

JULIJA SUPUT

A BOUQUET OF ROSES

After our love-making, my hands lazily explored my lover's spine, and my finger tips caressed each vertebra with the dedication of a scientist who hopes to make some sensational discovery. Time seemed to stand still on those hot summer afternoons of 1999, when the whole town on my small island took a collective siesta. The thought of having a lover who lived in the States did not bother me a bit. The summer would last forever, and we would repeat our love ritual every afternoon in my lover's rented studio. Afterwards, I would run home, my flip flops hardly touching the irregular stone pavers on the narrow passage between houses, and take my boys to the beach.

But the summer ended. Fifty thousand tourists I didn't care for, and my lover, whose soft skin I still desperately longed to touch, left. Sometimes, while I sat on the terrace of a coffee shop chatting with my colleagues about our students, I would see the silhouette of a man that reminded me of my summer lover. And my heart would beat faster. But I was not sure anymore whether my love story really happened or whether it was just my imagination.

Until my lover's phone call in November. Until his return in the middle of the winter. This time, I offered him my hospitality in my little run-down house, and the summer love suddenly acquired a different dimension. It seemed to have a future. A future in the United States, in California.

My knowledge about and interest in America was a loose patchwork of the best American movies I had seen in our small town theater. I mostly forgot the American authors I had zealously read in the seventies and eighties. I knew that there had been and perhaps still was an American dream, but it had never attracted my curiosity. I was a French and Italian teacher after all.

Nevertheless, when my lover had proposed marriage and asked me to come with him, it did not take me long to decide. I started imagining infinite possibilities for my young boys. All of a sudden the narrow streets of my town became too narrow for my feverish imagination, the familiar faces

boring. I wanted a change. I wanted my boys to have a better life, although what exactly that would be, I was not sure.

My lover left for the second time. My boys and I would follow him as soon as my fiancée visa arrived. My friends and colleagues looked at me in disbelief while, with my hands dancing in the air, I talked about my plans. Their eyes told me what they didn't want to say. "You are too old for this big move. You are forty-six and you have kids. Where are you going? Are you crazy?" I was not scared. I was excited and curious.

With two of my boys I left on January 14, 2001. At the airport, I felt a lump in my throat while I hugged my oldest son who would not come with us. I was on the brink of tears when my mother hugged and held me tight, and wouldn't let me go. Then, the last call for all passengers flying to London.

"We will come back next summer," I told her and freed myself from her embrace.

I pushed my boys gently towards customs, holding three passports with visas stamped in them in my hand. I turned back one more time and tried to smile. I saw my mother crying, my oldest son hugging her; I breathed deeply.

It was midnight when we arrived at the San Jose Airport. My fiancé kissed me furtively on the cheek. He didn't embrace me.

My eyes were wide open in amazement as I carried my suitcase to our master bedroom. The house was huge with five bedrooms and three bathrooms, high ceilings, everything clean and new. Later, in bed, my hands wanted to reconnect with the lover I remembered from my island. But they could not. There was a barrier between my hands and my lover's skin, as though I were touching a knight in his armor. "Probably jetlag," I concluded as I sank into a dreamless sleep.

The next day, as we drove to Costco, my eyes searched for some sign of a real city, some tall buildings, some skyscrapers. In Costco, I felt dizzy from seeing so much food and so many people pushing their gigantic carts around. My fiancé hopped from one stand to another where ladies in red aprons and white hats offered samplings of different foods.

I soon learned that *free* was my fiancé's favorite word. When he saw it or heard it, his face lit up, acquiring an almost pious expression. *Expensive* and *destroy* were other buzz words for him. The expression I detected on his face when he uttered them was far from pious.