

The One

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No matter where we are, no matter how gray we are, no matter how rich we are, on a daily basis we got a moment that takes us back to our childhood. Sometimes a scent hugs, sometimes a sound slaps us. But, we do go there. It's woven in our being. Our soul is branded with places and people who were there when we took our first breath, our first step, and all our firsts.

Now, when I live in a magical, small town in Sonoran desert, on the shores of an upside-down river that appears briefly several times a year, I know, I feel it with every single cell, that my soul is branded with a river...

The extraordinary, powerful, beautiful river that runs through Balkans, feeds European East and West with a mist of mystery. She is (yes, she is a lady) an aorta of the heart shaped land.

My first memories are emerald colored. My first sounds are pianissimo with occasional staccato interludes. Every breath I take is fresh and zesty.

Thousands of miles away, decades ago I didn't adore the river, I didn't glorify her in all my writings, I didn't count her in my daily blessings. After several years a ranger doesn't get goosebumps when he comes to work at the Grand Canyon. We get used to beauty. (Such a sad sentence.)

From my father's house it takes just two or three minutes to stand by her and watch neighborhood kids with envy as they dive in and quickly come out trembling, their giggles interrupted by uncontrollable Morse code teeth signals.

I was not allowed to swim there. "If you want to have children?!" . Our mothers were sure that freezing waters limit your childbearing chances. Luckily, my grandmother lived several miles upstream and treated me with best days of my summer vacations by letting me in for "two minutes only." If my parents showed up a bit early to pick me up, grandmother had several chores in her sleeve that would take me away from the house till my indigo lips turn red again.

I can't recall a friend that didn't have a first drink, first cigarette, or a first kiss by the river. We all had "our" willow or poplar tree. We all had "our" hiding spot, party place. For generations.

Once the heart shaped land industry became so strong and her right antechamber no longer had a person willing to work still jobless, we begin to worry about our river's future. I was old enough to write for the local papers and fortunate enough to be involved in the birth of the first eco group in the Balkans. We wanted our grandkids to be able to drink our river from her spring through all hundred thirty two miles. Like our grandfathers had.

My assignments led me to different stories, but every now and then I would find myself yelling at local government for cutting a three that held her banks intact, building cement squares too close to her,

dumping garbage in her vicinity. I did for her whatever a big sister would do. Yes, that was the way I felt at that time. Like a big sister. Before and after, she was a mother to me.

One of the assignments took me to a man whose great grandfather had for decades been pouring all fruits of his business skills into acres surrounding our river. A hundred years later their name is a landmark. Not too long after our first "meeting," my then boyfriend, handsome and an (oh so) smart engineer, "the one," took me there and whispered those three little words that I carried in me, wondering if he felt the same.

If we have a girl, we'll name her after our river. He said it; and it was so logical to me.

After our two boys (named after an Italian renaissance painter and a Croatian poet) were born; our heart shaped land started to bleed. Her red cells overnight turned into white; a cancer of hate and death grew rapidly. I can't say that my ratio was surprised as much as my soul was. Our emerald river was tinted with the blood of our friends and family.

In the second summer of that madness I made a brave decision to finally freely swim in our freezing river. I've already had kids; bullet, bomb or a shell can take me at any moment; WTF!

And, I did it! My experienced kayak-friends took me to their diving spots. Not so many guys dared to dive between unpredictable travertine rocks. That day – I was a man! Head on!

One of the last summer days, waves of sound brought in on the breeze: shell detonations, laughter of my children and my friends, blending with the worries of my mother and the Love of my grandmother. I just did not care. For a rare and very brief moment of my life I felt so protected, so encouraged, buoyed up. My river, my powerful sister was washing away all my fears, all my disappointments and all my tomorrow-worries. Somehow, I knew we would be all right. Somehow, I felt that the madness would subdue, the inflammation tame.

For two decades, the heart-shaped land's cancer is in remission. I like to think it's gone for good. Madness destroyed most of the job producing factories twenty years ago. Some were sold to newly established madness aristocracy for scrap metal. The rest, the hands of nature, sometimes gentle sometimes not, covered with layers of weeds and oblivion.

From all the turmoil my sister emerged gorgeous and pure. Literally pure. We can drink all of her one hundred and thirty two miles of healing and hope. Part of her, a big part of her, is a national park named after her.

With her stillness and stubbornness, with her calmness and vigor, as always, she teaches modest life lessons.

The main one: It's all so simple.

No wonder Romans named her UNA. The (only) One .

