

I want to tell you a story, are we sitting comfortably, then I shall begin....

As the new year dawned and some people got the opportunity to be dancing the night away in costumes as glamorous as the moonlight, an e-mail conversation continued over the digital airways, passed between a short respectable looking man and woman in London offices and a temporary director of the ecumenical humanitarian organisation in Novi Sad, Serbia. The subject was one English girl, who's request for placement had been broad enough that, though no placement had been made in Serbia for some years, the experience exchange program was confident that this girl could make it. "Kate could be an excellent volunteer in EHO, but I wonder whether we could meet her expectations in terms of accommodation, living costs and our time dedicated to her." read the first response from Serbia, coy, perhaps not. For this little sentence held more truth than could first be imagined. But I get ahead of myself, I do, for Serbia is not like Southampton or Swindon, a place we all recognise even if we do not know. No Serbia is a land away from us, it's customs different and yet strangely similar, it's laid back attitude and history of war more prevalent and written across the faces of the young. These people know pollution of warfare and the glow of the night sky from the results of cluster bombs. Though peaceful for a growing time they cling to their past as a defence of their lives now, leaving religion linked to nationalism and a youth apathetic to the world they see themselves in, blaming historical inflation for their poverty and drinking the night away with home made rakia. And so with trepidation and an adventurous spirit the volunteer arrived in the second largest city of Novi Sad, to be greeted by it's three hundred thousand strong population with little social divide and a ethnic mix so diverse that it's almost indecipherable. After the first meeting of Eho and this youngster perhaps expectations ran a little high, but the excitement soon wore, listening to a language so complex and failing to find ways of filling the hours, living alone with so little knowledge of even the basics of existence, the beginning of this story hold tales that probably won't be retold. Angels guided her footsteps, found people crawling out of the woodwork, projects to get involved in, and slowly a timetable formed, peppered with group after group where she would try and join in while the few who could translate partly explained drips of the conversations that flowed around her. From days working with the physically and mentally disabled, Roma children turning up to have help with their studies, computer lessons with the laughter of English operating systems, sewing classes at the eho centre, and a photography project with German volunteers. Other days she would spend speaking her native tongue, trying to expand the vocabulary both as official and unofficial teacher. Often called upon by groups that spoke English. Often she was the novelty, a boast and claim to allow the volunteer or organisation to show off about their links to the wider world, a representative of the sacred EU that so much of the country has their eyes set upon, a world encyclopedia having travelled more extensively than most. She spent her days talking about this religion that didn't involve buildings or symbols, that breathed and danced and inspired. She spent her days listening to stories of how people had come to be where they are, tales of what had shaped the country, and hopes of escape. She learnt to think of the flat land as a place of the forgotten, a place people left when they could and yet somehow they sold the beauty of the diamond for the abundance of sand. This land was a magical place, it didn't really accept anyone, but didn't really reject them either. It had been traded like a pawn for so long it simply sat and waited, gained a reputation it seldom deserved and started to look lazy when it was really more like laid back. The challenge that eho set before her was to find a passion and project of her own, a daunting task for one who barely knows the way home. So days turned to weeks, weeks to months, friendships formed and timetables were fulfilled, parties attended and events saw the unfamiliar sculpture and skin tone of the English girl. She found her place and started to feel like she could temporarily belong in this piece of earth. The temperature rose and the extra layers of coat and jumper were shed. The placement had come to it's middle point and time came for her to depart temporarily to reflect on her time spent and time to come, to renew her three month visa-less standing in the country, to breath a different air for some days. But the air she breathed didn't have the dust of the Novi sad streets, it lacked the chatter of the youth that sat in the squares as the days waned and were born afresh. She dreamt of returning, dreamt of those young, for Novi Sad had thirty thousand

students, dreamt of crashing through their glass façades of apathy and getting them to ask questions afresh. She dreamt of video's being watched and conversations being born, of showing grace and kindness to these young and neglected, often unemployed and hopeless, movie bread theologians and desert wanderers of the soul. Of taking something they would really want to see, of feeding the liquid diet with food and giving reasons for the isolated groups to connect. And here at this late stage is where the story really starts to begin, for here, now she had discovered enough to start to navigate the corridors and complexities, did the project really begin. Like all heroes, she needed a sidekick, a dedicated individual who probably did more work in the long run, but picked up the vision from day one and enabled the project to go from mind wanderings to realisation. Her sidekick was an ex-alcoholic, media student, whose definition of god came no more specific than a giant ball of love, and whose knowledge of anything Christian other than orthodox religious practice was all but nought. From the day our girl returned to Novi sad and sat admiring the view from the fortress and sharing her vision our sidekick was hooked. She was perfect, stubborn, and I'll let her speak for herself. Letter so the project came to be, the paperwork was agreed by eho with no questions, the city council similarly passed through the request with no exceptions other than no date changes. Every office they went to was astounded at how they seemed to have the perfect paperwork, the simplicity at something which normally proved so complex. Every barrier that could have been placed before the project melted like sugar in the rain. The volunteers applied for the positions and the young Christians from a neighbouring town caught the vision and came to join in. The day of the first volunteer interviews our girl received an e-mail saying the funding she had already raised would cover the project, almost exactly. The unexpected costs and savings meant it was kept to, though quiet how would baffle the most experienced of accountant. The evenings were planned. At seven the team of volunteers would show up, wearing their bright green t-shirts which read simply 'ask and know' upon the back and would instantly be surrounded by a group of inquisitive children. For five nights they had a labyrinth of questions, an examination of love, a sculpture of community, a freedom of painted canvasses, and added footprints and hand-prints and risked taking part! Every evening they showed a video, a Christian inspired message but only by digging into it would the young see the god it portrayed. The families and teenagers, the students and the beggar, the Goth and the slut, the angel guided and the demonic inspired moved together. Obviously the addition of the computer game they had not seen before helped but there was more here than just playing with toys. Young Christians who had never entered that square for stories of drunken shambles learned the wisdom of the worldly, non-Christian volunteers saw the miracles of divine providence as time and again prayers were answered almost before they could be uttered, with all the options of conversations God and grace came to the front. Atheists were astounded by the faith of the support workers and their willingness to serve them, religious weary were given a reason to re-examine, and food distribution gave opportunity for every person in the square to be approached. Young Roma children (gipsies to the politically incorrect) found themselves being accepted into activities on an equal footing, 'and even I can play' one was heard to utter after reassurance that the activity was truly free. A young musician caught the atmosphere and provided blues and jazz when the music system failed, and questioning individuals returned night after night to sit in the quieter parts of the evening and discuss the merits of their various world views. Our girl sat and smiled as she observed her volunteers moving between the child and the teen, deep in discussion with parent and toddler, helping each other and those they met without judgement or fuss. These five nights would not be enough she thought, these five nights were the flag on the tip of the ice-burg, and only time would tell if its presence would alert any ship of its danger of sinking into apathy. But the stories she could tell from those five nights would fuel her for months, for years. All too soon it was over, all too soon the tiredness of each night swept the volunteers and things were packed away. But on the nights between she would sometimes meet people and they would say, 'your that girl who did that project in Porta aren't you?'