

## *Survival Language Or Marilyn Monroe was Our Mother*

In school we spent much time learning survival Bulgarian. Mostly reviews. The next day, we had realistic situational exams, where we tried to buy tickets, stamps or food at “stations.” My language exam interview did not go very well. The stations did go well: post office, restaurant, train station, party, and grocery store. Then at 10:40 there was an ecology interview for park sites, which I think went well. A package from my parents arrived with my pillow and a wool suit.

That day I had a pizza and salad at Napoli with Jo and Cliff. Language class and technical session seemed dislocated. Went back to the internet cafe for more messages. Then I studied with Calpurnia at the Euro cafe (with the green awnings) and had a coke and melba, which was a fruit salad covered with ice cream scoops, a cookie and plastic umbrella—it cost about 80 cents. I treated. We were rehearsing saying the history of the Peace Corps, to recite to inquisitive Bulgarians. She had trouble with the word for ‘founder,’ which was ‘suzdaden.’ So she suggested saying Kennedy was the father.

“Who was the mother then?” I asked.

“Marilyn Monroe!” she answered.

“And the first baby?” I asked, smiling.

“Sergeant Shriver, maybe?” she responded.

“And the goals?” I asked.

“To spread information,” she started. After we were finished, she went to the internet cafe.

I went home for an hour to study, from 9:30 to 11:30, then went to Tiffany's birthday party. She was 23. I went in my running shorts and muscle shirt since it was in the 90s. Had a Cuba libre that the bartender had to give me the pieces to make since he did not recognize the name. Smoked and had a vodka Collins, which he did know how to make.

It was the end of July at last. I might survive after all. Two more language classes went down. We had switched teachers again, for the third time. Having had Hassan and Petko, I now had Lillia, the tall, pretty teacher, who was in her first year teaching and always seemed flustered and apologetic, causing her breasts to move invitingly in her peasant blouse. In the class was Barbara (again), Anthony, and Betty Lou, the food-fight queen.

After lunch we were bused to the hotel on the mountain for a conference with other volunteers from the ecology field, as well as with their counterparts, who would be staying at the hotel. We played frisbee during breaks. I got business cards from the Bulgarian counterparts.

Dinner was vegetarian for many of us and we sat at the same table, Michael and Marta for instance. I sat next to Calpurnia; we talked. I asked her for some of her French fries and gave her some of my coke—you can tell we were from the South, since we had coke with everything. Jenna and Tiffany were nearby. After dinner we played full-contact frisbee in the dark. I stood between Amber and Barbara, and was able to do quite well, at one point catching eight in a row. But I got over confident: while reaching for one I tripped, then Amber and Barbara jumped on top of me. A rock was under my

chest and pushed in a rib. I was sure it was broken and it was hard to get up. I could not throw right-handed anymore, so I foolishly played left-handed for another thirty minutes.

That night I had to sleep on my back while cursing my clumsiness and old age. The pain got worse.

The conference continued the next day, as did the Frisbee sessions, but I could only play left-handed again. At noon we were bused back to the school, where we had language all afternoon.

More language all day. I liked Lillia. She was very polite about mistakes and helpful. More pain at night. I could not sleep. Now, I thought also I had broken a tooth, eating peanuts from the bazaar, the peanut sack with pebbles added for weight. It hurt when I drank cold water. Arrggghhh.

Finally, we were offered our assignments for the next two years. The announcement was at 2:00. Tables had been set up with a giant cake in the shape of Bulgaria. The staff had drawn a chalk map of Bulgaria covering half of the playground. Drinks and watermelon were available.

The announcement began. Sylvia was first out of the hat and got Vratsa. So it went. I got Pavel Banya, the forestry unit. An ugly surprise since I was in the parks program, but everyone said it was a beautiful resort city with baths. I was to be working with the Balkan Park and the City, also (three masters, a bad sign).

Marta and Ben, maybe Marcus and others, started a food fight. Malcolm was cutting cake in his wool suit. I was standing talking to Jb; I was wearing my black silk suit. Suddenly, cake flew everywhere. Jb and I left to look for Cliff, who was depressed at his assignment and had wandered off.

Jb and I went to have a melba, after failing to find Cliff. Jb went home. I changed into tank top and black jeans and went to the Underground cafe to talk with Amber, Tiffany and Jenna about the luck of the draw. We heard that this cafe might be run by the mafia.

Saturday. I studied. After dinner I went out looking for people to talk to. I found Jb, then Tiffany and Amber. Amber and I hugged and walked around hugging or holding hands. It was very sweet. I forgot momentarily that I was older than her father, at least for five minutes. Of course, I was very fit, strong, smart, and adventurous (cough cough).

Sunday: I studied, I walked. What a dull guy. A quiet day with the host family. More studying and walking.

On Monday, we prepared to visit our site, mostly with technical language about our past and Bulgarian environmental problems. We, that was Carman, me, and Milli, went to Napoli for pizza and beer. Then I studied and packed two bags, one of clothes to leave at the site for September.