

# Keeper of the Keys

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“BUT, SIGNORA, ONE NEEDS TOURISTS TO HAVE TOURS!” GROWLED THE HENNA-HAIRED CLERK AT THE TOURIST BUREAU IN TIRANA. SO THAT’S HOW I FIND MYSELF ALL ALONE IN BERAT AFTER A FOUR-HOUR BUS RIDE. I’M HOPING IT UP TO THE MEDIEVAL CITADEL, ONE HAND ON A DRIPPING CHOCOLATE CONE, THE OTHER ON *BLUE GUIDE ALBANIA*, WHICH CALLS THE FORT ONE OF THE GREAT BALKAN MONUMENTS. I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I’LL FIND UP THERE—BESIDES OLD CHURCHES—BUT ALBANIA NEVER FAILS TO SURPRISE.

I set out from the row of shops running along the Osumi River. A wood-carver still hasn’t gotten around to fixing his bullet-ridden windows from the 1997 riots. A thin wail from the Bachelors’ Mosque spikes the air as I thread my way up the coiled path of the Ottoman town. The huddled homes are brilliantly whitewashed, with upper stories jutting over lower and rich chocolaty details—mullioned bay windows, thick beams, and wide wooden eaves. All in happy harmony. The faded terra cotta roofs roll like gentle surf, softening the steep rocky backdrop. After weeks in scarred Tirana, I get a thrill out of this pristine place—the zest you feel when a crystalline day dawns after long bleak rains.

But wait, I remind myself. Just. One. Minute. If these seductive walls could talk, they’d tell a dark tale: not so very long ago, they bristled with Hoxha loyalists; the madman culled his most feared henchmen—the *Sigurimi*—from this charming town.

I keep climbing. Lizzards skitter underfoot. The white city reveals its colors up close: throbbing-pink oleanders, pool-blue doors, emerald-green vines with fat grapes ripe for the plucking. A cat stretches in the sun. I sniff the air: cilantro, perhaps, and lamb being grilled with rosemary. The Sigurimi pulled off their reign of terror by infesting the country with informers—neighbor spied on neighbor, wife on husband, son on father. They turned Albania into Europe’s biggest jail, killing people like flies, almost crushing my friends Marko, Bashkim, and Sonya.

A leather-faced elder coaxes a reluctant mule up the steep steps, *clippity... clop*. A woman in black, lit by a shaft of light, scurries through a stone archway and then fades. The road loops past a kiosk with wheels of fresh-baked flatbread stacked under a white cloth.

I stop to buy water from a man with a wooden cart. Something about his gaunt face or too-short-in-the-sleeves jacket makes me praise his labored English. He rewards me with a toothless grin and launches into a story. He learned English on his own as a boy. One day in the 1980s, he found himself in a shop with a tourist who wanted an apple. The vendor didn't understand. So our man translated. Police arrested him for the crime of aiding a stranger. "I was in army then," he says, finishing his story, "and my chief took me from the prison. But I never ever speak English again until the democracy. Life was full with traps."

It's a breathless trek to the citadel. I pass men hauling sacks of potatoes across lean shoulders, or gas canisters—endless Sisyphean tasks—and children with big bottles of water and strained faces.

The path grows rural, crawling with stray dogs. Lush terraced orchards come into view. I will learn later from friends in Tirana that they were forced as student "volunteers" to carve out these hills, or similar ones, under a white-hot summer sun. Armed with nothing but pickaxe and fear, they made them bloom. Now, they take no joy in their beauty.

Shirtless boys stop kicking a soccer ball to beg "*Caramelle, caramelle!*" They cling, causing a moment of panic before scattering. A trickle of water dances down the road, like the dribble of sweat down my sternum. The cobbles are worn to a buttery sheen. I have to plant each foot deliberately.

Tada! The summit—inside the fortress—feels like Olympus, halfway between earth and sky. Sweet, sprawling pines. And beyond, like a da Vinci landscape, the vast sweep of terraced vineyards, figs and olives, green valleys and the snaky river.

A lace maker roosts on a blanket of pine straw like an eagle in a nest. She's dressed in a white headscarf and blue dirndl, surrounded by a web of lace drapes and doilies. I linger awhile, watch her crochet, speak broken Italian, ooh and aah, buy, hug, kiss. I tell her she has the most beautiful shop in the world.

The cobbled streets of the fortress are empty, but for a trio of kids. I ask where the churches are, and they scamper off to fetch the Keeper of the Keys.

I expect an old man, but it's a nymph who skips my way jangling a ring of black keys. She has a halo of wild curls and black eyebrows that look as if they'd been boldly painted by an artist with a fat brush. Something ephemeral about her—the slight frame, winsome laughter, or maybe the mountain aerie she inhabits—makes me think of Tinkerbell. I can't tell her age—twenties? Early thirties?

Rajmonda leads me out of the ramparts, past stone towers of Illyrian origin and around a steep path to the flank of the mountain. And there it is: Shen Mehil, a thirteenth-century Byzantine church precariously perched above the world. A raven swoops and dives. Rajmonda heaves open the door, uncorking a scent of old incense and mold. She points out the frescoes damaged by students run amok in 1967, when Hoxha declared Albania officially an atheist country. She talks about saints and apostles, and about

an accident she had in 1997—a lawless time—when vandals came ripping through Berat in the wake of collapsed pyramid schemes and set fire to the church. As she rushed to put out the flames, vertigo catapulted her down the rocky flank, or so I gather. She mimes much of this horror with a pulsating *joie-de-vivre*, then casually hoists up her culottes to expose the jagged pink scar that splits her thigh in two.

All the other churches and museums in the fortress are closed, either for renovation or because it's Sunday. So I bid her adieu and try to slip some crumpled *leke* into her hand. Oh no, I cannot, she sings—and it's then I first notice her dimples—I take money only if you come my home drink coffee.

And so I do.

When Rajmonda pushes open a heavy set of blue arched doors, I find myself in a secret garden, a fantasy come to life. Everything is freshly whitewashed—white cobbles, white fountain, white tin cans blooming with lavender and thyme, white birdcage. They shimmer and glow in the bright afternoon sun. We wash our hands at the fountain under a sharp-smelling lemon tree.

She beckons me up a set of blinding white steps, where we shed our shoes and duck into a low doorway defended by a garlic-braid charm. She seats me on a nubby sofa in a sitting room no bigger than a walk-in closet and calls in her older sister, clad in a daffodil babydoll dress, or maybe it's a nightgown. She's Rajmonda's double, but for her more sober countenance. We shake hands, very formally. Then Rajmonda walks her unsteady mother into the room and props her into a chair. I take Mother's hand in mine; her skin feels thin as butterfly wings. The two young women disappear to make coffee, leaving me alone with Mother. Though fragile-looking, she sits ramrod straight, her grey hair tied back in a neat bun. Purple veins pop from her arms; a bloody gauze bandage wraps her elbow. When I smile, she looks through me with lifeless eyes. Still as the mountaintop.

I study the room. It's as if someone has turned back the clock in here, to circa 1960. Formica coffee table, vinyl chairs, plastic flowers, rotary phone, sepia photographs—all recall similar objects that once furnished my grandmother's simple home. Religious icons hang on one wall. An incongruous sweetheart vine covers the other three walls, threatening to overtake the room in an exuberant burst of life. Trying to get comfy on the hard couch, I upset a shrine to America behind me: bronze Statue of Liberty, plastic Minnie Mouse, Niagara Falls snow globe.

There's the sudden dark sweet smell of coffee, and Rajmonda glides in with a tray of tiny cups. Sipping the molasses-thick brew, she gazes tenderly at her mother, explaining she hasn't been well since 1997. This was the year that armed rebels held Berat and the rest of Albania hostage; the year the family was sequestered in the fortress for six months, fearing for their lives; the year of the fire and Rajmonda's injury, a crisis that triggered her father's fatal stroke hours later; the year the third sister deserted them for Philadelphia. I get the sense that Rajmonda, too, would like to trade this medieval fort for a life along the strip malls of Philly.

Mother sits rigid, unseeing, even when a cat leaps into her lap. It's as if

the weight of tragedy, loss, poverty, and anarchy was too much for a warm heart, and so she froze.

Rajmonda reaches for my empty cup and looks into it with furrowed brow. She finds winged blackbirds in the coffee scum and forecasts more travels for me. Albanian hosts read your destiny with mirrors, matches, smoke, beans, even chicken bones—and in my experience, it’s impossible for a guest to get an inauspicious reading.

She clutches me when I get up to leave. “Here nothing for me. All the day I sit in my house.” There’s no bitterness in her voice. But her ancient Illyrian eyes speak of hunger, of regret for the sands that spill relentlessly through the hourglass of her life.

It’s understandable: her thwarted hopes, her itch to flee a haunted past, the unending sameness of her days. Still, you have to wonder if her basketful of daydreams would really make her happy. The pleasures here are simple, the pulse slow. Shall I tell her the bald truth? That the pressures of urban life are brutal? That money isolates? That the work she is doing here is noble? Why, I wonder for the umpteenth time, are we humans so restless?

I say nothing.

We take photos and scratch addresses. Guilt, the sense of leaving her stranded, pinches my chest. Rajmonda dips into the bottomless well of Albanian generosity, unearthing a piece of handmade lace from an old chest. Out in the soft air of the secret white garden, turning rosy from a sinking sun, she plucks me a posy of sweet basil.

“You my sister,” she says, her mouth quivering as she walks me to the gate. Declaring someone a sibling is a tradition in the Balkans. Yet returning her tight squeeze, I can’t help but be moved by how quickly hearts unfold in this harsh land, by the serendipitous way that people and cultures unexpectedly mesh.

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