

THE BULGARIAN LAD FROM ALASKA

by Deyan Enev

translated from the Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

The train for Belgrade looked like it had come out of a museum of Socialist art. But the people travelling to the Serbian capital were bang up-to-date. In the compartment with me was the poet G.K., a young German with his girlfriend and a Bulgarian lad from Alaska. The train didn't start for a long time as though it were taking part in a documentary on the state of Bulgarian Railways. The mother of the Bulgarian lad from Alaska spent the whole time prior to the train's departure, on the seat opposite her son. She gazed at him continuously with her dark motherly eyes, stayed silent and from time to time leant forward to caress him. The boy pulled back, even so he was an almost thirty year old man. He was big and very calm, like a cliff. At one point he told his mother to finally get off the train and the mother obediently got down onto the platform and continued to gaze at him from there. She didn't take her eyes off him. At last the train creaked and started out. The German lad and his girlfriend began to write notes as they took it in turns to write in a notebook. Two hours later I asked them what they were writing. They were recording their travel impressions. It was the first time they were travelling on such a train and looking at such a landscape through the window. Clearly the poverty of the Slivnitsa area had shaken them deeply. They'd landed in Istanbul by plane and had stayed there a few days, then they'd reached Sofia by train, where they'd stayed another few days. Now they were going to look at Belgrade, after that Vienna, finally returning to Germany for the start of the semester. He was studying engineering, and the girl French Philology. I went out into the corridor to smoke. At some point the big stout boy came out of the compartment. We chatted.

He said that he was travelling to Alaska. He would catch a plane from Belgrade, because that way was cheaper. He'd graduated as a librarian in Sofia. He really was a well-read intelligent lad – that was obvious from his conversation. He explained that he worked on an oil rig off the Alaskan coast, he was an assistant cook, peeling tomatoes. Two weeks out at sea and two weeks in Dawson. His girlfriend was an Indian from the local tribe. How old was he? Twenty eight. How many years there? Five. Did he read books? Well, yes, he read, on the internet. What sort of people were on the rig? All sorts from all over the world. Both good and bad. Did he have friends? There was another Bulgarian lad, they were mates. He was bringing him rakia now to try, as he hadn't been able to return to Bulgaria that year. And how did he

spend his time in town. They didn't go out much because his girlfriend was a little plump and was embarrassed. But then he'd got fatter and now they were like two peas in a pod. The lad laughed. "We sit at home and listen to music. We go out to eat. That's it." And had the Indian girl introduced him to her family? "Yes we've been invited there. By the way the patterns on the old Indian women's costumes are fantastically similar to ours. I discovered a similar observation in Aleko Konstantinov's "To Chicago and Back". I even tried to remember the passage because I was really astonished, myself. What did Aleko say? Something like this: 'in the exhibition there were several huts with Indians. The appearance of the Indian women reminded me very much of our Shopkini (women from around Sofia). There's a big similarity in the costumes and decorations of the Indians and Shopkini. They also plait their hair and hide their faces, they comb their hair the same way, they wear the same metal necklaces... and can you believe it? – they sing almost the same as Shopkini. Their furnishing – their rugs, towels, embroidery, blouses, look as if they've been stolen from our peasants.'"

"Bloody Aleko!" the lad laughed and returned to the compartment.

I stayed in the corridor up to Belgrade, smoking cigarette after cigarette and squinting my eyes at the night flying past through the open window. and it was as though I still saw the mother's gaze, the dark horrific maternal gaze, like that of a she-wolf. The same, just as I remembered it from the Sofia platform. I thought of how Bulgaria must appear from outer space, pierced like a pincushion by hundreds of thousands of such looks, which encircle the world and reach it's opposite end. As far as Alaska.

It's just as well that the costumes of the old Indian women look like our old Grannies' costumes. In faraway Dawson that surely helps a lot.

His bloody Aleko!