

THE THINGS I HAVE FOUND

LOST THINGS AND THEIR STORIES

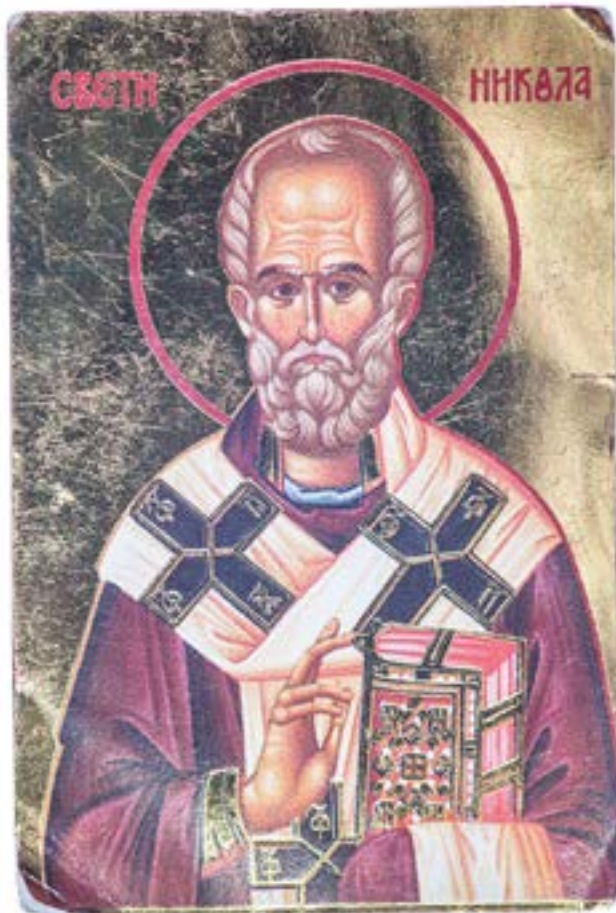
ALL KINDS OF THINGS

a story by Sam Beebe

FOUND IN: BREGENZ, AUSTRIA

47°30'17.2"N 9°44'49.9"E

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a photographic project by Robert Götzfried and friends

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Dear Q,

How's the European sailor's life treating you? Is it as romantic as you imagined? The photos you sent seem to suggest that it actually is – they're almost difficult to comprehend as real. Is Lake Constance really that color? Are the mountains really that close? At least tell me you have to deal with obnoxious, entitled tourists on the boat. Young men such as ourselves need some rough seas to weather.

I'm writing to you from Kyustendil, Bulgaria, an old spa town a couple of hours southwest of Sofia, not far from the Macedonian border. V's grandmother was born and raised here, so it's a kind of pilgrimage for her – as is this whole trip, really. I don't think I've told you much about her Bulgarian history. Her dad escaped from communist Bulgaria in the 70's and fled to Italy and then Germany as a political refugee, never to return. Ever since he died, V has been aching to see where that whole side of her family is rooted – so here we finally are.

You know, if earlier in my life a prophet had told me I was going to marry a half-Bulgarian woman, I think I would've been astounded. Before I met V, the Bulgarian people had barely even crossed my mind, let alone the notion of falling in love with one. It wouldn't have been prejudice, of course – at least I hope not – that astounded me, but wonder. To a younger me, the vision of wedding a woman of immediate Balkan descent would've struck me as utterly surprising and exotic – and, ignorant as I was, that vision would have also been incredibly vague. As reality, now, I'm enjoying its specificity, which, even though V is culturally more German/Western, still retains exciting whiffs of the exotic – especially now that we're actually here in Bulgaria for the first time. Before coming, it was still all stories and photos and snippets of language – little myths of elsewhere places, elsewhere people, elsewhere times.

Sofia, I can assure you, is a very real place, the truths of its existence and past written in the flaking facades of its grand, pre-Communist cultural institutions, and drab, cement apartment blocks. There is no mistaking that it was once a very elegant and cosmopolitan European city, much more so than I expected, and that it is in the process of reclaiming a cultural personality that was entirely suppressed by the Communist regime. Artsy bars and ambitious new restaurants in unlikely pockets of the city, some of them even Communism-nostalgic in their decor, tell the story of a rising wave of creative freedom surfed by young Sofians who rightly see in their city terrific potential. I loved it all.

Enclosed you will find an icon card of Saint Nicholas – Sveti Nikola – who, in addition to being the inspiration for Santa Claus, is considered the patron saint of sailors. I was given the card at Boyana church, a small but important chapel nestled in the hills on the outskirts of Sofia, which is home

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to some of the oldest, most intact, Medieval frescoes in Eastern Europe. One wall depicts a series of scenes from Nikola's life, including the legend of "The Miracle at Sea," in which he allegedly saved a sailor who had fallen from the rigging into stormy Mediterranean waters, somehow using his piety to bring the half-dead man back to life and temper the winds enough to bring the ship safely to harbor. Sailors have been praying to him ever since. The painting on the card isn't from Boyana though – it's much later. A leathery woman with deep eyes handed it to me on my way out of the church grounds, then solicited from me a few leva in exchange for her gift. Once I saw it was Nicholas, I thought I'd send it to you. Maybe you can tack it up in your sleeping berth, to protect you from sea-sickness.

I'm learning much more about what it means to be Bulgarian. As problematic as it can be to make generalizations about an entire people, pattern recognition is also crucial to knowing and understanding a culture, so I'll go ahead and gather for you a few of the hallmarks I'm picking up on so far. Though first I should make a distinction between the older generation and the younger, because they are markedly different – almost opposite. I'll start with the elders, whom for us are most vividly represented by V's great-aunt, Slavka, and Slavka's younger brother, Mirko (both in their late 80's). For them, living under the choke of Communism is the central fact of their lives. 1946-1989. Slavka is so attached to this past narrative that almost all conversations seem to inevitably lead back to the harsh truths of those times – the hardship, the censorship, the lack of freedom, the fear. For 44 years, Bulgarian citizens were robbed of a huge portion of their human agency and their individuality was effectively disallowed in public. They lived in a strangling web of fear and betrayal where one couldn't even trust that one's own family members weren't spying and informing on them to the Party in order to protect themselves. Slavka returns to and reiterates and repeats these truths as if impelled by not only the pressure build-up of so much swallowed emotion, but also a deep need to make outsiders know how bad it really was. I'd like to think she's trying to exorcise the ghosts and demons, but in fact I think she's clutching onto them for dear life, because her identity relies on them completely. She may be an extreme case (Mirko, for example, is considerably less attached to the darknesses of the Communist past), but I do think she's representative of some essential characteristics and dualities of the Bulgarian generation that lived through those times as adults: resilient but still wounded, freed but still repressed, simultaneously proud and sad.

The younger generation seems to be partly defined by a reaction to their parents and grandparents – as most younger generations everywhere are, I suppose. I get the sense that to them Communism is a sad story they're tired of hearing their elders tell again and again, ad nauseum. One of Mirko's sons, Dancho, was so visibly bored and unaffected by Slavka's stories that I wondered if he might just get up from the restaurant table and walk away. Later we learned that as a teenager he had spent two years in a juvenile labor camp, for an astonishingly petty offense: a fellow student heard him call President Zhivkov an idiot. I realized then that his aversion to Slavka's rehashings might be more about anger and pain than boredom.

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In Sofia we stayed in an apartment that belonged to a couple about our age, and their most personal associations with communist days are nostalgic memories of the toys and tv shows. For them, the seriousness was secondhand, filtered through the protected-innocence bubble of childhood, and probably as a result were wonderfully bright-eyed and eager to seize their lives as global citizens, unencumbered by Bulgaria's heavy recent past.

It seems that our generation in general is staying younger longer, and being here is making me wonder whether it's caused more by the culture of the NOW, or more by a response to what we often see in our parents and grandparents: the unsettling effects of having settled, perhaps earlier than one's heart truly desired. You and I, Q, are good examples, living in wanderlust into our thirties with hopes of doing so forever. It's not that your parents or mine are unhappy with their lives, but there's a lurking sense of compromise, to which young idealists like us are allergic – for better or worse. Of course, a lot of that that dynamic is probably timeless, but it is true that the average ages for all of those settling moves – establishing a career, marrying, having kids, buying a house – has been rising steadily in Western culture, and there have to be reasons. Maybe it's that more and more of the world and its experiences become more and more accessible to us, making the act of settling a larger potential forfeiture of possibility. Ah, who knows? All kinds of things cause all kinds of things. How's that for a nugget of wisdom? Not sure how I got here anyway. This is the end of the last piece of paper in my notebook, which is probably the universe's way of telling me now would be an appropriate time to shut up and have some lunch. There is a cold cucumber and yogurt soup here called tarator, which sounds gross but is really growing on me.

Be well. Write. In wanderlust we trust.

-B