

The Start

1966

They need a *lektor* for English down in Pristina with your ‘nice’ Albanians — remember?” Nada had written in August from Belgrade. She meant my Turkish-Albanian band. “I have suggested you for the post. It’s at the *Filozofski Fakultet*. All you need to bring are boots.”

Nada had been down in Pristina that spring, teaching at the Peoples’ University. “I never saw so much mud in my life.”

I remembered the dust, the donkeys’ hooves sinking into it like sand along the side streets.

“Pristina’s Faculties are part of Belgrade University. Teachers go down twice a month but they need someone there. For now, you could come up for the weekends and their University year is very short.”

So, as a university town, Pristina, capital of Kosovo and Metohija, (Kosmet) Autonomous Province of the Yugoslav Socialist Federal Republic of Serbia, had that much in common with Oxford and Cambridge.

“You know, if it were any of my other friends I would never suggest it,” Nada concluded “but you are different.” I wondered what Nada could mean by that.

Part I

Liberation

1966-1968

1966

ONE

Situation Vacant

Suleiman, the Albanian assistant from the Pristina English department, was on the platform with Nada when the Tauern Express pulled into Belgrade at six in the morning. Dark and quite handsome, he looked about in his mid-thirties, a few years older than us. He was wearing a charcoal grey suit and a pale grey satin tie. I was wearing my-two-nights-and-one-and-a-half-days-on-the-train-sitting-in-a-corner-seat-if-you're-lucky look. Nada, still tanned from an Adriatic summer, was cool and chic as usual, in sandals and sun-dress. It was early September and hot. The shouting passengers racing past us were shiny with sweat. They were shoving huge suitcases randomly through train windows in the classic Yugoslav manner. Under the bright blue sky I had to remind myself that I'd not come to Serbia for another long summer holiday but, at the start of a new academic year, to try and get a job.

Home in Nada's flat, where Fowler's *Modern English Usage* still propped up *Rat I Mir* (*War and Peace*) on the shelf above the couch, Suleiman explained over his coffee cup how he'd first met Nada. Not sloshing through the springtime mud of Pristina apparently, but years ago, on a British Council English course. Pristina was a young, pioneering department he announced, the youngest in Yugoslavia. Plenty of scope for new ideas. Of course, text books were always a problem. And qualified staff. He turned to me graciously. Nada wanted his opinion of a new English grammar. Amid the talk of verbal phrases and new approaches to the problem of the indefinite article, I started to nod off.

“— And what is *your* field, Miss Mary? Your prospective area of research?”

This was going to be worse than I thought. Surely the whole point of

traveling from one end of Europe to the other, especially to the rough end, was to get away from that kind of question. My English degree of six years ago might be getting a little faded at the edges but I'd hoped it was serviceable enough for the academically lightweight role of 'lector.'

"Mary likes the old Yugoslavia," Nada said smoothly. "That's her 'area of research.' She's a romantic. That's why she doesn't mind going down to Kosmet."

"Yes!" Suleiman exclaimed. "When Nada told me there was an English girl with a degree in English willing to come to Pristina — I didn't believe it!"

Certainly even the fact that I knew some Serbian and as a 'Native Speaker' spoke something called "R.P." ("Received Pronunciation! BBC English!" Suleiman murmured reverently in his own impeccable accent) seemed completely overshadowed by the fact that I had not only been to Pristina but was prepared to go back.

TWO

The Balkans and the Beale Street Blues

1963

I hadn't noticed any Faculty of Philosophy when I'd been down in Pristina three years before. Not that I could honestly say in a place like Pristina I would really be on the look out for one. Kosmet was Southern Serbia. Macedonia lay to the south, Bulgaria to the east, Albania to the south east and Montenegro over the mountains. It was the heart of the Balkans and I'd been in the classic Balkan traveler mode, wandering about bemoaning five hundred years of Turkish occupation while delighting in the world it had left behind. As our bus trundled into Pristina down Marshal Tito Street we passed three gypsy carts, each one towing a large brown bear. And at the bus station a shoeless gypsy knee-deep in children was leading a pink-bottomed monkey through the market on the end of a piece of string.

Pristina's more permanent attractions according to Putnik, the Yugoslav travel agency, were the Imperial Mosque, the Sultan Bayazit Mosque, the Turkish Baths, the Partisan Memorial and the Nineteenth Century Clock Tower with Roumanian Mechanism. The Turkish Baths should be struck off the list, confided the boy at Pristina's Putnik because they'd been turned

into a cheese factory. And that was it for Pristina. Even Putnik, famed, if not notorious, for its optimism and powers of positive thinking could only manage for the capital of Kosmet in 1963 "...not before long an oriental village."

Until 1912 Kosovo and Metohija had been part of the Turkish Empire. The local Albanian workmen still wore slightly raffish turbans made of grey scarves or what looked like tea towels wound round white skull caps. Packed into a bus with a load of them coming up from the station I felt I was further east than the Balkans. In their mix of old lounge suit jackets and untidy turbans they looked less like Socialist workers in Tito's Yugoslavia than pictures of Yemeni irregulars or Kurdish rebels. The fact that many of them were fair with blue or grey eyes under the turbans made them somehow the more striking.

I'd been nearing the end of a marathon impulse trip round Yugoslavia. Having started off from a tiny seaside place on the northern Adriatic, just to see Zagreb, and leaving most of my stuff behind, I'd been looking increasingly scruffy and out of place till I came south to Kosmet where no-one else looked like they had many changes of clothes either. It had been October, and a beautiful Indian summer. How right the word seemed for Kosmet with its water buffalo, turbans and ox carts, the gypsies with their dark Indian faces, the mosques, the buses jammed to the roofs and children everywhere and to the west and north west the great mountains blocking off Albania and Montenegro; the Northern Albanian Alps. Kosmet had been the Ottoman Empire's wild North West frontier when the fathers of the workmen on the bus were young men.

The plain of Kosovo was nearly 600 meters above sea level. As the sun went down it grew cold. The loaves being sold in the bread kiosks were steaming in the twilight. The soldiers and police were already in winter great coats nearly down to their ankles, the gun belts riding up over the top in an oddly innocent way, like a toddler's harness. I'd never been in Yugoslavia in cold weather. The young soldiers in their great coats with the red star on their caps looked as though they should have been off guarding Lenin's tomb.

In the October chill I'd been almost as down at heel and cold as the barefoot gypsy children pushing their fists against my legs. ("Come on, Aunt! Give me ten dinars! Only ten dinars!") So down at heel, in fact, that the man on the door of Hotel Bozur, the new hotel in the center of Marshal Tito Street, didn't even want to let me in on Saturday night. It was a dark, slim young waiter with an exact blend of deference and personal interest who had sized me up, ushered me in, brushed the crumbs deftly off the table cloth and brought me a strong Turkish coffee.

Like all the waiters in Yugoslavia back in the early sixties he still gave

the impression of just playing the part but he was playing it very well. When he discovered I was English he announced grandly, "Then you will be our guest."

"I" he said with a significant pause, "am... Albanian!"

He was the first Albanian I'd ever met.

"You're the first Albanian I've ever met," I said.

"Oh, we're *all* Albanian round here!" he declared with a flourish. "It's only the peasants who wear the white cap."

I had read a lot of books on Yugoslavia, especially Serbia, my favorite Republic. I knew Albanians were the black sheep of the Balkans. They were in Kosmet in great numbers because they had driven the Serbian Christians out. They were the Balkan Christians who had 'turned Turk.' But that evening I was to discover if the waiter and the band were anything to go by then Albanians had all the proverbial charm of the black sheep, too.

Outside the gypsy children on Marshal Tito Street had pressed up against the glass, gesturing to their mouths, till the man on the door chased them away and my Albanian waiter drew the thick red curtains. He was bringing out free saucers of the management's potato chips which he called 'krips' and frowning at the men sitting nearby who kept going Psst! at me.

"If you like," the Turkish drummer suggested tentatively, "you can sit at our table. Here it is not good for a girl to be alone."

The band had started at seven thirty when the lights went up. They played *St. Louis Blues*, *Beale Street Blues* and *Sixteen Tons* and never once the miserable music that had been following me all round Yugoslavia that summer, the wan selection from *The Merry Widow* with its tinny, unheeded climaxes on stringy violins, the sort of music that made me wonder why Yugoslavia had had a revolution at all.

When the band stopped they came down to sit with me and 'make the joke' as Nada used to call it before her English got almost better than mine. All except the piano player, the oldest, who had been their biology teacher. He stayed up on the bandstand marking a pile of biology books behind the lid of the grand piano. They were all Turks and Albanians; saxophone, electric guitar, trumpet, and the Turkish drummer, fair with freckles. In fact, there was nothing exotic or Balkan about any of them. Two had degrees in physics, one was a vet. We played matchbox football on the table top and told bad jokes. At eight two singers had arrived; one very dark and quiet who spoke a little English and so became bashful and tongue-tied. He sang *Granada* and *Be My Love*. The other fair one, ("I am NOT Turk! I am ALBANIAN!") belted out *Beale Street Blues* and *Let's Twist Again*. He was a boxer, he announced and "The Champion Non-stop Twister of Belgrade." When I wrote down the words of *Hit the Road, Jack* he went off and did it right away as 'Heathrow Check.'

The packed Saturday evening crowd talked uproariously through the music and applauded uproariously every time it stopped. All Serbs and Montenegrins said the band. All men, smoking and drinking hard. No! said the drummer there are so many *women* here tonight! I'd counted four and that included me. The band drank lemonade and didn't smoke. "We are *Muslimani*."

About eleven some of the Serbs and Montenegrins began to smash their glasses on the floor. Though Bozur was new it had the sign up on the wall usually seen only in the smaller, rougher *kafanas*: *For the breaking of glasses, 1,000 dinars.* Soon a ragged line of men formed, arms round each others' necks, stumbling over the broken glass. The band played on, switching to a Partisan song and then the *kolو*, the Serbian national dance. When they came down to sit for their last break round about midnight they asked me, "Are you having a good time with us, Mary?"

"Yes" I said. "My nicest evening in Yugoslavia."

They found that very funny. The Champion Non Stop Twister of Belgrade nearly fell off his chair. "— Then tell your friends in Belgrade!"

So as I had a post card of Pristina, taken from the new end, all new blocks and flower borders, I did.

THREE

Belgrade Maneuvers

Suleiman had arrived very early the next morning. "We must strike while the iron is hot!" he announced through the bathroom door.

Nada had just left for her first class. Her mother was at the market. When we got back the water melon would be cooling in the bath and there would be fat Yugoslav grapes on the coffee table. After lunch we would all retire for a nap enveloped in the cosy smell of ironing as the drawn curtains baked in the windows against the hot glass.

Suleiman was talking about work permits. It was suddenly dawning on me that much of the charm of Yugoslavia resided in the fact that it had always been a place impossible to imagine ever working in. Most Yugoslavs had the same problem, confiding disarmingly, "We don't like to work, you know!" with a touching innocence that anyone could even stand in the doorway of most Yugoslav shops or offices and not realize that immediately.

Nada's family lived in an old flat that had survived the war, right in the center of Belgrade so it only took Suleiman five minutes to march me along to an office on the ninth floor overlooking Marx-Engels Square.

The Serbian woman who interviewed us wore a *twinset* and pearls and spoke better R.P. than I did. In keeping with her *twinset* and pearls she seemed obsessed with the British Council. Had they advertised the post? Had I been there? What did they have to say? Without official backing from the British Council, the cultural branch of the Embassy, the idea of a foreigner just going down to Pristina and wandering into the Faculty was, for *Tvinset*, quite out of the question.

Down below Marx Engels square was jam-packed with cars. I could remember when it was just a building site. That was where I'd first seen Albanians, probably, men in white caps with barrows and pickaxes. I could remember when there were no cars in Belgrade at all, when it had been like Pristina.

"Of course," Suleiman was saying blandly. We were, of course, just on our way to British Council but as a courtesy, had called on *Tvinset*'s government department first.

The British Council offices were on a noisy corner of Marshal Tito Street over a book shop. Suleiman led the way up the stairs past dove grey photographs of British poets and composers, through the outer office policed by Serbian secretaries ("Good morning, Comrade colleagues!") and straight into a room where a fair young man was kneeling among piles of books and what looked like an inexhaustible supply of posters of Westminster Abbey.

"This is Tony, our English Language Officer," Suleiman announced, gazing down at him benignly.

Before I could stop him he'd introduced me as the new English Language teacher who had traveled across Europe specifically to seek Council backing for the new Pristina post.

The head of the British Council was even less encouraging than *Tvinset*.

They had no money for an extra post! And they were certainly not empowered to contact any lady up on any ninth floor. And, frankly, Kosmet was a very difficult area. If I should succeed, well, I would be welcome to borrow books and things. Met Tony?

We found ourselves back on the pavement again and it wasn't even nine a.m. We did have a lot of posters of Westminster Abbey. Suleiman was starting to look hot in his dark suit and tie. The peasant women selling flowers on the corner were already sprinkling them cool with water. The thing to do said Suleiman, thinking hard, was to leave no stone unturned.

What we needed was someone interested in Kosmet. Someone who saw the importance of opening up the province to foreign teachers, of aiding Albanians at this dynamic stage of their development. Someone with vision. Someone, that is, with more clout than *Tvinset*.

I was told to be ready by seven again the next morning. Suleiman was going to try to get me an interview with the Secretary for Education in Serbia. He was an Albanian.

The Minister was seated alone at the end of a conference table, three ash trays along. Dark as Suleiman, a little weary and remote, he still had that un-English spark of appraisal and appreciation when faced with a female, even at eight in the morning, which never failed to surprise me. In England only men who dug up roads or worked on building sites were allowed to react to the presence of women which was why I'd never quite lost the feeling once across the Channel that almost every man in sight was leaning on a shovel watching me go by.

The Secretary ordered coffee and started to question Suleiman in Serbian about the Faculty and the closing of the English department in Prizren. Suleiman told him Prizren students could come to Pristina.

"Do you think I care about town students?" the Minister broke in scathingly. "Prizren is the center for a *mountain* region. And you destroy *that* because you teachers are too 'tired' to travel there twice a week!"

Suleiman looked at the ministerial carpet. I counted the ashtrays. Coffee arrived and Suleiman began again in what must have been Albanian. The Minister was beginning to look amused. There was a definite twinkle. He was probably hearing about my 'nice' Albanian band.

"Yes, of course, it would be very good for us if you went." He was talking in Serbian again. "But —" dryly — "aren't you scared? It seems you know the conditions in Kosmet but haven't you heard what they say about us Albanians? ...That we sell girls in our villages? Hmm..." He was leaning on his shovel again. "...Your father could get quite a good price for you..."