



Cody McClain Brown Drafts

Slippers and Mother in Law

Part 1

Clearly, like most Americans I didn't know where or what Croatia was. As you can see from my example, even we students could use a geography lesson. On the other hand, I bet even Croatians or Europeans do not know where Oklahoma is on the map. So we are tied, or not really? The problem lies not knowing where Croatia is, but the fact that not even knowing what I know. I was sure of it that I knew where Croatia was, somewhere in Russia. The lack of my knowledge in geography clashed with my self-confidence, we Americans are the best!

Part of the problem lies on the geographic position of the United States of America. We are situated between two huge oceans and we are just prone to placing everything on the other side somewhere over there. Growing up in the cold didn't really help either. The closeminded bipolar political mindset simplified geography too. If a country was in Europe and was communistic, then it was Russia for us, which means that everything that was behind the Iron Curtain had deadly winters, long rows, and sad people who couldn't wait to wear Levi's and eat at McDonalds. In my hear the map of the Cold War world was divided into freedom, colorful, happy democracy and the dark, repressive spaces 'Evil Empire'. The specifics were not important at all. When Vana said she was from Croatia, I concluded, Croatia, Czech Republic, Republic of Dagestan, Azerbaijan, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Siberia, Belarus, Armenia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Moldova, was all the same. All former communists, poor and destroyed by the war. It all used to belong to some crap person which then broke into billion pieces.

Part 2

Welcome to the neighborhood. Welcome to the wondrous world of the Croatian neighbors.

The neighbors in Split were more similar to further relatives than to some neighbors in the building. With each random arrival and departure, the unbelievable ability to figure out everything about you before you open your mouth, all caught me of guard.

In the United States, we have a saying, *good fences make good neighbors*, and we tend to hold on to that. Our houses are all fences, either for esthetic reason or for privacy. We, who live in buildings, tend to ignore each other on purpose. The faster we close our doors and enter in our apartments, the better. We do everything we can to avoid uncomfortable encounters. There is an



understanding that my business is my business and that no one should be concerned about it. All the snoopy neighbors who are hanging around and trying to figure out your business are basically extinct; you can only see them in comedy series and Hollywood movies.

The Croatian version of that phrase would probably be something like this, thin walls, corridors full of echo and open windows make neighbors. The term privacy is a laugh here. It's not about neighbors having sharp eyesight and ears, but rather just having them. Everything is heard and known, and you don't even have to try to find out something. You know who is sick and who isn't. Instead of running from such a situation, they simply accept it. The mutual familiarity with neighbors makes for a greater sense of community than anything else I've seen in the States. The connection between neighbors goes beyond the building you live in it-self. The building or street you're in is like a separate world. Sons and daughters of neighbors, living in Italy or Germany, are considered to be your neighbors too. Calling someone your neighbor can be as calling them your cousin.

They also take care of one another. When Vana and I were living in Istanbul, Vida got really sick and wasn't able to get out of bed for a whole week, if not longer and during that period, the neighbors looked after her. Every morning, our neighbor Paula would bring breakfast and newspapers. Lunch was brought by another neighbor, and the doctor from above would bring her dinner and keep her company.

The relationship between neighbors is one of the most important things in Croatia. It sounds crays, and annoying, but comforting to know that people know who you are, what's happening in your life and if any help is needed. The unification of such a community is totally unfamiliar with Americans, it's something we would consider being seen in the past. It actually reveals that people here rely on one another, while in the United States, at least the places where I lived, people act like they live on separate islands.

Part 3

The time Vana was living in Oklahoma, where we went to school, there lived another Croatian. The neighbor and his wife invited us to join them for dinner. It was the first time I went with someone for a meal that wasn't with Vana.

We went to Applebee's, it is known for serving mediocre food and alcohol. Nothing is like the overcooked, gummy ribs (called ribbblets) and a cold beer of 3.2% alcohol. Our friend from rural Oklahoma orders almost half the menu, as it was the most similar to civilization on highway I-44. French fires as the side dish, fried onions and wings for the appetizers, clogged the table just like fat clogs the arteries. Drinks, dinner and dessert all followed after.



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The most that irritates me was exactly that. People who ask you to dinner order everything from the menu and assume you want that too, afterwards, you end up paying half the bill. I didn't want fried wings coated with honey, with a sauce made from mustard and honey. I didn't want the guacamole either. I just wanted a burger and beer, eat, drink up my drink, pay my part of \$11.54, leave a tip (exactly, I didn't even plan on paying for Vana's meal). Just a quarter of an hour, and the Croatian guy ordering, my budget was exceeded, and so instead of me feeding myself in the endless amount of food, I got tired and drowned in my own skin.

To my surprise, the Croatian guy, paid for EVERYTHING. The board in my just flipped, everything just went blank, the music stopped and I am in shock. What just happened? I rewound everything in my head, piece by piece, I was so frustrated. It's all clear now, him forcing me to order more, the excitement with which he asked the waiter for drinks, he wasn't trying to screw me... he was just being a nice host.