

Hole-punched Fate

Mila Knezevic '21

She looked down the dark street hoping to see the half stranger waiting in a cluster of shadows. When she found him, he gave her a limp hug with a huge smile. “You gave me the wrong address for your uncle’s house,” he remarked in his stilted English “You gave me the address of a bakery.” Aleksander had a friend with him, Marko, who was small and wiry with bulging eyes and a frayed mustache. She walked with them meekly as they tossed ideas for evening plans back and forth.

When Mila was in Serbia, her sense of belonging was confused. A clear misfit in the region where time seems to move slower, and old habits die hard. It was her father’s country but her New York City upbringing was in her education and in her accent. With a new iPhone and trendy sneakers, she stuck out in the crowd. Here, the horrors of war are latched onto people’s memories in a way that is almost parasitic. Most Serbs will readily speak about their bitter hatred for a variety of peoples, a list that usually includes Americans. Despite the many contradictions she felt internally, this is where she laughed hardest and where she looked physically like everyone else, with her dark features, hardened stare, and olive skin. In past visits to Belgrade, she was mostly with older relatives. The opportunity to hang with Aleksander and his friends was alluring, and possibly, one step closer to feeling like she belonged there.

Aleksander and Marko decided on Medusa, a bar with two levels and some outside seating. Like most venues in Belgrade, no one sat inside, and tables full of people were crammed into the narrow sidewalk. Slow Latin samba played as Marko talked wistfully about his girlfriend in Australia. Aleksander cockily and jauntily recalled his trip to America where he had spent “five days in Vegas and five days recovering in San Francisco.”

Marko said he had never been to America. Mila was surprised, “Really?!” she said incredulously. Aleksander tried to lighten the moment, “You fucking Serbian peasant Marko! How have you never been to America you *Seljak* piece of shit.” They laughed. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she said with an apologetic smile. She suddenly felt like an intruder; an arrogant, privileged American.

“Anyways when I was in Vegas this guy was trying to sell me coke and kept saying, you’re the guy from suburbia, right, you’re the guy from suburbia right?”

Aleksander had a commanding presence. He was almost seven feet, had a lazy eye, and a thunderous laugh. He began to tell random anecdotes about twerking on set for a Russian tea ad campaign, about how many times he needed to put the tea bag into the mug before they got the right shot. He had a way of spinning stories, and he had Mila’s and Marko’s full attention. Mila interjected, “I’m getting my Serbian citizenship tomorrow! Dual citizenship baby!” Marko replied, “Congratulations you’re a real Serb! Although I’m not sure that’s cause for celebration.” Aleksander said, “Woo! Something for us to celebrate tonight!”

They threw back a shot of some liquor made from wild anise, which grew thick and burly along Serbian highways and even thicker on the Croatian coast. The boys repeatedly ordered drinks from a smiley, round, motherly waitress. Mila asked her to take a picture of them with her disposable camera.

“That’s some hipster American shit,” Aleksander said through his smile.

The night’s volume level slowly rose. Complaints and gossip and the soundtrack of lighting cigarettes swirled up through the narrow cement streets, and into the flat black sky. Two other guys joined them, dragging chairs up to the table that was only meant for two. Almost

immediately one started cracking jokes about how he thought all science concerning nutrition must be wrong “cause Serbs only eat red meat, bread, and cheese and are the strongest and tallest in the world, just take a look at Aleksander.”

They howled with laughter. There was no better way to get the crowd’s appreciation. There was nothing that could be enjoyed more than a backhanded compliment about their shared Serbian heritage.

As they drifted through the streets the four men circled Mila and made conversation. She thought they were protecting her as maybe some long-lost cousins or brothers would. Their intentions with her however, became a bit blurry as time passed and more drinks were had. Despite their motives, she knew for sure she wanted to win them over, as it was a way of connecting to the place she was supposed to be from. They stopped for a drink at Marko’s apartment and she sang them an Italian Aria. Their collective cockiness slightly softened. Traditional music in Serbia is very different than this style of bel canto singing. This musical expertise perhaps set her apart in a positive way.

The nightclub was on the Danube and the metal detectors outside stood in marshy grass. Each side was flanked by a vulture-like bouncer that scanned the crowd for handguns and disorderly patrons. Strippers made arabesques on a catwalk along the ceiling. Marko was drinking a bit extra because he had just realized he had left his phone in the cab. The rest of the group told him that according to Serbian lore, these kinds of things mean good luck and money are on their way. Later in the night, Mila and Aleksander pretended to be Danish so they could steal a table someone else had reserved under a Scandinavian-sounding name. They did not look the part, being dark haired and giggly, and the bartender called their bluff.

The space boomed with folk dancing songs remixed into dizzying electronic beats. In some miracle of physics, everyone managed to dance while simultaneously smoking and drinking. The air was opaque and nauseating with thick vanilla clouds from their thin cigarettes.

Aleksander walked Mila home, but took a long way, and led her up to a deserted playground on a hill. The air was still and the light was fluttery. It began to reveal hues of amber along the white rooftops. They sat next to each other in silence watching the sunrise. Once in a while, one of them would pipe up to recount some crazy character who had made a strong impression at the club. The park was donated to Serbia by Azerbaijan, and a shiny 9-foot-tall bronze statue of the Azerbaijani president stared from the center of the park. Mila looked out at the imposing figure. “He looks lost,” she said softly.

All of a sudden, Aleksander grabbed Mila by her narrow shoulders and pressed his lips into hers. He was forceful and drunk. She realized almost immediately this was not what she wanted. Her goal was not this kind of validation, but rather the simple, innate feeling of knowing she belonged. Even though she was certain she was uncomfortable, in shock and fatigue she found it hard to struggle away from him. All she had wanted was not to feel meek in a country that was supposed to be her own, and here she was unable to even speak up as he grabbed her from every which way. It felt like hours had passed before he said, “I should get to bed, say hi to your parents ok Mila?” She walked home alone as the morning light grew fluorescent and red and green graffiti glowed on its cement surfaces. It was surreal, a sad solitude that felt so wrong after a night of fun. The last night in the country supposed to be hers, and how strange it had been, filled with extreme joy and excitement and heartache. Aleksander’s kiss had felt like the betrayal of a farfetched dream.

At noon that day she would head to Croatia, to see her family, to see her sea. Her father had spent his summers along its shores growing up. That was before the brutal war that would

split Yugoslavia into eight tiny countries. The relationships between them remain hostile to this day. With her being Serbian, Mila was technically more of a misfit in Croatia, but she felt a deep and ineffable connection to its nature. The water, the islands, the animals were all free and serene. It was in the pure azure depths of the Adriatic that she might be able to wash off the stench and stains of Aleksander. She could never tell her parents, or her sisters about it. They had seen him for years as some extension of the family, just like she had before a few hours ago.

It was around seven when she arrived at her uncle Milos's apartment. Three locks lined up pretty on his door, each matched with radically differently shaped keys. She fished the key out of her pocket and shoved it into the lock. The couch is white, objectively not suitable for children, and growing up she had steered clear. Now her uncle was dozing on it, swaddled in a thin blanket. He shifted lightly as she tiptoed through the room. He had bragged to her a day earlier that he can speak Arabic in his sleep. She didn't hear any Arabic. She quietly opened the double doors open to his bachelor pad bedroom, one wall is a big mirror, and one has a big window. The light snuck through slim cracks in the shade. She sat on the bed and brushed her hair in the mirror. A dull headache began pulsing behind her eyes, sour taste remained in her mouth. She ate some strange tuna fish salad with garbanzo beans she found in a kitchen cabinet, and caught up on a Netflix suspense series. It was two hours before the Serbian Citizenship was to be finalized, and sleeping, she decided, could only slow her down for the day of travel to come. The taste of tuna and his sour breath lingered on her tongue. She brushed her teeth four times.

At half past eight, Milos woke up and abruptly said it was time to leave. They clambered into the lime-green Peugeot, which had been baking in the sun and felt unbearable for the first few minutes of the drive. Milos pulled his aviator shades from his bald head and over his eyes and flicked through the radio stations: folk music, then traffic, then weather, then news, and finally landing on Yugoslav 80s hits. Mila laid her head against the warm window and watched the scenery pass. Gray and white buildings, uniform in their brutalist architecture lined the wide streets. Elms along the sidewalk looked past their prime and dark sinewy cypress trees had snuck their way into the cityscape. Old ladies were doing their morning shopping. Colorful scarves wrapped their heads. They moved slowly carrying heavy bags of fruit. *The day I become a citizen*, she thought.

The police station was a square white building, and its first floor was a cavernous wooden hall. Various officials sat in wooden booths lining the walls, and the lines to them stretched across the room and crisscrossed each other in a disorderly jumble. Most people looked disheveled and tired, like they had been waiting in the ancient looking building for years. Milos waited behind Mila in line and began to make fun of her morning-after look of droopy mascara and hollow eyes. She kept her focus ahead. The notary they waited for sat in her wooden throne in a mini dress and false eyelashes. Her ironed hair was dyed a dark red and she had a winged heart tattooed on her neck. The name 'Ivan' written in script within it. She had light-gray colored contacts in her eyes. They looked reptilian and jarred a half-awake Mila. "*Pasoš*," the notary said robotically. Mila handed her the American passport as a form of ID. The notary's long silver fingernails grabbed it from behind the glass.

Suddenly, she put the passport in a contraption on her desk and clamped a lever down. Mila watched in dazed horror as she realized what had just occurred. The notary had just punched two little holes through the cover of the little blue book.

A Serbian passport is not really of much use unless you want to go to China or Cuba. Virtually every other destination requires an extensive visa application process. Most Serbian

citizens are denied visas even to other European countries. She needed her US passport desperately, and before her flight, which was in two hours. Milos had a delayed reaction, but he soon began spurring out obscene curse words at the vacant-faced notary.

Before they knew it, they were shuffled into a back office of the station. Zelka Matic, chief of police, was mousey and apologetic behind a colossal desk. The office was small and filled up with stacks of paper wrapped in twine. They were each labeled with a different Cyrillic letter and were in every corner, jammed up the ceiling. Orthodox icons poked their heads out from among the bureaucratic debris. They shined gold, silver, green, red, and blue. Mila was frantic and her Serbian could barely extend past domestic conversation and into the realm of mini-crises involving government officials. However, Milos was really the one who was losing it. He paced inside the tiny office with hands thrown in the air, cursing God. Zelka gave Mila a signed and stamped letter in Cyrillic, and her sleek red Serbian passport. On her way out of the police station, Mila made eye contact with the unapologetic notary who had ruined her passport. She gave the worst gesture in the book to the dress in the booth. Zelka had said that the girl was new and had thought the passport was an expired Serbian one, which had not been printed in navy blue since 1986.

Milos's angst filled the small car as they pulled away from the building. He kept imploring Mila about why she would ever want citizenship to such a "shit, shit, shit!" country. He kept saying that this was probably her father's idea and that it was the stupidest idea he had ever heard in his life. "This is how everything works here: everyone is depressed and sleeps at their jobs. Nothing ever gets done and everyone wants to leave. The Serbian dream is to leave Serbia." Mila's face was stony and determined. She called the American embassy and an annoying recording in an accented English kept playing at the other end. In more ways than one, she was built for this kind of event, she quickly decided in her head. The more Milos yelled about how much he hated Serbia, the more she wanted to make her flight out of it too.

Her mother had some connections in the government from her time as an American journalist covering the wars in Yugoslavia. In those ten years she had been fearless, and has tales of guns to her head and mercenaries at her heels. With the blessing of her lasting connections, there was potential for a solution. Mila started to place calls over the din of Milos's fury.

Finally, she received a text saying, "go to the embassy, bring your destroyed passport, one-hundred and fifty dollars, and an American size passport photo. The guard will be waiting for you." Mila had two hours to make her flight.

They argued and haphazardly tried to find a place that would take American-sized passport photos on an August Sunday. They found one that was only slightly out of the way, and Milos weaved in out of cars in a maddened frenzy.

"You drove past it!" Mila yelled. He made a treacherous U-turn and then turned onto the wrong road.

"Stop! You're going the wrong way again! Never mind. I'm doing this myself."

"What! You're crazy Mila! We can get there. We'll get there!"

She ignored him and got out of the car. Waving her arms wildly so that cars would see her, she sprinted across the highway. She made it across without being mowed over and hurdled over some knee-high fences, at last reaching the narrow street the store was on. She went in and asked for a photo. She stood in front of a white screen and squinted into the flash, with two fuzzy braids and pursed lips. Milos came rushing in the door a few minutes later.

"Can you make the printer go faster?" He said briskly.

The girl at the register rolled her eyes and shook her head. The printer coughed up the photo. Mila stared at the ghoulish creature within the frame as they left the store.

They arrived at the embassy, a large compound hidden behind plastic-looking pines. The guard said “Are you Mila? I went on my shift just for you.” She wanted to reflect on how strange the interaction was and acknowledge the power of her mother’s influence, but had no time to waste. Only she was allowed to go inside, the metal doors shut and she saw a last image of Milos’s head gleaming in the strong sunlight. She handed over her electronics at the security checkpoint: her phone, disposable camera, and a light-up cube she had been carrying around for good luck. Since she could not contact Milos once in the embassy, her fate truly would be decided by the Americans inside the building.

She started running, following signs that said citizenship services, her two dark braids were swinging behind her and a delusional smile grew on her face. Guards started to yell at her and chase after her, “Slow down! This is a government building! Watch it!” But she could not stop now, the seconds were rapidly disappearing.

All the Americans in the embassy sat at desks behind a giant pane of glass. They looked like stock images for American government officials, blonde and blue-eyed with neat hair and plaster smiles. They wore pencil skirts, navy suits, and wire rim glasses. What a sense of relief came over Mila as she watched the early 2000s TV playing a loop of an eagle landing on a flagpole as she waited her turn.

The Americans made Mila take two oaths before printing a new passport, one that verified that what she said was true, and one that verified that she indeed was who she said she was. In a thin, patronizing tone one said, “Apologies are not even part of the Serbian vocabulary.” Another chimed “You have so little time left! We’ll give Air Serbia a call, ask if they can ground the flight for a few minutes.”

Finally, a fake-looking two-page long temporary passport came out of the printer. The lamination over the photo was foggy and loose. Mila now had a maximum of twenty minutes to make her plane to Croatia.

Like an action movie’s climax, Mila got into her Uncle’s car and uttered one word: “Drive.”

The airport was twenty-five minutes away on a good day, and they got there in seven. Milos skidded on back roads and had his hand pressed on the wheel in a constant honk. He went head-on into traffic several times and the car felt like it was never fully on all four wheels. A land without rules, for better or worse. When she arrived at Nikola Tesla airport, she ran up to the Air Serbia counter and asked about her flight. The guy behind the counter looked backed at the pleading girl with three passports in her hands. “Flight’s already left,” he said dismissively. “No, no, no you don’t understand; the American embassy got me on this plane.” She realized that she had no idea what that really meant, and she saw the disgusted look on his face. “Does not change that the flight has already left,” he retorted.

What to do now?

She looked at a map and realized it would make sense to travel to the coast of Montenegro. The next flight to the coastal town Tivat was in 5 hours. She bought the ticket. Anything to escape the chaos that had just ensued, and the feeling of being dirty and confused.

She sat in the only restaurant in the airport called *I Want Sandwich* eating a tepid ham and cheese melt and staring at the passports that had brought her three different fates. The red shiny Serbian one, the hole-punched American one, and the brand-new, temporary American one. Her lack of sleep began to hit her, and the airport commotion morphed into mirages of the

nightclub. Aleksander's smell and demeanor haunted her as she laid her head against the table. She wondered if the notary had punched her passport on purpose because it was American. She would never know.

With all the trials she had been through, she did begin to understand how profoundly lucky she was. Her American privilege was something she did not really want to escape anymore. It had saved her today. It had given her a tremendously powerful document in several minutes, one so many people would wish their whole lives to hold.

Landing in Tivat five hours later, she got into the first taxi she could see. It was only an hour drive to the Croatian border, and maybe this cabby could get her over it. After they drove ten minutes from the airport, the Adriatic flooded into view. The sun glared a 7pm magenta onto the crests of silver waves and into the windows of the car. The simple scene of water and sky was beautiful and overwhelming for the raggedy girl in the back seat. How beckoning and peaceful it was, free of borders, paperwork, and life's complications. In her sudden joy, she began to make conversation with the driver. His name was Mickey and he liked living in Montenegro for the "slow life." He complimented her on her Serbian. When they neared the Croatian border, conversation slowed and worry began to collect in wrinkles on Mickey's face. "I'm an illegal immigrant from Kosovo, I can't get you over the border."

Another person trapped by documents. She paid him, thanked him, and continued on foot. She rolled two suitcases in either hand and carried a backpack larger than she was.

Dusk was growing dimmer in little Montenegro when she neared the first border checkpoint. The Montenegrin border guard questioned her about where she got the passport, then finally stamped it. She asked if he could drive her over to the other side in his police car since night was falling, and it was a seven-mile walk. He laughed in her face and said she could hitchhike. She stood awkwardly by the booth as he checked people's passports. He gave her amused sideways glances as she nervously waited. She was the only one on foot. She entered the first car that she flagged down.

Inside the car was a mother and son. He was driving and she sat in the passenger seat. They were both Montenegrin but the mother had grown up in Panama. She was a bottle blonde and bragged about her son, the filmmaker, and his first full-length feature. It's about "how awful life is in Montenegro, and how hard it is for young people to find jobs. The plot is that a young man needs to get a job so that he can pay child support, because this woman won't let him see his kid until he pays. And he does not end up getting to see the kid." The son looked proud and kept his eyes on the road. "Oh, wow," Mila said, a little bit unsure of how to respond. The line to get into Croatia was about two miles long so she decided to get out and walk the rest. "Are you sure? It's dark," the mother chimed from the front seat. "I'm fine thanks."

She hopped out of the car and started walking in between the maze of parked cars of tired looking families and double-decker tourist buses, stuffed with German, Polish, American, and Chinese people. She realized at some point that her peasant blouse, braids, and the fact that she was the only one walking, made her look like some sort of fictional character or Balkan mascot. Tourists honked and children waved as she passed by their car windows. She smiled and waved back.

She remembered her mother's stories of watching thousands of Bosnian women and children leave Serbia, carrying everything on their backs, saving their lives by crossing borders on foot.

Finally, she got to the Croatian checkpoint and was relieved she could show her American passport and not her Serbian one. The border guard asked how she arrived, "by bus or

by car?" She replied, "by foot." The guard was not much older than her and she shook her head and laughed when Mila told her she had walked to her country. She stamped her passport.

She pushed on down the highway with the two suitcases into the dark. She had not slept in forty-two hours and the mirages persisted. They drifted from her Uncle's fuming to Aleksander's arrogant laugh. Visions of the notary's light-gray eyes danced in the dark roadside shrubbery.

A man appeared in front of her and said "Are you Mila? Your mother sent me."

She had many questions but did not have the energy to ask them. The man, his car, and her mother's wisdom were the only things she was sure were real. Her mother, the strongest person she knew, who never let obstacles stand in her way; no man, bureaucracy, or border could confine her. And now, her silent omnipresent force in the region had allowed her daughter to do the same. "How did you find me?" She mustered. He said, "Not too many girls crossing the border at this time of day. And you look like your mother." Mila got in and fell asleep almost immediately and the car continued on the obscure, twisting mountain roads that led down to the faithful sea.