

Pearls

Since Mark had been living in Tepelenë for about a month, he boasted an unwarranted confidence in his ability to speak Albanian, almost fluently. And when Margo and I realized our translator had not shown up that day, Mark appointed himself our honorary substitute.

Mark was twenty-four, but looked like he was in his mid-thirties. He'd lived a hard life, he claimed. Jesus had graciously plucked him from the evil clutches of nightclubs, hard drugs, and easy women. I'm guessing that by "easy women" he meant prostitutes, because I couldn't imagine him mustering up the grace or tact required to seduce anyone. Mark was not pleasant to look at and even less pleasant to listen to. His speech was crippled by an uncomfortable blend of British accents, predominately Cockney. He was awkwardly tall with bad posture, and his cookie-jar head was just slightly larger than bodily proportions normally allow. As if his exaggerated physical appearance wasn't enough to demand everyone's attention, Mark had a way of dominating any conversation in the room, up to three separate conversations at a time.

Upon our group's arrival in Tepelenë, it had been Mark's responsibility to brief us on local issues, like where to purchase food and exchange currency. But in addition to this basic information, he had taken a special pleasure in emphasizing how different Albania was from our privileged homelands. He reminded us how we would not be using toilet paper, and how most of the food was improperly cooked, and how running water was available only an hour at a time, at 6am, noon, and 6pm, so you'd better bottle up. We had already been briefed for several weeks before leaving England, and had heard all this before, but Mark welcomed the challenge to try and scare us anyway. He was simply that kind of asshole.

Our group dispersed to deliver the Bibles, each trio heading into a different pallati. These concrete apartment buildings, monuments to communist accommodation, rose like mini-skyscrapers all over the rocky Tepelenian mountainside. Walking in the midst of their gloomy grays and browns, the sense of smog overwhelmed my peripheral vision, even though there wasn't a smoke stack for miles. We followed a cobblestone sidewalk for a little over a block, and when it ended underneath a small mound of garbage, we crossed the road.

"There," Mark pointed at the gray building before us. "We haven't been in this one yet." It was a seven story concrete cube, with windows. The entrance in front of us was like all the others. No actual door, just a huge gaping portal. Concrete stairs wound all the way up to the top floor.

"I have a system," Mark announced as if he were leading a couple of third graders on a field trip. "We start at the top and work our way down. That way we don't lose track of which doors we've been to. And best of all, you get the stair-climbing out of the way all at once." Mark's gangly legs took on three steps at a time, as if to congratulate himself on the brilliance of his "system."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to start at the bottom and work your way to the top?" I noticed that Mark had let Margo and me carry the backpacks full of Bibles. "That way you only have to climb one flight of steps at a time, instead of all seven."

Mark continued to climb as if he hadn't heard me.

“Ooh, very clever, Jayce!” Margo nodded. “I’d much rather go down stairs all at once, than up them.” We were already at the top of the first floor. Mark had continued on, disappearing around the corner of the second landing.

“Did he not hear us?” Margo laughed uncomfortably. “Mark?” she called up the stairs. “Mark!” A little boy opened one of the doors on our floor. He stood in the doorway and smiled, waiting to see what we might do.

“I guess we should just go all the way up,” I heaved the pack of Bibles up a little higher on my shoulders.

Margo looked at me in disbelief. Seven flights? She smiled back at the little boy and waved. “Si jeni?”

He simply continued to smile, as if she hadn’t said anything at all.

“Si jeni?” she tried again. “Mirë?”

He didn’t even blink.

“Have I frightened him?”

I looked over at the boy and waved. His smile changed a little into a playful grin, like he was almost ready to laugh, but not quite ready to share the joke.

“Si jeni?” I asked. “Mire?”

“Mire” he conceded. His voice was quiet, and naturally hoarse.

“Are you shy?” Margo squatted down. Children usually seem to appreciate adults that recognize their height difference. But this child’s baffled face indicated that he had no clue what she had just said or why she was suddenly squatting in front of his apartment. He looked to me for a translation. Being our first week in Albania, there were few phrases we knew other than “hi how are you,” and “very well, how are you?” I shrugged as if I didn’t understand her either. He laughed, entertained.

“Why is he laughing?” Margo asked, still squatting. He looked at me again - my cue to translate.

I rolled my eyes and stuck out my tongue, twirling my finger around my ear, “është çmendur,”

He laughed hard, shaking his head yes.

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him you’re crazy.”

She slapped my arm, playfully, and pointed at me, “Yo! Është çmendur!” But the little boy wouldn’t hear it. The platform had been set for him to flirt with Margo, and he laughed and pointed back at her.

“Are we passing out Bibles or playing with the kiddies?” Mark bellowed from the top of the second floor steps.

Margo stood. The little boy inspected Mark.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense,” she began, trying not to break into uncomfortable laughter, “to start at the bottom of the pallati and work our way up to the top? Then we don’t have to climb up the stairs in one stretch.”

“You have to climb up the stairs either way,” Mark argued.

“But we’d rather break up the climbing into shorter bits at a time, and go down the stairs all at once.” She was making perfect sense, but his face remained blank.

“It’s easier to walk down than climb up,” I pointed out, frustrated at having to explain it to him.

“Especially with a backpack full of Bibles,” Margo agreed.

“Fine,” Mark rolled his eyes. “Two against one, you win.” He trudged down the stairs onto our landing, and began walking down the next flight.

“Can’t we just start on this landing?” Margo asked before he got too far down. “We’ve been trying to talk to this little boy. We could start with his apartment.”

Mark turned around, and paused as if he were going to huff, like a child. But he didn’t. “You can’t start in the middle. Otherwise you lose count of the doors you’ve been to, and the ones you haven’t been to.”

“We could just write down the apartment number,” Margo suggested, “so we don’t lose our place? There’s no need to go back downstairs when we’re already here.”

Mark shook his head, “There’s a system. We’ll do it backwards, if you insist, but we can’t start in the middle.” Without waiting for us to confuse him with any more logic, he turned and descended the stairs.

“Çmendur” I muttered, waving again to the little boy, who had resumed his original stance in the doorway, just watching us and smiling. Although our language made no sense to him, he seemed to understand.

“How do you say, ‘we’ll be back in a few minutes’?” Margo asked softly, clearly annoyed, but keeping a cheery face.

I had no idea.

At the base of the stairs, Mark was positioned to knock on the first door. He waited an extra moment or two after Margo and I were standing beside him, to re-establish his role as the person in charge.

He knocked.

Margo glanced at me as we waited for someone to answer, her face was clear. *I like it better when Edlira is our translator.* I nodded.

A middle aged man answered the door, with a cigarette in his mouth. Mark exchanged an introduction with him, informing the man that he and Margo were from England and I was from the United States, and we were making sure everyone in Tepelenë had a Bible.

“Keni un Biblia?”

The man raised his arms to welcome us into his house. Without removing the cigarette from his lips, he introduced himself as Skënder and ushered us into his living room. He seemed to have been talking with a friend, whom he introduced as Arben. A bottle of raki and two small shot glasses decorated the little table next to his friend’s chair. Arben stood up to greet us, shaking Mark’s and my hand and giving Margo a respectful little wave. Skënder spluttered phrase after phrase of Albanian, and it became very clear that Mark understood very little. Our host gestured to the padded bench along one wall that served as a couch and possibly a bed. He then disappeared behind the little curtain separating the kitchen nook from the open living room area.

“Have a seat on the couch, he says,” Mark pretended to translate.

Arben lit a cigarette, certainly not his first today. The room was thick with smoke, and there was an ashtray on the floor, full of ashes, but mysteriously no butts. Skënder returned with a stool and three more shot glasses.

“Café?” he held his hands toward me in question.

“Yo, faleminderit,” I declined.

He held his hands up again, insistent, “Është ska’problem.” He directed his gesture toward Margo and then Mark, “Café, café...” and disappeared behind the curtain before they could answer either way.

Arben was already pouring us shots of raki. Found only in Albania, Raki is a wine based liquor, sometimes as high as 90proof, and tastes like a cross between gin and rubbing alcohol.

Mark tried making conversation with Arben, bending each Albanian word with his clumsy Cockney accent. There was a lot of shaking of heads, and nodding; Arben gestured with his cigarette.

“I know Anglisht,” he tried speaking English, “speak the little.” He explained to Mark that he had studied some written English in school many years ago, but that it didn’t help him speak very well.

“He says that they’ve been discussing philosophy,” Mark informed us, after stumbling through a series of broken sentences and slowly pronounced words.

“Really? We showed up at just the right time!” Margo beamed, faithful that our arrival was part of some divine intervention.

Mark disagreed, “Not totally. These guys will have us here all day in a philosophical debate if we let them. We’ll talk a little and see if they’re actually interested in knowing more about Jesus, or if they’re just looking for a chance to shoot the shit.”

Mark babbled out some more Albanian and Arben was slow and dramatic with his answers. There was no question that he was indeed discussing philosophy. Skënder reappeared from behind the curtain, interjecting an opinion on the matter. Without hesitating for the debate to continue, he picked up his shot glass, and raised it for a toast, indicating that we do the same. Arben had his glass in hand. Mark and I picked up our glasses, and Margo slid hers over toward my area of the table – as a female, she was allowed to refuse raki.

“Gazuar!”

Instead of tossing back the entire shot, Skënder and Arben sipped their raki. Mark pretended to sip his, but I threw mine back, trying to gulp it down before it even hit my tongue. I was only nineteen years old, and had no previous experience with alcohol, but I had learned over the past few days that raki was not something I could sip. Skënder and Arben applauded my gusto, and reached for the bottle to pour me another shot. I quickly held up my hands to decline, taking hold of Margo’s glass to show them I still had plenty. Upon noticing that Margo now had nothing to drink, he grabbed a delicate crystal glass out of a little display cabinet – the only piece of furniture in the room that offered any ornamental quality – and a small bottle of syrupy orange liquid.

Masking her disappointment with an enormous grin, she nodded, “Oh, faleminderit!” and explained to me, “They served this to me at the first house I visited yesterday. It’s some kind of liqueur and it’s so horribly disgusting.”

The liquid was so viscous it hardly moved at all when Skënder set the glass down on the table. Holding up his shot glass again, Skënder commanded another toast, “Gazuar!”

“Again?” I was horrified, but picked up Margo’s glass of raki anyway.

Arben recognized the word and agreed, toasting, “Again!”

They each took a sip, this time including Margo with her sugary orange syrup. I tried to fake a sip, but the raki that touched my lips was enough to make my face wince uncontrollably. It was unbearable.

Arben and Skënder would have nothing of it, “Pije! qe ta mbushim prapë!”

“They want you to drink it up,” Mark said, as if I was too dim to understand what was going on. I held my breath, tossing the drink down before I could taste it. My throat burned, but there was no wincing this time, and they celebrated with cheers. Margo thanked me for distracting them while she had only pretended to sip her unsavory cordial.

After minutes of chatter between Mark and the two Albanians, Skënder disappeared again behind the curtain to pour the coffee. Mark attempted his spiel about Jesus dying for our sins, offering salvation to anyone willing to accept Him as their personal Savior. Arben held his head back in total agreement, insisting that he believed. He asked a few questions that challenged Mark’s vocabulary; clearly he was trying to steer the conversation away from the spiritual and back toward the philosophical. Of the two intangible subjects, he obviously preferred the one that imposed on him the least.

Skënder returned with a tray of teacups that were about the same size as the shot glasses. Arben lit another cigarette.

“Poezi të pelqën?” he asked Margo.

“Do you like poetry?” Mark translated.

She wasn’t sure.

“Just say yes so we can get on the road.”

“Po,” she shook her head, yes.

Arben shifted his posture, striking a melodramatic pose. His eyes focused on a distant space just beyond our foreheads. He began to stammer words, some sounded Albanian, some English, but none of them made sense.

*Thesee, zult tonav world
Porls shell wore emit porld
Und nikid gorlz camintu yor haryim
Brunetund guldyin
Slimund sond gearlz
Und thisee fyld wooth porlz*

As Arben finished, Skënder shook his head emphatically and reached for another cigarette.

“Shumë bukur,” he marveled at Arben’s poem, enjoying the dramatic tension it created whether he understood a word of it or not. “You say, ‘Magnifizzy?’”

“Magnificent?” Margo corrected him, barely able to contain her laughter. It didn’t take much absurdity to set Margo into a laughing fit, and I recognized that these events - the cordial, the philosophy, the poem - had pushed her well into the danger zone. Skënder pointed to her, yes. Magnificent.

Arben asked each of us what we thought, and we stammered as many compliments as our vocabularies would allow, mostly “merë.” *Nice*. This did not satisfy him, and he singled me out, asking me “por çfar kjo prej?”

“He says ‘But what about it?’” Mark explained.

Arben's philosophizing had surely peaked, as well as his buzz from the raki.

"Nuk ai di," I was perplexed at the absurdity of the question, the conversation, and the language gap. None of it made any sense to me at all.

Mark announced that we had to get on to the next house, and we began thanking Skënder for his gracious hospitality and Arben for his company. Arben insisted we wait a moment, and chattered quickly to Skënder, until our host brought out a pen and paper.

Mark tried not to roll his eyes, "He wants to write down the poem for you."

Arben pulled the words from memories of his English studies several years ago, showing me the words he could write, but not pronounce. Margo read over my shoulder.

*The Sea, grand sultan of the world
Pearl's shell wore empty pearled
And naked girls came into your harem
Brunette and golden,
Slim and sound girls
And the sea filled with pearls.*

The first line was all Margo needed to lose control, and as I continued reading the poem, she buried her head between my back and the bench-couch, trying to stifle her laughter.

I thanked Arben for the poem, and had Mark translate for me, that whatever it means, it certainly is beautiful. Arben shrugged, and sucked on his cigarette. Skënder saw us to the door, thanking us for visiting and urging us to return again soon for more company.

"Don't we need to leave them a Bible?" I asked, after Mark thanked him again for his hospitality. He waved, and Skënder closed the door behind us. Margo's erratic breathing had already turned into chuckles and was elevating into a mild hysteria.

"They've got one," Mark muttered. Instead of climbing the stairs, he began walking down the block, on to the next pallati, embarrassed. "I didn't recognize the house at first, but I was here yesterday, talking to Skënder's brother. They've got a Bible. I've already been to all the houses in that building."

"Great system," I made sure he heard.

Margo stood on the sidewalk, cackling out of control, holding her stomach in near pain, çmendur.