

The Village Sledge Run

The first annual Kosovo snows are met with dismay by the parents; exhilaration by the kids. Nazmi frets about freezing pipes when the electricity is cut and the circulation pump stops. He recalculates the cubic metres of wood stacked in the yard, assessing whether the early winter will exhaust his store, "If I have to buy more later it is double the price". The early bird catches the dry wood and enough of it. He has often tried to explain wood to me but I never quite get it. I am certain of inconsistencies in local names and suspect the same wood has a different name each time I ask. Nazmi explains, "This burns fast, it is good to start. This burns hotter and we use it more on cold days. This is good at night, it is long and slow." These could be 'ahu', 'bung' or 'qarr', today at least; the texture and weight are the real language. In regular Albanian everyone is happy that rabbit and hare are the same, like tortoise and turtle, mouse and rat; bird is bird, mainly.

I creak open the oak door from the yard and snow powders me. The children have been sledging since early and the runs have crushed the snow into ice. Armend shouts, 'Watch, watch!' and redoubles his determination that this run should be fast and long. I watch with some admiration as he flies past the neighbour's crumbling stone gateway, scrapes his shoe into the snow to brake and turn, negotiates the unguarded bridge over the stream and heads on down to the school.

I slither along after him, dodging Arber, Anita, Arijeta and Albion as they dare the same route. It always strikes me as odd how many names start with A, like Albania, as if the imagination stretch to think of B or Z is too exhausting.

I congratulate the children as they gather themselves for the trudge up for the repeat. I test out my Albanian, piecing together 'rruga' for road, 'plot' for full and 'akull...something' for ice, and shout, 'Rrruga është plot me akullore'. Suddenly the whole group of village boys are overcome with laughter. The girls, a little too embarrassed to laugh, glance at me and turn away in explosions of giggles. Their mirth subsides and they catch each other's eyes and smile. Then, more excited by the snow, they all yank on their sledge tethers and head up the hill.

I go off to find Nazmi and hope to be invited for tea. He is satisfied with his inspection of the wood, water and roof. He calls, 'Hajde, qaj'. We head out of the cold. Strong tea is poured into the glass and hot water tops it up, a chunk of lemon. The lemon is a sop to the foreigner and substitute for my refusal to take three spoons of sugar.

Armend and Anita arrive, their boots kicked off outside and the glow of cold on their cheeks. They politely shake my hand and wish me a good day as is customary, a questioning shyness playing around their continuing amusement.

Armend whispers something to his Dad. Nazmi slaps his knees and gives me a friendly thump on the shoulder. Whatever I said down the hill is an additional highlight to the morning's sledging. Unable to ask for an explanation for every odd thing that I fail to understand, I let the friendship carry me through the unknowing. Daring to trust takes courage. I sip the tea. I smile. They smile. Anita giggles. I laugh.

'Okay', I say, 'What, what?'

Armend finally breaks his barrier of polite respect and, grinning, says, "You said the road was full of ice-cream!"