

**T**he Tudina  
Mirrors in  
Black & White



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## Pronunciation Guide

- j as in yes
- c ts sound as in mats
- č as in church
- ć as in tune
- đ as in George
- ž as in pleasure
- r as in register, or dirt, lightly trilled, used as both consonant and vowel/consonant.

To Nada Ljubic, my dear friend in Belgrade, many thanks for an incredible gift: knowledge of the origins I'd sensed all along, that was the most important thing in my life all along. Without your encouragement and tireless patience with countless questions this story could not have been written.

"The worst thing you can do to a people is take away their memory of themselves" – Randall Robinson

". . . the people who do this thing – who practice racism – are bereft – there's something distorted about the psyche. It's a huge waste and it's a corruption and a distortion. It's like a profound neurosis that nobody examines for what it is. It feels crazy. It IS crazy. And it . . . has just as much of a deleterious effect on White people, possibly equal to what it does to Black people." – Toni Morrison

American racism is the perversion of the Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome<sup>1</sup> of the runaway slaves of Europe. – lkc

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1 Joy DeGrey, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*.

# The Throwback

## A Match Made in Serbian Heaven

Jovanka was lithely dancing the kolo in Serbian Heaven when she heard about the American brother who was going to rescue her Goddaughter, Leslie, from the Tudina. As she danced, a floret of tiny red flowers at the end of her waist-length braid of shiny, blue-black hair bounced furiously. Small red flowers as well were dancing along the bottom of her apron. Above them on the body of the apron were closely tied rows of gold coins jangling a high-pitched percussion along with the music.

During her lifetime on earth, at a time when even the leather to make a pair of shoes was hard to come by, there had never been any coins, of any specie, to adorn her apron. But God in His Heaven is always the most indulgent to those of His children who gave their lives defending their own, whose lines are now extinct, with no children left on earth to pray for their heavenly repose.

The many coins on her apron in Heaven were pure, solid gold. There were so many, that after dancing for hours her waist would be pinched from the weight of them. She had added an embroidered set of suspenders to support them more comfortably.

There were smaller gold coins suspended from her headband as well, with strings of tiny, sparkling beads cascading above her ears. If these touches were reminiscent of harem girls, that was a fact no one *ever* mentioned, it being too humiliating to reflect on how many of their girls had been stolen and sold into the slavery of harems. The coins, a gift from God, and the beads, accented her large, light brown eyes, flecked with gold, fringed dramatically with dark lashes and brows.

Her genie shoes, braided tan leather uppers culminating in a curved upspout at the toe, suggested that she could take flight, as her dancing was more in mid-air than on the floor. She moved like a graceful child with the complexity of movement typical of a strong kinetic intelligence.

The kolo is highly aerobic. It's danced in a mixed circle and, in this variation, consists of three bouncy steps in place, then three steps to the right. With each step the dancer is to stand uncommonly erect and skip upward as high as possible at the pace of the dance. The music is loud and primarily rhythmic in the style of Central European peasants, heavy on a muscularly-belted accordion.

All the girls, and all the boys in Jovanka's circle, or *kolo*, were from the *Krajina*, the No-Man's-Land that defined the border between the Middle

East and Western Europe for three centuries. That was no accident. It was an act of will. Theirs. During their lifetimes on earth, most had been the Keepers of the Gate, runaway slaves resisting the onslaught of their Turkish enslavers to the East, who still held in bondage their brothers and sisters on the Eastern side of the border, in colonized Serbia. The rest were from the generations following that enslavement, who had slipped from chattel status to that of vermin, and had died defending their helpless ones.

They were all dressed with impeccable consistency, the girls with their black skirts, gold coins and floral embroidery, the boys in matching vests and fez. Each one was either quite beautiful, or at the very least, extremely interesting.

She was just finishing the dance, scarcely winded, when a much older soul, a shipwrecked sailor by the name of Dušan, told her about his many greats-grandson, Donald, the American brother who was destined to rescue Jovanka's Goddaughter Leslie.

Dušan stood well above six feet, well-muscled for someone who still moved like a cat. He had a broad jaw and heavy brow accented by dramatically arched eyebrows and warm, dark eyes he worked like a rakish magician – an extraordinarily handsome fellow.

He had lived on earth during an era when there were still a few seaports in the Balkans launching ships that sailed even to China, actualizing themselves across the planet. His ship had floundered in a hurricane off the Outer Banks of what became North Carolina, thirty years after Contact. Kindly locals took him in, and he lived a long life amongst them, leaving behind many beloved descendants of color.

He had to shout to be heard above the din, “I hear you're trying to find a Balkan scholar in America. Have I got the genius for you!” She motioned toward the door and the two made their way out of the boisterous hall.

He then told her about his great-great-great-great-great-grandson, Donald. “I mean really great,” he said, “A real gem. You gotta see this guy.”

“You think he can understand my Goddaughter Leslie?”

“What needs to be understood?”

“She doesn't know she's a *Krajina* Serb, or what's been happening to us. She has been told she is a Croat,” she said, then bitterly, “though none have taken her family in.” She lowered her voice dramatically and leaned towards him. “She is a victim of cultural genocide, *kulturna genocida*, lost in the Tudina.”

“My God!’ said the sailor, crossing himself with three fingers. “What a cruelty. To live without knowing you’re a Serb! How can the world possibly make any sense?”

But then he tapped her on the shoulder with a thought, “Ah, but you know. Donald is obsessed with the subject.” He pronounced the word “obsessed” with reverence.

Jovanka continued with her explanation, “Yes, she is a total throwback. A beautiful sight to see. All she knows is who seems familiar, the people there the most like us, and that’s who she loves, of course – the *Amerikanac* she has, as they say, assimilated to. Thank God.” She crossed herself. “We are so proud. But the other *Amerikanac* are persecuting her for it, for choosing the Kingdom of Heaven. Of course she’s depressed.

“What we need is someone to rescue her and bring our family back to life in the world, at long last. We will never be extinct, never,” she vowed. “Only dormant,” she said, flinging her arms out fervently, “waiting for spring to sprout!”

“And he’s the one to get it sprouting, eh?” he nudged her with a wink and a loud guffaw of lusty laughter. “Well, let me tell you about this boy. This is what I’ve had to do on the in-law’s side, over in the Chowan Spirit World.

“Over there it’s very strict. You have to look after your children for seven whole generations, and all your decisions while you lived were supposed to be for a whole seven generations out. And they say the bond is the strongest with the last of the seven generations. So the wife was after me to keep up with all that and now I’m glad I did, ‘cause that boy hears everything I say, I swear. And he’s looking for me! He doesn’t realize that’s what he’s doing, but that’s just making him look all the harder!”

“Yes, I would love to meet your wife,” Jovanka said. “I absolutely adore extinct people. They are my favorite. We need to stick together, you know, and be as noisy as possible . . . the noisiest of ghosts.”

“Please don’t teach my wife to be as noisy as a *Srpkinja*,” he teased, referring to female Serbs.

Jovanka laughed very loudly, elbowed him sharply and fairly shouted, “And I shall learn from her secrets on how to keep in line such a rude fellow as yourself!” Several people turned their heads in her direction, distracted by all the commotion.

“How could anyone say such a thing about me?” he asked.

“Anyone who’s made your acquaintance,” she countered.

“Yes, sister, I see what it will be like to be in a family with you,” he said.

“So tell me about this genius child of yours,” she asked.

“He is a very special young man. Ever since he was a little boy he always followed me whenever I led him out a little further than he wanted to go. I taught him how to cross many a narrow gangplank. That came in handy later when he started admiring what The Turk did to us!”

“God forbid!” cried Jovanka, crossing herself.

“But I just had to knock a few books in his path and he got the picture right away and straightened right up. Why does your girl need for him to be Black, *crni*?” he asked. “Unusual request coming from America. I should know, most of my descendants are considered *crni*.”

“Those are the people she listens to,” Jovanka replied. “She’s mistaken them for us. They are the people there the most like us. Don’t you see? She does not know who she is, but she *feels* it.”

“Interesting. I can see how that would happen . . . No one knows better than me how much they are like us. They’ve been living through what *we* have been living through.”

Jovanka crossed herself, “Yes, they are God’s favorites, too.”

“Exactly,” Dušan concurred.

“So that’s what’s going on,” Jovanka explained. “She has been told she’s a Croat, and knows nothing about us. All she’s been told is that Croats are better than Serbs. But being a natural Serb she can’t stand people who think they’re better.”

“Actually, this is perfect!” Dušan proclaimed. “Your girl is just the one for my boy. I can see you will soon be my new sister. Come, let me buy you some *šljivovica*. Let’s go make a toast to the happiness of our beautiful children.”

They made their way to the church bar which was at the back of the hall to buy their plum brandy. Some of the neighboring heavens thought it scandalous that a church should have a bar, but those in Serbian heaven thought it very good sense. Nobody’s going to get foolishly drunk at the church bar. No, they are just going to imbibe a bit of convivial spirits as they ought and leave it at that.

Warmed by the brandy, they sang several songs with the lively group singing in the church bar.

“So, my sister, *moja sestra*, ” he said. “When can we start on this adventure?”

“The sooner the better,” she replied.

“Well, then, let's go!” he said, jumping up enthusiastically. “We can catch him in his lecture hall.”

“His what?”

“He's an assistant college teacher.”

“Oh!” said Jovanka, smiling broadly, her eyebrows raised, impressed. “Good deal.”

“Let's go,” he repeated.

“No, no, I have to change. I want to wear something else.”

He laughed good-naturedly. “Once a woman, always a woman.”

“Why, thank you,” she said.

“But why should it matter what you wear? Hardly anyone ever sees us.”

“It's not about being seen. It's about the total experience. Come on with me. I have just the thing for you to wear.”

“Me?”

“Yes, I have a plan.”

She took him to the little cottage she shared with her husband, Srđa. He was not so dashing a figure as Dušan. He had light brown hair and stood at an average height. He had about him an air of very good-natured brilliance. He loved history and had used his knowledge to appoint the simple home with all the trimmings of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbian peasant cottage, with a rough stone floor, rough-hewn furniture and fragrant dried herbs hanging from the rafters under the steeply pitched roof that gave the tiny room the vaulted feeling of a chapel.

A raised firepit was in the center, used for warmth and cooking, directly above a vent in the center of the roof. It was more decorative than functional, since, in Serbian Heaven, it was never cold and no one was ever truly hungry. Just thinking would produce whatever dish that was a sentimental favorite, without any beast ever being slaughtered.

Jovanka took his hand and faced Dušan, “My Srđa was one of only 30 people, out of the 40,000 in our district, who had a college education,” she boasted, pronouncing the last words distinctly. “You have no idea how much my vocabulary has improved since meeting him. He absolutely delights me with words.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Srđa, “don't mind my wife, she never brags about herself. Just me. It's terribly embarrassing.”

“The love of my life,” she explained to Dušan. “*And* my after-life.” Then she addressed Srđa. “Dušan thinks he has just the boy for our Leslie. He's

going to take me to him.” She was unbraiding her hair. “Do you want to come, baby? We’re about to run down there.”

“All right then,” he said. “Do I have to change as well?”

“Well no, I think these will fit Dušan better.”

She gave Dušan some clothes while on the way to change hers. When she came out she was resplendent in a lovely flower child outfit, with a paisley top, jeans with gargantuanly belled bottoms, enormous sunglasses and platform shoes. She had changed to a headband with a large, perky pink plastic flower in the middle of her forehead. Srđa was amused.

She inspected Dušan's attire. “You make a great hippie,” she said.

“Yes, I must admit, this does suit me,” he said of his own get-up, a flowered shirt with wide lapels he had only buttoned to mid-chest so as to reveal his manly chest hair. He already had long hair.

“Ready?” she said.

“Certainly, let's go.” Dušan took her hand and she held Srđa's as they all three stood shoulder-to-shoulder. He turned to look at them to be sure they were on his wave-length, since they had quite a distance to go on that basis alone. He nodded as they took a step forward and stepped into a university commons bustling with young people hurrying in many directions between stately oaks and old Gothic architecture. It was the University of Chicago. The year was 1976.

Jovanka was delighted. It was a glorious autumn day, a pleasant breeze rustled the golden leaves of the oaks. “What a beautiful square,” she said. “I always dreamed of going to college. Now you see why I wanted to dress like the natives. Today I am a college girl.”

“And I am a 400-year-old college boy,” Dušan said.

“I used to crash lectures here in the thirties,” said Srđa. “Jovanka failed to mention that much of my college education was acquired on the sly.”

“Really,” said Dušan. “What a good idea. Is the place changed much?”

“The place is the same, but the people look entirely different.”

They were, in fact, in a throng of 'natives' dressed as they were, tie-dyed tee shirts colorfully competing with the golden foliage. Big hair was everywhere. Big Afros, big Jew-fros, big curly jumbles of unkempt hair, long, straight hair wafting in the breeze. Some were dressed conservatively, but here the Silent Majority was clearly a minority.

Dušan escorted them to a lecture hall on Islamic history in one of the old Gothic structures. The hall was filled with young people, Black and Brown,

just one blue-eyed blonde boy sat in the front. He was a Bosniak boy whose uncle and aunt from Sarajevo had made the acquaintance of Malcolm X while in Mecca. They were quite sure it was they he had referred to in his autobiography – the blue-eyed blondes who had convicted him of the humanity of Europeans.

The three ghosts wandered down to the front of the class and surveyed it. Dušan whispered to Jovanka, “Why am I whispering? No one can hear us. I always forget.” So quite loudly he asked her to see if she could guess which one was Donald, although in those days he was still known by the name Hakim he had taken on several years earlier while exploring Islam.

She surveyed the assemblage of bright, handsome young people, then closed her eyes. She felt a wave of insecurity that a Serb will often feel negotiating a crowd of Moslems, symptomatic of being enslaved by Moslems for half a millenia. Jovanka brushed that feeling off with a large declaration she made to herself that she was every bit as good as they were, every bit as good looking. She spread her hands in front of her.

Srđa chuckled. “Her geiger counter,” he mumbled to Dušan.

“Her what?” he asked, lost.

“I’m sorry. I forgot that’s not your era.”

After surveying the crowd Jovanka looked toward Dušan and pointed at an average looking brother of average height, with broad shoulders, unequivocally brown skin he was clearly very comfortable in, an oval face with high cheekbones, his haircut a ‘natural,’ meaning his own natural, nappy hair, closely cut, and very bright eyes. He exuded the air of someone concerned with seeing, not being seen. Dušan smiled broadly and nodded. Jovanka excitedly chased up the aisle and sat down next to Hakim (aka Donald).

The professor, a Black American in a fez, was finishing up his lecture. “So, in conclusion, during that period of history when Jews were being burned or driven into the ocean in an Inquisition, the Islamic empires exercised a degree of religious tolerance unknown elsewhere, free of persecution and forced conversion. Any questions?”

“Except, of course,” muttered Jovanka, “when they were stealing our eight-year-old boys.”

Hakim raised his hand. When the professor saw it he almost hid a frown as he acknowledged Hakim. “Yes, Donald?”

There were several gasps from people who understood the relationship between the two men, and knew that the professor’s sudden use of Hakim’s

Christian name, Donald, heralded the professor's decrial of Donald's fall from the blessings of Islam. At least insofar as it existed on his department floor.

"What is your estimation of the practice of the blood levy?"

"The what?" The professor squinted.

"The Ottoman practice of stealing the best and the brightest of non-Muslim children, every fifth eight-year-old boy, forcing their conversions to Islam and impressing them into eventual military service for the Empire."

Most of the students had turned in their seats to stare and/or glare at Donald, intoxicated by the scandalous unfolding of scholastic heresy. At least in this department.

Donald pressed forward. "It's estimated that 3.5 million boys were stolen in Serbia alone during its 530-year occupation. They were trained as *janissaries*, in other words, goons, who enforced a brutal, enslaving police state onto their Serbian parent population. There are even anecdotes of parents who were driven mad by the practice and would cut off their son's fingers to prevent them from being stolen. The *janissaries* were the base population of the present-day Moslem Bosniaks." The blonde boy in the front row winced angrily.

Jovanka was beside herself. She threw her arm across him and planted a big kiss on his cheek. He then shifted in his seat, closer to her, and leaned onto that cheek with his hand.

"I love this guy!" she shouted down to Dušan, who was watching bemusedly. "You're right. He's perfect. My hero!"

Jovanka was in Seventh Generation Heaven.

She followed the newly re-Christened Donald home, with Dušan and Srđa tagging along behind.

They followed Donald on to his apartment. His girlfriend was already there. Dismayed, Jovanka regrouped, settling in to observe.

The girlfriend's name was Tina, a tiny, bright-eyed, nutmeg-colored girl with a cherubic innocence to her face, haloed by a perfect circle of fluffy hair. She chatted with Donald in her soft, high-pitched voice as she made two grilled cheese sandwiches on the tiny apartment stove.

They fell silent as they began eating.

Jovanka was about to place her hand on Tina's shoulder, in order to discover what Tina was thinking, when Dušan pulled her into the living room.

"You're right," she said. "I can't meddle."

"Don't worry, you don't have to," he said.

“What do you mean?”

“There is a situation brewing here. You will see. There are some things, like a boil on your butt, that can only come to a head.”

“Oh why did you have to bring up that image?” she said, laughing.

Joining in her laughter, he teased. “Why, have you had one?”

“No, but my husband did.” Srđa laughed.

“And you're the one who had to pop it?” Dušan asked.

She fell out onto the couch, laughing, and forgot all about her anxiety concerning Tina.

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Donald had an appointment the next day with the professor he was assisting, the same man Donald had clashed with the day before in the lecture hall.

“What is this shit?” Professor X asked.

The door into the cluttered office was ajar. Professor X stomped over to it and shut it.

Dušan, the ghost, always enjoyed walking straight through shut doors and, nonchalantly, did so. He settled down into a side chair to witness the exchange.

The Professor picked up a stapled document and waved it at Donald. “Abuses of the Moorish and Ottoman Empires?”

“Yeah?” said Donald.

“You'll do well,” said the professor. “Playing right into The Man's hands.” He threw the paper down onto the desk in front of Donald.

“I'm not playing paddy cake with anybody,” Donald replied. “Equality is a bit more nuanced than anybody's party line – it has to be about both power *and* powerlessness. That's how I feel, and I don't care which set of thought police are trying to push me. Are my arguments defended properly, or aren't they? That's the only issue you are authorized to address. Whatever chunk of truth has come to my attention that I want to investigate is entirely my business.

“So, are they?” Donald pressed.

“Are they what?”

“Are my arguments well defended?”

“I haven't read them yet.”

"Ah, I see. Those are the kind of academic standards we have around here." Donald picked the paper up and handed it back to the professor. "Hope you enjoy." He left the office. The professor tossed the paper onto a credenza already stacked with papers. It slid onto the floor, crumpled, where he left it.

Dušan stuck around until the professor left. He'd spotted a fez on the bookshelf he wanted to check out. He tried it on, and looked at his reflection. He took it off and read the Aramaic.

"'Believers are like brothers.' Well, brother, you took something of ours, so I will take something of yours." He put the fez on his head and left with it. It looked good on him.

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Donald and Tina were eating subs in a small, hole-in-the-wall shop on Seminary Street. It had started life as somebody's front lawn. The deli bar was on the long front porch, a customer stepped up three steps to make his order, then sat at one of the tiny bistro tables in what was once part of the front lawn.

Donald stuffed his mouth with some fries. "What pisses me off," he said, "is that I actually feel guilty applying for that grant."

"Why, baby?" she asked.

"It's not because I care what anybody would say about me. It's that, even though he's an ass, I still understand all the work he's done and why. I don't want to harm that. But there are two sides to equality. They co-exist or there's none of it at all. If there's a way I can demonstrate that, then that's what I have to do."

"He's really not an ass," said Tina. "Neither are you. And he does think you're talented. He said so just the other day."

"But you do understand the deal, don't you?" Donald asked. "Wilkerson is the head of the Manson grants. The same racist ass who good ol' Ralph X had to fight like a motherfucker to get his dissertation accepted, and then fight again to get the Islamic Department instituted."

"I understand," she said and touched his hand.

Later that week Donald got a letter from the University that his position as a teaching assistant had been terminated.

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"What the fuck is this?" Donald demanded as he burst into the professor's office. He was brandishing the termination letter in his hand, but had a whole new 'what the fuck' on his face once he'd opened the door.

Tina was sitting in Ralph X's lap.

Donald was in a rage. Too angry for words. Too angry to dare any action, except one. He completed the application for the Manson Grant with an immense sense of pleasure.

As soon as he dropped it into the mail chute, he started thinking about Tina. The sprite was gone. His sweet little sprite was gone. He woke up dreaming about her, turning to the empty side of the bed, only remembering that it was empty when he opened his eyes.

She had no idea what she was getting herself into. He thought of his mom, how emaciated she became in the end, how removed from the world, lost in a sea of depression. Her greatest sin in life that of loving selflessly someone who betrayed her relentlessly.

Just like his mom, Tina was headed for nothing but disaster with a man like Ralph. He had to warn her. He called her and asked her to meet him at the cafe on Lincoln.

It was an odd, triangle shaped building that sat at the juncture of three angled roads. They sat at the table in the front that gave them a view of three streets at once.

"Whether you want to be with me or not, I need to warn you about a jerk like that," he said. "You're the one who will be hurt. It won't even occur to him to take *any* kind of responsibility."

Tina's girlish face remained impassive. "Donald I'm really sorry I did you like this. I really do care about you, but I'm just not in love with you. And you're wrong about Ralph. He *does* love me. I'm sure of that. Donald, look at me, he's *not* your father. This is not the same situation. I'm really touched that you're concerned about me when you have every right to be hating on me. You're a great, great guy. I know there's somebody out there looking for you. I'm sure of it. It just isn't me."

Several weeks later Donald received word that he was the recipient of the largest grant in the history of the Manson Endowment Fund.

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## There Are No Accidents

Jovanka was following Donald through a University hallway. She'd been working on the timing for several days. They passed by a tall young man with light brown hair whose name was Nikola. Jovanka knocked a book from the pile Nikola was carrying into Donald's path.

"I'm so sorry . . . *Žao mi je*" Nikola said as the two young men reached for the book. "I'm so clumsy," he laughed, "too much šljivovica last night!"

Donald noticed the book's cover, written in Cyrillic. "What kind of Cyrillic is that?" he asked. "Russian?"

"*Ne,*" Nikola replied. "*Srpske.*"

"You can read Serbian? No kidding!"

"I would be in sorry shape, *brate*, if I couldn't," Nikola smiled.

"I have a grant to write a dissertation on the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans. There's money for translations. Maybe you'd be interested."

"I'm always interested in money, *moj brat*. I'm always interested in that topic, as well."

"Well, whoever said there are no accidents?" Donald said as he headed in Nikola's direction.

Jovanka threw her arms across both their shoulders and kissed them on their cheeks. "Not when I'm around!" she cried with glee. Donald touched his cheek.

"So, you're post-grad?" Donald asked.

"*Da.* Yes."

"Did you get your undergrad here?"

"No, not here."

"Where?"

"Howard University," Nikola replied.

"Really," said Donald, surprised Nikola would go to an historically black college. "Why'd you choose Howard?"

Nikola threw his arm across Donald's shoulder, "Just between you and me, *brata*" he said speaking confidentially, "I feel more comfortable around Black *Amerikanac* than White. You are the more familiar. We two are like mirrors, but I'm not telling you anything you won't see for yourself, as you write your dissertation. And I will help. *Rado*. Gladly."

"Fascinating," said Donald.

"Oh," said Jovanka mischievously, "you will be much more fascinated by the time I'm done with you."

Donald smiled.

"I take it "*brata*" means 'brother,' he asked, and Nikola nodded. "You must have picked up the habit of calling people that at Howard."

Nikola burst into laughter. "Go to Serbia, *brata*, and find out for yourself."

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## Srđa Helps Leslie with Her Diatribe on Racism, Chicago, 1976

Srđa never could quite put his finger on what it was that made Leslie look so different from Jovanka. Something was missing. Biologically they were first cousins, one generation removed, and feature by feature they might have been twins, but there was some ineffable essence that was lacking in Leslie. Where Jovanka glowed, Leslie flattened sadly. He prayed Jovanka was right and her matchmaking would do Leslie some good.

Srđa and Jovanka were both lounging on Leslie's bed, relaxing as best they could in the din of noise coming from Leslie's ancient black Underwood typewriter. Srđa loved writing with her. Other than when she was dreaming, that was the time it was easiest to talk to her.

He liked the juxtaposition of the newly-sanded hardwood floors, which seemed to glow with the sunshine captured a century earlier when the tree the wood came from lived, and the crumpled old plaster walls. The walls were bordered by ornate moldings lurking under the many layers of paint that had accumulated over the decades. He was observing the dentil crown molding on the other side of the room, like a long row of teeth smiling down at him from ten feet above, when Leslie's clattering on the keyboard abruptly stopped. He got up to read where she was stuck.

A fundamental problem was obvious. Under the title, where her name should have been, was her boyfriend's name instead – Reggie Wilson. She was pretending she was him! When in the world was she ever going to just be her own self?

Srđa understood why she was doing it – understood all she'd been through that made it plain no one was in the least interested in what she really thought, only in their presumptions. Nor was anyone interested in how she felt about the way the world was persecuting her for being with her

Black boyfriend in the first place. He'd overheard her say the day before that no one ever seemed to have a clue where she was coming from. Of course, that was the problem. Neither did she. Literally.

She was most of the way down the page, describing an incident she'd recently come home talking about – one of many incidents she often regaled her boyfriend with. She described them as her “Things White People Say When They Think There's Only White People in the Room” series.

“Bob Pirotelli,” she had written, “the president of Pirotelli Management, the largest apartment management company in the city of Chicago, may have officially stated to the city's mayor earlier this spring that 'I am deeply committed to fair housing practices in our beloved city,' but recently told his own personnel, 'do the best you can to keep those porch monkeys off our porches.”

Srđa thought of a rejoinder and laughed. He then whispered into Leslie's ear. She laughed as well and then resumed her typing.

“I'm not sure,” she wrote, “why Mr. Pirotelli would ridicule other people as ape-like. I've seen Mr. Pirotelli roll up his sleeves. His arms are as furry as any primate's; while mine, on the other hand, are perfectly smooth, *human*.”