did, and went to live in Sweden. Similar life stories are what led us to bond so easily and quickly, as well as our love to run away back to Nis. In Nis he lives just on the other side of the river in Durlan. One walking bridge down the street from my apartment building takes us to each other.



*Figure 36: On the Other Side of the Nisava. Photo by Author.*

I wanted to ask how my Mom ran away from home, but I was hesitant and too deep into my own thoughts. What if I just ran away? Was it so much different when my parents were my age to just stop life and start another one? I wonder if I should have just done it then, at the end of last summer. Why return to a place I never felt like was home, but more like a prison? A place of routine and of hiding, wasting precious moments of life away. A place I didn't feel safe in my neighborhood, where I barely knew my neighbors, and where I had no family. A place I couldn't risk my safety doing enjoyable

things like going out with friends because what if something happened to me or if the police got involved? My parents wouldn't be able to help me. It was a place where I was so isolated from nature and the outside. Through the act of not risking our safety and future, we ruined it. We became homebodies that only further deteriorated our mental health. I could go days inside my room and even if I wanted to leave and go out, the stress of my parents' concerns and protection was too much and not even worth the trouble. I spent so much time inside my room I painted the sun and the moon on my walls to be closer to the sky, to the landscape.



*Figure 37: Bringing the Outside In. Photos by Author.*

But I still, didn't have the courage to run away and to be met with an unfamiliar life. I guess I am not as brave as my Mother was to trust my Father and a new country, or as brave as my Baba Letica after her husband died, or my Great Grandmother to end her abuse.

#### **Thursday, June 21, 2018: They Didn't Tell You?**

Not only do my Baba and Tetka live in the same building as me, but my God Family does as well. Although they are not next door, or above my apartment. They live on the fourth floor and today we decided to take the elevator ride down from the eighth

floor to see them. It was the same conversations every time, the same questions. Well, why so long? And why didn't you try something earlier? And can anything else be done to help Ivica or Jelena? I know that everyone means well, but the constant repetition of the same questions and the same answers for over a decade has become like an interview process. I was tired of it defining our lives.

I knew that my Kumovi (God Family) missed my Dad. My God Father, Sasa Zlatic was my Dad's best friend. From this visit I found out more about my parents from him than I ever did from them. He told me that he went with my Tata when Mama ran away from home. They waited for her at the bottom of her street by the railroad tracks. When she snuck out and met them, Sasa took them to his house in the village to hide them. He had hidden them there for a couple of days while Mama's parents frantically looked for her. They had known what she had done and why she did it. They did not approve of my Mother dating my Father. I think it was for a variety of reasons. Maybe it was because of money, or the fact that they didn't approve of my Dad's family, or because at one point in time, our two families had been one. My parents were in no way related, but both families came from the village Mokliste and a long time ago Letica's Mother Mara was married to Mama's Father's Brother who passed after they had two kids together. My Great-Grandmother Mara then remarried Deda Rade, with whom she had four kids with: Slovenka, Vida, Toma, and Letica.

From stories that my Baba Letica tells me, she was happy and thrilled that my parents found each other and decided to get married. Mama's Father, my Deda Vlasta was not. But Mama got married anyway, on June 26, 1991.





*Figure 38: Ivica and Sonja on their Wedding Day. Photo Credit: Sonja Randjelovic.*

She moved into Letica's apartment on the ninth floor and two months later she was pregnant with Jelena. My Sister was born on May 11, 1992 and in August 1993 my Tata left for America. All these stories were confirmed when I found my Mama's old diary hidden away among books in Tata's old room. She started the diary when she met my Dad and recorded key events up until shortly after Jelena was born. Her journal entries always began with the date and ended with the phrase: *toliko za sada*, meaning that's all for now.

I know it was hard for my Mom after Tata left. She was alone, and it wasn't like it is now. She would only hear from him every Sunday when he could buy a calling card. Letica was heartbroken that her Son had left her. Having a Son was regarded as such a prized possession. It was a reason to carry pride. A male child was more valuable than a female one and my Grandmother was never shy to show that. She often blamed my Mom for her Son leaving her, saying that she talked him into it, not realizing that my Dad not only left her, but he left my Mom and Sister too.



*Figure 39: Jelena with Baba Letica 1993. Photo by Sonja Randjelovic.*

My Mom went to the American Embassy in Belgrade the summer of 1994. She walked into the embassy and it was filled with refugees and people from different places. It was so full, people were sitting on the floor. My Mom sat nervously waiting her turn for an interview, bouncing her leg anxiously. An old man next to her smiled at her and put his hand on her knee to stop it from dancing. He looked at her warmly and gently said,

“Ne brini, dobices ti.”

“Not to worry, you’ll get it.”

My Mom said it was like he transferred luck over to her just by his gentle touch and later that day she got her visa.



*Figure 40: Yugoslavian and American Passports. Photo by Author.*

### **Saturday, June 23, 2018: Do you Know Where You're Going?**

I packed up my peach colored carry on and was waiting across the street from my apartment for Aco to pick me up in a taxi to take us to the bus station. I had decided to jump right into my research and head to Belgrade. I was excited, Belgrade was one of my favorite cities. Like any bustling metropolitan city, it had the perfect mix of some things that I missed in America, like the food, but it also had the things I adored about Serbia, which was everything else. Last summer Aco and I explored the city to great lengths and discovered our favorite spots on the town. I found my favorite book stores, ice cream shops, late night pizza joints and views. We sat on the cramped old bus and tried to kill three hours' worth of time from Nis to Belgrade. Direct Nis Ekspres buses usually only make one stop about twenty minutes into the ride at the station in Aleksinac, just up the Morava river. Aleksinac is a town where Letica's Sister, Vida, used to live. I met her only

once in 2010. She came to see me that first time I came. She was a small woman, short and very old. She had only a couple of teeth left, and she clung onto my arms and stared right into my eyes when she talked. A couple of years ago she tragically passed away. No one knows what really happened but there were fights between her and her Son and she poisoned herself, taking her own life in the end. They say that she was being too controlling in her Son's life, his relationship with his wife, and that he wasn't taking care of her properly so she poisoned herself to make a point and get back at him for not listening to her. Rumors say that the Son poisoned her to get rid of her and her demanding presence. No one knows the entire truth, but part of me believes that she took her own life. Regardless, the death, the cause, and the rumors really took a toll on my Baba. Letica took it so hard. I think that she was closest to her Sister Vida. Her oldest Sister Slovenka lived in Belgrade and had already passed some time ago.

Aco and I rented a small one-bedroom apartment in the Old Town of Belgrade. We called a taxi from the small park hub of bus arrivals to 42 Majke Jevrosime. When the taxi driver made the turn onto the street of Majke Jevrosime, Aleksandar and I turned to each other in the backseat of the car and smiled. We didn't realize it when we were booking the apartment, but we were here last year. On our first trip together as a couple last summer we came to Belgrade and we stayed in an apartment in 43 Majke Jevrosime, the building right next door. An alleyway separates the two buildings with a mural of pink graffiti that says:

“Volimo te!”

“We Love you!”



*Figure 41: We Love You Graffiti. Photo by Author.*

What are the chances? The street was narrow with tall apartment buildings, cars lining each side of the road, and a community of neighborhood cats roaming the streets. Inside our one-bedroom rental on the first floor, I opened the curtains to the only window to find that our view was of the alleyway and the pink mural.

Hungry, we walked down to the main pedestrian city center street, Knez Mihailova. The street was bustling with tourists and live music by performers and poor street kids. Stores, boutiques and outdoor cafes dominated the area in every direction. Street vendors selling popcorn, ice cream, books, paintings and souvenirs lined the sides. The choice of where to eat was always overwhelming. Aleksandar and I walked down to the end of Knez, which leads into the Belgrade fortress of Kalemegdan and indecisively, we figured to just sit down in a cafe-restaurant near the end of the street, rather than walking all the way back up to look for a different place. I read the special drinks menu and it was unusually familiar to me. I looked around the area and then through the old photos of our Belgrade trip in my camera roll. I laughed. We had sat down in the same

cafe that we had the first day of our trip last year: Snezana Cafe Pizzeria Beograd. What are the chances? It was a funny and nice way to spend our first-year anniversary.



*Figure 42: Knez Mihailova. Photos by Author.*

Later that evening, we bought tickets to go to a concert in Tasmajdan Park Stadium. As a woman I always felt anxious in public spaces, but especially in large gatherings like these. You want to enjoy yourself but in the back of your mind, you know you have to be alert. Your mind is always on its toes. As a woman I always felt hyper aware of my surroundings. My mind was scanning the people around me and the situation. What were they doing? Do I look lost? I can't look lost or like a tourist. I have to blend in. I must know where I am and even if I don't I have to make sure that I look like I do. Most importantly, look calm. Being programmed to think like this sucks the fun out of everything. Did men ever feel like this? Were they ever panicked that someone would be watching their every move, waiting for you to be vulnerable enough to swoop in and take advantage? It was hard to let loose, especially in another country when people can pick up on your accent in a second or notice that maybe your sneakers or your phone or your purse makes you look like an outsider.

I did feel better that I wasn't completely alone and that I had Aleksandar with me. But I don't think he ever thought about this kind of stuff. Taking the wrong turn on a

street or blatantly looking lost wasn't a big deal for him. By the time the concert ended it was dark outside and exiting the stadium threw us on a road I had never been on before. The mass of crowds walked in one direction and I figured we follow, blend in until the crowd dies down and we could find our way back to our apartment. I refrained from speaking English or even Serbian and looking at Google maps on my phone. I walked normally trying to read the street and my surroundings. Where was I? Look for street signs, context clues, follow my intuition and we'll just have to take a left and then a right at the end of this street. Behind me Aleksandar asks in English,

“Shouldn't we have gone the other way?”

I ignore him and shake my head.

“No, Diana I think we really came from the other way. We're going the wrong way.”

He was right, we had come from the other way, but that was to get into the stadium. Not to get home. It was late, we were surrounded by people, and I was uncomfortable. He couldn't orient himself from where we were. I felt like I was swimming alone in unknown waters and he was telling me the shore was in the opposite direction. Of course, it bothered me. Half because he wasn't self-aware, and the other half because he didn't need to be. Of course, it wasn't his fault, that just how things worked. I



shook my head no at him again and took a left turn out of the crowd at the end of the street and then a right which put us back on Majke Jevrosime.



*Figure 43: I Don't Want a Rose, I Want a Revolution. Photo by Author.*

### **Sunday, June 24, 2018: The Book Picks You**

The next Belgrade afternoon was hot and sunny. Finally, no rain, and finally radiating the true beauty of the White City. I decided to wear all white. I was sick of the chilly and gloomy rainy weather. We walked down random streets of the Old City, or Old Belgrade as some call it. New Belgrade was the nickname for the part of the city on the other side of the Sava river. We walked through Knez Mihailova again looking through old bookstores and street carts selling books in the little nooks of Knez. I found some gems like old maps and books on the history of Lepenski Vir, and even an old travel book of the Danube when Yugoslavia was still together. I was happy with my treasures.





*Figure 44: Book Kiosks. Photo by Author.*

We walked through the Kalemegdan fortress as the sun set. It was nice to see the atmosphere at night, I had only previously been there during the day. When you cross the street from Knez Mihailova into the fortress you walk by a row of street vendors selling souvenirs and in front of you is a statue dedicated to France as Gratitude for aid during WWII. The monument is surrounded by topiaries and roses. I always turn left however, before even approaching the statue. To the left there is a large, round fountain with a statue of a man strangling a snake sitting in the middle of it. The sculpture represents the victory of man over nature. I never had much interest in the fountain, but the view further behind it. Circling around the sculpture and walking further down towards the edge of the fortress is where you see it: Belgrade. Below you see the Sava river dotted with Splavovi (floating restaurants, clubs, and cafes) on its edges. Behind the river you see Usce Park

and the cityscape of New Belgrade. If you look upstream, you see the bridges of Belgrade from the Brankov Bridge to the newest Ada Bridge.

Walking through the rest of Kalemegdan is like being on a movie set for a film or along the lines of an outdoor museum. The ancient ruins built in 279 BCE are not just looked at as artifacts but every aspect of it is part of Belgrade life. It is almost like Belgrade's biggest playground. You could get lost in its meandering walkways, gates, and levels. Every time you went, you saw something new: a new ruin, a new angle, a new artifact.



*Figure 45: Kalemegdan Levels. Photo by Author.*

The trees made you feel like you weren't even in the biggest city in Serbia, but somewhere lost in history. The most common landmark of the fortress is that of Pobednik (The Victor). The statue of a man stands tall at the edge of a fortress square, holding an eagle symbolizing Serbian Victory during the Balkan Wars. The man looks over Usce,

which translates to confluence, and is met with the joining of the Danube and Sava Rivers.

In certain seasons and in certain light you can see the two different shades of water clashing together. The Danube is cut in half by the Veliko Ratno Ostrvo (Big War Island) which sits in the middle of the river just before the mouth of the Sava. Momo Kapor, a Belgrade writer, assigns a gender to the atmosphere of each of these two rivers in his book *A Guide to the Serbian Mentality*. The Sava is said to be feminine because her flow resembles the gaze of a woman young searching for love, but her muddy banks and broken branches that invade her waters float downstream like betrayed expectations. On gloomy days, Kapor says she looks sick and melancholy, while the Danube is always masculine and serious, a great Master of Water.<sup>5</sup> I wondered what the meaning of the broken branches meant when they were floating on the Danube. Serbians like to say that Usce is,

“Gde Dunav ljubi Savu”

“Where the Danube kisses the Sava”



Figure 46: Usce from Kalemegdan. Photo by Author.

It was mesmerizing to watch the two rivers meet, but I didn't think the union to be one of love. The Danube paid no mind to the Sava's contribution in my eyes. To me, the Sava gave herself to the Danube, reluctantly because she had no other choice. Belgrade is said to be unique in three things: its rivers, its sky, and its people. The lines of character of the Belgrade people are defined by the contours of Kalemegdan and the lines of their hearts can be found on the banks of their river islands.<sup>6</sup>

Observing the two rivers joining as a reflection of a woman giving herself to a man shows why women, our Mothers, are the last true prisoners of our families.<sup>7</sup> They give all of themselves to us. Does a man ever lose himself in being a Father? It was then that I realized that I knew so much more about my Father than I did my Mother. I knew his favorite soccer club, his favorite music and places. I knew stories of his young years with his friends and ones that so well depict his comedic personality. But, I didn't know anything about my Mom. I didn't know her favorite anything. It felt almost as if she didn't exist before she met my Dad. Her life never seemed to matter as much, or her side of the family and their pain was never as great as my Father's side. My Father's side lost a Son! He went all the way across the world and never came back. But what about my Mother, didn't she do the same thing? Does her identity not matter as much? Interesting how you can lose yourself in the shadow of a man or in the flow of his built-up importance. But without the Sava, would there be a Danube? Without the woman, can there be a man? Does the Danube really kiss the Sava, or does she die when she meets him?



*Figure 47: Untold Truth of the Confluence. Photo by Author.*

Will we ever really know what these rivers hide in their waters? What secrets are buried deep in the riverbed? As generations pass on these rivers will they be subdued to nothing but metaphors of romanticized beauty. Looking out over the horizon of Belgrade it's hard to believe that all of this was once underwater. About ten million years ago, the Pannonian Sea used to dominate this area of Belgrade and all of Vojvodina, not to mention Hungary and parts of Romania and Croatia. After the vanished sea dried up, it had revealed this land and allowed it to create its own fate.<sup>8</sup> Was the sea feminine or masculine? Did it have a gender? Could a river even have a gender or was it all just fluid, taking on the weight of everyone's secrets, regrets, and sins in its tide?

If the Sava really is a woman, I have hope for her because on the foothills of the Kalemegdan fortress, sits the church of Saint Petka, the patron saint of unfortunate women. Bearing the name of my Great Grandmother, Saint Paraskeva of the Balkans was a prominent Holy woman of the Serbian Orthodox Church. She is said to be the protector of women, the sick and the poor. At the church there is a mineral spring to drink from. It is said that the water has the holy power to heal and protect you from sickness and refresh

your spirit. I only knew so much of St. Petka because of my Teta Vesna. I knew she valued this Saint so much more over the rest. On the Saint Day of St. Petka, October 27th she told me she always goes to church for it. When I was fourteen and came to Serbia for the first time, I used to wear a gold necklace with a gold cross and trinket with the letter D that my Grandmother gave to me. Before I left to go home that summer, my Tetka had bought me a gold pendent of Sveta Petka to add to my necklace. My Baba Letica would give me a pocket-sized icon of Saint Petka to put in my wallet after every trip, telling me that she takes care of women and to always keep it with me. Even today, I keep her in my wallet, everywhere I go.



*Figure 48: Church of St. Petka, Kalemegdan. Photo by Author.*

To end the night, we went to one of my favorite bookstores: Knjizara Dereta. Dijana Dereta is a publisher in Serbia. The Dereta bookstore was so warm and inviting. I looked through the wall of books and a particular small book caught my eye. The book had a brown frame around a black background with white text that read: Milorad Pavic *The Tale That Killed Emily Knorr*. There was a little logo of a white deer at the bottom of the cover. I flipped through some of the pages in the book and the words “Landscape of

Death” popped out at me. Without a second thought, I closed the book and immediately bought it. I wasn’t sure why. At the time I wasn’t looking for anything relating death, but about life and water. But when a book chose you, you let it, you don’t ask why.

### **Monday, June 25, 2018: A Reason to be Upset**

The next day I woke up frustrated and anxious. Nothing felt right. The excitement of being in Belgrade faded and I was overthinking every choice I had made. Anxiety over research exhausted me. Was I doing the right thing? Was I getting the pictures and info that I needed? If I don’t get it now will I have enough time and money to even come back? I felt like I had been moving slower than I needed to and that I had no idea what I was doing to begin with. I had just graduated with a degree in Landscape Architecture I should know how to do all of this! Imposter syndrome set in and I tried to shake it off all day. As we left the apartment and walked to Kalemegdan, I clenched my camera that hung around my neck, keeping it from bouncing against my stomach. I walked quickly through the fortress trying to get as many pictures as I could, but I hated how they were coming out. I felt so uncomfortable in my own skin and something was wrong, I knew it, but I didn’t know what. I had no reason to be upset, I was ruining my own day, everything was fine, but I couldn’t calm myself down.

We were standing in the middle of Kalemegdan looking down at the square and statue of the Victor where the Danube meets the Sava. I felt defeated and I knew I shouldn’t be feeling like this, but I couldn’t shake the feeling. I knew Aco felt helpless, that he wanted to help but didn’t know how because nothing was wrong other than my intuition eating me alive. He asked if I wanted him to take a picture of me, to make me feel better. I did like taking pictures, for the memories. I handed him my camera and tried



to force a smile out of myself but couldn't bear to. I looked straight into the camera with an empty straight face and then uncomfortably turned my head, looking out to the water.

I couldn't shake that I was visibly upset.



*Figure 49: Documented Emotions. Photo by Aleksandar Vuckovic.*

I felt like I had done nothing that day, even with all the pictures I took. We headed back to the apartment because it was getting late and we had tickets for another concert in Tasmajdan Park. I wasn't looking forward to being surrounded in another over packed crowd and even though music typically brought me joy, I had a feeling that I didn't, and I shouldn't go, and then God gave me a reason not to.

I sat on the bed, sneakers on, tickets in hand when my phone rang.

Kitty

Facetime Audio



It was my Mama. Any other day, I would have ignored it, let it ring and called her back later. I don't know why I answered, we were just about to walk out the door. But, I had been upset all day and I thought that talking to her would make me feel better. I was wrong.

“Hej Kitty sta radis?”

“Hey Kitty, what are you doing?”

“Gde si Bela, evo sedim sa Vesnom i sa Babom.... Sta ti radis?”

“Hi Bela, I'm here sitting with Vesna and Baba... What are you doing?”

“Spremamo se da idemo na ovaj koncert, ali ne znam, nesto mi se ne ide.”

“Getting ready to go to this concert, but, I don't know, I don't really feel like going.”

“Sto sta je bilo?”

“Why, what's wrong?”

“Pa ne znam, ceo dan sam nesto nervozna. Nisam raspolozena, nista mi ne ide.”

“Well I don't know, I've been uneasy all day. I'm not in the mood, nothing is going right.”

“Sto? Jer te neko dirao?”

“Why? Did someone bother you?”

“Ma nije, ne znam, nesto mi nije u redu. Ne znam zasto.”

“No, I don’t know, something isn’t right. I don’t know why.”

“Diana... imam nesto da ti kazem”

“Diana... I have to tell you something”

“...Sta je bilo?”

“...What happened?”

“Deda Ljuba je umro jutros”

“Deda Ljuba died this morning”

“Sta! Ne! Kako?”

“What! No! How?”

“Imao je treci srceni udar. Nije mogao da izdrzi.”

“He had a third heart attack. He couldn’t handle it.”

“Ne!” I wailed.

“Mozda je bolje da ne idete na koncert. Ne znam nisam ni htela da ti kazem, ali glupo mi je da mi ovde placemo a ti ides na koncert. Ne znam, sutra ujutru je sahrana.”

“Maybe it’s best if you don’t go to the concert. I don’t know, I didn’t want to tell you, but I feel it’s wrong for us to be crying and for you to be at a concert. I don’t know, the funeral is tomorrow morning.”

“Ne znam sta da radim”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Pa ne znam, ako ste vec kupili karte i ako hoces, idite na koncert. Ne znam. Sutra ujutru je sahrana, ne znam ako bi uopste i mogla da stignes.”

“Well I don’t know, if you already bought tickets and if you want, go to the concert. I don’t know. The funeral is tomorrow morning, I don’t know if you would even be able to make it”

I stayed silent. I didn’t know what to do or what to say. Mama kept repeating that it was up to me, but the funeral is tomorrow. The funeral is tomorrow. The funeral is tomorrow. I felt sick and I sat on the bed feeling broken.

“I didn’t even get to see him.” I uttered before hanging up. I shoved the phone away from me and slipped my sneakers off. Tears poured down my face quickly and silently. I was drowning again. I couldn’t breathe, and I rolled up into a ball on the bed.

Aleksandar watched me, apologizing for another unexpected hardship that he couldn't help or prevent.

"My Deda is dead. He's gone, and I didn't even get to see him." were the only words I could get out before a full attack ensued. I gasped for short breaths through sobs and the guilt tore at my chest. The air in the room was gone and it was quickly filled with water and I struggled to breathe beneath the surface. I want to control it, but I can't. I want to breathe, but there is no air. It felt like someone was holding my head down underwater. Aco hugged me and I hyperventilated into his chest until I fell asleep. I woke up four hours later, my makeup smeared around my eyes and down my cheeks, revealing the trails of my tears and my pale skin. My contacts were dry on my eyes and I blinked quickly, disoriented, and then remembered the bad news again.

"Hey, I talked to my Uncle and your Mom. We can change our bus tickets from Wednesday to today" said Aco gently.

I changed into sweats and took the leftover mascara and foundation off my face before curling back up and crying myself to sleep again. I woke up two hours later at 1:00 am. I decided that I wanted to go to the funeral and Aco, already knowing that had figured out a plan for us to get home. We needed to change our bus tickets to today at 5:00 am to make it to Nis by 8:00 am so that I could get on a bus to Mokliste with my family at 8:30 am and make it to the village in time to make it to the funeral. We decided to walk down to the bus station, so I could clear my head. The city was nearly empty by now. I didn't care to look at my phone to see where I was going. I knew what general

direction the bus station was in, it sat on the banks of the Sava, downhill from where we were in the middle of the old city, and that's the direction I walked in.

The cool night air felt refreshing and I could breathe again. I felt unusually free and I wasn't paranoid about the things around me. Nothing mattered, my Deda Ljuba was dead. Right now, nothing could be worse. We walked down a street, approaching a Cafe that was still working even this late at night. A few people sat scattered across the tiny outdoor tables. A man wearing sweats was angrily talking on the phone just a few feet from the cafe and in front of us. Without turning my head, I saw a man waiting on the street corner to the right, his eyes vigilant. At the end of the street in front of us, a woman pretended to be on her phone, but was scanning the adjacent street, up and down. The man on the phone spoke aggressively to the other person on the line,

“Slusaj, reko si da imas pare. Nemoj sad sa te pricas da ih nemas vise, znam tu pricu.”

“Listen, you said you have the money. Don't come at me with that talk that you don't now, I know that story.”

After passing the situation I asked Aco if he had seen the mafia deal we just walked through. He didn't and again, the notion of a man being unaware of his surroundings astounded me. Belgrade and Serbia in general was notorious for the mafia. It was known and some even took pride in it. We walked through the empty, dark streets and I gazed at graffiti on the walls of buildings. We were getting close to the bus station because signs for “Beograd na Vodi,” the Belgrade Waterfront kept popping up. In the

last two years the waterfront of the Old City had been under construction. They took people out of their houses to build luxury hotels that barely any Serbian could afford.

Along the water SWA group implemented a design for a new waterfront boardwalk extending from Brankov Bridge and going far upstream. Construction was still being extended up the river, so who knew where the gentrification would end. It astounded me that they didn't make these interventions on the other side of the Sava in New Belgrade, it might've been more fitting. The waterfront boardwalk put murals on power boxes and on the underpass of the Zemunski Put bridge, but my favorite piece of graffiti was on the stairs of this design that read "Fight Gentrification!" As we walked down a steep and narrow street, the side of a building said:

"Jebe's Waterfront!"

"Fuck the Waterfront!" So, I guess you could say that Belgrade locals were taking the intervention well.



*Figure 50: Reactions to a Changing Landscape. Photo by Author.*

**Tuesday, June 26, 2018: Death Brings You Home**

The Belgrade bus station at five in the morning is a different place than it is at any other time. The cafe's and kiosks were closed. The bakery didn't send out smells of fresh pastries. Everything was eerily quiet, gray and somber until the city woke up and began to shuffle about.

The three-hour bus ride back down south was tedious as usual, but this time I wasn't excited to get home like I usually am. I tried to nap during the ride since last night was sleepless, but my thoughts didn't let me. I felt nervous and nauseous. I thought about what to wear and the things I had brought in my suitcase. I wasn't ready for something like this. When you pack for a summer getaway you never pack your black "just in case someone dies" funeral dress. I have been to wakes before but, I had never actually been to a funeral. I had never physically seen a human body being lowered into the ground and becoming one with earth again.

The green Prvi taxi dropped me off in front of my building on Bulevar Nemanjica and I flew into Baba's apartment just as my Mama, Tetka and Baba were getting ready to leave. I threw my bags on the ground and pulled out a long black dress with a mosaic of tan circles on it. I slipped my Mom's flats on and was ready to go. My Tetka complained that it was cold, and I needed stockings, but who packs stockings in the middle of summer? We walked down the Bulevar to the pijac, the flea market to buy flowers. A floral shop on the corner had arrangements just for this kind of occasion: small bouquets and big baskets. Mama bought a big basket of red roses. My Mom had never been to a funeral in Serbia before, she was nervous for not knowing the customs. We were both still in shock from the news that he was gone. The older woman working at the stand was

helpful to us. She took a thick red ribbon and asked who our last goodbye was for and in big, elegant Cyrillic letters she wrote,

“Poslednji Pozdrav Deda Ljuba od Ivicu, Sonju, Jelenu i Dijanu”

“Our last goodbye for Deda Ljuba from Ivica, Sonja, Jelena, and Diana”

From the market we walked to the bus stop on Bulevar Dr Zorana Djindjica.

There was a small Nis Ekspres kiosk on the sidewalk next to a newsstand in front of the Internal Medicine Clinic Hospital where Deda Ljuba spent his summer last year. Arriving in Serbia last summer, I had no idea that my Deda Ljuba was even in the hospital until my Tata called me one day telling me that Ljuba had had a second heart attack and that he was in a hospital in Nis. Baba Letica and I went together. Ljuba was Letica’s first cousin and my Great Uncle. Letica’s Mother, Mara was the Sister of Deda Zika, Ljuba’s Father. We waited patiently to see Ljuba that day. The waiting room was empty when he walked slowly out of a door, using a cane. He was wearing a white undershirt, sweatpants, and flip flops. He was the skinniest I had ever seen him. His arms were frail, and his belly was gone. He would frequently wear crisp dress pants and his belly was always big. The doctors said that he needed to have a triple bypass surgery, but he was too weak to have the operation. He looked broken and weary when he came through the door, but he smiled wide when he saw me.

“Diko, Diko kad si dosla?”

“Diko, Diko, when did you get here?”



He hugged me, his arms, shaking. We sat down, and he asked me about my parents. His voice was so low I could barely hear him when he spoke. He asked me about the house and the garden. My Deda Ljuba used to live in the house that I live in now in Edison, New Jersey. It was a brick house and it's where I grew up. I know that my Baba Jagoda, his wife, specifically loved the house. Even though she didn't know any English, I think she loved living in America more than Serbia because here she had something of her own. The last time I saw her before she died, said that she always wanted a brick house and when she finally got one, Ljuba decided he wanted to go back to Serbia and she had no choice but to leave her beloved home behind. Before I started Kindergarten, Baba Jagoda and Deda Ljuba would take care of me. They babysat me while my parents worked, and my Sister was in school.



*Figure 51: Ljuba, Jagoda, Mama and I in front of the Red Brick House in Edison, New Jersey. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic.*

Every morning I woke up to the sound of the mailman on the porch, closing the mailbox. I would change into my day clothes Mama packed for me in a transparent green purse and I'd go outside, pull the bench sitting on the porch closer to the mailbox, so I could stand on it to retrieve the letters for the day. That was my favorite part of waking up: I got to bring my Deda the mail every morning. I would bring it to him and then he would pick me up and bounce me on his knee while singing tasi tasi ta na na. He loved to fish and to garden. The backyard was his oasis. His grass was always the greenest and I was never allowed to play in it. He had two planting beds for his peppers, tomatoes, and a trellis for his cucumbers that my Tata still upkeeps today. Only half of one of the planting beds were Jagoda's where she planted her flowers, even though most of the flowers had to be Ljuba's favorites. He liked to call them his candies: bombonke.



*Figure 52: Ljuba and Jagoda with their Garden in Bela Palanka, Serbia. Photo by Ljubomir Manic.*

His hobby of fishing he equally loved. In the garage of the house he would have a wall of fishing rods. I remember him grilling fish he caught and cleaning it for me to eat, making sure that there were no left-over needles in it. Ljuba and Jagoda had no kids and I didn't have Grandparents that I knew or could ever know. For the first five years of my life, we were each other's missing pieces.



*Figure 53: Deda Ljuba Holding his Catch of the Day. Photo by Dragisa Manic.*

Ljuba came to America in the 80's in search of his father, Zivojin Manic who had disappeared during World War II. In 1941 Nazi Germany occupied Serbia.<sup>9</sup> At the time, Deda Zika was in the Serbian army when he was arrested by Germans and taken as a prisoner of war to a concentration camp in Germany sometime between the years of 1942 and 1943. He, as well as many other Serbs were used as free slave labor to German special interest areas.<sup>10</sup> They were taken upstream to the birthplace of the Danube. As a

forced worker, Zika picked corn. No one in my family knows much else about it, as he kept his pain and past to himself.

After the war ended Zika had fallen in love with a German woman named Helen. Some say that she was purely German while others say that she was a German that lived in the melting pot of Vojvodina in Serbia. Zika and Helen married and had a daughter in Germany, who they also name Helen before they went to America and had five more children: Mary, Barbara, Kathy and Elizabeth who were twins and a boy named John that died when he was twenty years old of cancer. They lived in Edison, New Jersey on Inman Avenue.

His life was a secret really, Ljuba and his Brother Danilo had believed that their Father had died in the second World War up until the late 70's, early 80's when they received a call from Dragisa Jovanovic of the Holy Ascension Serbian Orthodox Church in Elizabeth. Dragisa was a particular man, he always wore a bolo tie and a cowboy hat. He was one of Deda Zika's friends and he had confided in him about his other family he had left behind in Serbia. After finding out, Ljuba went to America with his wife Jagodinka Manic and lived there for twenty years. Danilo and his wife Nada followed and came to America in the late 80's. Deda Zika had helped my Dad come to America in 1993 and then Ljuba sponsored my Mother to come in 1994. Deda Zika passed away in the Spring of 1994 and Baba Helen then followed, dying two months after my Mama came to America, in November.



*Figure 54: Ivica's First Picture in America at the Holy Ascension Serbian Orthodox Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Photo by Ljubomir Manic.*

Ljuba whispered lowly and told us about his troubles before getting up and giving each of us a hug. He shuffled slowly back to the door he came from, using his cane for support. He walked through the door without looking back, and that was the last time that I saw him. He stayed in the hospital that summer recovering, and then made his way back downstream to Bela Palanka at the end of August.

The bus was warm, and my eyes began to flutter and pull me into a memory. I was three years old and standing in the living room of our basement apartment next to the Raritan.





*Figure 55: Basement Apartment Circa 1997. Photo by Ivica Randjelovic.*



*Figure 56: Basement Apartment Circa 2018. Photo by Author.*

The couch was picked up off the floor and propped on top of my plastic toy chairs. Through the window brown water began to rise, blocking out the little sunlight that peered in from the outside. I could hear Mama and Tata in another room talking quickly and with a sense of panic. I looked down at the tan carpet that was getting darker and darker. I looked at my white sneakers and then at the door of the bedroom, towards the sound of my Mama's voice. I watched as the water filled the fibers of the rug like a sponge. I stood on a small patch of dry carpeting as the water surrounded me. I wanted to call for my Mom, but I couldn't, I was in shock and in awe of the quick power of the water. I stared at my shoes when I felt my body being lifted into the air. Mama had run in and grabbed me under my arms, holding me close as she splashed through the rising water to our car that was parked a little farther away from the bank. She threw me into my car seat and disappeared.



*Figure 57: Flooded Valley Manor Apartment 1999. Photos by Ivica Randjelovic.*

There were garbage bags full of clothes all over the car and my Sister was sitting next to me with her thick brown bangs, no toothed smile, and a pink Minnie Mouse shirt. I woke up from the daze of the distant memory of 1999 when Hurricane Floyd hit New Jersey. Our first apartment and all of our things we didn't have just a couple of years ago

were gone at the will of water. We moved into Ljuba and Jagoda's home until the flooding was taken care of. We were given a new apartment on the second floor, facing away from the water.



*Figure 58: Walking Away from my Tata in Front of our New Apartment Facing Away from the River. Photo by Sonja Randjelovic.*

By the time I started school in 2001, Ljuba had decided to go back to Serbia and since then we have lived in the red brick house. I couldn't stop thinking about how we should have gone to see him right away, he didn't even know we were here. He didn't even know my Mom was finally back. I'm sure he would have been happy to see her and that everything was going to be okay. They said he was doing so well lately and that he



had plans to even come to visit America again, no one was expecting this. If he survived last summer, it didn't make sense that he didn't survive now. In 2014 after Baba Jagoda died on June 23rd, he came to visit everyone he knew in the States. That was his last trip.

I stared out of the window at the cliffs and the landscape rushing by. Mama used to tell me that she loved a certain landscape on the way to Mokliste. She said it had admirable evergreen trees and bushes. Whenever we drove down the to the beach, she saw a part of the Parkway's landscape that reminded her of it. Ever since she told me that I always thought about it because it was the only time she told me of a connection she had to a landscape in Serbia. It felt like a rare memory. We were getting closer to Mokliste when Mama leaned over to me and said,

“Remember that part of the Parkway that reminds me of Mokliste? It should be coming up soon.”

We both stared out of the window, as she hoped to see the part of her memory that she kept with her while I knew that after 24 years, she wasn't going to see it. I really hoped it would be there, but it wasn't. She let out a sigh and shrugged,

“Nema ga vise.”

“It's not there anymore.”

The bus stopped in the middle of the road and it was our cue to get off. It drove off into the distance and there it was: Mokliste. We passed Belanovac, the train station there and walked over the tracks. We approached the bridge above the river.



*Figure 59: Belanovac Station and Nisava River, Mokliste, 2018. Photos by Author.*

The Nisava was a foamy green color, looking murky, but surprisingly clean because it had rained the night before. We began the trek up the uphill with three miles of asphalt ahead of us. We were early to check in on the house before the funeral. The graveyard for the village was far from the houses hidden in the side of the hill, camouflaged by trees and shrubs. We had just gotten close to the beginning of the houses in the village when we saw a black and white puppy sitting directly in the middle of the street, like he had been waiting for us. The puppy carried a happy spirit and ran up to us and in between Mama and me. He ran alongside us as we talked to him. I loved animals and he lifted my spirit with his friendly and welcoming aura. I usually avoided stray dogs

but this one felt like I had known him my whole life. As we continued walking up the road he followed us for a while and licked Mama's ankle. My Mom let out a yelp, she was afraid of dogs. I laughed and told her that it was fine, he was just giving her a kiss. The puppy stopped following us and sat down in the middle of the road. I was disappointed that he didn't continue up. My Mom turned around and told him to stay right there for us, because we were coming back. I watched his tail wag in the distance until I couldn't see him anymore.

At the top of the village in the southern mountains of Serbia, stands our white mud house of the Randjelovic family. A new gate now stands in front of the yard and is connected to the old chain link fence. The tall gray gate replaced the wooden one that stood there before to keep out people that come around and rob whatever is left. Our homemade brandy, rakija was stolen out of the basement years ago, and Baba never let it go. On the door to the house, there is a large padlock on it. In the far right of the yard sits a well and the yard is dominated by a vegetable garden and a big Mulberry tree sits right in front of the entrance to the house in the yard. Other small fruit trees were scattered through the garden and Baba picked some fruits off of them and put them in a bowl for us at the top of the stairs.



*Figure 60: Bowl of Handpicked Fruit. Photo by Author.*

Baba loved being home even if it was for a sad occasion. She cleaned up the house and made coffee. We all sat quietly on benches or shuffled about the house in silence. There was nothing to really say to each other. It was somber and with every minute it grew closer to saying goodbye.

When it turned 10:30 am we began our descent from the house in the mountains. Back down the dirt path that then turned into an asphalt one. We rounded the corner by the only store shop in the village and walked downhill. Approaching the houses by the end of the village, the black and white puppy was not there, and my sadness deepened. I looked at my Mama and she sadly said,

“The puppy isn’t here. I told him to wait.”

Walking down the mountain provided a better view. A larger mountain stood across from the one we descended, and it was beautiful to gaze at it.





*Figure 61: View Downhill with Graveyard in the Distance to the Left. Photo by Author.*

Suddenly, we turned off the asphalt road and into the long grass walking down towards the graveyard that had begun to expand over the years, getting fuller. Ljuba and Jagoda's plots were right at the entrance to the graveyard. I braced myself as a knot in my throat began to form. But then, under a tree next to Ljuba's headstone lay the black and white puppy.

"Mama look!"



*Figure 62: The Black and White Puppy. Photos by Author.*

The puppy jolted up at the sight of us and ran right to Mama and me. It hopped over the grasses with a smile on his face and wagged his tail excitedly. No one had arrived yet for the funeral, so we walked further into the graveyard looking for the grave of the Grandfather I never knew, Deda Toma. The puppy followed me, running in and around my legs. He looked up at me with deep, black eyes, glowing with happiness. If I stopped walking he would stop and sit on my feet. He hopped next to me with every step. Sitting in front of me, I gently pet the top of his head. He looked back at me with relieved eyes, relishing at my touch and smiling widely at me.

Deda Toma's grave sat next to his Mother and Father's, headstones side by side, enclosed by a gate. Two small trees grew from his parent's grave, where my Great Grandmother and Great Grandfather, Paraskeva and Djordje lay together. A large boxwood bush grew on top of Toma's grave, it was hard to get through to the headstones to kiss them. Letica always talked to Toma when we visited the grave. Her voice would choke back tears as she spoke and weeded the area of the overgrown plants she was able to remove.

We made our way back through the graveyard, weaving through the headstones, with the puppy behind me. Back at Ljuba's plot, people began to gather. Baba Nada, Danilo's wife was leaving watermelon and cookies on Danilo's headstone which lay right behind Ljuba and Jagoda's. Danilo was younger than Ljuba, but he had passed just a couple of months before him, in March. We all greeted each other when more people began to file in and behind them four men carrying a black casket. Jagoda's plot was to the left of Ljuba's, they lifted the black marble stone to reveal a hollow hole. Mama and I stood to the left of Jagoda's grave and the puppy stood behind me for some time before

backing up and curling up under a tree. Two priests began to sing as the casket approached and I began to cry. Then, the sadness in the air sobered when Letica began to wail,

“OH BRATKO! Brat moj, zasto si ode tako rano! Bratko! Zasto si me ostavio Bratko!”

“OH BROTHER! My brother, why did you leave me this early! Brother! Why did you leave me, Brother!”

Her sobbing wails felt like a knife stabbing into the silence. It was an old tradition for women to wail like this when a loved one died. It was uncomfortable to hear it in person, I stopped crying immediately at the sound of it and an uncomfortable feeling filled my body. Letica shouted and cried over the grave. It must have been hard to lose both of her first Cousins only a couple of months apart. The priests ended their prayer and four men began to descend his casket into the ground. They did it clumsily and with only two ropes. It was unsettling to watch, so I turned around and looked at the puppy who had now fallen asleep cradled up in a bed of grass under the tree behind me.

They closed the grave after we all threw soil over it and we proceeded to light candles for him behind his headstone. On the back of Ljuba's headstone there is an engraved photo of him playing his accordion. It made me smile. He loved to play the accordion. He used to keep his accordion in a big blue case inside a cabinet that I used in my bedroom for years. When I was little I used to beg him to take it out of its case and play it for me so that I could practice dancing around, learning the steps to the rivers that

I wouldn't see for another fifteen years. I was too shy at that age to dance with the other kids at folklore practice, so I would do it at home with Deda. He would also break his accordion out for our birthday celebrations, playing it in the background of loud diaspora conversations over the war back home.



*Figure 63: Deda with his Accordion. Photo by Ljubomir Manic.*

The funeral was over, and everyone was mingling. Letica was introducing us to some people from the village and many were shocked to see that we were there. I stood there silently when a woman walked over. She was short, and her hair was brown, slicked back into a ponytail. She came up to me and smiled sweetly saying she recognized me from the pictures Deda kept. Her name was Ana and she took care of Deda these years. They were having a dinner for him down at the church in Palanka and invited us, saying that Deda would love to see us all at the table.



After agreeing, we found a ride down to Palanka and after dinner at the church, Ana asked if we would like to stop by Deda's house for coffee. She said that she knew that Deda would have liked it if we stopped by. I'm usually quiet about decisions like this, I never wanted to make someone go somewhere or do something if they didn't want to. I always waited for a unanimous decision. But this time, I didn't hesitate to say that I wanted to.

The house now empty with no one to fill its walls sat on a street corner and had two separate buildings. One building was the main home and then the adjacent one was an addition equipped with a kitchen and dining room. We entered from the side of the house near the garage and between the two housing structures.



*Figure 64: Entrance to an Empty Home. Photo by Author.*

Deda's fishing rods and equipment lined the walls and an outdoor dining set sat near the garden. The garden was full, green, and well-manicured, like Deda always kept it. There were rows of peppers and some plum fruit trees. In a little side garden, he had his "Bombonke" his little candies, the flowers he loved. I stared at them, they were in symmetrical lines, but some were crushed.



*Figure 65: Ljuba's Bombonke. Photo by Author.*

"E, tu je Deda umro."

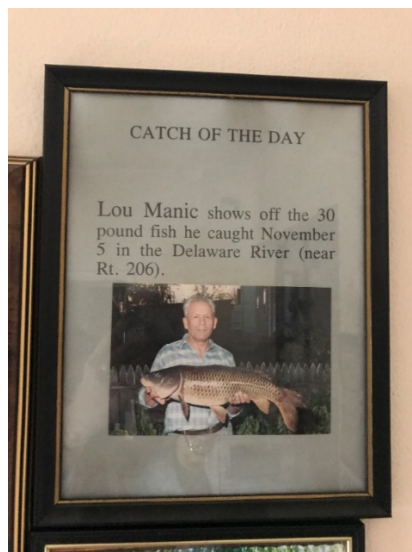
"That's where he died," Ana said.

She pointed to the Bombonke that were crushed. She went on to tell us that this is where she found him yesterday morning when she came to see him before going to work. He was face down in the soil of his favorite flowers, the watering can next to him. He had gone out that morning to water his garden, something he loved to do. Due to his heart

condition the doctors had told him to avoid going outside early in the morning and late at night when the temperature differences were vastly lower than during the day. He didn't listen. It's funny how we think we're invincible sometimes and how the things we love, we give ourselves to. He had gone out that morning and in the middle of watering his bombonke, the cold air induced his third and final heart attack.

"Would you like to come inside?" Ana asked, referring to a tour of the house.

We walked in through the kitchen and then into the living room. Deda had all his awards and recognitions framed and hung on the wall. He had a large frame of himself fishing on the banks of the Delaware River, holding three large fish. The top of the picture said Lou Manic, of course. He told Americans that his name was Lou, it was easier, I can assume, rather than hearing others stumble over the pronunciation. It made me feel an odd new connection with him. We both reduced our names to what letters could slide easily off an American tongue.



*Figure 66: Proof in Pictures. Photo by Author.*

I remember Deda used to work for Wrigley's gum on Park Avenue in Edison. He would always bring me home Wrigley's pink Hubba Bubba Bubble Tape. The bottom of the frame wished him a happy retirement and for him to continue enjoying what he loved to do. He did enjoy the rest of his retirement and life doing just that. The rest of the pictures hung on the walls proved it. One shows him on the Delaware with the catch of the day on November 6th. He had caught a thirty-pound fish then.

The room adjacent was a small computer room where Deda would Skype us and wish me happy birthday over Facebook. His birthday wishes were always delayed, and he always apologized in the post, he was away fishing and had just gotten back.

Above the computer hung his most recent and possibly last fishing accomplishment before he had gotten sick. In 2016 he caught the biggest fish in Divljansko Jezero, a lake further south of the town, in the woods. The Divljansko Lake flows into Koritnicka River which flows into the Mokranska River. This river cuts through the town of Bela Palanka until it spills itself into the Nisava. Ana said that just a couple of months ago someone caught a bigger fish from that lake and broke his record, but they thought it was best not to tell him.

The last time I visited Deda Ljuba and Baba Jagoda in Serbia was in 2013. I remember it was just Tamara and me. It was a hot August day and we had taken the bus. I had walked into the side entrance of the house by the garage then, too, and Deda was standing there fiddling with a fishing rod. When he saw me he smiled widely, showing the small gap between his two front teeth and he said "Diko" before giving me a hug. Baba Jagoda was happy to see me. She was short, and her back was hunched over from all of her garden work. That day Ljuba took me to Divljankso Jezero. He was so excited

to show me where he would go fishing. Sometimes when he couldn't go all the way out to the Delaware he would come to our apartment complex by the Raritan. He would go through a space in the fence and sit on a folding chair on the muddy bank. That August day Deda got all dressed up and pulled his 1997 Mazda 626 out of the garage.

Immediately I recognized the car. It was the same one that he bought in America that used to sit in our driveway. Inside, the car still smelled like it did when I was little, almost like it was still brand new. The smell filled my lungs and transported my body through childhood memories.



*Figure 67: The Scent of a Landscape Memory. Photo by Author.*

He drove us down a dirt road along the Koritnicka River until we reached the Lake. At the far end of the lake kids were jumping in and out of the water. We watched them from Deda's little spot on the river. He had a little wooden shack where he kept his things and a bed where he would sleep on his trips. He had a dock that extended out to



the lake and a little seating area to the side with a radio and some shoeboxes he put out for stray cats that he liked to feed.



*Figure 68: A Fisherman's Spot on the Lake. Photo by Author.*

At the end of the day he dropped Tamara and me off at the bus station. Whenever Deda visited me, and he was about to leave, he would always slide me a hundred dollars for my birthday. As we waited for the bus he took out a red hiljadarka, a 1000-dinar bill and gave it to me. He then looked at the kiosk across the street and insisted to buy me an ice pop before I left. Another memory. He used to always give me four quarters to buy myself an ice pop from the ice cream truck when it drove by our house. But just as we turned to cross the street, the bus to Nis pulled up and we had to go. I looked at my Deda standing there through the window as the bus pulled away. I cried uncontrollably from Bela Palanka to Nis that day. That was the last day that I saw my Baba Jagoda and Deda Ljuba the way that I had come to always know them.

Other pictures on the wall were of Deda playing his accordion. One picture was of him sitting in the Serbian Orthodox Church in Elizabeth where I danced folklore. I could

tell from the wooden floors and wooden wall panels. The lamp in his bedroom was the same one that we had when we lived in the Valley Manor apartments. The lamp now sits as an artifact in our basement. On his dresser he had a picture frame of Jelena and me. We were wearing our traditional Serbian Folklore outfits that my mama sewed for us because we couldn't manage to buy them from Serbia like the rest of the kids. I clutched the photo and smiled, wishing someone would tell me that it was okay if I took it with me. Looking around the house made me feel sad. Not only because my Deda was gone and all that was left of him was the picture frames on the wall, but because there wasn't one photo of my Baba Jagoda. It was like she had been erased. Her presence in the house was practically nonexistent and it made me sad. The only memory I have of her in this house was when I walked in to surprise her, and she threw her arms in the air and shouted,

“Juuu! Diko!”



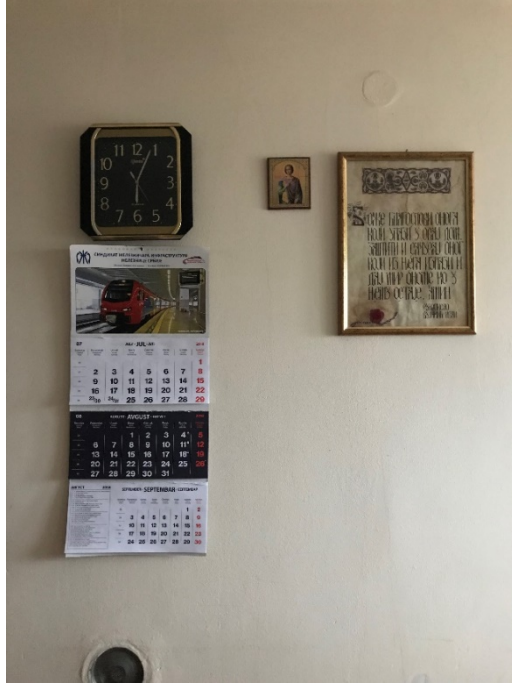
*Figure 69: Hidden Presence: Jagoda at the House in Palanka. Photo by Ljubomir Manic.*

Ana offered to drive us to the bus station. Her car couldn't fit all of us, so she took the keys to the Mazda. She told us that Ljuba never let anyone else drive his car, but I guess that all changes now. The car still smelled the same and the bus station still looked the same. While waiting for the bus to come I remembered the ice pops across the street. I ran over and bought four of them. One for each of us, Mama, Baba, Tetka, and me. We all ate them as they melted, and it brought a smile to each of our faces. It was time to let go. We were home again.

**Sunday, July 1, 2018: Don't be Selfish Your Life Isn't About You**

The furniture we bought from Forma Ideale finally arrived today and Mama and I finally had beds to sleep in and wardrobes to put our clothes in. It felt like home, like it never did before then. Before I always lived out of my suitcase, for months on end. Letica had a big wardrobe upstairs but I could never use it. She kept all of Tata's old clothes in there and she was very adamant about keeping them, even after twenty-five years. I don't think he would be able to fit in any of them. Letica kept everything in her apartment, walking in, it was like walking into a museum. Her home was a piece of history. The whole thing itself is an artifact. You can see exactly that time hadn't changed from the furniture to the photos to the clothes and the books. The plants in her apartment have seen it all.





*Figure 70: Leticia's Museum Apartment. Photo by Author.*

I was happy to finally have a place for my clothes and a place to lay down. It was sunny and warm, so I opened my big window in my small room. The window took up half of the wall and it was a nice change to windows I was used to in America, the ones that only opens halfway for safety reasons and the ones that didn't open at all because why would you need to when you have central air? I opened the window all the way and lay down in my bed with my new book, *The Tale That Killed Emily Knorr*. It was a short story about a rosy cheeked man who told stories and it is rumored that someone always dies twenty-four hours after hearing his tales. The story elaborates that only women perish from his stories, saying that his words are like poison if they hear them.<sup>11</sup> The stories are said to have no effect if told by women. It then made me realize that the language of men and their stories are dangerous and harmful. One of the tales the rosy cheeked man told was of a landscape of death. It described a pastoral landscape, one with

peaks of mountains, vineyards and a river with forests, neat pastures and fields.<sup>12</sup> I thought about my Great-Grandmother Paraskeva. That had been her deathbed landscape and her Son's.



*Figure 71: My Bedroom Window in Nis. Photo by Author.*

I wondered what my landscape of death would look like, although I have imagined it several times. I have had suicidal thoughts for as long as I can remember. The first time I had one, it might have been innocent. I can't remember now if it was a dream or if it truly happened, but the feelings were real. Before we bought and moved into Ljuba's house when he went back to Serbia, my family lived on the banks of the Raritan in Edison in the Valley Manor Apartments.

Our first apartment that we lived in when I was born was a basement apartment facing the river. The only thing that separated us from the water was some vegetation, a chain link fence and parking.



*Figure 72: Bridges Over Raritan. Photos by Author.*

Next to our apartment building there was a pool where I first learned to swim. And further down by the edge of the woods there was a little green space tucked above the water. The space had a picnic table and some grills for barbeque. At the edge of the space there was a cliff. When I was little, it looked bigger than it actually was. I remember standing at the edge of the cliff and wondering if I would live if I threw myself off.

Two years ago, I had been fighting these thoughts for a while. I loved to look out to the city of Nis from my Baba's balcony. I would hang over the railing wondering if it was high enough while staring at the asphalt below. I stopped myself every time because it wasn't something I could do to my Grandmother. It would have been selfish, and she had already been through enough.

**Wednesday, July 11, 2018: Up the River, Through the Woods**

Today we set out downstream, to try to hit re-start on my research. Aleksandar's paternal Grandparents had not arrived from Sweden for the summer yet, so they lent us their car. It was an old gray Opel and its engine roared when we drove. We walked along the Nisava that morning, revisiting all the old places we loved to sit and talk. The Nisavski Kej was my favorite of them all. Maybe I'm biased but it was so much livelier to me than the ones in Belgrade and Novi Sad. On the river closer to the city center, people would bring guitars and sing at the top of their lungs all night. The amphitheater was always full of people of different ages and tastes, but the water brought us all together. Everyone was snacking on something and laughing over extraneous amounts of beer. We'd sit there until the morning, and then the fishermen would replace the kids and the sun would rise. Some part of the banks of the Nisava was always dotted with a fisherman, enjoying his favorite hobby.



*Figure 73: Fisherman on the Nisava. Photo by Author.*

Graffiti would dominate the walls around the river with declarations of love and wishes of happy birthdays for women special to someone. The river was always special

to me. If I had nowhere else to go, I could go to the river and watch the water flow away from me. It was freeing almost, it felt like every thought and all the bad stuff of the day would wash right off of you and you watch it be carried away from you downstream.

If I walk out of my apartment building and down the road straight ahead I would make it to the river in five minutes. A straight shot from my apartment is a walking bridge that I usually take to visit Aleksandar on his side of town. The Kej there is undeveloped and mostly just dirt paths as opposed to the paved path closer to the city center. It was nice to sit here too though. It was quieter, secluded and more intimate. At night the sound of frogs in the river echo under the bridge, but during the day, people exercise along the bank. Some lay their towels down and sunbathe while other fish and some bring their dogs to play.



*Figure 74: Apartment to Bridge: A Straight Shot to the River. Photos by Author.*

As you went further upstream, the Nisava got more uncontrollable. The waters were deeper and faster while in the city center they were low and flowed silently. Upstream, further from town, things were less and less developed and the banks of the river thrived with different vegetation. The shrubbery was thick and every once in a



while, you would come across a dirt path that separated the thick vegetation. The path would lead down to the water where secluded fishermen would hide.

Upstream between my apartment and Aleksandar's the river Gabrovacka would flow into the Nisava. The Gabrovacka river was sad, almost pitiful to look at, but at the same time it was intriguing. I wondered what gender Momo Kapor would assign to it. The river was so low that it barely contributed much to the waters of the Nisava. It was green, mucky, and moved slowly. The Gabrovacka began up in the mountains outside of Nis and then ran through the city from Cele Kula, through the backyards of people's homes to the Nisava.

Cela Kula, Skull Tower is a historical monument on the Trosarina, where my Mama's family lives. The tower is built of skulls of Serbian men cut off by Ottoman soldiers during the first Serbian Uprising. The Gabrovacka River flows right by the tower.

Walking along the Gabrovacka is like walking through an abandoned wasteland. Old buckets, bottles, wrappers and plastic bags sit stuck in the waters. Children's toys wade in the muck. Half of a boy's tricycle sits at the edge of the water never to be used again.



*Figure 75: Abandoned Possessions of the Gabrovacka. Photos by Author.*

It was unsettling to see the river be killed slowly by these things. It appears that some neighbors used the river as a disposable trash bin while other houses had hoses extending from the waters to their backyards to water their gardens. Both stories of life and death are active in these waters, perhaps more blatantly visible than the others.

Regardless, declarations of love on the river still existed. Graffiti tags proved it. Even right up until the end as the Gabrovacka gave whatever it had left of itself to the Nisava, red letters spelled out “Volim te, Stevane” (I Love You, Steven).

Later that day we packed our things into the car and set out to find the Morava, a river to the joins several other Serbian rivers together and dominates the middle of the country’s landscape. The Nisava flows into the Juzna (Southern) Morava somewhere near the village of Secanica. I wondered about the Morava and what it looked like. I had actually never seen it before, but I learned its ancient steps young and far from its waters.



*Figure 76: Morava River and Opanke: Traditional Serbian Dancing Shoes. Photos by Author.*

When I was little my parents used to take us to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey on Friday nights. There we were taught the traditional folklore

dances of our culture in the church hall. The first and most basic steps you learn are from the Moravac Kolo. If you can learn those basic steps, you can learn to dance the rest. It was beautiful to me that the foundation of a part of our culture comes from the foundation of our rivers.

The Morava river was not developed. The main roads stopped as you tried to get close it and village roads of rocky, uneven dirt paved the way to the waters. The roads were frequented by tractors rather than cars. Once you turn off the main road you were either driving through grass or corn fields, if you could see from the dust picking up under the tires. We drove up to the village of Secanica and took the crop roads that don't show up on maps, down to the water. We passed thickets of vegetation knowing that the river was just on the other side of it, looking for an opening. I wanted to see the Nisava flow into the Juzna (Southern) Morava, and if I had mapped it correctly it was somewhere along the bank of where we were.

We suddenly passed by an opening in the vegetation, but still couldn't see water, but a car parked in the sand and a gray muddy, wet cement like substance. We got out of the car and noticed footprints in the wet gray muck when a shirtless man popped out of the woods. He was wearing red shorts, flip flops, a thick gold chain and a beer belly. He held a fishing rod in his hands and greeted us as kids. He told us we could get down to the water by a narrow and overgrown path. I weeded my way through the plants until I came to a tree and could see a glimpse of a reflection of light from the sun off the water. I made my way as close to the water as I could, and we sat there for a couple of hours. The Morava was chocolatey-brown and calm but moved very quickly. Near the shallow banks, small frogs camouflage themselves and jumped across the water. The area was



peaceful and quiet except for faint roars of drunk men fishing in the distance. I watched the Nisava flow into the Morava current, carrying bottles and branches: debris floating peacefully as their two different shades of brown merged into one.

We drove further up the Morava, rocking back and forth on crop roads, looking for where the West Morava and the Southern Morava joined. Some dirt roads separated the river from lakes that formed on the side from erosion and deposition. These lakes made me sad; they were like leftovers, forgotten and unwanted. They were used when needed, abused when wanted, and uncared for, because they weren't the main attraction. The lakes were dirtier than the river, having nowhere to relieve their filth that was forced upon them. They cannot transfer their pain to another place, they were stuck, and it showed. It showed through the leftover broken fishing equipment and the liter bottles of Coca-Cola and Fanta. I wondered: if we were water, what would we look like?



*Figure 77: Oxbow Lake Neglect. Photos by Author.*

Following the Morava further downstream, the car wobbled slowly down the dirt paths, looking for signs of life or maybe even hope, but finding only more hidden encounters of neglect. We looked for the marriage of the Southern and the West Morava, but their union was hidden deep in a forest, unattainable to all except possibly a few who knew which unmapped roads to take.

Looking for a connection in the landscape, only brought us more disconnect with it, and shame: visible only by the blatant act of trying to keep such wrong doings hidden. Somewhere along the Velika Morava (Great Morava) off Route 190 between Cicevac and Varvarin, a dirt road circles around neglected oxbow lakes. The land appears to look untouched, or that's what I hoped for. A concrete pole sticking out of the shrubs holds a sign that reads:

“Zabranjeno Bacanje Smeca”

“Littering is Forbidden”

Just up the narrow road sits a landfill. The day was so hot that steam appeared to be radiating off the heaps of waste. Aleksandar and I tried to drive deeper into the piles upon piles of garbage, hoping to find the water, but it was impossible to get through the trash that took over the road, spilling into it. Seeing something like this often provokes us to ponder the morality of man: How could he not care about the earth? The land? We do this to Mother Nature, we torment and poison her and then question how someone could not care about her. But do we ever stop to ask: do we even care about ourselves? We do the same to one another as human beings, we neglect and hurt each other. Yet are we ever as astonished or fascinated when we do so to humans as we are when we see our reflection in the landscape?

Just on the other side of the road, we came across a suspension bridge over the Great Morava, hidden in overgrown trees and shrubs. Vines twisted up the structure of the bridge, like how my Grandmother's plants in her apartment clung up her walls. The

wooden planks were just loosely screwed into the sides of the bridge, and it was narrow enough for one person to walk across comfortably. The water of the Velika Morava moved quickly and the view of the banks of the river showed so beautifully that the world is not just black and white: it is brown like the water, it is green like the plants, and it is blue like the sky. Sometimes I had felt like all the hardship that Baba Letica had to go through had sucked all of the color out of her life. In her eyes, the world was gray, she had seen and experienced it all, every death of the people that made her life colorful.



*Figure 78: Suspension Bridge Ecology. Photos by Author.*

We drove up to the town of Cuprija, the only developed town on the banks of the Morava. Moravski Park lined the side of one the banks of the river and one bridge could take you to the other side. The river flowed madly here. Swirls of the current created small whirlpools that drowned plastic bottles that journeyed downstream. The current

was visibly fluid and frothy. The brown water looked like a kid's cup of chocolate milk after a straw spun around its edges and its liquid form were blown into bubbles. The water was most riveting here because it had felt most alive. It danced and twirled, and it became a living thing again, putting on a show, reminding us why we love her.



*Figure 79: Velika Morava: An Unattainable Cup of Chocolate Milk. Photos by Author.*

From Cuprija, the Morava becomes unattainable again, only to be seen quickly through a car window when driving over a bridge. She hid herself in the trees of Serbia and performed just for herself, dancing her way into the Danube as we forgot about her existence again. The memory of her dancing waters continues to live only in our traditions of our own dances and lives.

Somewhere off of the coast of the city of Smederevo, the Great Morava spills into the Danube, where her dances drown, and she becomes just another river that feeds the mighty man. The day ended when we reached a small home on the outskirts of the city of Smederevo called Dunavska Kuca (The Danube House) where we stayed for the night. The backyard of the home was the river where waters from all over collectively unite under a new identity to begin a new journey. Most of these private homes that dotted the banks of the Danube had personal docks that had accumulated remnants of neglect the



Danube carried on his back and disposed of wherever he pleased. The Danube was vast and unattainable, its width and depth overpowering. The water moved slowly here and appeared almost stagnant swarming with oversized mosquitos. Small motorboats drove through the sunset waters while larger cargo ships slowly waded downstream.

#### **Thursday, July 12, 2018: Familiar Traces**

The next morning, we explored the Danube through the eyes of Smederevo. The city was familiar now. It had been my first stop on my research trip last summer, but now I looked at it with new eyes. The Smederevo Fortress sat behind a large railroad that you must cross to enter the Fortress park.



*Figure 80: Railway Tracks and Smederevo Fortress. Photo by Author.*

You walk over the railway tracks and through the decaying gates and towers of the Smederevo Fortress, to what used to be the big town or the outer city. The inner city stood in the far-right corner, behind a water trench, equipped with different levels of access to the towers overlooking the Danube. Before, the inner city was accessible to all for free; this year a fee was implemented to control traffic and finance repairs. I could understand both sides: the fortress was at risk due to its age, high groundwater levels, air and urban pollution, as well as damage from bombings in World War II by the

Germans.<sup>13</sup> Now locals that enjoyed the fortress as their backyard playground were weeded out and only tourists who could afford the luxury were those who could enjoy the fortress as they pass through.

Smederevo was once considered the capital of the Serbia when the fortress was built in the early 1400's under Djurad Brankovic. In its time the fortress had seen a lot when Serbia was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, from frequent seizures to the common exploitation of woman for political ties. Djurad Brankovic's youngest daughter was married to Ulrich II who had ties to Hungary. The marriage was considered a threat to Serbia's peace and safety with the Ottomans which led to Brankovic's eldest daughter to be given for marriage to Sultan Murad II.<sup>14</sup> It's amazing the unwilling sacrifices made by women through history to preserve the power and alliances of men. The impact a woman's role in history plays is too often overlooked. We can be found as the foundation to these monuments of history that last longer than the legacies of the men who sold us for them. To what lengths do we have to go to so that they can have a place called home?



*Figure 81: A Place Called Home. Photos by Author.*

By late afternoon we drove into Belgrade, descending from Autoput A1 into the city. The view of the White City changed within the last three years: now as you drive in,

three big high luxury apartments tower over the rest of the city scape on the edge of the Sava River. Efforts to push the Belgrade economy and “improve” the cityscape is the force behind the new modern urban renewal project with Abu Dhabi developer Eagle Hills. The new buildings and proposed ones look copy and pasted out of an architecture magazine. Nothing about the project screamed Belgrade or Serbia but our flag hanging over it.



*Figure 82: Driving into Belgrade's New Cityscape. Photo by Author.*

### **Friday, July 13, 2018: New Perspectives, Old Friends**

The next day Aleksandar and I took a boat trip along the Danube and the Sava Rivers. We boarded the small tourist liner along Beton Hala (Concrete Hall), a strip of restaurants along the docks of the Sava. Seeing the city from a different perspective, from the water reveals how the water looks at us. What does the Danube see when it flows through Serbia? I wondered about the changes that the river saw us go through. Now, as the edges of the Stari Grad (The Old City) change rapidly with a waterfront, I wonder what the rivers thought of us.



*Figure 83: Kalemegdan and Belgrade's Stari Grad from the Sava River. Photos by Author.*

I watch the cityscape change as we floated upstream on the Sava. From the ruins of Kalemegdan to the Belgrade on the Water development. Once you cross under the Brankov bridge the change is hard to ignore. Everything further upstream was shiny and new.

How long would it be until the Belgrade Waterfront encroached on the rest of the Old City, I wondered? It won't be long until the remaining walls of the Kalemegdan Fortress are torn down or buried under a new skyscraper to appease the tourist. A common Serbian would never be able to afford any such means with their monthly salary. Which brings into question: Who is this development really for? The sacrifice of preserving history comes at a cost. The man isn't going to make money off of preserving this old artifact, but he will make money if he builds something shiny over it. Extents of Kalemegdan already sit buried under our feet when we walk over Trg Republike (Republic Square). I saw it myself as they renovated the Square this year. When they cut into the ground you saw remnants of the fortress. If the extend of the fortress comes all the way there, who is to say where else we walk on its forgotten walls. All other



fortresses in Serbia are enclosed by mighty ramparts while Belgrade sits on tops of its fortifications. We only see the extent of walls of the fortress looming over the Danube. Where men once fought we now sit and drink. Only the stockades along the steep slope leading down to the Danube are visible, we can only wonder how far into the city the fortress really goes and where the other walls end.

It is said that anyone that finds themselves yearning for Belgrade is a member of diaspora that will realize that their adaptation to their new waters is an illusion and they always come back as if to a long-lost love. As I looked out at the changing city, I knew it wouldn't be long before our old love would be unrecognizable. Diaspora will be longing for a place and a home that will cease to exist.

Later that afternoon as we sat waiting for our food at Restaurant Stepenice, I scrolled through Instagram to find that my childhood friend from New Jersey, Aleksandra Kasikovic was having dinner herself, just up the street. I immediately sent her messages, in disbelief of the coincidence. She was in the city for the night before heading out to Novi Sad with her father. Aleks and I grew up dancing folklore together at our church in Elizabeth on Friday nights. Her parents were exceptional people, calm and level headed, despite the things in life they had been through. Her parents were both Serbian refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their families were relocated to Novi Sad, where many of them still live, but her parents were lucky enough to get out of the situation of war and live in Canada before moving to New Jersey. Her family had always been good to us, a hard thing to come by when living in diaspora for so long. The people you related to and confided with in the beginning became the same people who pit families against one another, creating a competition out of who was more successful in their American

Dream. Due to our circumstances, we fell out of the race, not that we ever wanted to be in it in the first place.

### **Sunday, July 15, 2018: What's Your Normal?**

The next day Aleksandar and I crossed the Brankov bridge to explore Novi Beograd (New Belgrade). We walked along the Zemunski Kej all the way from Usce Park to the Gardos Tower in Zemun, a municipality of Belgrade. Much of the Kej was lined with Splavs. Many of them on this side were hostels and restaurants rather than clubs. Looking out to the river the Big War Island stared back at us. A floating bridge implemented by the army allows access to the island and a small beach where many sunbathe and swim. Others circle the area with their boats and wade in the waters just off shore. As we got farther into Zemun, I thought about my Teta Snezana, she was a part of my family, from my Dad's side. Sneza lived in Zemun and I had met her several times before. She is a strong woman and very independent. She had never married, and Baba Letica frequently likes to comment on it, saying her excuse was that she was too tall, and men could never match her height. I didn't know if I believed that excuse in the literal sense. Figuratively, I did believe that no man could match her and she just didn't want to get married, and what is so wrong with that?

The Zemunski Kej came to an end. The concrete path curved left and the trees that lined the walkway stopped, letting the sun beat down on us as we walked the last strip of the Kej. We followed the path up the slope of the terrain above us. It took us through a street with some quiet cafes and abandoned boats resting in the hillside. The path took us up further into the trees, where it stopped, and a set of weathered stairs stood before us.



*Figure 84: Stairs in Zemun and Gardos Tower with Engraved Graffiti. Photos by Author.*

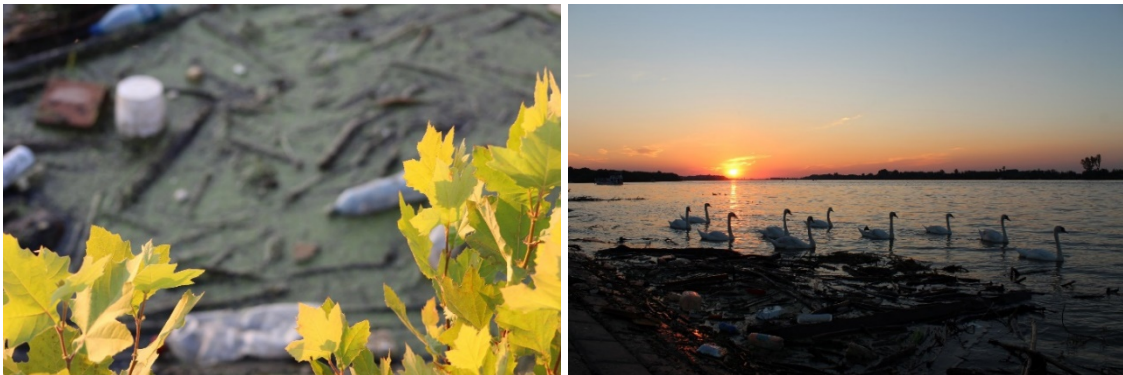
The stone stairs, sunken in the middle from water runoff were shaded by young trees. The stairs took you up a scenic path, raising you further up the slope with gleams of the Danube visible through the leaves. The staircase put us out onto a road in a suburb of Zemun; the city graveyard right in front of us. Stray cats circled the streets and watched us sleepily as they bathed in the sun. The streets were empty and quiet; only the sound of the World Cup Final between Croatia and France could be heard from the houses and cafes nearby. We walked quietly through the silent streets of the old town towards the Gardos Tower. Silence would break at times when distant roars filled the streets temporarily, signaling that one of the teams made a goal.

The Gardos Tower sits above Zemun and overlooks the city and the Danube, built in 1896 to celebrate a thousand years of Hungarian settlement in the Pannonian Plane.<sup>15</sup> It is hard to imagine that once; this entire area was covered by water of the Pannonian Sea. The heart of Belgrade was visible in the distance, an odd sight to see: looking at a place you are usually in, from the outside. I wondered at that moment, what our situation looked like to others from the outside. Those in diaspora probably thought we were antisocial and worse. Those back home thought we had it good, we lived in America for

Christ's sake! What could be wrong? We could make more money than we ever could in Serbia, and we could have opportunities! At a cost, of course. The top of the tower gave a panoramic view of Zemun. The tower was constructed of red bricks, like my house in New Jersey. The rules at the top were simple: No Graffiti! Visitors cleverly obeyed. No one drew any graffiti, but instead left their transparent trace as a carving in the red bricks that make up the tower.

We ended the night on the Dunavski Kej on the side of the Old City in Belgrade. We watched the Danube flow by, carrying the secrets of other countries in its waters. We walked there from the Brankov bridge, along the Sava. The waters were different when you walked along it's edges versus when you see it from any other angle. From the boat, and from viewpoints, you can't see the pollution collecting on the sides in between shrubs and abandoned Splavovi. Even the active Splavovi didn't mind being used as a gutter. People sat on the boat terraces eating fish and drinking wine as the debris collected near their feet. Even with all of this, people are still attracted to the water and I wondered why. Water has the reputation of being the source of life. If we drink it, it will keep us healthy. If we bathe in it, it will keep us clean. If we Christen ourselves with it, it will keep us Holy. Half of the human body is composed of water. We are attracted to water because we are water, not because of its promises of life, but because it postpones death. Are we more concerned with death than we are with life? I wondered if they noticed the trash wading in the waters around them. Were they ignorant or were they simply used to it? Our environments, no matter how toxic can become normal. I had grown up thinking it was normal to stay inside as much as I did, to scope for cops when we drove to the grocery store, and to hid if someone unexpectedly rang the doorbell.

We sat on the side of the Kej and watched the sun set on the horizon of the Danube. A flock of white swan's sway on the edges of the water. The pack of swans are known to Belgrade and its people. I've seen them in pictures on the Danube waterfront of the city before. They waded into the dying sunset.



*Figure 85: Pollution, Swans, and Sunsets. Photos by Author.*

### **Monday, July 16, 2018: Hidden in the Sands of the Danube**

The next day we drove upriver to Novi Sad, the second largest city in Serbia. The city of Novi Sad is in the Vojvodina province of Serbia. Driving further north, the terrain of Serbia gets flatter, the mountains of the south now fully disappeared, even with the horizon. With the change of landscape comes a change in dialect as well; you begin to hear different languages from Ex-Yugoslavia. Many Serbian refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina had been resettled in Novi Sad because of the war. The city of Novi Sad was bigger, and it almost felt like I wasn't in Serbia. The streets felt different from Belgrade and Nis. Maybe it was because they were flatter, but I also felt like things weren't as easily in walking distance as they were in other places in the country.

We walked from the outskirts of the city center, where we rented an apartment, to the City beach "Strand." The walk down Bulevar Oslobođenja felt tedious and never-

ending until we reached Most Slobode (Liberty Bridge). We walked under the bridge, through the parking and to the entrance of the city beach along the Danube. The entrance fee for the day was instead replaced by a donation box for a boy with cancer.

The beach ran along and under the Liberty Bridge. Families and kids ran around the sand and splashed through the water of the river. A man in a small boat waded by a bridge footing. There was such hope and happiness in the air. Aco and I took off our sneakers and grinded our toes in the sand. Observing the river water for so long and seeing it at its most raw and ugly has led us to feel that it was forbidden to touch. I briefly put my feet into the water, letting the coolness of it lower my body temperature on that hot day. We had been running around the country so quickly that we had forgotten to take a moment to stop and breathe. The aura of relaxation was so overwhelming that it was hard to believe that this was a landscape of death for a lot of people in Novi Sad.

In 1999 NATO bombed Serbia for 90 days straight. On April 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1999, the Liberty bridge was destroyed by the bombs. The cable-stayed bridge collapsed into the Danube river and wasn't reopened until 2005. Even with the bridge in the river, severing ties with the other side of the city, people still came to the beach and continued their lives. Just two days earlier, on April 1<sup>st</sup> of 1999 the Varadin Bridge, which took you straight from the city center into the Petrovaradin Fortress was destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

On April 23, 1999 the Zezelj bridge, just further downstream past the Petrovaradin Fortress, finally gave in and was destroyed after being bombed twelve times.<sup>17</sup> The bridge served as an international railway line and transit road. In less than a month, all three connections over the Danube were destroyed, leaving people with no way to cross the river to get to work or to see their families on the other side. It not only

cut off communication, but electricity, and most tragically, water. Due to the attacks in Novi Sad, 40,000 people had their water supply cut off, while 300,000 had their water supplies severely disrupted.<sup>18</sup> During a broadcast of the bombing of the bridges on CNN by Christine Amanpour, the news anchor urged the question: Why are they crying? Referring to the broken people of Novi Sad, watching their future lay, destroyed in the waters of the Danube. They were not only bridges, they were much more than that. They symbolized life, hope, and connections. To see that destroyed, would you not cry? The Zezelj bridge was rebuilt and reopened in September of 2018.



*Figure 86: Zezelj Bridge 2018. Photo by Author.*



*Figure 87: Zezelj Bridge after Bombing 1999. Photo by Darko Dozet.*



From the city beach we followed the hidden paths just under the Suncani Kej along the Danube back down towards the city center. We walked on the hardened crust of sand on the bank of the Danube, under a canopy of trees. Everything was quiet here. Paths were evident from the frequent use. Runners jogged by, while others sat under the seclusion of the trees and watched the vibration of the water's edge wade in and out. Through gaps in the trees you could see glimpses of the Fortress on top of the hill on the other side of the river.



*Figure 88: Silhouette Against Water, Novi Sad, Serbia. Photo by Author.*

### **Tuesday, July 17, 2018: Can You Take a Picture of the Sky?**

The next morning Aleksandar and I walked across the Varadin Bridge, the first bridge to be destroyed in Novi Sad by the bombing, from the city center to the Petrovaradin Fortress. Along the sidewalk of the bridge two messages in large red letters spelled out the very powerful messages: “Say NO to American and NATO Imperialism and Fascism” and “Destroy Capitalism: Save the Planet.” I smirked at the ever so appropriate placement of the messages and I couldn’t help but think how our lives are political, our landscapes are political, our water and even, our bridges.



Those who aren't blatantly aware of such impacts are lucky. They don't have to go through life thinking about their existence as just another cog in the machine. To never have your life defined by a derogatory description of your being must be a comfortable way to live because you never have to think, what will make me a lesser human being today: gender, ethnicity, race, religion, mental health, legal status or even something as simple as an accent? These are the things that can make me different from you and things that I must dissociate from to fit into your world, which is supposed to be free.



*Figure 89: Disappointed Angel, Novi Sad. Photo by Author.*

Later that afternoon we picked up Aleksandra from her apartment in the center next to the Danube Park. We had dinner last night and she agreed to come back down to Nis with us for a couple of days. We headed towards Avala before getting on the Autoput A1. Mount Avala is home to the Avala telecommunications tower that looks out over Belgrade. The tower was built of reinforced concrete like much of architecture in Yugoslavia was and it stood as a witness to all the bombs that fell on the region, until

itself, was targeted. At the top of the tower an antenna served to broadcast television and radio to the country, which made the tower a target. Disabling RTS (Radio Television Serbia) would have left the country off-air during the time of the war. On April 29, 1999 one of the three concrete legs that held up the tower was hit, and the landmark was left in ruins for years until it was rebuilt ten years later.<sup>19</sup>



*Figure 90: Avala. Photo by Author.*

My Mama told me about the tower. She said that she had gone there on a school field trip once. I looked up at the tower and tried to take in the fact that it wasn't the same one that my Mom had visited. An elevator took us to the top of the tower, where a panoramic open-air platform allowed us to look out over the red roofs of the countryside. The city-scape of Belgrade sat in the far distance where a blue curve cut a scar into the landscape, the mighty Danube protecting the back of the capital city.

On the highway, near sunset, we made a rest stop. On our way out of the store and back to the car Aleksandra gazed up at the sky, stripped with hues of pink, yellow and orange as the sun said its final farewell to our side of the world for the day. She turned to

me and asked me if I could take a picture of the sky for her. She loved sunsets, she confessed. I snapped the picture and air-dropped the photo to her. She was grateful and then went on to talk about sunsets for a while. As she talked I couldn't help but think about the reason behind her affection towards the sun. In December of 2015 Aleksandra's Mother passed away. She was a strong and powerful woman, traits she passed on to her daughter. I remember hearing that at the funeral, her Father's speech to his late love was a story of how on one of her last good days, the sun was shining making the sky brilliant and the day happy and she said that they should sit outside to drink their coffee. He said that now, whenever the sun shines like that, he will know that it's her. I guess every family has their own landscape connection that stands as a metaphor for the story of their lives. No story is insignificant, and each story should be shared. That way, we can understand each other better and through that, understand our landscapes better as well as our connections to them.

### **Wednesday, July 18, 2018: Nis je Nis**

We arrived in Nis late that night and exhausted from the trip across opposite sides of the country. From northern Serbia we came all the way down south, and I felt relief that I was home again with the mountains surrounding my city, with the dirty streets, and the rules of grammar thrown out the window, I was in Nis again. All that other stuff is nice and all, but as the saying goes: Nis is Nis. The oldest name of Nis, Naissus, which used to be my Dad's email when I was little, comes from the Old-Hellenic word: Nais, meaning Nymph. When translated it means "the lake nymph." When in reference to the river, it stands for the "river of the nymphs" and when it refers to the city: the "city of the nymphs" which implies that Nis was covered with swamps and marshes during the first

settlement.<sup>20</sup> We are people of the water, in spirit, in nature, and in reality. I actually missed my Mama. I usually love getting away and not having to deal with the strains of my family, but there are some things you can only talk about with your people.

When I woke up that morning Aleksandra was already awake and talking to Baba Letica on the terrace. They looked out on the city but spoke closely. Baba was naturally spilling her heart out to Aleks, like she did anyone that came as a guest. Baba had to make sure you knew her pain before you got too comfortable. To know her, you had to know her pain; every story in detail, from her husband passing to her Son leaving and everything in between that quite literally broke her heart and made her sick.

I took Aleks for a walk through the city. We started on the Bulevar where we walked down to St. Sava Park and then to the little part of the Kej on the Nisava down the street from my apartment where Aco and I usually sit. We hadn't seen each other for a year and there next to the bridge, we caught up; updating each other on our lives from where we left off as the river never stopped, and continued to flow, listening to our stories and keeping our secrets. The water was low that day and as we talked I watched dark storm clouds roll in over the mountains. It hadn't rained in weeks and I had foolishly gotten used to it. Trying to beat the rain, we continued our tour following the river to the city center where I took Aleks to the top of the Nis fortress for a view of the city. From the top you could see down the main street of Nis, past King Milan Square. To the left, looking back upstream, I could see my apartment building and it brought a smile to my face. We walked down the main street of Nis and I took her down Dusanova Street, showing her the places where I practically grew up with my Cousins, Marija and Tamara. I pointed out the places they used to work on the street and shared stories of all the good

times we had there. Tamara used to work in Beer House and Marija in Sunset Club before they both found their way to New Jersey.



*Figure 91: Nis Fortress. Photo by Author.*

That night when the rain subsided we went to Berta, a pub on Dusanova Street with Aco and our friends. I was nervous because his younger Sister Anastasija had finally arrived in Serbia for the summer. Last summer I only had the chance to meet her, but we never had the chance to get to know each other better. As we all shouted stories over one another and over the music, Aleks told Nikola how earlier today she accidentally withdrew \$200 from the ATM when she meant to only take out \$20. She had misunderstood the exchange rate and instead of taking out 2,000 dinars she took out 20,000. No one really found the story amusing as they did unsettling. Nikola chuckled and said that she withdrew a Serbian's entire monthly salary, just like that! It was true. As disturbing as it was, a full-time worker in the country would struggle to make an average of that a month.

### **Thursday, July 19, 2018: Topla Voda**

The next morning the sky was cloudy, and the air was heavy. Aleksandra was going to go back to Novi Sad later that afternoon, so I decided to take her on one last adventure and give a face to a familiar name: Niska Banja. Niska Banja was a municipality of Nis and one of the most popular spa resorts in the country, sitting at the bottom of the Suva Planina, the Dry Mountain. Growing up dancing folklore together, we learned the steps of the waters of the Niska Banja dance. The town is known for its thermal waters that come from a spring in the mountain. The spring releases hot, radioactive waters that contain traces of radon. The waters are known to be capable of healing, particularly coronary, blood vessel and blood pressure disorders. The dance is coordinated with its own song:

“Niska Banja, toplu vodu, za Nislije ziva zgodu”

“Niska Banja, warm water, for the people of Nis, it’s a good life”

Tambourines are used in the dance and like many traditional dances, a playful flirtation between a boy and a girl in the group. I figured it would be nice for us to see the water at its source, coming out of the mountain or to sit on the sides of the public channels of thermal water that run through the park and put our feet in.

We began to walk up the paved trails of the mountain, looking for the spring’s source, but somehow, we ended up off of the paved path and following dirt ones climbing further up into the mountain. The paths were steep and suddenly we found ourselves on a nature hike in the middle of a city. As we treaded up the mountain side I reminisced the

first time I came to Serbia. Marija and Tamara used to live in the suburb of Nikola Tesla, or Broj 6 outside of Nis which sits right outside the bottom of the mountain near Niska Banja. Before my Teta Vesna left my Teca Misko and moved into our apartment building on the Bulevar, this is where they used to live. Maka and Taka used to work in Niska Banja and they had many friends there who worked in the cafes in the park. Back then I spent more time here than I did in the city. We would take an unlit dirt road from their house, through corn fields to get to Banja. That first year I was even Christened by my Kumovi in the Church of St. Ilija in Niska Banja. Coming back now by myself was different. Instead of being the one who was being showed around, I was the one showing someone else around. We made it to the top where we were greeted with a view over Nis. I told Aleks more about Banja and how when Letica got sick after her second heart episode, she stayed in the hotel and hospital down in the park where they provided therapies. This had been right before my Father decided to send me to Serbia for the first time. Baba had also met her partner, Milenko here. He was an elderly man from Belgrade that had listened to Letica's stories of her life and he had grown to care for her. Since then he would come to Nis for every holiday and accompany her on her trips to Mokliste. He would help her with the things she didn't understand and with the work she could no longer do in the village. I was happy for her. She had lived alone for so many years.

Looking out over the landscape it was hard to imagine bombs falling out of the sky. Nis was cluster bombed on May 7, 1999, causing the most civilian deaths. The bombs were targeting the Nis Airport, but missed the location due to winds that carried the bombs closer to the city.<sup>21</sup> It was hard to think about this because many don't realize the impact that this has on people in the future. Even today, you have to be cautious

because hundreds of unexploded cluster munitions can be found in the Serbian landscape of the countryside. Mama's father, Vlastomir was battling cancer before he passed in 2005. One day a severe thunderstorm echoed like bombs through the valley. In fear of the bombings happening again, Vlasta fell and since then he was unable to walk. Baba Zine took care of him as he was bed ridden until he passed.

At the bottom of the mountain Aleks and I rested our feet from our three-hour hike in the thermal waters. It was then that it began to rain lightly, and the warm waters mixed with the cold rain. The temperature of the thermal waters became lukewarm and we dried our feet before taking a walk around the park until her Father came to pick her up.

### **Saturday, July 28, 2018: Drago Mi Je**

I was doing my makeup in my room with the window open. The day was hot, and the breeze was refreshing. My travels seemed far away as I was nervous about something else. Today Aco's sister Ana was celebrating her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday at Kafana Romansa. The 18<sup>th</sup> birthday is a milestone in our culture, you are finally an adult and the celebrations are a must. I was nervous to meet Aleksandar's extended family. I had already met most of his family. They were kind and unbelievably positive, something that I rarely felt the feeling of. More than anything, they were generally good people. They did things with genuine intent and love, something that I hadn't felt from another family in a long time. Diaspora communities change over the span of time from when they first arrive to once they've established themselves. Families become more distant, more competitive, at least in my experience. When we had to find a sponsor for my Mother and we were thinking over who we could possibly ask, anyone we thought of who knew our situation and who



were supposed to be our friends, we knew they would be hesitant, or they would do it, but simply to hold it over our heads, taking immense credit for their help. All we needed was a signature from someone, nothing else and we couldn't think of one person to sign.

That's when I realized how alone in this we were. Everyone cared enough to talk about it, to ask us questions and then to gossip. Everyone knew what we were going through, but do you think any of them cared enough to step in and help?

Danijela, Mama's best friend from her former life as a young woman in Serbia, came over as I was getting ready. My Mom made them coffee and they talked about all of their high school friends and former loves. They looked through an old photo album that Mama found in her old room at Baba Zine's house. They laughed at the pictures and my Mom seemed happy. She had someone who was her own and she relived a history that was solely hers, an existence before my Father. As they relived their past, I prepared to make memories with my future. I slipped on a red dress and called the green taxi to take me to the party.

At the party I sat nervously with Aco and our friends, under the pressure of many eyes. Aco's Mom kept him distracted throughout parts of the night just enough to grab my hand and take me to every table, introducing me to each person in the family. The amount of times I said, "Drago mi je" (It's a pleasure) felt like my tongue was going to fall out. By the end of the night, Olja, Aco's mom was dancing on a chair to the song Puste Pare Proklete, a song about leaving your family and your hometown because of money. The song starts out with the lyrics:

“Sprema me majka na dalek put, zora je pusta svanula. Ne placi majko, ne tuguj, vraticu se tebi ja”

“My Mother is preparing me for a long road, the cursed dawn has risen. Don’t cry Mom, don’t be sad, I’ll come back to you again.”

We all were gathered around her, singing along as she threw her arms in the air and sang from her heart. I smiled up at her and she reached her hand out to bring me up on the chair with her. I was naturally reluctant, but a hand pushed me from behind and before I knew it, I was dancing on the chair with her. The experience was different from any other celebration I had ever been to with my own family. We were always quiet. When you have a chip on your shoulder, something someone can use against you, you’re careful to never be too loud. We always sat at a table somewhere in the background, near a corner. The confidence, positivity, and visible strength Olivera emulated was inspiring. Not to say that my own Mother’s strength wasn’t, but there was something different about it. We had no hope left and it was nice to see it in someone else.

As the night ended and we helped clean up, Olivera came to me and told me that tomorrow morning I needed to be dressed and ready for church. She was Christening Ana’s friend Aleksandra tomorrow and now that I was part of the family, I was also a part of the God-family.

### **Sunday, July 29, 2018: You’re Family Now**

We all arrived at the church that morning half asleep and tired from the night before. The Christening took place at the Saborna Church just outside the outskirts of the city center. This was my first time at the church. It was white with large arcs wrapping

around it. This was the church my parents were married in and where Jelena was Christened. Aco's parents were married here too. He and his sister were also Christened here. Church's hold so much history, not only religious, but personal ones.

Ana's friend who was being Christened was also a Serb from Sweden. She was 18 years old and it made me smile watching her go through the ceremony because she reminded me of myself. I was 15 when I was Christened on August 1<sup>st</sup>, my Tata's birthday. She made a facial expression at every part of the ceremony I did when I went through it.

Later that afternoon we all had a celebratory lunch at Biser, a kafana tucked into a corner of the outside of the Nis fortress next to red clay tennis courts, just across the street from the river. We gathered in the front, waiting for everyone to arrive. An old Yugo pulled up and person after person kept filing out of the small car. We all shared a laugh as Saca, Oliver's partner told a short story. His eyes gleamed with reminiscence. He laughed and said that the car reminded him of when he was young, and all of his friends got together and piled into one small Yugo and drove up to the Morava to swim for the day.

We sat at a long table under an awning. The table was overflowing with food as we listened to a live band replay all the songs we sang last night. We laughed and shared videos of Olja taking the microphone from the singer and singing her favorite song herself because he didn't know it. Then, one of their family friend's, Dunav, the Serbian pronunciation of Danube, asked to take the microphone from the singer to sing the refrain of the song "Rastao Sam Pored Dunava," a song about growing up on the Danube. While we all recorded with our phones, he sang:

“Dunave, Dunave, kraj tebe mi srce ostade”

“Danube, Danube, I left my heart with you”

Even in our songs, we sing about the strength of our connection with the landscape. As the dinner died down, the discussion topic shifted to our upcoming trip to Greece. Ana and her friends from Sweden were going to the island Zakynthos for a week and Aco and I were recruited to chaperone. Since Serbia is a landlocked country with no beaches, the common joke was always that Serbians don't need the beach because we have the Danube! Some even go as far to joke that those who travel to other countries to swim in their waters instead of the Danube are cowards! Someone joked, “Well what if you swim in the Danube but on the Croatian border?” Which was met with the sarcastic answer, “Well then you're a traitor!” Borders are a provocative topic. Invisible lines that define who you are and where you're from, but what happens when the border is visible and more than that, geologic? The Danube is a river that runs through or traces the borders of ten countries: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Ukraine before draining into the Black Sea, a sea that additionally touches three more countries: Georgia, Russia and Turkey. We claim water as if it is our own. We call the same waters different names. So many different places on this earth are connected by the same rivers and oceans, but instead of letting them connect us we continue to let them divide us.

**Monday, August 13, 2018: How Long?**

Olivera was leaving to go back to Sweden soon and she was adamant on meeting my Mother in person before we all retreated to our realities. I was nervous because my Mom wasn't very social and even asking her, I knew that she didn't want to. Even though she agreed, I was afraid because we were different, a little rough around the edges from the trauma we went through. Olja being a very happy and positive woman, only made me see how we weren't. We were sad, broken people, fearing the future and using our negative thoughts as a battle shield.

I asked my Mama for the time to see when we should leave. We were going to meet Olja, Saca, and Aco at the park down the street. My Mom stared at her watch and asked me how far ahead we are from New Jersey time. I told her it was six hours when she told me it was still only two in the afternoon back home. I glanced at the watch on her wrist and noticed that she had never changed the time forward. Her watch still read the time it was in New Jersey. I wanted to ask her why, but I already knew the answer. When I go back to Jersey after being in Serbia it takes me a while before I build up the courage to change the time back. It just made me sad that she still didn't want to be here. I hoped that she would get used to it after some time and even if she did seem to become accustomed to life here, her watch told the truth.

We sat down in an outdoor café in the park and order a round of drinks and some appetizers. The conversations started off casually and it was only a matter of time until time until the real questions came out. The topic changed to being in Nis and how it was to be home. Mama confessed that it everything looked the same, but it didn't feel the same. She liked to say that everything was the same, but at the same time everything was

different. Maybe she didn't realize or didn't want to realize that she was the different factor. Olja agreed with her, telling us her story of meeting Aleksandar's Father and leaving for Sweden, learning an entire new language, new culture, new landscape at such a crucial age. Both of them had now lived longer in a different country than the one that they once knew as theirs. Mama began to go into details of the differences and funny encounters of trying to assimilate back to her original form. She talked about how she was neither here nor there when Olja asked how long it's been since my Mom had been back. The answer of twenty-four years made Olja's eyes widen. She didn't ask many more questions after that. The pain was understood.

#### **Saturday, August 18, 2018: Downstream**

The summer was coming to an end when I took my last trip along the Danube. This time, we went east, following the river and letting the current take us. We rented a white Skoda car and set out to see the Danube. We headed towards Ram, an old town along the Danube, east of Smederevo. Descending from the mountains you could see the Danube in the distance and we were now on smaller roads, narrow and less busy. On the side of the road sat a small gazebo and a place to pray. Ram was small and had its own Roman fortress that was closed for renovations. The town sat right on the river where the Danube still cut through Serbia. Just after the town of Ram, the Danube became a geologic divide and served as a border between Serbia and Romania. If you didn't know, you would barely realize the difference in landscape and that now across the river you weren't looking at northern Serbia anymore, but Romania.



*Figure 92: Religion and Water. Photos by Author.*

We drove further east over a road that sat on top of the water, separating the river from the lake. The lake, Srebrno Jezero or Silver Lake was a popular tourist destination outside of the town of Veliko Gradiste. We drove through the tourist area where families on vacation were swimming in the water of the lake on one side of the road and on the other cargo ships waded by down the river.



*Figure 93: Manmade Divisions. Photo by Author.*

Just down the road we were in the town center of Veliko Gradiste. We drove past cars tucked into the trees on the side of the road on our way in. The cars belonging to fishermen that drove in to their spot on the lake hidden between the trees. There along the

Carevcevo setaliste down to the city park, I had arrived back to another familiar trace. Last summer Aleksandar and I took a trip to the Iron Gates and we had stopped in Veliko Gradiste to eat breakfast. We bought some pastries from the local bakery and ate them along the waterfront, under the trees in the city park. The waterfront was different now in the sense that it was the afternoon. There were more people around, many sunbathing with their towels out on the concrete. Others were swimming and some men were fishing. There were kids playing in the shade of the trees and further down past the park is where the forgotten artifacts hid. Motorboats waded in the waters behind a ship. A rusted and abandoned water tower stood to the side next to an old shipwreck that sat on top of the earth, no longer in the water. Algae, grasses and trash accumulated by the sides and in between the small boats. This area was like a graveyard for things unwanted by the Danube.



*Figure 94: Abandoned Artifacts. Photos by Author.*

We continued driving east along the Danube until we came to the entrance of the Iron Gates, a gorge on the river between Serbia and Romania. The Djerdap National Park sat on the Serbian side of the river. The river between the Iron Gates of the two countries was changed dramatically with the construction of two hydroelectric dams and two power stations that raised the water level. Near the dam people were forced to relocate.



The entrance of the Iron Gates was guarded by the medieval Golubac Fortress. The other side of the river across from the fortress was now recognizable as one that could not possibly be Serbian. Wind turbines marked the hills of Romania here while on our side a fortress lay in ruins. The fortress was still undergoing reconstruction, so we were only able to walk around the park made in front of the stronghold, but the view of the fort on the water was breathtaking. Due to the hydroelectric dam built in the gorge in 1964 to 1972, the water levels were elevated, flooding the lower levels of the fortress, now destined to drown underwater for the rest of time.<sup>22</sup> Golubac had seen its fair share of battles and secrets. The monument was readily passed through powers between Turks, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Austrians, and Serbians from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until 1867. The reason for the name of the fortress is not exactly known. Myths say that there was once a beautiful Serbian girl names Golubana and a local Turkish man had fell in love with her. She had rejected his love, proposals, and gifts so out of anger he took her down in a boat and imprisoned her in the cone-roof tower. Other versions of the myth say that he tied her to a rock above the river, leaving her to die.<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 95: Golubac Fortress. Photo by Author.*

Just down the road sat the historic site of Lepenski Vir: an archaeological site of Mesolithic Iron Gates culture, approximately 8.5 millennia old in the Iron gates of the Danube in the Balkans. A number of sculptures and architecture were found here, noting the existence of a planned settlement along the river and creation of prehistoric culture in Europe.<sup>24</sup> What parts of our culture would they dig up centuries from now? I wondered: what would our secrets say about us in the future when found?

We ended the night in Donji Milanovac, a town located in the middle of the Djerdap National Park, somewhere tucked into the lower bend of the river. The town, although small, was filled with people that night. An old local rock band from Ex-Yugoslavia had a concert next to the river. The atmosphere had felt like we had walked back in time. Suddenly we were immersed into the culture of the country that existed thirty years ago and everything felt right.

### **Sunday, August 19, 2018: Finding Yourself**

We woke up in a village outside of Donji Milanovac with a view of the river from our room. Throwing our things in the car, we waved goodbye to our hosts but not before noticing that across the road there was a gap in the barrier that led you down to the water.



*Figure 96: Water Never Forgets. Photos by Author.*

Grabbing some fresh fruit from the market in town, we walked along the water where we were the night before. They were taking down the stage from the concert and I wondered if the waters remembered us and all the people they seen over the years. I think water remembers, like an elephant, water never forgets.

As we drove away from town and continued further east, I asked Aco to stop on the side of the road, so I could take a couple of photos of the river. He stopped in a thicket of bushes, out of the way of traffic and I got out of the car. I began taking photos of the water between the branches of trees when I noticed a beam of light reflecting off a piece of broken glass. I stepped back to see a jagged part of a broken mirror propped up against a tree. My reflection stared back at me and I suddenly felt different, I could see myself in the landscape and there I was propped up against a tree on the side of the road. Who could have left this mirror here like this? The placement was more than coincidental. As I stared back at my reflection, I heard faint yelps in the background. I looked down at my feet to find a small orange stray kitten meowing. My heart was full then, and I ripped up a small croissant for her to eat. She was skittish and jumped if I got too close but accepted my offering. I watched her eat and talked to her until she finished. I tried to pick her up to drop her off closer to the houses down the street. She was stuck on the side of a busy road. She refused to let me help her, so I ripped up another croissant before leaving.



*Figure 97: Reflection. Photo by Author.*

That afternoon we took a hike in the Djerdap Park in the Mali Kazan region of the water. The hike up took us an unexpected total of five hours. The dirt path up was steep and rocky from erosion. Trail markings were scarce and there was no human interaction. It was just you and the mountain and no knowing of how close you were to the top. You fought your way up without any recollection of when you would make it. The last hour of the hike the dirt path ends, and you tread through overgrown grasses, shrubs and branches that had overgrown into the path.





*Figure 98: The Iron Gates. Photos by Author.*

Weaving your way through, you feel like you are being teleported through time and space. The end of the trail just before you make it to the top feels like you had entered a fairytale. After you make it through the overgrown path, you find yourself in a green wonderland with tall trees and cool air. At the top nothing holds you back from the edge. You are now up above, viewing the Danube through the Iron Gates in its entirety. We sat at the edge under a big tree and watched a storm brew over Romania just on the other side of the river. The sky was dark now and gloomy. Only lightning made the sky light up for a second. We enjoyed the breeze coming off of the storm and the river, listening to the thunder bellow in the gorge below, we were untouchable at the top. Just under the rain in Romania, carved in the side of the mountain is the rock sculpture of Decebalus. A monument to the last king of Dacia who fought against the Roman Empire for the independence of his country which later became modern Romania. If you didn't know he was there, you would have missed his as he blends into the natural rock of the mountain side. Below the sculpture sits a white Monastery with brown roofs guiding the morality of the fluid mistakes we make.

Just outside of the end of the Djerdap National Park by the town of Novi Slip, sits the Roman ruins of the fortress Diana. The fortress wasn't large and glorious like the

others. The ruins contained no tall towers. Diana sat humbly imbedded in the landscape in front of the river just off the coast of one of the power stations. You enter through a gate of two half circles made of stone and red brick. One weathered blue sign with yellow writing shows the plan of the fortress and its history. No other information posts sit through the site to explain the different ruins. The visitor is forced to understand her, she does not reveal her secrets right away. You must earn the story of her history. If you were just driving by you might even miss her, as she is not boastful, but once you immerse yourself within her you see the authentic remains of her impact protecting the river. The fortress was named after the Roman Goddess Diana, the twin sister of Apollo. She was known as the Goddess of the hunt, the moon and nature. She was also recognized as the Goddess of the woods, children and childbirth, fertility, chastity, and had the power to talk to wild animals. Diana had a reputation of protecting Mothers and children, earning her a place of honor among women.<sup>25</sup> I realized then that all women are Goddesses because we are all symbols of nature. We create life and we emulate love and protection, each in our own special way. Through all of the stories of women hidden in history, I have come to understand that we are all strong and we all make in impact. The history of man would not be the same without the role of a woman. As women, we are not only worthy if we are leaders. We are always worthy, no matter what we do. And there on the banks of the Danube, in the ruins of an old fortress at the end of the Iron Gates, I found myself.

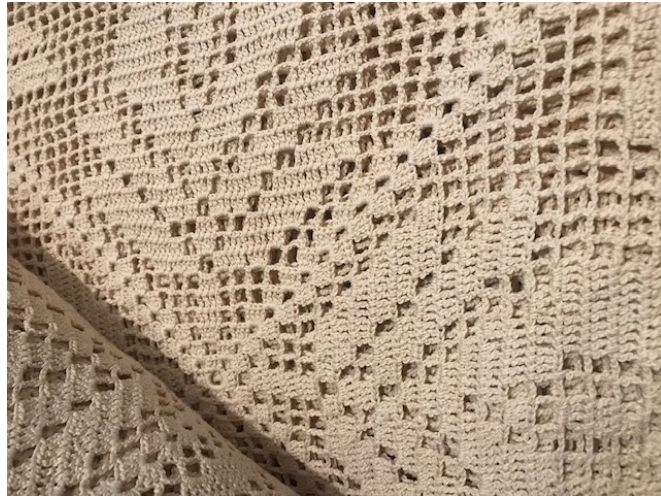


*Figure 99: Diana Fortress. Photo by Author.*

### **Sunday, August 27, 2018: We're Always Saying Goodbye**

Goodbye is not easy when you're always saying it. Our suitcases were all packed and our flight was early in the morning. My mood had begun to change back, and the happy, free feeling of relief was slowly leaving my body. I felt like I was going through a metamorphosis again, putting my cold, individualistic mask back on. Leaving always made me shut down as I had to prepare to go back to a world that I did not identify with completely. Mama on the other hand wasn't as upset to leave. She was ready to go back, as the time on her watch so clearly revealed.

Baba had come downstairs bearing her typical gifts, four Najlepse Zelje (Best Wishes) chocolate bars and other little trinkets. This time she came with something else. She handed me two large shopping bags. Inside them were towels, tablecloths, and a variety of her knitted works. She said that one was for me and one was for Jelena. They were the dowries for each of our weddings. They were heavy in my arms and I felt helpless and almost as if I didn't want them. I wanted her to give them to me when I was actually getting married. Not now.



*Figure 100: Baba's Dowry. Photo by Author.*

I knew in the back of my head why she was giving them to me now, but I didn't want it to become a reality. It was a just in case I don't live to give it to you when the time comes. I wanted so badly to be able to give her that joy and opportunity to see one of her Grandchildren get married and I could if I wanted to, but I wasn't ready to get married. I didn't even know if I wanted to. I had given so much of my life to fulfilling my family's wishes that I needed to do this for myself. I thanked her for them and gave her a hug before packing them away in an empty, unused drawer and said goodbye. Until next time, hopefully.

### **Wednesday, August 29, 2018: What is Home Anymore?**

Mama and I landed at JFK the next night. Tata picked us up in Jelena's car and drove back to Edison. We walked into the house and everything felt smaller now. It was all familiar, the furniture, the kitchen and my room, but everything felt like it wasn't mine. I felt like I was walking through my past and looking at the things I used to have and the way I used to live. The traces were familiar, but they were no longer mine. I



looked out of my bedroom window and all I saw was the street and the two houses that sat across from ours where neighbors I didn't speak to lived. There were no red rooftops or gorgeous sunsets anymore. There were no mountains in the distance or view of the moon that lit up the room like in the apartment in Nis. Instead the moon was painted on one wall of my room, the sunset on my ceiling, and the sun on the other wall. Everything felt weird to the touch, as if I was in someone else's home.

The next morning, I drove down Route One towards New Brunswick. I passed by the exit to Old Post Road that I would take to get to High School every morning. I waited at the red light in front of Wick Shopping Plaza where we would get groceries at Pathmark when we lived in the apartments and the T.J.Maxx we still shop at today. I crossed the Donald Goodkind Bridge over the Raritan River where the Valley Manor Apartments sat on the banks of. Zooming past the Loews Theater, that I would look up at when I was small from down below in the apartment complex. I took the Route 18 exit into New Brunswick, the city I was born in. I turned into Cook/Douglass Campus and went to Studio. Through all the changes, Blake Hall stayed the same. It too, felt smaller this time or maybe I had just outgrown it. I checked my watch for the time and did the math, subtracting six hours. Then I went about my day, waiting for the next time I could buy my ticket home and swim in my waters again.



*Figure 101: Time Difference. Photo by Author.*

### **Tuesday, December 25, 2018: Six Months Gone**

I arrived in Serbia that winter with a sigh of relief. I had finally made it back. It was cold now and traveling was harder. I flew into the Skopje airport with Olja and Aco from Sweden. This was the first time that I didn't fly in through Belgrade. Saca picked us up at the Macedonian – Serbian border and drove us home. They dropped me off in front of my building and there I was again on the Bulevar. This time, alone. I always used to go straight to Baba's apartment, but this time when I got into the elevator, I pressed the button for the eighth floor. I fumbled for my keys to the apartment and walked in just to throw my suitcases inside. The apartment smelled like my Mom, fresh like a clean basket of laundry. I dropped my suitcases in and took a look around the apartment. Letica had been keeping an eye on our plants and the window in my room, watering the flowers and making sure the rain didn't get in through the window while we were gone. You could tell Baba had been here because the tables and couches were now covered with her

knitted works and the entire apartment was covered in pictures. The pictures were mostly of my Father and I was instantly annoyed.

I locked the door to the apartment and rang the doorbell to the apartment next door. Teta Vesna answered, squealing with joy. I came in and we talked for a while about how the flight was before she mentioned that they opened Deda Ljuba's will today. I was confused. I had thought that the will had already been opened. I had confused cultures again and forgot that in Serbia you wait six months before reading the will. I couldn't believe that six months had already passed and that he had been gone for that long already. I also couldn't believe that I had arrived back six months later on the same exact day that he passed. I had already forgotten, and I felt guilty. Vesna confirmed that Ljuba left everything to Ana and her husband, my distant cousin, who had taken care of him in the last years of his life. I hadn't even realized that he had a will because I already assumed that he left them everything, which was valid. It made sense and I understood it. But I couldn't help but feel forgotten. The money didn't matter, and I never expected anything from him, but I was sad that he didn't leave me at least the hundred-dollar bill that symbolized a token of his love. I had to shake the idea that not being mentioned in the will meant that he didn't love me.

Tamara walked in then, she was home for the holiday's too and I felt a little less lonely with her here with me again. We called Baba on the phone to tell her to come down and join us. When she came, she was visibly upset that I didn't come up to her first and I felt bad. We went upstairs to eat dinner then. As always, Baba's welcome home dinner was ready. After dinner, Baba tried to convince me to sleep upstairs in Tata's old room. I told her that all my stuff was downstairs and that I just want to sleep in my own

bed. She kept trying to convince me that I was scared to sleep alone; a thought I chuckled at. I told her again that all my clothes were in my closet downstairs. That's when she brought up my Father's suit again. After our furniture was delivered, Baba became adamant on moving Tata's old clothes down into the wardrobes. She was particularly persistent about his suit. I knew she wanted to have a space for him downstairs, but it was too much. He wasn't here and who knew when he would be able to be. I refused the suit and left.

Downstairs I threw all my clothes from my suitcases into my wardrobe and chucked the suitcase away in a corner where I didn't have to see it and be reminded of the fact that this wasn't forever and that I had to leave again. I looked at all the pictures of my family scattered across the apartment, all of them mostly of Tata. I took them all down, put them away, and went to sleep.

### **Sunday, January 6, 2018: Family Memories**

After two weeks of living alone I had begun to feel lonely. I found myself calling my Mom and my Sister on Facetime more than I ever had before. When Aco would come over I found myself begging him not to leave because I didn't want to sleep alone or wake up to an empty apartment. Luckily, Badnje Vece (Orthodox Christmas Eve) was tonight and we would all gather at Baba's for dinner. It was exceptionally cold, and a snow storm had rolled in. I walked into Baba's apartment and she started throwing walnuts on the floor at our feet. The tradition was that the kids had to grab as many as they could. Whoever got the most wins. Tamara and I rolled around the floor fighting each other for the last walnut. We toasted with rakija to celebrate and wished each other a Happy Christmas Eve. Tamara and I opened a bottle of wine after eating. Usually, after

dinner we all couldn't wait to leave Baba's apartment, but this time we stayed for another five hours. We talked about our family tree, trying to decipher the various blood ties we had. Baba cracked open the walnuts as we drank wine and snacked on them. She was so happy that we were there with her and now I understood her. It was really lonely to be by yourself in an apartment with only your thoughts.

As we got deeper into the family history, I hesitantly asked if we had a Great-Grandmother who had taken her own life. I had heard the fact from Jelena once when the Kavanaugh case was going on back in October. We talked about how a woman is treated and how everyone turns a blind eye to her suffering, while giving the man the benefit of the doubt, but never the woman. We talked about how the abuse of women was always swept under the rug when Jelena mentioned that we had a Great-Grandmother who killed herself because she was really abused. Never hearing this story before that left me curious, so, I asked if it were true. Letica hung her head and her eyes moved quickly, trying to recall a memory of a family member taking their own life. She was quiet for a while and then she picked up her head and told us that there wasn't. She seemed sure of it, and it made me doubt the accuracy of Jelena's knowledge.

That night I went to Midnight Mass with Tamara and Aleksandar and I lit five candles, three for the living: one for my Mama, Tata, and Jelena and two for those who passed, one for Deda Ljuba and then the other for my Great-Grandmother, whoever she was.

### **Saturday, January 12, 2018: You're Serbian Now!**

Today I went with Saca and Aleksandar to pick up my Serbian Identification Card at the Post Office. Saca worked for the police and he took me in over the line to help me

get it quicker. I had applied for one in the summer before I left because carrying around my American passport wasn't the safest thing I could do.

I opened the envelope and pulled out the ID. Saca patted me on the back and exclaimed that a celebration was in order, I was Serbian now! I nervously chuckled at the comment. Was I not Serbian before?

### **Wednesday, January 16, 2018: The Youngest has it the Hardest**

Today I went upstairs to talk to Baba after a couple of days of taking time for myself. I only went upstairs to find some old photos. As I was looking through my parents' old things, Baba mentioned that she was thinking the past couple of days and she remembered that there actually was someone in our family that had killed themselves. It was then that she told me the stories of my Great-Grandmother, Paraskeva.

As I took in the story, I thought: if I hadn't learned the history of my Great-Grandmother, her memory would have died in my generation. Her story and her sacrifice would have been washed away with the power shame and embarrassment can hold. However, my Great-Grandfather's memory and impact would have not been erased. If I were born a boy, my name would have been his: what an honor. His name and his legacy would have continued, his actions hidden by the playful character trait of being able to drink a lot, or in terms lesser said, an abusive alcoholic. Even now, with all female Great-Grandchildren, his memory continues. Our ability to drink extraneous amounts of alcohol is celebrated as a character trait we received from him.

“Svi ste na Deda Djoku”

“You are all like Deda Djoka” my Father or Aunt always joke.

If I had not known the legacy of Baba Ceva, I would have never known that maybe, I am more like her than anyone else. But her memory and impact could have been gone that quickly, as fluid as water in a river traveling downstream. Her traces made on the landscape would have been invisible. Her work in the fields: the soil she tilled, the grapes she gathered, and the Rakija (brandy) she made out of them that Djoka drank, would have been forgotten.

We erase histories and we do it to the benefit of man. We erase important parts of history, small histories and large ones, to glorify the man. We subject our landscapes to being predominately male. Do we ever design for the woman? And do we ever design solely for the woman beyond the preconceived notions of what a man believes a woman should be? We design for the person, yes. We design for the child, yes. We can design for the homeless, the mentally ill, the elderly, but do we ever stop to think, what are the “normal” things that women are subjected to and how can we design this space to help her combat these things she is dealing with? How does the homeless woman deal with her period in this park? How does a woman with anxiety feel on this sidewalk? Is this young girl comfortable and able to engage when she is in this playground? It made me sad that we didn’t exist; in history, in our own families. We were always left in the shadows although we are history’s most beautiful and most resilient revolutionaries. Women are the essential backbone to it all, our villages, our cities, our homes and our work fields. I believe that women are where every landscape story begins.

**Friday, January 18, 2018: Toliko Za Sada**

I believe that pain is genetic and trauma travels through family lines until someone is ready to heal it. Trauma will continue to transfer through generations and stay buried in the landscape. Nothing can change until we dig it up and I think that ancestors and descendants of a family benefit and celebrate every time the work to heal such trauma is done.

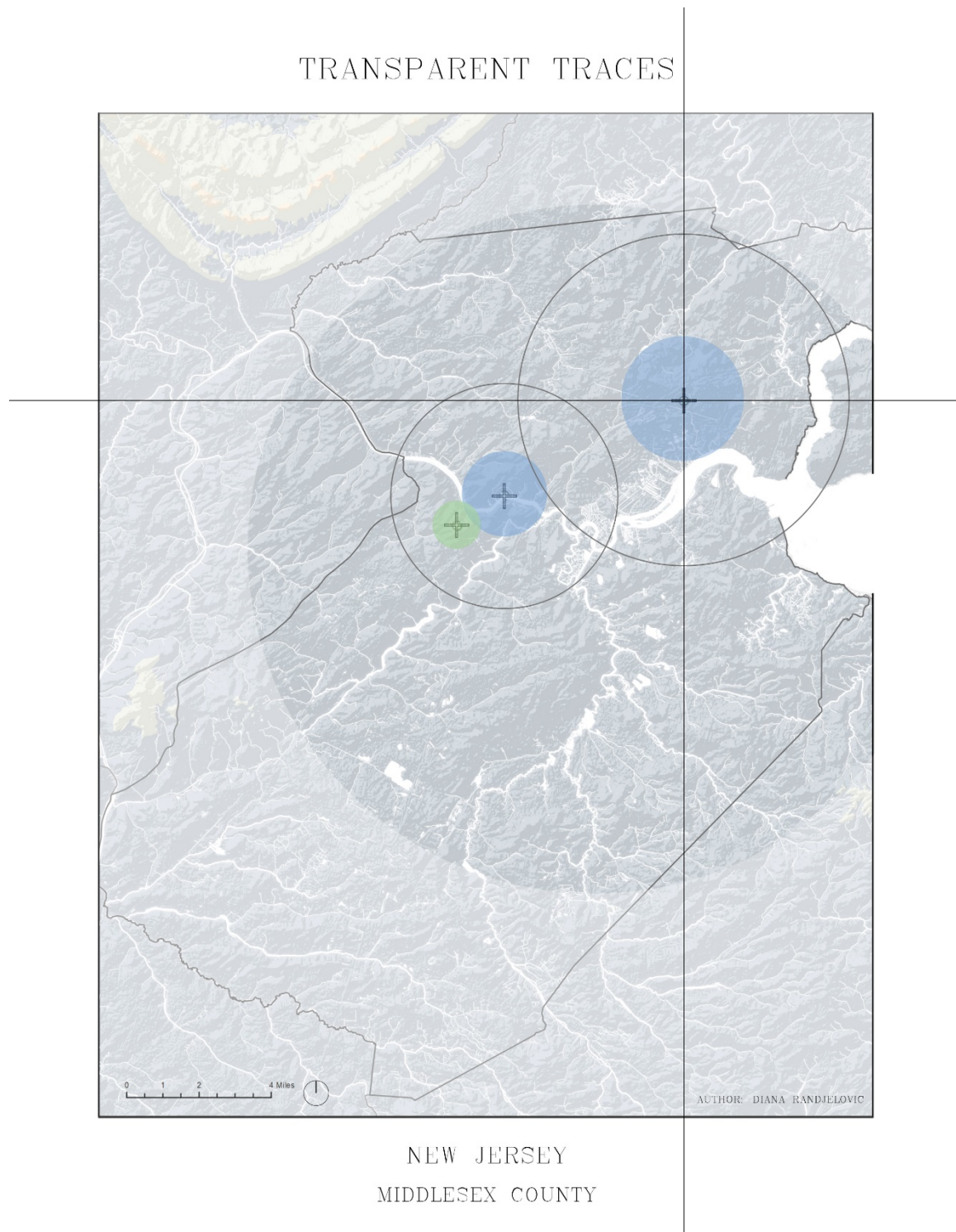
I left Serbia on January 18<sup>th</sup> and I couldn't help but feel like it might be my last trip for a while. Saying goodbye was easier before because my next trip was already planned out in my head. My next ticket home was already mentally purchased. But this time, I couldn't guarantee that I would be back again for the summer. Who knows where I would be in the next couple of months? I wondered where we would all be in the next ten years. Will I stay in America or would I move to Serbia or maybe Sweden? Will my parents continue to stay in New Jersey or will my childhood home be sold? I wondered if my parents could live in Serbia after all these years. In the next ten years I know that Baba would be gone, and my heart broke at the thought of her apartment being empty and without her. I wondered what would happen to all of her things and who would be the keeper of our stories.

Baba Letica looked small and frail to me for one of the first times. Her sadness had become mine and for the first time I wondered if this was our last goodbye. A lump caught in my throat and I hugged her hard before I got into the elevator and pressed 0, taking me to the ground floor where Aleksandar was waiting for me to go.

Who knows where we would be, but that is the beauty of a landscape story. You go where the fate of the current takes you and it is a story that never ends. And as Mama



would say when she would end her journal entries: *toliko za sada* (that's enough for now).



*Figure 102: Map of New Jersey, Middlesex County: Places like Home. Map by Author.*

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<sup>1</sup> Klaver, "Meandering and Riversphere"

<sup>2</sup> Kapor, 222.

<sup>3</sup> Sowards, "Lecture 25: The Yugoslav Civil War."

<sup>4</sup> T., Miran, "Ex-Yugoslavian Countries"

<sup>5</sup> Kapor, 19-20.

<sup>6</sup> Kapor, 14-16.

<sup>7</sup> Kapor, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Kazmer, "Birth, Life and Death of the Pannonian Lake"

<sup>9</sup> "Yugoslav Prisoners of War in Norway."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Pavic, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Vukovic, 120-122.

<sup>14</sup> Vukovic, 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Dobbs, "Repeated Attacks By NATO Puzzle City of Novi Sad"

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Fitz-Gibbon, "Bombing of Yugoslavia 1999."

<sup>19</sup> Petrovski, "Avala Tower"

<sup>20</sup> Rakovic, *A Historical Storybook*

<sup>21</sup> "THE CRISIS IN KOSOVO."

<sup>22</sup> Vukovic, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Radovanović, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Vukovic, 162.