

# Snowdownia.

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The definition of Snowdonia is the area surrounding and affected by Mount Snowdon, the highest peak in the mountains of North Wales.  
(elevation 3,560 ft)

Hurrying forward he took the aisle seat in the exit row, leaving an empty space between us. Dark and youthfully handsome he exuded nervous excitement and within minutes had eagerly introduced himself: Tural, a State Department scholarship student from Azerbaijan headed for a year of study in economics at the University of Waterloo, Iowa.

By our arrival at O'Hare Airport eight hours later I had not only learnt about the scholarship program, extended several years earlier to all the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, but a lot about Tural as well. He hadn't travelled before, had never seen snow, the ocean, and many many other things; had never been to a big city, and had been totally overwhelmed by the turmoil of London's Heathrow when transferring to our Chicago bound flight. I learnt about his mother and his family, his expectations for his year in Waterloo, and his desire to learn everything possible about the United States. He had innumerable questions, which I answered as best I could. His innocence and naivety were so delightfully refreshing they invited a desire to help him in whatever way possible. We exchanged email addresses and I told him he could stay with my husband and me should he want to visit Chicago.

A few days later I received an email telling me that I was his first friend in America, and had become his second mother. Our correspondence continued as his experiences grew through the impressive program of visits set up for students on the State Department program. Two scholarships are awarded annually to each former communist satellite country for admission to universities around the USA, no two recipients speaking the same language going to the same institution - thus fostering improvement of their English. In Waterloo Tural had visited city hall, a courthouse, a voter registration drive, and a prison - this was the time of Abu Ghraib. In early November he'd witnessed the voting process of the 2008 election, a visit followed by an ecstatic email saying he would love to be Obama - because he was so loved by

everyone. An interesting point of view coming out of small town Iowa, but indicative of how “The Man from Chicago” had captivated the youth vote across the country.

In mid-November Tural asked to come to visit at Thanksgiving. Because my husband was in Japan, I had planned to join friends in Bloomington for the holiday, but wanting to honor my invitation, and unwilling to take Tural to yet another small town and cheat him of his Chicago experience, I agreed. We spent the holiday with Jewish friends at an eclectic table of mixed religions and cultures, including a delightful young Russian girl with whom Tural spoke fluently in her own language.

During the course of the long extended meal, he showed his growing maturity when questioned about Azerbaijan. He gave excellent account of its salient political and social advances, also acknowledging its shortcomings. No doubt he had perfected this delivery over the previous months in Waterloo in response to enquirers, some of whom had probably never heard of his country. On departure after dinner he politely asked to be dropped at Best Buy on Clark Street where, I learnt, his co-student, Nasim from Turkmenistan, was holding place in line for the early morning sales - they had certainly learnt the economics of American consumerism. Late on the Sunday evening they tumbled aboard the bus back to Iowa, clutching bags of sandwiches, and their new computers, so gallantly won at the cost of an extremely cold night on a Chicago sidewalk.

The emails continued. I was told of the government allowance, part of the scholarship program to allow for travel around the US. The two boys visited our daughter in Seattle and our son in LA, among other cities. They stretched their money as far as possible to maximize their experiences. In February on a trip back from New York they stopped over with us in Chicago and, as I was going to the opera that evening, I offered to take them too. Without prejudice or preconceptions, and some excellent student tickets, we sat in row DoubleA to see The Magic Flute. Once they got over their awe at the size and gilded opulence of the Civic Opera House, they were transfixed by the performance. Later Tural told me proudly of the Azerbaijan Opera, which he had seen.

The following July Tural returned home to Baku, yet his emails continued to arrive giving glimpses of his life there. His initial desire to return to the USA for graduate study waned as he integrated back into his own society. The requests for information on oil engineering courses in the US changed as he set his sights on finding employment with one of the major international accounting firms, then recruiting in the Caucasus. Messages were sent from his mother and I sent back birthday gifts. I was happy for Tural and his continued success.

One day an email arrived telling me of his surprise and concern about five boys from his university who has disappeared to Afghanistan to join the Taliban. No one had suspected them and the entire student body was upset and alarmed. I replied with little reference to the incident, renewing my encouragement to Tural for his upcoming graduation. And that was the last I heard of him. It seemed our communication had been cut. A year later a message arrived via Nasim In Turkmenistan, to which I hastily replied. But again communication was broken. Despite expecting that this interference would continue I occasionally sent messages to them both, to no avail.

That is until eighteen months ago when I received a jubilant message from Tural; he was in Washington DC on a week's training course with Ernst and Young, his current employer in Baku. He didn't have any free time for travel but wanted to make contact. I rushed to reply and congratulate him on his success. But by the end of the week again silence. Some months later another email announced that he had been sent to London for three years. Knowing I was English he hoped we might at some point meet-up again in the UK. I was ecstatic. What wonderful success this charming and obviously capable young man was having. What an amazingly successful outcome of a government program, designed to select promising students from far distant countries and cultures, for exposure to the US system and education. Tural was a natural: intelligent, outgoing, open-minded and persistent; he made friends, and made efforts to keep in touch with them. I am lucky enough to be one of his friends, despite possible efforts of another branch of the same government that sponsored him, that seeks to cut relationships they deem suspect, presumably based on computer identification of key

words.

Can there be another explanation for the breaks in communication between Tural and me as long as he was in Azerbaijan? Once he was in the US or Europe, email connection was renewed. Were he and I caught up in Snowdownia, trapped in the outer fringes of the great security trawl made public by Edward Snowden?

Given the world today, I am not particularly averse to the collection of data for security purposes, I had not feared surveillance because I have not, nor am planning on doing anything that could possibly be of security interest. What is disturbing is that this was an innocent communication that was never checked out to establish its innocence - it was simply terminated. I resent this and what it portends for the future for those inadvertently caught up in surveillance without opportunity to establish their absence of guilt.

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