FUCKIN' FOREIGNER

True Story

IGOR Ilić
Dedicated to my mother and father

_Draga and Stjepan Ilić_
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There is much talk these days in America, and around the world, about migration, immigration, aliens, nationalism, asylum and other topics relating to the movement of people from one country to another.

Igor Ilić’s story is just one of the many poignant stories that illustrate the trials and hardships, the challenges and successes, that are part of relocating from one country and culture to another.

Of course this movement is not such a new thing, especially from a historical and global perspective. But policies, laws and rhetoric change, often from generation to generation. How these topics are addressed and the behavior that follows influence how we treat ‘foreigners’—those not born into our own culture, town or nation, those with different ideologies or religions, those who speak a ‘foreign’ language and those whose skin color or physical features are different from our own.

There is no silver bullet, no easy answers, when it comes to deciding who should and should not move from one place to another. There are laws, both just and unjust, often easily—and sometimes not so easily—avoided by those desperate enough to do anything to seek better circumstances for themselves or their loved ones. There are cultural subcurrents in most nations that use foreigners, both legal and illegal, as a major part of the economic and social fabric that makes the lifestyles of the majority possible.

Still, many in America, and worldwide, see all foreigners, except those with great wealth or stature, or those who have been ‘westernized’ to the point where their foreignness is not so obvious—see them as dangerous, untrustworthy, criminal, and even less than human, unworthy of the basic necessities of life granted to ‘natural’ citizens.

And yet, the vast majority of these foreigners are much more like us than they are different from us. They breathe, they
bleed, they love, they work hard, and much, much more often than not, they help make the world a better place.

Fuckin’ Foreigner is the story of Igor, a young adventurer from Croatia, a veteran, a hardworking and ambitious worker, who found his way to America, struggled to find his place in this foreign land, and through many adventures, and a few misadventures, learned how it all worked, found himself a trade and came to consider the United States his new home.

Len Hodgeman
Co-author, The Second Book of Truth
THE VISA

“Congratulations, Igor! You are hereby awarded the Order of Danica Hrvatska for special merit in culture and sports! And, in addition, the Order of the Croatian Wattle for special merit in developing and promoting the Republic of Croatia and the welfare of all the citizens of Our Beautiful Homeland.”

The President of Croatia placed the ribboned medals around my neck and squeezed my hand firmly. I could barely believe what was happening! Our president was congratulating me! I could hardly stand still I was so excited.

I saw my mom and dad in the crowd, proudly standing in line waiting for the ceremony to end, so they could give me a hug and a kiss and share this happiness with me. My sister was here with her kids. I didn't see my brother-in-law, maybe he was traveling again.

A few minutes later I saw him too. Yes, my brother-in-law is here! My friends that I served with, and old friends and acquaintances from my neighborhood; all wanting to congratulate me and shake my hand. Suddenly it all seemed overwhelming. I felt flushed. My tie was strangling me. Drops of sweat trickled down my back. I couldn’t wait for the ceremony to end and the partying to begin. I hate all this bustle and commotion.

Someone hit me hard on the shoulder. “Igor get up! Igor! It’s 7:15 already! Get up! You have to go to the American Embassy!” I opened my eyes to see my dad looming over me. My head was throbbing, the morning light streaming through the window hurt my eyes and the dream was gone.

“Whaat?” I mumbled, burying my head in the pillow.

He hit me again, harder. “Just a few more minutes!” I begged.

“Get up, now!” he ordered. “Or you’ll fall asleep again!”
“OK, OK! I’m coming.” I said, grudgingly sitting up.

“This is what happens when you stay up all night fooling around and playing cards,” my mother chimed in from the hallway.

*God, I hate their nagging!* Especially this early in the morning, when I’m tired and have a hangover. This is the worst!

I glanced over at the alarm clock. 7:23! I didn’t have much time, and this is really important, I’d better hurry.

I took a quick shower, toweled off, pulled on my pants and a T-shirt and dashed back to my room. *I don’t know what to wear!* I rummaged through my closet and managed to find a white short-sleeved polo shirt. *Sporty but a bit elegant. Goes OK with my jeans.*

In the kitchen, I hastily poured myself a glass of milk and grabbed a couple of cookies. “You need to have a good breakfast.” my mother said.

“I can’t eat. Besides, I don’t have the time,” I answered.

“Oh Igor, when will you come to your senses? You’re thirty-one already!” she replied.

I rushed out the door and bounded down the stairs before she had a chance to say anything else. My cell phone rang.

“Yeah?” I said, catching my breath.

“You’re late again, boss?” asked Zlatko. We were supposed to meet downtown for a cup of coffee before heading for the American Embassy.

“No, only a couple of minutes,” I said quickening my step.

“Yeah, I can see that. *Fuck!* When did we say we’d meet?”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” I replied.

“Alright but go straight to the Embassy; I’ll be waiting outside. We don’t want to be late,” he said.

“OK, we’ll have coffee later.”

There were no trams at the terminal, so I bought a pack of gum and waited for the next one, chewing nervously. *I’ll steal a ride to the center, and I’ll have a few more kunas left for the coffee with Zlatko. As long as I don’t get caught without a ticket.*
It was 8 o’clock by the time the tram came, but there was still a chance that I’d make it on time. We had an appointment for 8:30—a privilege—as most people would have been standing in line waiting to apply for visas since 6.

We were applying for our visas as part of the Croatian national billiards team headed for Las Vegas to participate in the World Championship from May 23rd to June 6th.

I could hardly wait! Not because of the championship and playing pool, which I did quite well, but because of the tourist visa that I was going to be given for entering the U.S.

Of the twenty-two people in the group, everyone was a member of the team that was supposed to represent our country, except for myself and a fellow named Ivan.

Zlatko and I had been working for a friend of mine for the last couple of months, and her husband had mentioned that he could get us well-paid jobs working on fishing boats in Alaska.

“Of course, the only problem is getting the visas,” the husband said.

“You get the visas, and I’ll do the rest. I’ll introduce you to some people I know, and you’ll be good to go.”

So, looking at the promise of making some good money and solving our financial problems, we got down to business figuring out how to make it happen. Everyone we talked to said that getting visas would be a problem as we were both single and didn’t own any real estate. Marriage and property ownership were thought to increase the odds of returning and not trying to stay there and work in hopes of achieving the Great American Dream.

At 8:25, I arrived at the Embassy of the United States, next to Zrinjevac Park, where more than twenty people were already waiting.

“There he is, always late!” yelled out Zlatko when he saw me. People turned in my direction. I felt a bit embarrassed.

“I’m not late, I’m always right on time.” I held out my watch for him to see.
“OK, OK, it’s good you haven’t overslept.” Zlatko smiled wryly.

“Do you know when they’re going to let us in?” I asked.

“Any minute now, I think.” He exhaled nervously. “Hey, this is Ivan, he’s coming with us, just like you.”

“You mean, he won’t be playing? He just needs a visa?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’s entering illegally, just like—

“Oh, if only they’d give us five-year visas,” Ivan interrupted without waiting for Zlatko to finish.

“I wish to God they give us a one-year visa, that’s good enough for me,” I said.

“Just one-year?” Ivan seemed surprised.

“At the most,” I said, scratching my chin. “I plan on staying for six months, a year at the most, until I solve my problems. I won’t be staying longer.”

“What about you?” he asked Zlatko.

“Well … we’re planning on going to Alaska together,” said Zlatko, looking in my direction, “as I’ve already told you.”

“Right, right,” Ivan said. “I really hope it works out for you, and for me too.”

“Yes, God willing,” we all mumbled almost simultaneously.

The line started moving and I could see people being admitted through the massive wooden door at the entrance to the embassy. We could hardly wait for our turn! I was nervous; my uncertainty was growing more and more intense. The heat I felt in the air made my back and forehead sweat.

*What if they refuse to give me a visa? What do I do then? How will I manage to pay back my debts? Ugh, I’d better not think about that. Think positive, think positive, everything will be fine.*

I stared at a girl on the other side of the street who was just coming out of a house opposite the Embassy entrance. She was attractive and seductively dressed. I could see that other men in
the line noticed her too, nudging each other and smiling, making provocative remarks under their voices.

A young man came out of the Embassy and addressed our group loudly, “I need all of your passports. Here, please!”

I was a bit puzzled by this, my thoughts still across the street, when Zlatko tugged at my elbow and said: “What are you staring at her butt for? Take your passport out!”

“Oh, yeah, the passport,” I took it from the back pocket of my jeans and handed it to him.

“You don’t seem to be too eager to go to America,” Zlatko joked and some of us laughed a bit. I brushed it off, although the possibility of not obtaining a visa crossed my mind again.

“Are they all here?” asked the guy collecting the passports. We looked at each other and nodded confirmation.

“Those who haven’t turned theirs in don’t get to go to the tournament,” Zlatko said.

“Yeah, right,” Ivan slapped him on the back. Zlatko looked at him and they both laughed.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“You’ll buy us a coffee someplace while we wait.”

Zlatko asked the guy in front of us how long we’d have to wait before they invite us in. He replied that we’d better not go far but that he’d call us. But we shouldn’t be waiting for very long, he said, because they know who we are and the reason for our travel to the States.

“OK then, we’re gonna have a cup of coffee, and you’ll call us. Here’s my number. We’ll be back here in a minute. Thanks!” Zlatko said.

We found a coffee shop right around the corner, just a few minutes’ walk from the embassy. We sat on a terrace with a Plexiglas fence separating the people sitting at tables from the cars racing along the street, raising dust. No one really noticed the dust anyway as we were all talking and laughing and drinking our coffees on the sunlit terrace.
I was distracted, thinking about the visa again. Knowing how much the trip to America meant to me, Zlatko put his hand on my arm, “Don’t worry, everything will be fine!”

I looked at him, nodded and only said: “I hope so!”

Ivan raised his eyes from the newspaper he was reading.

“Could they tell that we won’t be playing along with the rest of the team at the tournament? And our guys have to get visas, they’re the national team!” He licked his thumb and used it to turn the page, settling smugly in his chair.

“Yeah, you are right,” I said, already more confident and convinced. I turned to Zlatko. “So much hustle and fear for visas, but that’s only the beginning of our journey! Our main task is still ahead of us!”

“Don’t worry,” he replied. “Ben told us we just had to obtain our visas, and not to worry about the rest. He’ll take care of it.”

“I know, but—” Zlatko raised his finger to shut me up as his phone began to ring. After a short conversation, he looked up. “We need to get back to the embassy, now!”

It occurred to me that we hadn’t paid our bill, so I climbed the stairs back into the coffee shop. “Thirty-two kunas,” the waiter said as he placed the bill in front of me. I took some money out of my pocket and placed thirty-five on the counter. “It’s OK,” I said proudly, leaving an additional three kunas for a tip. Good thing I didn’t buy a tram ticket this morning or I wouldn’t have had enough to pay for the drinks.

I ran down the steps and shortly caught up with Zlatko and Ivan. They were deep in agitated conversation.

“What happened?” I asked. Ivan frowned. “Your gloomy forebodings came true!”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know exactly, but we’re about to hear the details. It seems that they have denied us visas.”

I couldn’t believe it! Is there a jinx on us? Is it possible they found out that Ivan and I were not really members of the team? Or maybe there was another reason, but what?
When we arrived at the embassy, the previously hopeful expectation was absent from the faces of everyone in our group. The young man who had collected our passports was talking and wringing his hands nervously, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying.

I nudged Zlatko and asked what was wrong. He just waved his hand for me to wait, “I’ll explain later.”

“I don’t believe this,” I heard someone say.

“It must be because of that murder.”

**Murder?** I couldn’t figure out what was going on.

They started returning our passports. Zlatko took his and mine, said goodbye to the group and jerked his head at me to start walking. Ivan waved and said he’d be calling us and headed with a few others down Green Wave street. Half of the group had already dispersed, some calling out their goodbyes, others just angrily walking away without a word.

“Spill it! What happened?” I asked, tugging at his sleeve.

“Can you believe it?” he said. “They rejected the whole team!”

“The whole national team?” I repeated, not believing my ears.

“Yes, the whole damn team!” he yelled back.

“How can they deny visas to a national team? Even if you were a national team in tea boiling, they’d have to give you visas, wouldn’t they?”

“Well, obviously not, because they didn’t, did they? God, what do we do now?” Zlatko sounded desperate. “I reckon it’s because of that murder.”

“What murder?” I was curious.

“So …” he hesitated, “last year we didn’t even have to come here to wait for our visas.”

“Really? How come?”

“You know Viktor, the guy who was killed a few months ago, he had his own firm for importing billiard supplies and he was the main sponsor of the national team. The guy who was
just collecting our passports told me that they just put all the passports in one big envelope last year, and Viktor gave him enough money to buy a box of chocolates, some flowers and a bottle of whiskey, and that he gave them to some woman that worked in the embassy.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope, the next day they all got visas in their passports! And Viktor even got a five-year visa.”

“I don’t believe this,” I replied.

“Believe it or not, and I know it sounds incredible, but the guy has no reason to lie. And you saw how surprised they all were! Yet this morning they were in such a good mood and so confident about getting their visas.

“Well, yeah,” I said.

“That’s the sign that he’s telling the truth! I’m positive.” Zlatko angrily kicked at an empty beer can that happened to be in his way. “And now, after the murder, who knows what they think of us. You know, Viktor was shot with a machine gun in the very center of the city, and in plain daylight!”

“So, what’s that got to do with us?” I said bitterly, still not wanting to believe.

“Nothing! But what do the Americans know! For them it’s easiest to just reject everyone. That’s the safest way! They have enough criminals of their own, they don’t have to import ours, ha, ha!” he snapped cynically. “Fuck, we really are jinxed!”

“This can’t be happening! They’ll have to issue us visas! What does the national team of a country have to do with a murder?”

“Uh, nothing right?” he responded. “But why would they have to issue them? They obviously don’t. You don’t know what you’re saying! We’re supposed to leave on the 22nd and today is the 11th and they’ve rejected our visa applications. What’s the matter with you?”

“I can’t believe it’s going to stay this way, but this … is impossible! Whatever, I’ll see you later.”
“OK, see you tonight back in the block,” he said, boarding the tram for New Zagreb.
“I don’t know, I’ll see.”
“Come on, we’ll think of something.” He smiled sourly and waved goodbye as he got on the tram.

I still couldn’t accept the fact that they could deny visas to the national team of our country. Maybe there is still hope, although time is very short, and I’m sure they’ll be digging more deeply. But it has to work! It has to! I kept telling myself.

I walked past a few tram stops, trying to clear my head. I didn’t have enough money for a ticket anyway, and I wasn’t up to boarding without it and waiting for a ticket controller to come in and hassle me.

Later that evening, Zlatko called and asked me to meet him for a drink. But I wasn’t really in the mood. America had seemed so close, and now it was so far away! What now? How do I pay off what I owe to my parents and my friends?

My parents weren’t a huge problem. It wasn’t urgent that I pay them back, as far as they were concerned. Although I felt more and more uncomfortable about it every day. But having borrowed eight thousand kunas from a certain friend, promising to pay him 5 percent interest per month, I wondered how I would be able to pay it down or at least stop the interest from growing.

It was nagging and biting at me, not giving me any rest, keeping me from sleeping at night. I am not like those people who always owe huge sums of money, or those who have ruined our factories in order to make money through clearance bankruptcies while destroying the lives of so many families.

How do they manage to sleep? I have nightmares because of a few thousand kunas! Sometimes I wish I was like them, so I wouldn’t be worrying like this. Ugh, several times I have even dreamed about owing money to people I hadn’t seen since primary school and I had no idea how much I owed them! All seemed to be a blur in my head—names, numbers... Then I wake up and realize that I’m only dreaming.
Zlatko called the next morning and told me that he had talked to some guys from the team and that they were all still in a state of shock about being denied the visas. He’d also talked to people from the Croatian Billiard Association and the American Pool Players Association, and they were all equally at a loss about the situation.

They all promised to help us get the visas. Zlatko was very skeptical because there was practically no time left, but I was as optimistic as ever.

“They have to give us the visas! We are going to play in the World Tournament in Las Vegas in just two weeks! It is about a national team of a country, and it would be really stupid of them not to let us play at a world tournament just because a sponsor of the team was shot in a mafia confrontation.”

I had lunch with my parents and filled them in on what had happened. Mom looked at me in a perplexed way, not really understanding what it was all about. Dad, sick as he was, suffering from Parkinson’s disease, sat there looking at me with his big green tired eyes. Poor soul, I thought, He’s put up with a lot in his life, and now on top of everything, he’s had this damn disease for ten years—eating at him and breaking him down more every day! It’s getting harder and harder for him to fight it, despite all the medicines various doctors have prescribed him.

I had been trying to not burden my parents with my problems, but that was almost impossible since we were living together and ran into one another every day in our home. I tried to stay out as much as I could in order to avoid their constant nagging and murmuring about how “One should get a job”. My parents are old-fashioned people, Christians, Catholics, honest workers who do not owe anything to anyone and who always pay their bills on time. Everything they have, they earned honestly, by diligent and tedious work.

They were simple people who moved into town from their village many years ago, who met and got married here and started a family. They were never members of the Communist Party, I’m proud to say. Unlike many members of the Party, they
were not given apartments or high positions. They fought for me and my sister, patiently working with their hands and their will power, having faith in God, in themselves and their family.

After I said I didn’t wish to continue my studies, my sister was so angry that she protested by refusing to talk to me for a month. Mom was a bit angry, and dad just said: “If you don’t want to go to the University, you don’t want to go to the University. We managed to put Nina through school and she became a medical doctor, and we’ll manage to put you through school, but if that’s what you have decided ... Well, all right. But I will not give you money for cigarettes! Find a job and get to work!”

My parents were expecting me to find a job in order to have ‘social and health security’ like most of my peers. It’s unthinkable to me that I should get a job just to have one, especially if I don’t like what I do. To just get a job and ‘wait for my pension?’ As if there were nothing else in this world but jobs, retirement and security.

Sure, we all need those things, but I feel that I am not made for a nine-to-five job doing something I hate for minimum wage and just waiting for retirement. I am probably different than most people in that regard. To work, yes—but to also be paid by the hour—like in America. Not like in this Communist and post-Communist reality where we all earn the same whether we work or spend our working hours smoking cigarettes.

Whether we are honest and hardworking people like my parents or Communist Party stooges who come to work only to eavesdrop, in order to hear some remark against the Communist Party in the past or against the party in power today, so they can snitch to their bosses and ensure for themselves another rung on the ladder towards a more comfortable life.

My parents did not agree with me of course and considered all my ideas about work to be just vain philosophy.

For me, it started right after the war for Croatian independence, which I had joined as a volunteer. I realized that something was going very wrong. Our factories were being privatized in an odd way. Some weird, half-literate people were
becoming rich overnight; people of crude behavior, overbearing and arrogant, in designer suits, with expensive watches and gold chains around their necks could be seen strutting in the streets. A new tragicomic time had come.

When I tried to talk about this to my friends, they’d look at me like I was crazy, as though I was raving and spouting nonsense. I felt as if I were the only one noticing it. My parents were probably seeing me that way too.

After the war, in 1995, I worked on several jobs just in order to survive. I worked as a waiter, a driver and a bouncer in a dance club. I managed a coffee bar for seven months where I was even the fictitious owner. I rented water scooters at the seaside, I worked in an exchange office, I worked subletting rooms, and so on.

I did several kinds of jobs, but the result was always the same! It was like that for six years. My debt was growing despite all the work. My bosses commended me for being a loyal and hardworking employee, but I was dissatisfied and felt I was underpaid. I wanted more. To find a job which would make me happy and provide a satisfactory pay. A person can’t survive on glowing recommendations, but needs real money, a livable wage—as I would say when leaving a job. I needed to find a job that I would like doing, that I’d enjoy, and that I would be adequately paid for.

Besides, from time to time I was borrowing money from my parents, fifty or a hundred kunas at a time, adding to my debt which was becoming disturbingly high by Croatian standards. Before lending me the money they would always lecture me about how I should be working and not philosophizing. Even though it made me feel terribly ashamed, I replied that I was looking for more than just a normal job, and I didn’t want to work for such a miserable amount of money. We quarreled about money often.

My father would say “Any job is better than no job at all.” I didn’t agree. “Some people work for a salary of merely 2,000 kunas,” he said.

“Yeah, I know,” I would reply, “but some work for 50,000!”

*Why should I compare myself to the poorest?*