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Notes from the Albanian Diaspora

Tirana, 2012

Albert, his name was, and he stopped me as I was walking through the lobby of my hotel in Tirana, after dinner. He had asked me if I was American.

I didn't really hear what he said, so I bluffed.

Yes! hi, I said.

Where, he said. Where are you from?

I'm an American.

I know, that's what I asked you, if you were an American. What city?

Los Angeles, I said.

Ah! California! San Francisco is the most beautiful city in California.

Yes, maybe—

With the beautiful bridge! And San Diego is also more beautiful than Los Angeles.

So you have been to California, I said.

No, but, you know, I see. Pictures, news, movies. Santa Barbara is also a beautiful city, more beautiful than Los Angeles. I can name all of the states and their capitals. I lived in Greece many years. I speak Greek, Serbo-Croatian, German, Spanish, English, Italian. I wanted to come to U.S. in '92, '93, I gave money to lawyer, not much, two hundred dollars, pfft, gone, Mafia.

The last word he spit. He looked a bit like Harry Dean Stanton, a lifetime of L&M cigarettes etched into his face, first the counterfeit ones from the Albanian factories, now the real Romanian ones, smuggled in. He was sixty-something, seventy-something?, and had Stanton's slicked-back hair, maybe a bit more Brylcreem in it than Harry used.

We talked politics.

The problem with Albania? he said. I don't know! The people are sick. In the head. There is something wrong with them!

But it's better now? I asked. Without Hoxha?

These guys, he said, meaning the politicians, They only—he mimes blabbering on—they lawyer, they talk, just talk, they fuck, they, the politics! It is, it is—as he searched for the word, I offered “corrupt”—dirty, he said. It's dirty!

He kept his face very close to mine, too close. A cavernous stench of cigarette and drink overpowered the deep garlic and wine of my own meal. He gesticulated, kept looking both ways and leaning in, confidential. I mouth-breathed. A number of hotel workers glanced as they walked by, wondered if this was a situation.

He thought about my suggestion. OK, corrupt, he said. But more, more than that. Dirty.

I think, I said, trotting out my own favorite hobbyhorse, that the U.S. is the most corrupt country, in terms of total dollars, in the world. We like big corruption, not small corruption.

Yes, he said, dismissively. I know. You have the Elephant for the rich people, and Donkey, Obama, and they both take money. But we have seventy, eighty political parties. They all take money, and the two big ones, they take the most. One pretends to be democracy, one pretends to be socialism. But really, it is nothing. It is nothing, this new democracy. Just change of ownership.

What I had seen, arriving earlier that day from Macedonia, across several mountain ranges, was that the new owners seemed to be managing the place worse than the old. The stripped carcasses of factories hung ghostly over the smaller cities. What had once been an impressive rail line across the country was in ruins, its hundred-foot-high concrete stanchions still preserving the grade across canyons, but its tunnels, with their nicely finished stone fascia, sitting unused, staring at miles of weedy, rusted track.

The country looked like a museum of itself. The tiny concrete monuments to the madness and genius of dictator Enver Hoxha were everywhere. As Americans were building backyard atomic bomb shelters in the 1960s, Hoxha was prescient in assuming that wars would continue to be non-nuclear for some time, and so he embarked on a program of "bunkerization," having people build individual conventional-bomb shelters, 700,000 of them, half-buried bubbles of reinforced, poured concrete, built to withstand any bombardment. The idea was that people could enter and shoot out of them in case of attack. Hoxha had come to power in the mess after WWII and remained in Kim Jong Il-like total control until his death forty years later, closing off the country to international travel, ruling through cult of personality, information control, and terror. He fought wars of words with his neighboring dictator, Tito; he broke with the Soviet Union because Khrushchev was a reformist; he broke with China because they allowed Nixon's visit. He was the last true believer. While he was alive, he never ended the state of war with Greece.

The story goes that he forced the designer of the tiny domed structures to prove their safety by standing in one while it was shelled from all directions by tanks. It's a horrific image, an engineer's worst nightmare, or anyone's, really—death exploding overhead, only one's own designs for protection—until one realizes that of course the structures had been tested many times before Hoxha was presented with the final version, and the whole story starts to seem unlikely.

Making every civilian a soldier in an impervious gunner's nest had, of course, the side effect of making the populace feel under attack and protected by Hoxha's foresight. The at once archaic and futuristic mushrooms, so invulnerable that no one can manage to get rid of them, squat now as inconveniently shaped storage spaces in people's front and backyards, complemented by the larger hilltop artillery bunkers that sit forlorn and abandoned on strategic hillsides. They struck me as material versions of the terminally suspicious psychology I'd read in the work of Ismail Kadare, the circularly reinforced terror of dictatorship given permanent shape in this concrete sprayed across the land, as if Hoxha had marked every piece of property and every promontory in the nation with his own paranoid and paranoia-inducing vision.

I asked Albert if I was right, if things now were actually a bit worse.

Yes, things are worse in some ways, he said. Thirty percent have no work. With Hoxha, everyone was working, everyone. Albania, workers? They make ten, twelve dollars a day. In America, one hundred dollars a day. These people in government, they talk democracy, but in heart, no democracy. Ideology. Mafia.

He worked like a manic association test, nonstop, emphatic. I had given up trying to interject. He really didn't need any help. He was seventy, I decided, maybe more.

You know the big problem here? Pollution, he said, changing topics apace. Everywhere, the streams, the air, the sea—you see it—the bags of garbage everywhere. This is big problem.

And it is; piles of plasticized trash scatter the landscape. Albanians will sweep and wash a family grave in a small country graveyard, trim the weeds around it, festoon it with new plastic flowers and a picture in a shiny standing frame but leave behind a pile of picnic detritus, plastic bags, bottles, rinds, bones, a mess, including the old, faded plastic flowers, all two feet away. People whop bottles, wrappers, bags of crap, anything, out of their cars and trucks anywhere. It's one of those "over the wall" cultures. Albert agreed.

It's true! he said. People, Albanian people, inside, it is all clean, but *shooit!* They throw things out the window. They clean house and throw

things in the street, in the next-door yard. Their garbage is always the problem of somebody else. I like American people, I meet them, I say hello, they are good here—he pokes his heart. They have good ideology, good mentality, but the politics, no good.

Since he had rejected my version—endemic corruption—of our politics, I said, Why no good?

In 1991, he said, people came here, I met congressmen, big people, OK, not biggest, but middle-level political, congressmen. But after 1992, 1993, they don't like, they don't come back, 1996, '97, they don't like, then 1998, '99, everyone gets guns, starts shooting. But finally, Kosovo, they stop, and (shrugs) 2000, 2002, 2003, things (mimes rising water) are getting better, not good, but better. But still, the congressman, he doesn't come back.

He shrugs.

Thus: what is wrong with American politics is that the congressmen who were interested in Albania lost interest. The year that the Soviet Union collapsed, 1991, was also the year that Albania shook off the Hoxha regime (after his death in 1985 run by his henchman, Ramiz Alia) and began its current experiment in dirty democracy. The 1996 reference is to one of the most spectacular Ponzi schemes in history—a Bernie Madoff-level con, even more severe. Aided and abetted by some of the most important Albanian politicians, eighty percent of the adult population invested in a pyramid scheme. People sent back money from overseas and mortgaged their homes in a get-rich-quick frenzy, all for a promised twenty percent minimum return. After \$1.2 billion was invested, it collapsed, sucking most people's money out of the country in a matter of months. The ringleader escaped to Switzerland. Over a billion dollars in a country where the only airline has a grand total of three planes, those an average of twenty-three years old, and is owned by foreigners. It was in this context that Kadare wrote, "Can a country's people be better than its planes?"

People also lost interest in Albania because it proved to have a not-particularly-pliable workforce, once the totalitarian state wasn't there to scare everyone shitless. More than one person I talked to called it This Doing Nothing Country. In Berat, I met some other returned émigrés, a father and adult son who still lived in St. Louis, just back on a vacation. They looked like hick midwesterners, the son large, slack-mouthed, cowlicked, and T-shirted, the father a pudgy, nerdy bank teller in a checked shirt and high belt, all very Missouri except for the father's bling—a rapper's ransom of gold watch, gold chains, gold bracelet, gold rings—his American wealth displayed on his unlikely person.

St. Louis has a large Albanian community, they told me, five hundred families. It was large enough that these two hadn't needed to learn much English in the fifteen years they had lived there. The son didn't say much, and I suspected the father was talking to me in part to show off to his brother, who was with them, and who understood not a word.

I have been America three presidents, the father said efficiently. Obama, Bush, and Beel, he said, bending back a finger for each. For me Beel was best president.

Do you like Obama? I asked.

Look. Republicans is for rich people, he said, echoing Albert.

They both liked my thumbs down for Bush.

Bush-*shit!* the kid said.

But for me is Beel, the father said.

I asked how they liked St. Louis.

America, yeah, I like, the father said. But too much working.

Now the kid was ready to join in.

Yeah, he said, excited. Everyone is working, working all the time, and tarred. *Ahm tarred*, he said, impersonating the average American whining. *Ahm working, working, tarred, working!* Always they tarred and working, bushshit! he said, with real feeling, part glee, part anger.

Too much working all the time, the father agreed.

The Albanian brother had the look of someone who knows he doesn't understand, and not just the language. Why does my brother wear these gold chains? he seemed to want to ask. What good do they do him? Why is my nephew so unhappy? What right does he have?

Berat is a stone city on a hill. As the seven o'clock call to prayer started to sound from a nearby mosque, I was reminded that I was in Muslim Europe, and when the second mosque's muezzin started to call, I realized that my room, on the side of a hill, was right at speaker height and nearly equidistant from the mosques, one just a little bit louder. Competing versions of Islam were at work in the two mosques, the bitter rivalry played out at every call to prayer. The less-loud mosque sounded like it was being mocked by the other: *Allah akbar!* followed immediately by a staticky ALLAH AKBAR! like a big brother mocking and taunting a younger.

I had asked Albert about Islam.

Ach, he said, pawing at the air in dismissal. Nobody cares. Mosque, church, pah. Where do you go now? You have car?

Yes, I will go to the coast tomorrow and down to Apollonia, I said.

You have four-wheel?

No four-wheel drive, just a small car.

Pah, he said, disappointed. No good. You need four-wheel to see real Albania.

Albania has terrible roads, most of them switchbacking across mountain ranges. A cop flagged me down one day, far from the beaten path, presenting me, I thought, a standard poor country test—to baksheesh or not to baksheesh. He didn't speak English but asked me, with gestures, where I was going, and I told him I was going to Belsh. He wagged his finger twice and motioned me to turn around.

No, I said. Look. I pointed at my GPS, which showed a road leading to Belsh. He shook his head, like he had seen this nonsense about a road before. I like bad road, I tried to mime, but it was hard to get across to him. I pointed one last time up the road, imploring. He shrugged and shook his head one last time. I thanked him and turned around. He was right. Even the good road, the one he sent me down, had enormous serial potholes, hard to traverse without bottoming out.

Partway up a crossing, I ran into a mountainside traffic jam caused by a wedding party, the cars festooned, people in wedding clothes, all parked in the right lane along a hairpin turn, forcing uphill and downhill traffic to take turns. The hood was up on the fanciest car in the stalled procession, a large, ten-year-old Mercedes, maybe rented for the occasion. The people inside were glum. A couple of men under the hood had their fancy sleeves rolled up and were arguing about the engine. Wedding guests milled around the other cars; kids threw rocks over the cliff. I drove around them eventually, and then around a few herds of sheep, and continued on. For the next twenty kilometers, a series of other cars decorated for the wedding raced past me to the rescue.

That's the kind of country it was. A place where your limo breaks down on the way to get married. The basic business of life was hard, and it didn't stop for weddings. In other places, everyone adapts, moves on, heads on to the church, leaving a volunteer behind to mind the car. Not in Albania. I could read it in the simple body language of the fuming bride, in the heat, sitting without moving in the bridal chariot. She was arriving at the church in that Mercedes, not in anything else. There had been a dream, and nobody was giving it up.

Francine Prose's Albanian protagonist, Lula, in *My New American Life* says, "The Balkans have no expression for 'win-win situation.' In the Balkans they said, No problem, and the translation was, You're fucked." Lula, like Albert, was an optimist. Albert was emigrating again.

I am going to Singapore, he said. Seven hundred euros plane, I take two thousand dollars, and I look. I see. I think I can work there. You know Singapore? It is very nice, a city-state. Here, Albania, work three

hundred dollars a month. With supplemental work, *supplemental* work, four thousand in a year. In Singapore, five thousand dollars in one month.

He shrugged, case closed. He had come home temporarily. He was seventy. He was talking to an American in a hotel. He was going to look for work in Singapore.