

The End of May: Dan Državnosti & a Short Story by Marina Gudelj!

Croatia's young parliament, the story of a busy mother shocked by her sister's choice, & excellent gluten-free & vegan multi-purpose sauce



MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

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Have you ever been writing, cozied up on the couch, working to the rhythm of snores throughout your home... & found yourself face-to-face with a drained laptop at 4 a.m.? Yeah... Welcome to the first two-in-one edition of Mediterranean & Me!

As a "precap," we'll be talking about Dan Državnosti, reading a short story for National Short Story Month, enjoying a recipe, learning a little Croatian, & connecting!

May 30: Dan Državnosti (Statehood Day)

I don't know about you, but when I think of holidays, I generally think of them as being old—these time-honored traditions that have been around for *generations*. But the holiday I'm here to talk about today is younger than I am.

Yep. I'm going to be 36 next month, & this holiday is 34, as of today (Thursday). It's a strange feeling!

Now, which holiday am I talking about? Well, March 30, 1990, was the day the first multi-party Croatian Parliament convened, following the 1990 Croatian Parliamentary Election. May 30 is Croatia's Statehood Day (or Dan Državnosti), though some now refer to it as National Day. (Fun Fact: Statehood Day was set on May 30, 1990, but then was

moved to June 25th... But when Slovenia declared their Statehood Day as June 25th, Croatia moved their Statehood Day *back* to May 30. So if you ever see someone celebrating Croatia's Statehood Day on June 25th, well, they're not *wrong*-wrong.)

Statehood Day is a governmentally-recognized non-working/bank holiday, during which schools, public service buildings, & most buildings are closed. Families often see this as an opportunity to take a quick day trip or spend time with family over a chill barbecue or small party. It reminds me a lot of what my state-side friends & family do for Memorial Day.

The real reason I wanted to share this is because of what holidays in Croatia are teaching me about learning to live a slower life. My husband's business was closed for the holidays, & our kids were home from school, so he decided to take them on an impromptu trip to visit family in the country's capital, Zagreb, while I worked.

I'm grateful for the work I have, but it's hard sometimes to honor US client work while the country I'm in expects you to be relaxing! But while I worked in a quiet home, I took pleasure in the number of kids I could hear playing in the streets below my home: bicycle rims squealing down the street, basketballs thudding, soccerballs whooshing into portable soccer goal nets—enjoying the free day, racing to play before a storm, & getting that first whiff of playing until 9, 10, or 11 at night throughout the summer. It felt like such a relief, & I loved that these kids got to experience that, that my husband & children got to spend time with family, while I tapped away at the keys.



In Celebration of National Short Story Month

May was National Short Story Month, so what better way in a newsletter mostly about Croatia to celebrate but to share a piece by a Croatian author?! This short story was written by Marina Gudelj & was translated from Croatian to English by Ena Selimović.

Nepal

“What’s there to say? Mom’s crying all day; Dad refuses to speak to her. He says she’s buried her alive, that he won’t talk to her anymore if she

keeps crying. & Mom just keeps calling Antonija, & when the phone stops ringing she bursts into tears again.”

Ana was holding the phone between her left shoulder & ear while loading the dishwasher with her right hand.

“Ehh, well, no, no one expected it! She mention it? Yeah, she mentioned it, but who would’ve imagined this? She called me from the airport & then she called Mom. But with Mom, she couldn’t get a word in, so she called me again, asking me to calm Mom down. I told her: ‘My God, Antonija, you’ve done it this time.’ Like I’ve got nothing better to do than clean up her mess. & her poor Dena’s beside himself. Three days now since she left & he’s been staying here with us out of grief. Says he can’t believe she’s done this to him. Poor man, he can’t set foot in their place, he says, it’s too much for him. So then he’s crying here in front of my kids, & the kids ask if their nana’s dead, and if not Nana, then is it Gramps? Come on...”

She put a tablet into the dishwasher, closed the lid, & turned the dial to “Heavy.” Soon the kitchen echoed with the sound of a flood, the machine filling with water.

“Yeah, it’s the dishwasher. I’m just now getting to the dishes. Mateo had some poster he had to prepare for school, about the Vikings, so I spent the whole afternoon writing & gluing with him. & I made fish & chard & threw in a few eggs. My Zvone doesn’t like fish, says it’s no food for working folk, heh. But he’s right, fish can’t fill you up. You eat & eat—turn around & you’re hungry again. Don’t even get me started on chard. If it wasn’t for the kids, I wouldn’t go anywhere near it. This morning, I dropped by Danica’s to get some. Twenty-five kunas for a kilo. But you cook it & there’s barely a fistful. & let me tell you, that Danica, my God, she weighs it like it’s gold. Back when me & my sister were kids & my mom worked the farmer’s market, she never used those little weights. That Danica counts every single kuna.”

Ana put the phone on speaker, placed it on the ground by the fridge, & started rummaging in the freezer. She pulled out a chicken breast, jumped over the phone, put the breast in the sink, let the water run, returned in one leap, turned off the speaker, & nestled the phone back between her ear & shoulder.

"I'm thawing a chicken breast for tomorrow. Dena wants to make chicken in white sauce. He cooks it real nice—he even makes his own bechamel, no heavy cream shortcuts or any of that 'quick and easy' crap.

"You bet she's crazy. So many times he's cooked & done the housework, hung the laundry, vacuumed. Zvone can't even fry an egg, not that that keeps him up at night. He hardly ever helps me with the kids, & if he does hang the laundry, I have to follow behind & fix it. Well, that's what you get when no one's taught you how to do it.

"Ah, my poor Ma, she's getting on my nerves, too. Crying 'cause three years now they'd been cohabiting, as she puts it, 'paperless.' Says she's been hoping for grandchildren, praying for Antonija to get pregnant. I'm like, cut the crap—grandchildren? She's got two from me already, & she never calls me to bring them over. When I leave Bartul with her, she grumbles about how no one ever watched the two of us for her when we were kids. What does she mean no one ever watched us? We were always at one grandma's or the other's, or playing in the street, sometimes until nine or ten at night. But there were a dozen of us kids in the neighborhood—I can't leave the little guy to play outside alone. Different times now."

After throwing the chicken breast into a plastic bowl with warm water, Ana grabbed hold of the phone & plopped down on the couch.

"Huh? Oh yeah, something dinged, probably my Facebook notifications. A stupid game I'm playing. Yeah, she mentioned it. & I have to say she's been acting weird.

“Well, my God, until just the other day, she came over every day for coffee. I mean, I could never doubt her love for my kids—she always came around to see them, but then she started to withdraw. She mentioned that goddamned Nepal, & I half-listened, thinking it’ll pass, she’s probably just had a fight with Dena or whatever. When, lo & behold, a few days later, she calls me from the airport. I’m standing there crossing myself, asking if she’s lost her mind.

“She’s gone insane, I’m telling you,” Ana said, gesticulating with her free hand. “She says to me she’d mentioned applying for a visa, so why am I so confused? She wouldn’t have applied for a visa if she wasn’t serious. I say, ‘& Dena?’ & she says she already told me she called him, I never listen. Hell, how am I supposed to catch everything with two kids running around? Sometimes I can barely hear myself.

“How should I know what she’s planning to do? She says she’ll figure it out when she gets there. Is that nuts or what? Says she’ll climb the Himalayas. Mom lost it over that one. Mom was like, ‘The Himalayas? She’s never even climbed the Mosor, right here on her doorstep.’ Hah. She says she’ll look for work, be a Sherpa or something. I tell her, dear Antonija, my God, what’s the matter with you? You’re leaving our beautiful homeland for that disease-ridden garbage dump? I’m not racist or anything, but all those places are crawling with disease. Basically, she’s leaving a good job & a good life & dumping Mom on me. So that’s the story—I’ve got to see about all this beeping, & my battery’s dying anyway. Talk soon—& don’t tell anyone anything about this, we’ll see what happens. All right, bye.”



As soon as the conversation ended, she shook out her left hand, tapped the blue icon, then notifications, but saw nothing new. Then she spotted a red symbol above the mail icon. One unread email. She tapped the icon & saw the bold, black letters of her sister's name.

Dear Ana,

I just woke up—half an hour & we'll start our descent into Doha. I have to say the flight wasn't the least bit tiring (okay, well, I slept through it, hehe) & the more time passes, the better I feel. I'm less afraid & more & more excited.

I'll start this now, & finish it along the way, between flights & naps. I feel like we didn't say a proper goodbye or get on the same page. I know I dumped Mom on you, but she'll calm down. You know that yourself.

I told you everything started coming together after I watched that documentary about Asia. Afterward, I found it online & watched it again. Damn, sometimes I watched it three times a day. I couldn't stop. Something

kept pulling me back to it. Then I started reading about all sorts of things. About mountains & all that. When it crossed my mind that I could go there, that instant, a huge weight lifted off me.

A lot of it goes back to when Dena & I were in Istria & returning home on the magistrala. Dena can be really stupid sometimes—he likes driving fast & that always irritates me. This particular time, we'd just passed Zadar when he started speeding & I knew he was expecting me to bitch & moan. But I just sat there thinking—So what? Even if we died right this moment, so what? I wouldn't have cared in the least had we been pulverized. That was my thinking, just shy of my thirty-fifth birthday.

After that, there was no going back. I realized that nothing had ever happened to me, that I'd never experienced anything truly unusual, & I was scared I never would. At that moment, I felt trapped inside myself. All kinds of things occurred to me.

I also thought about how much I wanted kids (you know how much I love you & your kids), but that if I continued living like I was, I'd have no stories to tell them. When I saw the documentary, the thought crossed my mind—Hey, imagine if I went, & one day I could tell my kids: Guess what? Your mom's been there.

I read all sorts of things, about people who've climbed the Himalayas—& I'm not saying I ever will. I'm sure I'll try, but not with the goal of reaching the summit, just being there, near all that. When I read how many people died trying to reach the peak, I have to admit, I was overcome with a sense of urgency, & the fullness of life, & horror, all at once. To those people, the undertaking was so important that they put everything at stake. I want to be near that, in the vicinity of a situation where you could suddenly disappear, where there's a fine line between life & death. You probably think I'm being morbid, but I've never felt like those people—to me, nothing has ever been so important. Now I have a choice: die on a mountain or grow maggoty from boredom.

Which is why, after figuring out all the visa stuff & finding a place to stay, I stopped reading & decided to surrender myself to fate. I'll find some little job—I mean, so what if I end up carrying other people's bags? The job doesn't have to involve mountains. Or I'll ride people around on those tricycles they have there—I read somewhere they still use rickshaws, ha!

If I disappear in an avalanche, know that I was happy—though I doubt that'll happen. See you, at the latest, in five months, when my visa expires. But we'll talk before then.

Kiss the kids for me & good luck with Mom. Don't show her this email—she'll think I have a death wish.

Love from your sister.

Ana read the email again. She glanced out the window. Darkness shrouded the roofs of the houses, crept through fences, & formed strange silhouettes. The light at the end of the street had yet to be repaired.

She called out to Zvone that she'd stay up just a little longer, then padded along to the pantry & picked up the dark green bottle with the label *Extra Virgin* where they kept the sweet red wine from Zvone's cousin in Dugopolje. She opened her laptop, poured herself a glass, & typed "Nepal" in the search bar. She stayed up all night, scrolling through pictures of mountains, bright colors, temples, tents, dust, & catastrophes. She read about Hinduism, earthquakes, avalanches, local customs, & Sherpas. As dawn was breaking, she responded to her sister.

Send pictures.

*

"Nepal" © Marina Gudelj. Translation © 2024 by Ena Selimović. Previously published by Words Without Borders: The Home for International Literature.

This Newsletter's Recipe: Oddly Inspired By "Nepal"

Don't think I've forgotten about the recipe I teased in my [newsletter about the snails](#) (wow, that's a weird sentence)! I'm having trouble finding all of the ingredients at the beginning of tourist season, but as soon as I have them, that recipe will be going up!

While editing "Nepal" into this newsletter, I started thinking about a white sauce I developed after I got sick; if you've read my [About page](#), you know that I developed some health issues after moving to Croatia (no, I do not believe the two events are related), so I've had to get REALLY creative about my cooking—cutting out some ingredients I previously believed were *vital* to a delicious meal & incorporating more protein & vegetables anywhere I can to boost my gut health & immune system.

So about this white sauce. I used to start a simple roux with butter & flour, typically followed by onions & garlic, & then cooking cream or milk & water or cooking stock. Delicious. Now? I use margarine & all-purpose gluten-free flour (there's GF baking flour, bread flour, standard flour, etc... the all-purpose works well for cooking purposes), lactose-free milk, & water. Depending on the meal, I incorporate spices to take the place of the absent onions & garlic (I use softer/warmer/comfort flavors for poultry, & I use hotter spices for ground beef, pork, fish, etc.). It sounds really bland, I know, but it's actually delicious when you're patient with it, & it works for any kind of meat & side dish (rice, pasta, etc.).



Today's Meal Option: Creamy Chicken & Mushrooms, Plus Veggies & Side

All you need for this recipe is:

- Your preferred cut(s) of chicken (dark meat is amazing for flavor, but this recipe is a great way to keep moisture in white meat, as well)
- 2 cups mushrooms, flat-sliced
- 2 tablespoons margarine (for butter, use a little less)

- 2 *additional* tablespoons margarine (for butter, use a little less, or oil)
- 2+ tablespoons all-purpose gluten-free flour (for regular flour, swap out 1:1)
- approximately 1 cup (240 grams) of lactose-free milk (or regular milk)
- approximately 1 cup (240 grams) of water (I prefer water over veggie/chicken stock for this)
- your preferred spices (for a chicken dish, I'll have salt, cayenne red pepper, paprika, parsley, & cumin at the ready)
- optional additions: spinach, broccoli, & a side dish, like pasta or rice

This recipe is simple, but *give it time to cook*:

- Cut your chicken into preferred size (I cut white meat into strips & also separate out thighs & legs for this). Also, clean & cut your mushrooms into flat slices. Lightly season the meat & mushrooms.
- Place a large saute pan on your favorite burner (you know which one it is). You want a wider saute pan for this to give the mushrooms & chicken room to cook.
- Place your *first serving* of margarine in the pan & let it coat the pan.
- Cook your chicken through until it is mostly cooked through, & then add the mushrooms. Cook your chicken until it's developed a nice, light crust, & the mushrooms have softened. Transfer to a plate.
- Add your *second serving* of margarine to the pan with the chicken drippings. Scrape up anything sticking to the bottom of the pan, & if there are larger burned bits in the pan, remove them.
- Sprinkle in your flour, & mix it with the margarine until they've turned into a paste. If you're not already using a whisk, slowly stir

the paste with a whisk as you incorporate your water, & then milk. Stir until smooth.

- Finally, incorporate your spices, stir until incorporated, & *let the sauce cook*. When it starts to bubble in the middle, turn the heat down to low, & cover it for 3-5 minutes, depending on your stovetop's intensity.
- Give the sauce a good stir, & if it's at your desired thickness, add the mushrooms back in, gently stir, & then top with chicken. Once the chicken is coated in the sauce, I add spinach & sometimes already-steamed broccoli, & let all of that marinate for about 5 minutes (I say already-steamed, or cooked separately, veggies, because their release of liquid can really mess up your sauce's texture & make it separate or get clumpy).
- You can then plate this sauce as-is (that's often what I do now) with a side salad or bread for dipping, or you can pour it over a nice side of pasta, rice, & other filler you enjoy.
- Now the most important step: Enjoy! Dobar tek! (which, literally means "good appetite," but it's an equivalent to "Bon Appétit" or "Enjoy your meal")



Probably Your Second Croatian Lesson

Unless you're like me or have Croatian family or friends, you more than likely didn't choose Croatian as your next language study! Most language learning apps, like Duolingo & Rosetta Stone, do not even offer Croatian. I've enjoyed apps like Mondly, Drops, & Falou so far for basic phrases, memorization, & basic speaking skills (I struggle with stuttering & pronunciation when I have to speak on the fly, even in English!). I just found a "learn before sleeping" video today that I've enjoyed listening to in the background while working; maybe I'll pick up something new!

Here's a little Croatian for you, just for the fun of it!

- Kako si? (kah-koh see) - How are you? (informal - for family, friends, & kiddos)

- Kako ste? (kah-koh stay) - How are you? (formal - for groups, strangers, superiors, & adultier adults)
 - Želiš li kavu (Ž is pronounced like the z-like s in “measure,” & š is pronounced like “sh”) (zhell-eesh lee kah-voo) - Would you like coffee? (We need to talk about Croatia’s coffee culture...👁👁)
 - And because we’re seeing them EVERYWHERE with the arrival of spring: Mačka (mahhch-kah) - CATS. There are so many cats, that I’m seriously considering adding a tab to this Substack called “Collecting Cats” (in photos) or at least posting them on my *Mediterranean & Me* Instagram.
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Thank you for joining me again this week! I know we’re still only at the beginning, but I’m having so much fun thinking of what to talk about & what stories from my three years here might be of interest to you all.

There are a lot of new followers & subscribers since last week’s newsletter (thank you & welcome!). **What would you all like to know? Have you ever been curious about Croatia or traveling Europe? And a fun one: Is there an experience you’ve had that you wish more people (maybe me!) would have?**

Until next time! Želim vam prekrasan tjedan! (Have a wonderful week!)

Thank you for being here! **All content is free for everyone to read**, though there might be some book content in the future that will be exclusive to paid subscribers. If you’d like to support me another way, you can buy me a coffee! 😊☕ Thanks & Hvala!

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