

A Misunderstanding

My hiking trip in the remote Pirin Mountains of Bulgaria took a fateful turn. On the second day I came to at the bottom of a rocky ravine. The back of my head felt tender and sticky. When I pulled my hand away it was bloody. The last thing I remembered was running away from a pack of vicious, slavering dogs bounding after me from an isolated farmhouse. It had been raining and I'd obviously slipped and fallen into this narrow cleft. It was almost dark so I must have been out for a few hours

I checked myself for any other injuries. I seemed to be intact but there was a sharp pain in my hip. I'd landed on my mobile phone which was a mangled mess and fragments of plastic had bitten into my thigh. I staggered along the ravine in a disoriented state until I found a scree slope and scrambled gingerly up to flatter terrain. In the fading light I spotted a squat dwelling in the distance with a tendril of smoke snaking into the darkening sky. How I made it there I'll never know but the following morning I woke on a rough-hewn bed with a bandaged head and the tantalising smell of coffee in my nostrils.

As my eyes focussed I saw a grizzled elderly man in a shepherd's smock and a young woman staring anxiously at me. She was by far the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She bore an uncanny resemblance to a young Gina Lollobrigida. I'd only been in Bulgaria a few days and had exactly four words in the language. *Da* for yes, *ne* for no, *molya* for please and *blagodarya* for thank you. I looked straight into her hazel eyes and said *blagodarya* with as much heartfelt emotion as I could muster. I accompanied my verbal utterance with my hand clasped to my heart. The old man jabbered something in guttural Bulgarian but the woman shyly averted her eyes. Over the next few days I kept slipping in and out of consciousness but when I woke each time she was sitting patiently by my bed. I'd established that neither she nor the old man I'd assumed was her grandfather spoke English. I therefore used my routine of *blagodarya* with hand clasped to heart *ad nauseam*. Each time, this mime show elicited a beatific smile from my lovely nurse.

On the fourth day I was surprised to see a priest in full orthodox regalia stoop through the low door of the cottage. In a beautiful simple white dress with a garland of flowers in her hair my guardian Angel appeared. Somewhat incongruously the old man was leaning against the wall cradling an ancient shotgun. In halting English the priest explained that he was there to conduct a marriage ceremony. That is how I became the husband of a beautiful,

profoundly deaf shepherdess who was convinced my thank you gesture was a declaration of undying love.