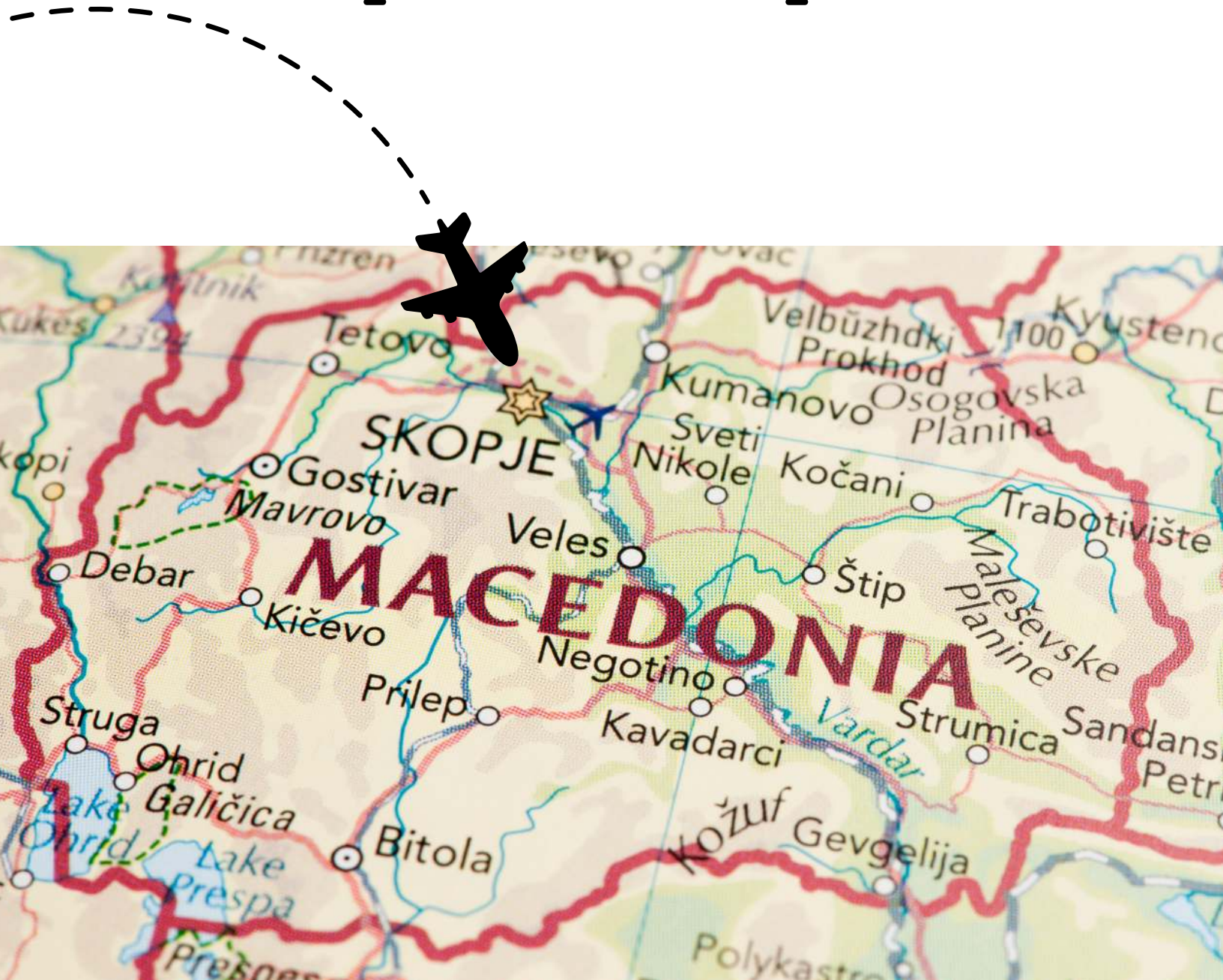


Meeting Macedonia

A short story
by Sabina Boyer



My name is Macedonia, and before we begin, there are a few things that you ought to know about me. The first is that I am one of the smallest and most insignificant countries in the world. Located in the southeastern region of Europe known as the Balkans, pretty much the only place you might have heard about me is in geography class. The second is that I am also one of the few nations that has managed to tick off every single one of my neighbors. For the record, that's not because I'm unfriendly. Just... unlucky. You'll catch on as we go. Just like the missionary family did.



The first time I met them was when they walked off the plane. They'd been traveling for almost twenty-four hours, with a sleep-deprived four-year-old no less, and weren't exactly the perky bunch that most Americans are made out to be. James, the husband, was the first one down the stairs. He was young, early thirties or so, with a baseball cap that had been on his head so long that his hair seemed to have reshaped around it. As he looked around at the scenery, I followed his gaze. The gray concrete

terminal, the barbed-wire fences, the weeds poking up out of the runway... crazy I know, but from his expression, I'd almost say he was disappointed. Either that or terrified.

The next one down the stairs was his wife. Cierra. Even with the bags under her eyes, she was everything her husband wasn't. Excited, glowing, eager. The dim sunlight in her red hair made it glow even brighter in contrast to the brunette heads all around her. She looked at the surroundings too, her eyes shining knowingly. Catching sight of something, Cierra bent down, pointing it out. And that's when I saw her: Little Annie. Their allergy-prone, red-eyed, sleep-deprived four-year-old.

Yeesh.

I know what you're thinking, so I'll just say it now... I'm awful with kids. And not the way that humans are awful with them. It's not enough that I don't know how to interact with them, it's actually much, much worse. With how much effort it takes for my people just to live another day, it's no surprise that child-rearing mostly turns into bribing kids to make them shut up. The upside? At least they learn the basics of bribery.

As they made their way over, I couldn't help but stare at the little girl. She was like a miniature of her mother, complete with bright blue eyes and curly red hair. While both of her parents continued to look around, struggling to pull their carry-ons over the cracked concrete toward the terminal, she stared straight at me. I worked to fight back the goosebumps.

Their teammates were waiting for them on the other side of passport control. A newly married couple, they'd only crossed into my borders a few months before, but compared to the thirty

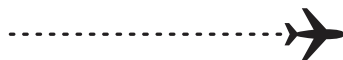
minutes the others had under their belts, it might as well have been a decade. I caught a ride with them in the back of their rented van.

“It’s so great to finally have you here!” The woman smiled even wider, bouncing excitedly in her seat. “We’ve been dying for some American community again!”

Smiling, Cierra hid a yawn. “Well, we can’t wait to dive into the culture here.”

From his place next to Little Annie, James stared out the window. Outside, the gray concrete of the buildings surrounding the airport was slowly changing into the gray concrete of the buildings in the capital. For the first time, he turned in his seat to look at me, his gaze uncertain. “Is it... always like this?”

The husband team member laughed, following his gaze. “Pretty much.”



They stayed that night in their teammates' house. And the next. And the next. Once they'd recouped enough sleep to function properly, the wife took them to a bakery nearby to try burek for the first time. For the record, while I may not have as much variety of food as most countries, my bread is to die for. I could see the recognition of that on their faces as they took their first bite. Cierra felt it the most. Closing her eyes, she savored the taste in her mouth, soaking in the flavor of salty cheese baked into layers of thin, flakey dough. Then, opening her eyes, she looked at me.



If Little Annie's gaze had unnerved me, and James' had accused me, Cierra's was something else completely. It was soft, warm, and knowing, with a light that seemed hand-made just for me. Keeping my eye, she smiled.

“We're really happy to be here.”

As they left the bakery, I stayed in my seat, frozen. ‘Really happy to be here’... It wasn’t something I heard often. It had been a decade since my last census, and everyone knew why. People were leaving. While the world’s population was growing at record speeds, mine was slowly dropping, diminishing each time some lucky college kid got the opportunity to chase down a better life. I didn’t resent it. It was just a fact. With my economy and opportunities, I’d leave too if I could. Everyone would. But these people... they weren’t leaving. They were coming... and they were happy to be here.

Leaning back in my chair, I crossed my arms over my chest. Like that would last.



Their apartment-hunt was a bit of a roller coaster: too expensive, too out of the way, too falling apart. Talk about unreasonable standards. By the time they made it to Vonko’s place, I’d begun to wonder if they were already on their way home. But instead, that second week found all three of them sitting uncertainly, staring across a low coffee table at the gruff old landlord.

Now, Vonko wasn’t a bad person. Just a hardened one. He and I had been friends ever since he was a kid. I’d seen him through the war, the Yugoslavian work camp, and his father’s early death, and that was all before his twenties. Often over the years I’d come and sit with him and his buddies as we watched regimes burn down one by one. We both had reason to be suspicious of something

new. Not that the old was all that great. But at least old was the evil we understood.

As the three of them sat across from him, Vonko stared them down, studying them one by one. Finishing his survey, he glanced in my direction, switching to Macedonian.

“Shpioni?” Spies?

I shrugged.

He turned back to the three of them, squinting suspiciously. When he finally spoke, he’d switched back to English. “Three months rent. Paid upfront.”

James and Cierra shared a glance, taken aback.

From the other room, Vonko’s wife entered, setting a plastic container down on the table. “Cookies?”

Little Annie didn’t need any more prompting.

They moved into the apartment not a week later. Vonko was still convinced they were spies, if for no other reason than they’d be stupid to come from America otherwise, but Cierra wasn’t having any of that. Either by herself or with whoever else from the family she could drag along, she ended up in Vonko’s living room once a week without fail, struggling to communicate with him and his wife through broken words and added hand gestures. I won’t say

the old man fell in love. Though he'd gripe and grumble at his wife, it was enough that she was his. But whatever was leftover in his hardened heart was soon designated for Cierra's weekly visits.



Unfortunately, getting an apartment was only the first step in learning how to live on my terms. Their first time going to buy groceries took several hours. Even though the store was less than half the size of what they were used to, their teammates took them through aisle by aisle, pointing out each item they'd tried and translating what it was. Little Annie stared at the labels, just aware enough of what letters were supposed to look like to know that this was not it. She stared up at me, blinking incredulously. I huffed. For the record, my handwriting is far more legible than most countries'.

That was the first time they realized just how helpless they were not knowing my language. Cierra threw herself head-first into her studies, pouring over textbooks and excelling in classes just like she had in college. James, however, took a different approach.

Now, James wasn't exactly a school person. Sure he'd gone to school, but he'd hated every minute of it, and the thought of taking classes again was enough to make his stomach churn. So, rather than buying a textbook, he found a coffee buddy.

The first time that James and Dané met for coffee was in that first month. They barely knew each other, connected only by a mutual acquaintance, but Dané wasn't the type to pass up a free drink. Still, the terms were a tad fuzzy.

“You want to do what?” asked Dané, his accent heavy.



“Just talk in Macedonian,” replied James, leaning forward against the table. “You know, about the weather, our lives, whatever. Just to give me a chance to practice.”

Dané looked from me back to James, his brow furrowed. “But you don’t know Macedonian.”

James shrugged. “I’ll pick it up.”

Dané sat there for a second, considering. “Zdravo.” Hi. James smiled. “Zdravo.”

Silence.

Grinning, Dané leaned back in his seat. “Káfe?”



One American stereotype that always seems to prove true is how busy people are. That was one thing that the family seemed to have brought in their suitcases. Starting almost as soon as they arrived, they were working every day in the English school that their teammates had begun, putting their church-planting dreams on hold to break into the culture. Still, with teaching their language during the day and studying mine at night, there was soon the question of what to do with Little Annie.

The answer came in the form of gradingka, a mixture between kindergarten and daycare. Not even knowing to read English, they

began to drop her off for the first half of every day, leaving her to figure it out as she interacted with the rest of the Macedonian kids. In their minds, I'm sure it made sense. In playing, she'd learn to communicate with them. In theory.

In her defense, she tried her best most of the time, interacting to some extent with the other kids and teachers, but story times were a whole other story. When all the kids were gathered around to listen to the foreign words, Annie would sneak off to the side, crawling away to tiptoe into the nap room and sit by the window, staring out at the rundown playground.

During that time, I often found myself passing by the schoolyard, stopping to stare back at her through the window. Catching sight of me, she would wave, her eyes lighting up for a moment before she settled back into her own thoughts. I always waved back.

Near the beginning of winter, while she was waiting for her parents to pick her up, I caught sight of her watching one of the teachers. The woman had lit up a cigarette right outside of the schoolyard, letting the smoke rise up from between her lips. Approaching the woman, Little Annie drew herself up, a serious expression on her face.

“Smoking is *bad* for you.”

There was so much resolution in her voice that both of us turned to look at her, taken aback. “What?” asked the teacher, staring at her.

“I said, smoking is *bad* for you,” repeated Annie, a bright curl dangling over her hard expression. “You need to stop.”

The teacher chuckled, taking another long drag on the cigarette. Then she nodded towards me. “I will when he does.”

Blinking, Little Annie followed her gaze.

That night, Annie told her parents all about the interaction. “I don’t understand,” she said, furrowing her brow. “How can a country smoke?”

Cierra shrugged, glancing across at where I was standing. “Maybe it’s a metaphor?”

I scoffed. Like anything I did was a metaphor!

James sighed, running a hand back through his hair. “I think... I know how.” As the two girls turned to look at him, he stood slowly and made his way to the front door. They followed right behind.

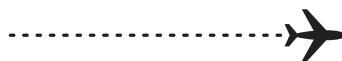
On the front porch, James made his way to the railing, pointing out at the dimming horizon. “That’s... how a country smokes.”

Out in the distance, somewhere near the center of the city, three billows of smoke rose in thick lines, spreading out to cover the skyline. Cierra put a hand over her mouth. “What is that?”

“The central heating,” replied James, sighing. “Dané told me

about it. He said once it turns on for the winter, there's no getting rid of it..."

Leaning against the railing a few feet away, I took a cigarette out of my pocket, lighting up as I watched them take in the sight. Let them judge if they want. I didn't mind. There are only so many ways to keep a city warm.



As winter wore on the days got darker, the nights got longer, and the sky got thicker. This is no great surprise to those who know me. You come to expect it after a while, but the missionary family did not know me. Not really. Not yet.

It hit Cierra the hardest. Sun had always been a lifeline for her, and the abnormally short days mixed with the taste of smog in the

air was just another weight on her shoulders. Another out of a thousand. The English school wasn't working the way they wanted it to. They all blamed me for it, but really it was on them. They didn't want to admit to the world that it wasn't to make money. They didn't want to admit that they were being provided for by people and churches in the States rather than living off their own meager profits. They didn't want to admit that their dreams for their people went further than their grammar skills.

And their students... well, sometimes there's a reason an entire nation has learned not to trust anyone. When every leader lies, and policemen ask for bribes, and every neighboring country is hungry to eat you alive... you learn to notice when two plus two doesn't quite make five.

One day, while I was making the nightly rounds, I caught sight of Cierra on her back balcony. She was staring up at the mountain overlooking the capital, just barely able to make out the lights on the cross at its top through the thick haze of smog. She was beautiful... and crying.



“Please. Please... I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. All I wanted was to be here. All I wanted was to *go*. And now... what difference are we making?”

Even though I was the only one in the street... something told me that she wasn’t talking to me.

That week went on like any other for Cierra. Looking after Little Annie. Studying. Teaching. Cleaning. Crying. Until her Friday classes.

She had had classes with Evona before, she was one of the few students who continued to come back, but this class was... different. Evona sat across the table from her, uncertain, fiddling with the strap on her purse. Taking a deep breath, she looked Cierra in the eye.

“Why are you here?”

There was a power in the question, but also a plea. Something desperate. Tensing in her seat, Cierra turned to look at me. My expression was enough.

“We’re here... for you.”

Nodding, Evona let out a breath. “Good.”

I’m not going to tell you what the following conversation was about. It’s enough to say that it dealt with a lot more than noun -

verb agreement. Once Evona had left, Cierra turned to look at me. There was an odd light in her eyes.

“You... *told* her she could talk to me.”

It wasn't a question. I nodded anyway.

“You told her she could trust me?”

I nodded again, averting my gaze.

Cierra took a step toward me, slowly reaching out a hand. When I looked up again, there were tears in her eyes.

“I don't think I ever properly introduced myself,” she said, smiling around the lump in her throat. “*Jac sym Cierra.*”

The accent was a little off, but I didn't care. She was speaking my language. She had learned... my language.

Nodding jerkily, I took her hand, shaking it once. “*Jac sym Makedonia.*”



It's amazing how much the coming of spring can change things. That first year, it gave me my first change to show off my natural beauty to the family. Sure, the buildings were still gray and communist-looking, but the smog lifted with the first spring

breeze, leaving only crisp mountain ranges and blooming trees behind. And, of course... the kittens.

I'll admit, I'm a bit of an animal person. Yeah, there might not be much wildlife left in the forests, especially with how much hunting people did a few decades back to keep food on the table, but *city* wildlife is a whole different story. Stray dogs and cats are visible around every corner, living their private lives side by side with the rest of you humans. And sometimes, when there is someone I know will do right by them, I make a connection.



When Bandit, Vonko's longtime alley cat friend, first brought his kitten to the missionary family's doorstep, I thought Little Annie might melt with excitement. She skipped in circles around the little furball, petting it and loving on it so much that the poor creature must have thought it was under attack. Standing in the doorway, Cierra and James shared a glance, unable to stop smiling. Neither Bandit nor little Bandita was ever hungry again.

Time went on like that for a while. Things were still stressful, and the darkness of winter that next year still hit hard and fast, but this time there was the knowledge that Spring was on the other side. For a while, it seemed like that's how things would go on. Learning Macedonian, teaching English, wrangling the now homeschooled five-year-old... it was a hectic rhythm, but it was a rhythm nonetheless.

Then everything changed. The English school shut down. As much love as had been poured into it, there was no more denying the need for them to turn their efforts into a church. Almost right away, their teammates returned to the States, beginning their plans of trying again somewhere else. Then it was their turn.

They got the news they were being kicked out of the country about a week before they had to be out. In my defense, it wasn't malice on my leaders' part. Without a job, their presence in the country only looked more suspicious, and that was enough. Technically, the family applied for a religious volunteer visa before they left. They found a small Macedonian church and filed for the ability to partner with them instead, but things like that take time... and paperwork... and connections.

I was sitting with Vonko when they left. We watched from his porch as they worked their suitcases down the flight of stairs and out toward the taxi to the airport. Leaning back in his seat, Vonko huffed, shaking his head. "They won't be back." The way he said it, there was an ironic twist to it. They won't be back... even though I wish they'd come back.

Watching them pull away, I shook my head. “No... they won’t.”

There are times when it is gratifying to be right. And there are times when it’s not. As the weeks grew into months, I found myself more and more often drifting past the places they would normally be, nonchalantly peeking inside. The gradingka. The English school. The apartment. Every time was as disappointing as it was vindicating. Of course, they weren’t coming back. No one ever came and stayed. Not really.

Then something strange happened. About four months after they’d left, while I was playing chess with Vonko out in the yard, the sound of a car rumbled to a stop on the other side of the fence. Blinking, I looked up at him. He was grinning.

They burst through the gate with all the energy that they’d lacked on first crossing the border. Dropping her things, Cierra came straight for me and threw her arms around me, hugging me tight. It was a full ten seconds before I realized I was hugging her back.

Pulling back, she laughed, the tears visible in her eyes. “We said we’d be back.”

Rushing from James’ side, Little Annie latched her arms around my legs, squeezing so tight she nearly tipped me over. “We’re home!”





They stayed in that apartment for another two years. With the pressure of the English school gone, they found a new, easier way of connecting with people through the Macedonian church. Don't get me wrong. I'm not a church person, but even I have to admit it suited them better.

In some ways, I guess you could say that my life was a little more eventful than theirs during that time. You might remember me mentioning before how all of my neighbors hate me. Well, they have easier ways of showing it than I do. Take Greece, for example. We've got some shared history, Greece and I. Literally. If you ask them, since the word 'Macedonia' comes from Greek, we're all just actually Greeks who should still be ruled by them. But that's not how I remember it. I remember the persecution, the being drive out of Greece if we didn't conform, the stealing and the mistreatment, and that's just the start. Not that I have the power to actually do anything about it.

And, with Greece blocking me from entering the EU, I wasn't gonna get that power anytime soon. So I resorted to some less... *dignified* ways of getting back at them.

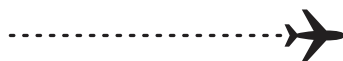
Even if you don't know much about the Balkans, I'm assuming you've heard of Alexander the Great. You might, with your limited knowledge, have learned that he was Greek. But let me enlighten you now. He was actually born in the province of Macedonia. Guess who *really* doesn't like that fact?



Over the course of those two years, I had more fun than I had in ages. It started with the new international airport. *Alexander the Great Airport*. Then the highway that runs down to Greece. *Alexander the Great Highway*. And finally, the statue in the very middle of the capital. Facing towards the Greek border, I built it four stories high, holding out its sword to spite our southern neighbors. This time, however, I got a little cheeky. The official name of the statue? *Warrior on a Horse*. Can you guess how Greece reacted?

Now, in all fairness, I'll admit that my claim on the figure is a tad shaky. Technically, the province of Macedonia that Alexander was from was one actually in Greece, neither in the same location nor with the same people group as we are today. But is that about to stop me from holding it over Greece's head? No. No, it is not.

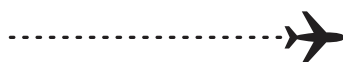
The missionary family watched it all as amused bystanders. But while Cierra and James stayed as far away from politics as they could, Little Annie began toeing the bottom line, letting every visiting foreigner know point-blank that Alexander was Macedonian, not Greek. Have I mentioned how much I love that kid?



After four years at Vonko's, they were forced to move. The old man felt terrible about it, but the added-on apartment was needed for his returning son. Thankfully, the family didn't take it personally. After moving, Cierra still came to visit once a week, drinking coffee with Vonko and his wife as they told her stories about their childhoods.

The reality of their new place, however, was very different from what they were used to. Unlike their old landlord, their new one was incredibly proud of the work he had done on the house's apartment add-on. "I built this place with my own two hands!" was a phrase that came up remarkably often. Especially when the rain came in, or the floor shifted, or condensation from the roof began dripping from the light fixtures. "I built this place with my own two hands!" Translation: suck it up.

Everything changed a little bit after that move. The two of them finally signed Annie up for more serious Macedonian classes, in spite of her groans. It's not that she didn't like me. In fact, after I brought those first kittens to their doorstep, the two of us had gotten along wonderfully, but she didn't see the point in it. On top of every kid her age already knowing English from American TV, most of her friends at that point were already other internationals, the children of other missionaries in the capital. Honestly, I can't say I blame her. Even when she'd look up from one of her lessons to roll her young eyes in my direction.



That house was where James really began to find his footing. Growing in his administrative role in the new church, he helped lead small groups and children's groups, showing up week after week to deliver when no one else did. I would still get the looks from him sometimes. Like when bad language was graffitied all over government buildings. Or when the healthcare system failed to live up to American standards. Or when he caught Annie making a game out of trying to dodge the trash on the sidewalk. He'd turn and look at me like: 'Really?' But then he'd remember the people, and the church, and eventually the looks came less often.

It all came to a head one day in the summer. Things had slowed down because of the heat and the capital emptying as people made their yearly pilgrimages to the beach or the mountains, and life was going well. James was sitting at his desk in the living room, writing to a colleague about a new Bible study they were working on translating into Macedonian.

"They can't figure out how to describe one of the concepts," he sighed, more to himself than to me. "There isn't a word for it in Macedonian."

Settling down on the couch, I shrugged, grinning slightly. "You'll figure it out, Amigo."

At the use of 'Amigo,' he chuckled. When they'd first moved to the country, he'd had such a hard time remembering people's names that he had just called everyone 'Amigo'. Now, years later, it was a

nickname that he couldn't shake.

Pulling back from his computer, he turned to look at me, his brow furrowed slightly. It wasn't like his usual looks. There was no judgment, no disbelief, just the quiet sort of acceptance when you look at something for what it is. "Call me Ja-"

His phone cut him off before he could finish. Wincing apologetically, he took the call. "Yeah. Yeah, I talked to him just last week, why?" His face changed. "I'll be right there."

Hanging up the phone, he rose to his feet, heading towards the door. "What's going on?" asked Cierra, stepping into the room. "What's wrong."

"It's Dané," replied James, not turning back. "He's in jail."



A few hours later found James and Nikola, the pastor they had partnered with, in a corner of the small church office. James paced back and forth, shaking his head again and again. I sat in a chair nearby.

"This is ridiculous!" cried James, shaking his head. "You're telling me that they can just throw him in jail? For no reason?!"

Nikola sighed. "It's not for no reason, James. It's election season. The current party has to make the other one look bad if they're

going to stay in power. Dané was in the wrong place at the wrong time. By pretending he was hired by the other party, they're able to trash them in the news.”

“But he didn't do anything wrong!”

I glanced up, turning from one to the other of them. “What difference does that make?”



James stared at me, and the gleam in his eye made me pull back. Hate. Not for my people, he loved them more than anything, but for me. For all my broken, messed-up pieces.

That's when I left.

A few months later, they ended up getting Dané out. Thankfully, enough people cared about him to pull together the money for a well-known lawyer who was able to intimidate the judge on his behalf. I'd like to say that made everything better... but nothing makes *everything* better. Dané was never quite the same after that. Not even I can justify what goes on in our prisons. I just try not to think about it.

James and I never had our heartfelt bonding moment like Cierra and I did. After everything that happened, he mostly tried to ignore me, finding convenient reasons not to look in my direction whenever I stopped by. I don't think he ever really succeeded. Not as well as he wanted to.

One day, a year later, James was out in the city center, walking to meet with one of the young men he mentored in the church. That's when he heard it. A Roma boy's drumming.

Roma are below most people in my capital. I don't say that to be mean... it's just a fact. They travel through the streets with carts hooked up to horses or mopeds, digging through dumpsters they might be able to eat or sell. So the sight of the Roma boy alone, banging at a small drum for whatever coins might come his way, was not uncommon. But something about that moment hit differently.

James stopped a little ways away, one hand drifting towards the wallet in his back pocket. He hesitated. Then, for the first time in months, he looked at me.



I was standing right behind the little beggar boy, leaning back against a lamppost that had seen better days. As James looked at me, I could see the question in his eyes. I shook my head.

Of course, the money wouldn't go to the kid. It wasn't his idea to sit out in the sun all day, just like it wasn't his idea to live the life he'd been dealt. No matter what anyone did, the coins that kid collected would go into the hands of someone far older than he. Someone just as broken and messed up as I was.

James gritted his teeth, shaking his head in frustration. Then, suddenly, something powerful came over him. Starting forward, he held out a hand and took the boy's arm before he had time to process what was happening. I watched, baffled, as the two of them made their way across the street, talking quietly to each other as they did.

It didn't take long for me to find them through the crowded square. They were standing in front of an ice cream stand, waiting in line for the one thing that could make the summer heat bearable again. The kid was staring wide-eyed at the frozen possibilities, his smile reaching to his ears.

A minute later, that smile was covered in chocolate. James smiled too, waving as the kid made his way back to his drum, and his coins, and his long, hot day. As James stood there, staring after him, I put one hand gently on his shoulder. I didn't say anything. I didn't have anything to say that we both didn't know. I just squeezed.

When he finally turned around, I was gone, too.



The missionary family moved again that year, switching to an apartment that, while not as pretty, had several stories above it to help keep the rainwater out, which was a definite plus. By that point, both James and Cierra had mostly moved on from me, focusing on my people more than me myself. I didn't mind much. They were *doing* things, things that I never could have been able to do myself, and I loved them for it. I *needed* them for it.

Annie, on the other hand, was a different story. She'd always made her closest connections with people who weren't from me. All her best friends came in the form of other missionary kids, with the best connection of all being her friends who lived just a

block away. But that's when the great exodus began.

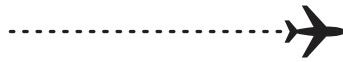
It started with the smog. The winter-long, sky-blocking, lung-clogging smog. The Burrows, who were one of the first missionary families to join me years before, finally couldn't take it anymore. Packing up their bags, they drove to the airport and left forever, taking their asthma with them. I don't know why it happened the way that it did, but that first departure started an avalanche. Before long, one after another foreign family left for good, moving to Germany, or America, or anywhere that wasn't me. One of the first families to go was that of Annie's best friend. Suddenly, the new apartment had a lot less appeal.

I remember passing the house one night only to hear Cierra and James talking through an open window. Things were only getting harder as they got lonelier. Long days turned into long months, which turned into a long year. I could hear it in their voices. They wanted to be anywhere but here. But what would I do without them?

That winter, I swore to myself to give up smoking. I waited long into the first frost, fighting the urge as the weather got colder... and colder... and colder. Then people started to freeze.

When I finally placed that burning paper between my lips, I could feel the change in an instant. The newfound warmth rushed through my veins, traveling down my spine to each tiny, thankful house as the sky turned black. That's when I realized it. There was never going to be a solution to my problems. There was never

going to be a version of me that could be fixed without breaking something else. I was broken... I would always be broken. And it was only a matter of time before I drove away the last people who cared enough to help me.



That year, Annie and I began to spend more time together. Some people might resent being the fallback for someone who's literally had all of their friends leave the country on her, but I wasn't exactly the most popular person either at the moment. With her international bubble gone, Annie started taking more of an interest in the place she was living, trying more of my cooking and even listening to some of my music.

One song in particular was so 'ironically perfect' in her own words she added it to nearly all of her playlists: 'USA.' Complete with electric guitar and accordion rock, it was all about someone from the Balkans trying to immigrate to America only to instantly regret it. When no one was watching, she'd secretly play air guitar to it, laughing at the heavily accented voices singing the English lyrics. Grinning, I'd join with my air accordion.

One afternoon, we walked down by the statue of 'Warrior on a Horse,' looking up at its massive silhouette for the millionth time. She passed it almost without noticing, already knowing each part by memory, but I hesitated. Another Roma boy was sitting on the steps leading up to it, his hand held perpetually out to passers-by. Suddenly... the statue was nothing more than a hunk of metal.

It wasn't easy to get on Greece's good side. Shocker, I know. Even after I renamed the airport and the highway again, they still weren't having it. When they first asked me to change my name to North Macedonia, I was incredulous. It was bad enough to pander to them at all, but this? Letting them win was like letting a little piece of myself die. The piece that was done being told I was lesser, and I was helpless, and I was someone else's to control. But then, I thought back to that Roma boy. No matter how humiliating, getting on Greece's good side meant finally being let into the EU, which meant finally having the help to make things better. Even when foreigners left or the weather turned cold... it was something. And something was better than nothing.

I remember Annie's reaction when she found out.

"You coward."

She said it playfully, but it still stung. Maybe because her voice was one of thousands. Still, I was sure I'd done the right thing.

Until Bulgaria blocked me from the EU.

They didn't want to make trouble, they said. They just wanted one, tiny favor. A favor... I couldn't give them.

That spring the capital was racked with protests... again. No one was exactly surprised. Spring was the season for protests, just like the winter was the season for smog. After the cold and the dark of winter, my people would make signs and chants and shout that

something had to change, and then leave in the summer for the beach or mountains and happily put their problems off to the side until the next spring. Still, this spring was far more... *eccentric*, than most.

They called it the 'Colorful Revolution.' Essentially it was most of the same, except with paint-filled water balloons instead of homemade signs. They targeted the government buildings first, quickly livening the gray concrete walls before turning on the many statues and monuments setup around the city. Annie was sad for the statues, many of which had become as familiar as old friends over the years, but once she saw me... Let's just say she was a lot less sympathetic.



I had avoided her for the first few weeks, knowing exactly the sort of snarky thing her newly teenage brain would come up with. But avoiding never lasts for long. She finally caught up to me on the way home from one of her tennis lessons. I was covered from head to toe in paint, the blues and yellows and reds crusted over my eyelashes and soaking through my clothes. All it took was one glance before she burst out laughing.

“Well, look at you!” she cried, falling into step beside me as soon as she’d caught her breath. “You look like a mascot for a Skittles commercial.”

Shaking my head, I sighed. “I really can’t take any more attacks right now, Annie.”

Annie raised an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth twitching upward. “Aw... what’s the matter? Are you letting a little bit of color get to you?”

“I just... don’t want to talk about it.”

“You know,” she added, glancing across at me, “if you just cooperated, people probably wouldn’t be so hard on you all the time. Just give people what they want.”

All at once, something inside me snapped. I whirled around to face her, my eyes wild. “Is that all it takes, Annie?!” I shouted, my voice sending several pigeons flying. “Is that all it takes? Just give the people what they want?”

Annie froze, taken aback. “I-”

“No! Tell me, Annie! What is it the people want? Because I *clearly* can’t figure it out! Do they want more jobs? Huh? Is that it? Or do they want better pay? Do they want more tourists to help the economy, or do they just want to get out of here as fast as they can? Clearly, they don’t want me to change my name, but they sure want into the EU. So what do I do? I try to make things better - I try to fix things - I finally make progress and what happens?

Bulgaria won’t let me into the EU unless I change my history books. They remember how they acted during the war, how they protected their own Jews but sent soldiers to steal all of mine. How they sent them to their... to their...” I stopped. My throat was tight. “So here I am, right? At this crossroads. I can tell the truth and let everyone who’s part of me suffer. Or I can lie and give up the last piece of me that I have left. And here my own people are... in pain... in need... and they’re attacking *me*.”

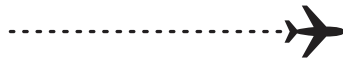
Silence hung between us. Tears gleamed in Annie’s eyes. Sighing, I took a breath, tasting the paint that hissed through my lime-green teeth. They were attacking me... and now I was attacking Annie.

Lowering my gaze, I turned, walking back along the street towards the center. When I was a few meters away, her voice stopped me.

“Wait!”

I hesitated, tilting my head as her footsteps came up behind me.

Slowing beside me, she locked my gaze. “Not everyone blames you.”



A few months later, Annie finally found some new friends... of a sort. They were an online writing group, other high schoolers who liked to talk about books and stories and movies. One day, while she was texting one of her more history-leaning nerds in the group, I apparently came up.

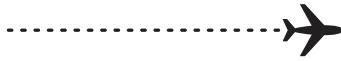
You know, wrote the friend, *considering its place in the Balkans, Macedonia is basically the armpit of the armpit of the world.*

Hesitating, Annie glanced back at where I had slowed in the doorway. I’ll admit it was one of the few times I wished I hadn’t been caught applying deodorant.

Scrunching up her face, Annie turned back towards the screen. She didn’t ever tell me how she responded, but I sneaked a peak at the chat later anyway. It was a whole paragraph, outlining every strength I had ever aspired to with none of my weaknesses.

You know that feeling when a friend of yours sticks up for you no matter what, even when you’re so screwed up that all the insults you hear match what’s already in your head? I sure didn’t.

But I do now.



There was never any doubt about what would happen to Annie once she was done with high school. As soon as twelfth grade was over, she'd be on a plane straight back to America for the next phase of her life. What could be better?

Her high school years went by faster than any of us were ready for. While Cierra and James desperately tried not to think about how quiet the apartment would feel, I tried not to think about what it would mean. How she would find everything I couldn't give her. How she would never move back. How her parents would eventually follow her home.

The two of us did our best to avoid the subject when we were together. She threw herself into the culture then more than ever, like she was trying to make up for all the years she had acted internationally before she had to leave me for good. Or for bad. Or for both.

I remember the last Saturday before she left for the States. She'd already said most of her goodbyes by then and stuffed so many keepsakes in her suitcases that her bedroom shelves had started to look bare, but that day, she went for one last walk up the old trails on the mountain.

I found her at her favorite spot. She was sitting at the top of a little meadow, staring down across a field of poppies that overlooked the city.



Stepping out from the woods, I sat down beside her, taking in the view under the glossy summer sun. It was beautiful. In its own way.

“The poppies,” she said quietly, staring out at the scene. “They were always the flowers I missed most whenever we traveled.”

Nodding, I motioned to the field, considering them with a trained eye. “They’ll be ready for harvest pretty soon. Soon they’ll be picked and used for opium.”

Annie let out a stifled laugh, turning to look at me incredulously. “You can’t just have a good thing, can you?”

A little sheepish, I shrugged. “You can’t live off of a good thing.”

Suddenly serious, she kept my gaze. “I think you’re supposed to.”

We sat there for a long time, staring out at the city past the layers of trees. “I hate this-” she said at last, her voice strained. “I’m just starting to love you... and now I have to leave you.”

I sighed. “Try not to think about it like that. Think about it like a new adventure. Like you did when you first moved here. You’ll go to college, and you’ll finally be with your kind of people again. You’ll make friends and eventually... you’ll love it there, too. It will become home.”

“I know it will,” admitted Annie quietly, still staring down at the city. “And I hate that, too.”



Cierra and James were a wreck dropping Annie off at the airport. As hard as it was for Annie to say goodbye, I think she secretly enjoyed finally seeing James cry for once. That made two of us.

Annie got the window seat on the plane. For a long time, they sat on the tarmac, waiting for the okay to take off. It was six in the morning, the air was chilly, and the heavy-set Balkan man to her right was already starting to snore. Pulling her hood up over her head, she popped in a pair of cheap earbuds, desperate to tune out the sounds of the engine starting up. Then she heard it.

Electric guitar and accordion rock.

It was less than a second before she spotted me through the

window. I was standing primed at the top of the airport's half-broken sign, pumping my air-accordion to the Balkan beat. As I sang along to the song, dancing for all I was worth, I could just see her face watching through the window. The face that was laughing... and crying.

Some may say that there's no way that I could have made her phone randomly choose that song at that exact moment. But I say, when you're a small country, you get really good at small victories.

As the plane took off from the runway, I played the last notes up after it, sending all my heart up with them. So tiny that I could barely make her out in the morning light, Annie waved one last time. I waved back.

The End



Notes:

Meeting Macedonia was written by Sabina Boyer and is brought to you by Global Partners. Sabina also provided the photos for the story.

You can find the audio version of Meeting Macedonia (read by the author) [HERE](#).

You can listen to the song U.S.A. [HERE](#).



About the Author:

While some names and dates were changed in the writing of this story, the heart of it can be found in the Boyer family's journey. After moving to Macedonia in 2009, the family struggled for several years to find their place in the culture, having to change strategies before they found their footing in the Balkans.

While her parents each did this through connections to people, Sabina, their only daughter, was drawn more to the country itself, learning to love it in spite of its many flaws. After fourteen far-too-short years in the country, Sabina moved back to the States to attend Asbury University where she currently studies Screenwriting and Creative Writing in the two-horse town of Wilmore, Kentucky.

