

Tirana, Albania

Dec 31, 1993

Dear Friends,

New Year's Eve and we have an unbelievable social calendar. Certainly Brian doesn't believe it. He is used to our "stay at home" ways in Sitka, and is surprised at the number of homes we are visiting this New Year. We'll spend the New Year holiday with our Albanian Friends. Christmas, after my radio show, was an American affair.

Doing a radio show here takes patience. I had to select my music from the library, and get it dubbed by an engineer to reel-to-reel tape in the music studio because the recording studio can only play reel-to-reel tapes. Then I had to take my cassette interviews and have them dubbed so I could edit them. I need to get a second engineer for the dubbing and editing. I needed to script the whole thing with music and fade cues so that a third engineer could put it together with my announcements before it went on the air. After I recorded the program I wanted a cassette dub, so I had to take it back to the mixing studio and get the second engineer to make the dub. Finally I delivered it to the International Service Program Director for broadcast over shortwave by a fourth engineer. It went out Christmas Eve.

On Christmas Day we were guests of Ambassador Ryerson and his wife, Suzanne, for Christmas Dinner. The list included embassy staff and aid contractors. At that party things were upbeat and optimistic. Although we got the normal jokes about how things in Albania (don't) work. One contractor decided that when an Albanian said "Ska Problem" (no problem) it really meant "it's not my problem."

The Ambassador dedicated the dinner to the woman who sent the floral centerpiece. We caroled at her house earlier in the week. She and her husband had worked for the Embassy in the 1930's and her husband had lowered the flag for the last time when the Italians invaded just before the beginning of the Second World War. Her husband died under Communist torture. When the Embassy reopened in 1991, She was asked to raise the flag her husband had taken down. She wrote on the card that came with the centerpiece that our caroling reminded her of a time before the war, and that the light of our candles would live in her memory as a reminder of a day that she had lived to see, which she thought she would never see.

The Peace Corps party after was a different affair. Many of the volunteers had been here 18 months. They were the first of the aid community. When they came things were most difficult. They rented flats for \$100 a month, and the landlords were glad to see the money. They signed contracts. Now the landlords, who think they can get much more money for their apartments, are trying to find ways to get squeeze more dollars from the volunteers, who do not have the money. The U.S. Government, says that they have contract with the landlords and won't increase the volunteers allowances. Some landlords see the volunteers as rich Americans. One volunteer is being charged extra for the use of the TV and refrigerator in his apartment. Another volunteer was nearly in tears as she told of her landlord accusing her of taking advantage of him. He said she was "only in the country to get what she could" from the poor Albanians. She said "why doesn't he understand... I'm giving 2 years of my life to this country as a volunteer?" After the excitement, the newness and the adrenaline rush of first being here fades, Albania remains.

The frustration of getting anything done here sometimes borders on the absurd. We were trying to get a Radio Tirana van to take us to the Airport to pick up Brian. "Ska Problem" according to Pigeon, the Director of Administration for Radio Tirana. But Brian had called it right when he told us: "Christmas in Albania sounds like a Monty Python movie." Going to the airport to pick up Brian was a Monty Python movie. We were riding high in the cab of a huge blue mobile television studio, because we couldn't get gas

for the station's smaller mini van. The lack of the mini van was frustrating because I had spent the past two days getting the required rubberstamps on sheets of paper (there was never enough paper to write news stories) from Pigeon, the Director General, Mr. Pollo, the director of radio, and several secretaries to release the van. As we drove to the airport we found ourselves looking out over fields of literally thousands of cement bunkers built by a paranoid dictator who had convinced himself, if not the entire Albanian population, that NATO and the Warsaw pact were going to unite to topple this only bastion of true communism.

The truck ran toward the airport, late, of course. I hoped Suzi had better luck at getting a car so someone would be there on time to meet Brian. He is not a good traveler and gets nervous when people who are supposed to meet him don't. Suzi was going to meet me at the radio station but when it became clear that we couldn't get gas for the van because there was no power to run the gas pump I ran over to the Helsinki Committee (the phones at the radio station didn't work) and put her onto getting a car. The Helsinki committee's car had been in an accident and "was broken." How broken? "broken." Cashku, Suzi's boss had a Ford Escort that could not begin to hold Brian's 6'9" frame plus any luggage. Suzi had arranged a car from a member of parliament, but at the last minute that fell through, so Victor Dosti, the chairman of the Helsinki committee called his brother who was an official of the Democratic party, and Suzi had a car.

In the meantime Mr Pollo was appalled that he couldn't get us the van and tried to get us the four wheel drive of the Director General. That car was tied up in producing the "Festival of Albanian Light Music" that was starting on TV that night, but one of the mobile studios was free. After getting the expedited signatures and rubberstamps for the studio and the diesel fuel that it would need we had to find the driver. The driver, it turned out, was waiting on line at the Greek Embassy. With an official unemployment rate of 29% and the unofficial rate much higher than that, waiting on line the Greek or Italian Embassy was the national pastime, even among the employed, usually on company time. Someone was dispatched to Greek Embassy and fetched the driver. So we were late.

When we turned onto the airport road a line of cars was coming back at us. The Alitalia plane from Rome had been on time. When the first small car went by Anila cried out, "Oh here goes Suzi." That small car and the big Blue television truck both turned around, the car with a nimble "U" turn and the van with a lumbering 5 point turn and my 6'9" son unfolded himself from the Nissan, which Suzi had commandeered from the chairman of Albania's democratic party and the family embraced in reunion at the side of the road.

Because Suzi had gotten an official "party" car the officials had waved her car onto the tarmac and she was standing at the bottom of the Alitalia ramp when Brian got off. Which impressed Brian. They also waived customs, and so Brian was in the first car out of the airport, which also impressed Brian.

Brian climbed into, what for him, was the more comfortable cab of the van, which after a long transatlantic flight an even more uncomfortable flight on the prop jet from Rome, truly impressed Brian. Brian made his triumphant entry into Albania's capital with a clear view of the bunkers protecting the city from the airport. Christmas in Albania.

Take Care,  
Rich McClear