

DOUBLE-DECKER DONKEY

By Steve Horowitz

.It was spring – the season known for the rains that often brought havoc to the mud-built villages, the unpaved streets, and the dirt brick walls filled with straw. Fortunately, I hadn't seen much of that; I lived in a town uphill from the river, and not too many people I spent time with – teachers in particular – worried or even talked much about these hazards of the season.

It was typical spring weather when I traveled to visit an American friend, a teacher, in an overgrown village five hours up in the mountains – two buses to the end of the line on an unpaved, pothole-filled, dirt and gravel-lined road. I went at that time because I was trying to create a library, and John had lots of books he never used. So, as usual, without any way to let each other know we were planning to visit, I just went down to the bus station and took the first bus heading in his direction-from Azerbaijan to the edge of Kurdistan. As we headed south, fewer and fewer people spoke Farsi, the national language; peasants populated the bus route and communicated in languages or dialects that I knew little or nothing of. Getting to John's little town, called Eagle's Nest, was a normal five hours of third world transportation – a bus that should have been junk-heaped a decade before, filled with tires, chickens, dust and a driver flirting with death on narrow mountain roads half-washed away.

It rained for most of three days in Eagle's Nest. We tried to stay warm in the cold dampness, read when we had electricity, went up on the roof when it wasn't storming to watch the sheep herded in at dusk. We ate whatever was available at the market and cooked as creatively as John could manage as long as the gas cylinders held out. But mostly there was the nourishment of conversation, tea, and visits with John's friends and neighbors.

In the rain, he waved good-bye and the bus headed down the gravel slope. The weather had worsened the road conditions, resulting in more frequent eruptions of spontaneous group prayers on the bus, definitely not something to soothe the squeamish traveler. In fact, after a while, out of both fear and boredom, I found myself repeating what I could manage of the increasingly familiar chant and hoping it would save us from disaster. Then, suddenly, a commotion. The bus slowed down. I tried to find out what was going on, but I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. Everyone seemed to be craning their heads toward the left side. The bus stopped behind a long row of stalled trucks and other vehicles. The rain had destroyed a big chunk of the road along with a village that lay along the opposite bank; cattle and debris (and I prayed not people) were floating within visible distance. I could see a number of trucks stuck in the river, angled to one side, water swiftly moving around their outlines. I reflected on my predicament: an American teacher with at least fifty pounds of books in a plastic suitcase surrounded by distraught peasants unable to go anywhere in the midst of a flood's devastation. I had no idea where any of us could go; we were trapped.

People were shouting in high-pitched, nervous voices. A driver came up to me to say that for the equivalent of about a dime, he would try to drive through the flood to the road with as many people as he could fit inside the frame of his pickup. Like a desperate fool, I joined the 15 to 20 dark coated Turkish villagers crammed into the pickup. A loud round of prayers. I was nearly

crushed under the weight of several large men. The truck groaned, the villagers prayed, the gears crunched, man and machine uncertain of how or where to go, how to avoid the holes that could send all of us underwater. Suddenly, the truck began to lean sharply...and slowly one end started to sink. Everyone scrambled to get out, taking their chances with the water depth. With my bag of books (which I refused to abandon), I was the last to get out. I found myself waist-deep in mud and flowing water, about 1/4 mile from the roadway. A man appeared. I couldn't tell where he had come from. "Mister. I take, I take...5 rials... come, come," as he offered me his back.

On the shoreline, which was actually the connecting road, and still navigable, a group of schoolboys were falling over in convulsive laughter: an American teacher completely soaked and caked in mud from head to foot, holding a bag bursting with books while being carried on the back of some poor guy who either took pity on the American or desperately needed the few cents payment. Two wretched creatures moving slowly through the dark wet muck. They laughed and laughed: a double-decker donkey.