ANTHONY LOYD is an award-winning foreign correspondent who has reported from numerous conflict zones including the Balkans, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Iraq and Chechnya. A former infantry officer, he left the British army after the First Gulf War and went to live in Bosnia, where he started reporting for *The Times*. *My War Gone By, I Miss It So* is his memoir of that conflict.

Praise for *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*

'An extraordinary memoir of the Bosnian War … savage and mercilessly readable … deserves a place alongside George Orwell, James Cameron and Nicholas Tomalin. It is as good as war reporting gets. I have nowhere read a more vivid account of frontline fear and survival. Forget the strategic overview. All war is local. It is about the ditch in which the soldier crouches and the ground on which he fights and maybe dies. The same applies to the war reporter. Anthony Loyd has been there and knows it'

Martin Bell, *The Times*

'A truly exceptional book, one of those rare moments in journalistic writing when you can sit back and realise that you are in the presence of somebody willing to take the supreme risk for a writer, of extending their inner self. I finished reading Anthony Loyd's account of his time in the Balkans and Chechnya only a few days ago and am still feeling the after-effects … I read his story of war and addiction (to conflict and heroin) with a sense of gratitude for the honesty and courage on every page'

Fergal Keane, *Independent*

An extract from
September Publishing

'Not since Michael Herr wrote *Dispatches* has any journalist written so persuasively about violence and its seductions in all of war's minutiae of awful detail … an account that demystifies war and the war reporter and strips them bare before the reader'

Peter Beaumont, *Observer*

'Undoubtedly the most powerful and immediate book to emerge from the Balkan horror of ethnic civil war … far more revealing and convincing than anything recounted to camera by visiting journalists and politicians'

Antony Beevor, *Daily Telegraph*

'An astonishing book … a raw, vivid and brutally honest account of his transition from thrill seeker to concerned reporter'

Philip Jacobson, *Daily Mail*

'Chilling … a true picture into the brutality of war and should be required reading for all those politicians who use phrases such as "collateral damage" and "surgical strikes"'

John Nichol, *Daily Express*

'Both beautiful and disturbing'

Wall Street Journal

'Part war memoir, part coming-of-age tale and part junkie diary, it's a raw account of the hypnotic lures of violence, heroin and danger'

Carla Power, *Newsweek*

'This is more than just despatches from the front. There's blood-red-vivid descriptions of the fighting, sure, but there's also the dark poetic insight of a man who's seen humanity at its worst. Loyd spares us nothing – not brains spilling out on the street, not his own bleak despair, not even the jokes – and he deserves a medal for it'

Maxim

'Magnificent ... a stench of blood, excrement, mortar-fire, slivovitz and human bestiality emanates from these pages'

Ben Shephard, *Literary Review*

'Battlefield reportage does not get more up close, gruesome, and personal … The fear and confusion of battle are so vivid that in places, they rise like acrid smoke from the page' *New York Times*

'Loyd's strongest writing is in his descriptions of carnage – of the sound and smell of shellfire; of the sexual release of blasting away with an automatic machine gun … This is pure war reporting, free from the usual journalistic constraints that often give a false significance to suffering. And Loyd waxes eloquent on the backblast of his war time, a heroin addiction that begins before his arrival and becomes the only way he can survive his breaks from the fighting' *Salon*

'First-rate war correspondence … [in] the great tradition of Hemingway, Caputo, and Michael Herr' *Boston Globe*

'*My War Gone By, I Miss It So* moves at the pace of a thriller. Why bother reading war fiction when you can read such intense reporting?'

LA Weekly

'[Loyd] has written an account of its horrors that will wipe out any thoughts you might have had that we have reached the limit of the worst human nature has to offer. The monstrosities he describes are beyond belief. But the book is also compelling for what it tells us about fear' *National Geographic Adventure*

'A testament to his honor and courage. And while it would be impossible for one man to tell the whole story, his book shines with small truths and larger, philosophical ones about life and war'

New York Post

My War Gone By, I Miss It So

ANTHONY LOYD

septe
mber

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This paperback edition published in 2019 by September Publishing
Published with new foreword in 2015 by September Publishing
First published in 1999 by Grove Press

Copyright © Anthony Loyd, 1999, 2015

The right of Anthony Loyd to be identified as the author of this
work has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any
means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the copyright holder

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed,
sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 978-1-912836-04-8

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

Mojim drugovima – For my comrades

Glossary

APC:	armoured personnel carrier.
armija:	Bosnian government's predominantly Muslim army.
Balije:	pejorative term for Bosnian Muslims.
BiH:	Bosnia Hercegovina.
BMP:	Soviet APC.
Četniks:	traditional Serbian term for irregular troops (from *četa* — 'unit'). In the latest war it referred to Serb nationalist fighters, though it became a label used by Bosnian Croats and Muslims to refer to all Serb soldiers.
DF:	DF 118s are prescribed heroin substitutes in tablet form.
drug:	comrade.
Gastarbeiter:	guest workers in Germany.
hajduk:	frontier guerrilla.
Herceg-Bosna:	self-styled Bosnian Croat independent state.
Hercegovina:	southern Bosnia.
HOS:	Croatian paramilitary force.
HV:	Croatian regular army.
HVO:	Bosnian Croat army.
imam:	Muslim prayer leader.
JNA:	Yugoslav People's Army.
Kuna:	Croatian currency.

MIA:	Missing in action.
NDH:	the Croatian fascist puppet state, which incorporated most of Bosnia, from 1941 to 1945.
partisans:	Tito's communist guerrilla army of the Second World War. Though dominated by Serbs it was a multi-denominational Slav force.
RPG:	rocket-propelled grenade.
šehid	martyr.
smrtniks:	Chechen fighters committed to death rather than withdrawal once in battle.
Turks:	pejorative term for Bosnian Muslims.
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commission for Refugees.
Ustaša:	Croatian fascist movement led by Ante Pavelić during the Second World War.

Pronunciations

Serbo-Croatian Pronunciations

The pronunciation of the language and its names are simple and phonetic with the following exceptions:

C is pronounced 'ts'.
Č 'tch' (as in 'scratch').
Ć like 'tch', but more similar to the 't' in 'future'.
Đ (d) 'j' (as in 'jab').
J 'y' (as in 'Yugoslavia').
Š 'sh'.
U 'oo' (as in 'mood').
Ž 'zh' (as in 'Zhivago').

Definition of 'Bosnian'

The people of Bosnia are predominantly southern Slavs. Though still a contentious definition, as a generalization it is true to say that those whose ancestors converted to the Orthodox Christian religion are known as Bosnian Serbs, while those who took the Catholic faith became known as Bosnian Croats. The majority, who inherited a loose form of Islam, are known as Bosnian Muslims. For simplicity in this book they are termed Serbs, Croats and Muslims. More recently the term 'Bosnian', or Bošniak, usually refers to Bosnian Muslims.

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

W.B. Yeats, *'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death'*

Foreword

These are the words of a young man that I once knew well. On a winter day, nearly a quarter of a century ago, he left his country in the manner that curious young men do: restless, vainglorious and yearning for adventure beyond a distant horizon. He wanted to see a real war. This is the story of what he found in Bosnia, where he stopped and lived for a while during the years of fighting.

I still recognize him, though much has changed.

My War Gone By, I Miss It So was written in the summer of 1997, two years after the end of the war, in little over three months, and one draft during an on-the-run interlude from heroin at a house by a river in France. The sudden firework burst of drug-free clarity, together with the brooding awareness of short reprieve, gave the writing its particular mood. When the autumn came I dutifully returned to London and the waiting arms of oblivion.

Looking back now, I recognize with some amusement the self-involved sense of wisdom that I had at the time of writing. Forgive me, for a young man's grandiosity in the telling is part of the vanity of youth, and overall I do not think that I short-changed Bosnia or its people too much in the tale.

I could never have told my story without first bending my knee to theirs: to the epic struggle between a flawed good and

incomplete evil, in which hope and tolerance were slain by the tawdry agents of sectarian hatred, in a slow time murder watched by the world.

Bosnia's plight and the moral abrogation that accompanied it, which allowed thousands of civilians to be slaughtered little over two hours' flight time away from London, blew their spores across the post-war years, so that echoes of what happened there, in the bucolic depths of the forests and valleys, still reverberate around the debates on intervention in the Middle East and North Africa today.

Yet for as much as it is an account of the war as I witnessed it, *My War Gone By* is also a personal story of lost innocence and rite of passage. Freshly emerged from metamorphosis, I was a jaded narrator when I wrote the book and, so fresh from war, inevitably thought that I was newly grown old and worldly wise. Huh! The war may have been the defining experience of my twenties, but I am old enough now to recognize how young I was then, even at war's end.

Growing older was what happened after the war in Bosnia. Growing older was war in Syria, war in Iraq, war in Afghanistan, war in Chechnya, war in Libya, war in Kosovo, war in Sierra Leone, and war in other places too: growing older was two decades of war, war, war.

Growing older was a pensioner's quota of dead friends by my mid-thirties; growing older was to hold the hand of my mother as she died; growing older was making vows and breaking them; growing older was dead lovers; growing older was to be bound and afraid and beaten and shot.

Growing older was also about love – good love, bad love, war love, all the love in every fire fight, the shared and terrible

love of it all. Growing older was cleaning up; growing older was bathing beneath the glow of fatherhood's golden skies; growing older was to cling to storm-weathered, besieged dreams despite it all; growing older was to rejoice and be thankful. (And, oh God of sinners, chancers and lucky men, I am thankful every day.)

Growing older was also to know that the answer to the question, after so many wars in so many places and with so much love and so much death, should be 'peace'. But I am not so old that I know what the question is, so I yet wander in the gardens of carnage and wonder why.

Someday, of course, I will know the right question, and I hope that by the time that day arrives my daughter will not remember her father as a fool, for to be in wars aware of age and wanting very much to live is a perilous position for a man: stupid, some would say.

As for how the others among these pages grew older? I should know the fate of everyone in this book. I do not. Youth takes few accomplices in its swift advance, and when peace came I walked out of that war hungry, wasted and nostalgic for the thrill of what it had been to me, rather than what it became for others, few of whom I ever saw again.

In quieter moments of reflection I often wonder, knowing now how desperate a fugitive time can be, what became of Momćilo, Petar, Yelena, Victorija and Milan, and of all the strangers who showed me such kindness, and what became too of the three-year-old girl, badly wounded in cross-fire, that I had helped rescue in western Bosnia so long ago. Did the beat of the butterfly's wing over her survival alter the course of the universe in some positive way? Or did she live to stride

like Medusa through her world, turning those she encountered to stone? I do not know. I found the complexity and guilt of trying to maintain relationships with those in war through no choice of their own too much to bear then, and now. Walking in and out of other people's nightmares is complicated enough, without making things worse by getting involved.

There are some here whose later fate I do know. A few – the fellow travellers, there through choosing – remain close friends, war siblings forever blooded by the Balkan Eden in which we grew up.

Others in this book I learned of through snippets in newspapers or snatches of conversation years later. Two died drunk in car crashes. One was an indicted war criminal but died during his trial. At least one went to prison. Another man, a fighter who cut ears from corpses as trophies, later became a waiter in an Australian café.

Kurt Schork, the outstanding war correspondent of his time, who was the best of us all in Bosnia and as brave and true a friend as anyone could ever wish for, was killed in Sierra Leone in an ambush in 2000 along with Miguel Gil Moreno, another pivotal figure among my comrades. The cosmos made a terrible and reckless mistake that day, killing such rare champions so far ahead of the hour of their need. Heaven must be filled with celestial error.

Kurt was my mentor as well as my friend. The road into the unknown seldom looked better than when rolling down it at dawn in his company. Fifteen years later, I remain profoundly grateful for the chance to have worked with such an inspiring man. There is little I have ever achieved since that I cannot in some way trace to his influence.

Maktoub, my friends: 'it is written'.

I cleaned up after Kurt and Miguel were killed. I was pretty much clean by the time it happened, after a few years slamming around the ring with heroin. About or week or so after their deaths I went out and got wasted just one more time, to remind myself of the route back to deep shelter should I need it again. After that I slid from the dream back into the world, shed the opiate cloak and walked away.

There were to be many other casualties after that. My later generation of war friends tumbled like mown hay. Some were killed; many others were wounded or irreparably burned out by the escalating demands and dangers posed by reporting on wars after 9/11.

Though we had never realized at the time, the Bosnian war represented the closure of an era of reporting. With the start of the twenty-first century, as the West became entangled in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, so the days of living and reporting 'amongst the people' ended for most Western correspondents, as the interventionist creed in which so many of us in Bosnia had believed was misapplied and ruined.

While the moral high ground tremored and crumbled beneath us, so our own credibility became grievously injured. Non-interventionism proved as dangerous. By the time the death count from the Syrian war had swamped itself in the blood of more than 200,000 dead, few people in the Muslim world still regarded Western journalists as credible witnesses, but saw us instead as the epitome of cynicism, charting the depths of depravity and suffering knowing full well that our record would neither bring good nor redress.

Looking back in sorrow from these end-of-days, the period

when we had once defined our courage merely as the ability to navigate through the impersonal currents of war violence, risking death by chance rather than by intent in order to report, seem simple and carefree by comparison.

Now we are hunted down and butchered for spectacle.

With this in mind, *My War Gone By* belongs as much to a past era as my own youth, and I flick through the pages not just with a sense of amused indulgence for the naivety and narcissism of the young man who hitch-hiked to Bosnia so long ago, but also with a trace of grief for the world as it was then, when hope and conviction and zest and friends were so in evidence and still alive.

Yet, if in the fullness of time my own daughter should come to tell me one winter day that she wishes to abandon the dull, lumpen crowd of those who aspire to fulfil their dreams but never take the risk involved with doing so: that she wishes to navigate the reefs and shorelines of certainty in a fearful world; to share the best and worst of times in the company of men and women who might smell of the winter war, of gun oil, brandy, wood smoke and tobacco swept from destroyed factory floors; to hear the thump of artillery and the chatter of machine guns, the soft jingle of muffled harnesses as the mule trains come down from the mountains with boxed ammunition and rifles as their loads; to break the yoke of familiarity and seek brave adventure over that horizon, telling others of what she sees there. If she comes to tell me this, then I hope I shall be able to reach back across the years, scratch my scars, remember my friends, recall that every great adventure starts with the lonely impulse of delight, and tell her ‘go’.

11 May 2015

PROLOGUE

The Forest

Srebrenica, Summer 1996

There were places among the crowded trees where the birdsong dropped away to nothing, shaded clearings with a sound vacuum: once you had stepped in no noise could reach you from the outside world except the rustling summer breeze, and you did not want to listen to that too carefully, for if you were alone your mind began to play tricks and it was more than just the grass that you heard whispering.

The bones lay strewn for miles through this woodland, paper-chasing a rough path eastwards across the hills from Srebrenica, the trail breaking then restarting in a jumbled profusion where a last stand had been made or a group of those too wounded or exhausted to go on had been found. The whole area was saturated with the legacy of the killing. There were mass graves in the valleys where prisoners had been herded, executed, then covered with a casual layer of earth which one year later was still heavy and reeking with decay. Elsewhere, more poignantly, there were solitary skeletons hidden in the undergrowth, individuals who had tried to make it out alone but had been hunted down and their lives chopped or shot from them. Even the roadsides bore tributes to the events of the previous summer.

Beside one junction a skeleton in a pinstripe suit lay tangled around a concrete post. Among the bundle of collapsed bones fast being reclaimed to the earth by brambles and moss you could see that the man's arms had been bound to the post with wire. Whatever had happened to him, it was unlikely to have been quick or painless.

If a chart could be made of ways to die then Srebrenica's dead had ticked off most of the options. Some had gone by their own hand in panicking despair; others in confused gunbattles with their own troops or those of the enemy; many more had surrendered, taking a last long walk in the summer sun to stand in rows with their comrades, the languid working of machine-gun bolts behind them the final sound they heard, except perhaps for a few last whispered words of love or contrition.

The Serbs avoided the forest whenever they could. There was still a heavy cult of the dead in the villages of eastern Bosnia, a belief that the spirit hung around the body after death. So the last thing a Serb woodsman would want to do was go into those dark woods alone, especially as most of the locals were, at the very least, complicit in the orgy of killing that had gone on beneath the canopy of leaves.

It was not only the Serbs who got the spooks. A recce troop of US soldiers from the NATO forces in Bosnia had been tasked to secure the site of a mass grave so that war crimes investigators could carry out an exhumation. More than a hundred Muslim dead lay buried in the slope of a bank capped by an earthen track leading to the hamlet of Cerska, one of numerous clusters of broken, long-abandoned buildings that huddled within the trees. The Americans were not really expecting trouble, but if it came then fire would be met and – as their staff sergeant stated

in a way that left no room for doubt – 'most certainly overwhelmed' with fire. They had a large array of hardware with them which if put to use could have levelled most of the remaining hamlet ruins and a lot of the forest. Somehow, though, it was the staff sergeant himself who seemed their most threatening asset. He was a large man, down to his last few months in the army, and everything he did and said was coated with the slick confidence and assuredness you find in men comfortably affiliated with taking life in a professional way. He had been a paratrooper for his first tour of Vietnam, a doorgunner with the aircav for his second. His men called him the Anti-Christ and unflinchingly obeyed his every instruction, while senior officers moved about him with wary respect.

Yet on the first night of their task, when the time came to send a foot patrol out into the trees, a tall black trooper from Mississippi refused to get out of his Humvee. He said he could hear voices coming from the bottom of the bank where the work of the investigators had scraped away the topsoil to uncover the first few bones. His mama had told him all about that stuff back in Mississippi, he told the staff sergeant. He would soldier against any enemy anywhere in the world, but there was no weapon in their arsenal big enough to deal with what he heard going down at the bottom of the bank.

The other men sort of laughed, but it was a dry sound that quickly faded into the night. There was none of the usual ragging and they shuffled their feet drawing unseen patterns in the stones of the track, not catching one another's eyes. The black trooper chewed his lower lip, hung his head and held out his hands. 'No, Staff,' he mumbled, 'I am not fucking around with you.'

A less experienced commander would have made an issue of it, forcing the trooper into a position where he would refuse to soldier and his fear would spark among the other men, clouding the mission in the days and nights ahead. But the staff sergeant did not have to prove his authority and, more pertinently, understood the way superstition can grip soldiers in the field. There are certain vibes that even the most modernized army in the world ignores at its peril. So he made the trooper hold his own gaze, broke the connection himself for a few seconds to look into the forest, then looked back into the frightened man's eyes. He ordered the man up to take over the .50 cal mounted on the Humvee and sent the white boys out into the trees. The pressure subsided so fast you could hear it hiss.

The war had been over for nine months. There was still enough of it in the atmosphere to fuel my memories and feed a sorrowful nostalgia. I reran the reels of the past four years through my mind feeling depressed, constantly seeking out friends to post-mortem the whole thing again and again in the hope of recapturing even a tiny part of its heady glowing rush, of putting it into some kind of context. The Muslim dead who still lay where they had been killed afforded a direct transfusion back to those times, a link that juiced up the whole engine again.

For several days I watched the work of the war crimes team as they dug at Cerska, my brain ceaselessly delving into the past like a tongue probing an ulcer. The smell and the flies got worse each hour but it was the patronizing tone of the team's spokesman that finally did for me. He seemed incapable of communicating without delivering some holier-than-thou aside, twinning piety with pathology in a mix that would have had a saint reaching for a bucket to throw up in. He could make

the connection between the victims at the bottom of the bank and the absent killers that pulled the triggers. Anyone could do that bit. However, the links fell apart between himself and 'the beasts' he demonized. He seemed to think it took something really special to kill prisoners.

It was always difficult when people who had not been in the war started voicing their opinions on it. While I loathe the way some men act as if they are a kind of higher being simply because they have seen a bit of action, nothing is guaranteed to anger me more than some Johnny-come-lately who turns up when it is all over and starts getting large with the hows and whys. Listen to some of the revisionist junk being spouted by the post-conflict generation of journalists and NATO representatives in Sarajevo and you begin to wonder if they are even talking about the same war.

So when a friend of mixed American and Yugoslav blood asked me if I would like to go back into the forest with him to find the body of a relative, I readily agreed. Anything was better than listening to the war crimes spokesman. My friend was fine company, having hung out in Bosnia for much of the war, which meant I could be sure that he would not grate my nerves with sermonizing. He had a Yugoslav's insight and New York humour; throwaway slang and expletives rolled through his dialogue in a combination that cracked you up, the more so as the speaker appeared completely oblivious to how funny they were. A survivor of Srebrenica had given him directions of where his wife's cousin was last seen, apparently already wounded and being carried by two others. Yet the details were typically vague. Never ask a Bosnian where something is. The answer will either be a riddle that takes hours to unravel, or

such an unformed generalization you feel embarrassed to ask for further clues.

And so it was that the friend and I ended up stumbling around in a vast segment of forest looking for 'a fallen tree'. Of course we never found the dead relative, though there were scores of others there. The dead have never lost their fascination for me. There was a time at the beginning of the war when my curiosity had often been tempered with sorrow, shock or horror at the sight of the state of bodies. Brutal mutilation would stick in my eyes like a thorn for days, or else the expression or posture of a corpse would evoke sadness and anger within me. But as you lose count of the number of dead you have seen, a hidden threshold of sensitivity is raised, neutralizing most of your reactions. Only the curiosity remains. Some of it is borne out of my inability to connect the thought of a living, breathing person with the discarded husk death leaves, even when I have seen the whole transition from life to death. There is no God behind me, and I have strong doubts concerning the existence of a soul these days, but when I look at a corpse it always seems as if there is more than simply life missing. There have been a few disturbing exceptions when death gives more than it takes. I once saw a dead Russian girl. In her early twenties, long haired and lithe, she had caught a bit of shrapnel in her chest, one of those tiny wounds that you would not believe could take a life but does. In death the rude sun-burnish went from her skin, retreating before an ethereal blue glow. Alive she was strikingly pretty. Dead she was so beautiful you could have raised an army to sack Troy just for possession of her casket. I had not wanted to look too far into that reaction within me and walked away from her presence, unnerved for days.

Many of the dead in the forest had their ID cards with them, scattered by looters around their bones, and the one-dimensional black and white faces on the photographs seemed so abstract as to be almost irrelevant. But even if their owners had still been alive, those ID pictures would probably have been obsolete. Anyone who stayed in Bosnia during the war had their face change on a level beyond the purely physical. Even the war crimes spokesman might have had something different glowing in his eyes had he been there when it was all on. It would be so trite, so inappropriate to say that the eyes lost something as they witnessed the whole madness of it all, to talk of empty stares and children with hollow gazes. But it was not what people lost in Bosnia that you noticed in their eyes, it was what some of them gained. Whether it is your own or someone else's, the taste of evil leaves an indelible mark on the iris. You can see it flickering in moments of introspection as the muscles relax. I do not know if I would have recognized the pre-war picture on my own ID card – the open baby face, tousled hair and curious innocence – had I seen it lying on the forest floor that day. I find that man almost a stranger now.

The sun sank lower in the sky, the shadows deepened and my mood darkened. I had only been clean for a few days, kicking my heels through a succession of sleepless nights in a hotel in Tuzla and, as always in the opiate backblast, I felt raw and hyper-sensitized, thoughts surging and abating like the swell of the sea. I have sweated through withdrawal in a variety of obscure war-torn hovels, but that forest had to be one of the strangest.

My friend kept talking but my responses grew more distant. Their dead; my dead; necro-fascinations and gravediggers that did not get it at all; nationalism, fascism, level killing fields and

equal guilt; all the crap you hear talked about Bosnia. You can break it down and build it up any way you want, throw on the cloak of interventionist or appeaser and spout the same words in a different order to broker your justifications for whatever standpoint you wish until you sicken yourself just thinking about it; pull up those bones like a Meccano set and make whatever you want of them until you find it is they, the dead, that are pulling your strings. You have to relinquish a lot until the reckoning comes, you snap off a twig in time, examine it and realize it's just the relationship between yourself, killers and victims that counts. Look some more and you see there is not much gulf at all between the three. Close your eyes, open your fingers and discover you are a hybrid. Open your eyes again, look in a mirror and someone else looks back: someone older and degraded. People call it wisdom but it is just a substitute for hope.

Before he took an icy dive into the Miljacka River and out of my life, Momćilo had once explained to me the mentality of Bosnia's killers in a few short words: 'In the morning they hate themselves, in the afternoon the world.' So, Momćilo, where are you now? For your words come from a different time, a Neverland era long past when it was all so different. Did you take that swim before the words applied to you as well? You might have warned me.

Faces, sounds and lights began to move in my mind over the dark screen of the foliage; there was the crackle of flames and screech of shellfire; Darko and The Jokers; an old woman with her broken teeth falling bloodily down her chest; a girl's severed ear; the last letter in its blue envelope; Hamdu, the Tigers and the final attack; frightened soldiers, the reek of smoke and clatter of a gunship. My war gone by, I miss it so.

1

Sarajevo, Spring 1993

There was a Bosnian government army sniper positioned in one of the top floors of the burned-out tower block overlooking the Serbs in Grbavica. He was audio landmark to our days. We lived in the street below at the edge of Sarajevo's ruined parliament building in a small strip of the city sandwiched between the frontline Miljacka River and the wide expanse of Vojvode Putnika, the street dubbed Snipers' Alley soon after the war began. The area had a few benefits but they were purely relative in the overall scheme of Sarajevo's war.

Our proximity to the Serbs meant that they were seldom able to bring down heavy artillery fire upon us for fear of dropping short and hitting their own troops on the other side of the small river. The tight blustering of buildings afforded protection from automatic fire, provided you knew which alleys to run across and were not unlucky with a mortar round. It was only if you chose to leave the claustrophobic confines of this narrow template in search of food or as a release from the stifling boredom that your troubles really began. There was no way around it, if you wanted to go anywhere else in the capital you had to deal with Vojvode Putnika. Empty your mind, fill your lungs and kick out for the centre knowing that if it happened then you would not hear it, merely get smashed forward onto your face by a mighty punch.

Some people never bothered to leave the area. They waited for others to bring them food, growing paler and madder with frustration by the day. Others never bothered running. They said that they were fatalists but I think they were just tired of living, exhausted by the mental effort of dealing with the random nature of the violence. Kalashnikov rounds and shrapnel might have been the city's new gods but there was no need to hand them your destiny on a plate. Even so, however fast you beat the ground you knew that it would never be faster than a speeding bullet. But most of us kept making the effort anyway, hoping it would cut us a bit of leeway with the reactions of the men on the hills above us.

I was sitting with Endre with my back to the wall of our house. It was late morning and the March sun was high and moving slowly south-west, leaving us in the wedged shadow of the building. We were indulging in Sarajevo's greatest wartime activity: smoking and hanging around hoping nothing would happen to us but that something would happen somewhere, anywhere, to break the monotony and give us a sense of time progressing, of anything progressing. The war had been going on for nearly a year and had no end in sight. The city's inhabitants were sinking into a sense of hopelessness which was catching, even for a foreigner with a way out. Our conversation followed the usual pattern: I asked lots of questions to try to get my head around the situation while Endre, a Hungarian Yugoslav, listened attentively and then began his answer. He did it the same way each time. 'Well, Antonio,' he would open ponderously, 'it's like this …' The sudden bullwhip crack of a bullet interrupted us and we looked at the tower block. The government sniper was obviously back up there, though we could not see him, and had taken a pop at something he had seen across the river.

The two sides of the tower visible from our position almost never changed their appearance: the front was a wide expanse of black and twisted window frames, the southern side a concrete Emmental of shellholes from tanks. There was only one time I can remember it ever looking different. Some Muslim soldiers had crawled up to the top at night and unfurled a long banner down the side of the building that directly faced the Serbs. 'DON'T WORRY BE HAPPY' it read vertically in letters each a metre high. The Serbs shot it to ribbons the next morning. I could never work out if this meant that they had got the joke or not.

After a few seconds silence our conversation continued. Then another shot rang out. Endre paused again, this time raising an index finger in expectation of something. Across the river a machine-gun fired a burst back towards the tower, its dull popping sound following only after the whacking of the bullets chipped off bits of concrete in harmless-looking grey puffs above us. Still Endre held up his finger, waiting for something else. Again the sniper fired, only this time there was a scant second between the crack of his shot and great explosive smashings and sparks as an anti-aircraft gun riddled the top storeys of the tower in a nerve-jangling roll of sound. Silence followed the last detonation. The sniper would not fire again that day. Endre lowered his finger and turned to me smiling. 'Well, Antonio,' he began, 'that is what we call "educating fire".'

Sarajevo was a schooling such as I have never had. At the time of Endre's words I had been in the city only a short while and still knew almost nothing of war though the subsequent days queued packed in line to throw their rocks into the still pool of my naivety.

Aside from the deeper reasons behind my being there, my path to the Bosnian capital was marked in equal parts by coincidence and intent, milestones which stretched from a prophetic warning on the day Tito died over a decade before to a stoned conversation with a Serb deserter in Marrakech in the late spring of 1991. By the summer of 1992 I had finished a postgraduate course in photojournalism. My CV, updated with the new qualification, swarmed through London mailboxes. I wasted four months before giving up on a response. There was no specific moment when I suddenly resolved to go to Bosnia alone, though I do remember having felt an accelerating motivation earlier that year when transfixed by a photograph in a British newspaper of a Serb fighter, cigarette in one hand, kicking a dead Muslim civilian in a town called Bijeljina. The photographer himself was to have a part in the final endgame of my war experience, but that was far away then; part of a future I could not have even guessed at.

I knew if I went I would not have much money with me, certainly not enough to hire an interpreter, so I rang up the Serb restaurant in Notting Hill and asked if there was anyone there who could teach me Serbo-Croatian. A surprised voice the other end of the line agreed to meet me at Notting Hill tube to discuss the prospect. Waiting for the rendezvous there as bedraggled commuters hurried in silent groups past me in the cold gloom of the winter evening I saw a beautiful girl waiting by the station's entrance. She had long straight hair that fell halfway down her back, its blackness matched only by the dark of her eyes, and was smoking a cigarette, hauling deeply on it as if it was the last she had. Mima was from Novi Sad. Her mother was Croatian, her father Serbian. She had left Yugoslavia to escape the

sanctions, and hated the Milošević regime. She agreed to try to teach me the rudiments of her language. Her advice on Bosnia she repeated to me like a mantra throughout most of our evening lessons: 'There are some very crazy people there. Very crazy. Most of the intellectuals have left. The scum have risen to the surface. You must be very, very careful.' The last lesson was different. She asked me if I would marry her as the Home Office was giving her grief.

In the New Year and with the end of winter in sight I felt ready for what lay ahead, my formless concept of war. Mima introduced me to some friends of hers in Hammersmith, Omar and Isidora, a Muslim–Serb couple from Sarajevo. Isidora's parents still remained in the city. She asked me if I would take a parcel of medicine and money together with some letters to them, and told me that if I wished to stay in their flat I would be a welcome guest. She drew me a little sketch map of the city, X marking their house. The X was a little close to the thick red line she had used to indicate the front line but it seemed rude to bring that up at the time. Sarajevo seemed an obvious place to begin my journey and I was glad to be given a contact there.

However, I still waited hopefully for an employer to end the drumroll of my preparations. The thought of going off to a war without the cloak of a professional guise was a little unnerving. Without a contract there would be no aim to fulfil other than my own, and that was fairly vague: merely to go to war using, if possible, journalism as an open-ended ticket to remain in Bosnia for as long as I wished. I felt I needed at least some kind of contractual blessing to go, some practical and mental safety net to justify myself if it all went wrong. None came. I was left having to face the full responsibility of my own actions.

Two friends from college were leaving London for Moldova in a battered Skoda, hardly the golden chariot of my dreams. They were driving via Budapest, which was not far from the Croatian border. I tried to balance reason to produce an answer that would tell me 'Go'. I failed. My plan was not reasonable. So I thought fuck it and went anyway, throwing my bags into the Skoda one cold morning. It was not a decision that had anything to do with courage, but more an absolution of self-responsibility, a releasing of myself into the hands of chance.

The journey across Europe in the Skoda passed like a week-long Last Supper culminating in a seedy but otherwise empty bar in Budapest where my two friends and I got drunk together before going our separate ways. At some stage in the evening the juke-box had fired into life as if operated by an unseen hand and a young Hungarian girl walked in and up to our table. She wore a short black dress, had slanted green cat's eyes, pale skin and blue-black hair so clean it smelled like gun metal. Without a word she beckoned me up, put her arms around me, pulled me close and began to dance, swaying slowly to U2's 'Cruel'. I felt young and lucky. It seemed like we danced like that for a long time in absolute silence before the music stopped, I sat down and she smiled and walked out of the door. I try to fight superstition with the power of reason, but with the drink and smoke and significance of that last night I could not help but feel that she was some ghostly omen of good fortune. Then again, maybe she was just bored and between tricks.

From then on I was alone, taking trains and buses until I reached Split on the Dalmatian coast. At the UN office in the airport I flashed around a covering letter of accreditation made out by a friend in London which suggested I was a photographer.

In return I was given a UN press card, the ticket for passage on a Hercules flying aid into the besieged Bosnian capital. I had no conception of mortal fear then, just apprehension at what lay ahead.

There was no slow spiralling of descent. The plane just nose-dived suddenly and through one of the windows I saw Sarajevo rising up beneath us. Acres of small ruined houses marked the western end of the capital, giving way to a narrow linear run of taller buildings and apartment blocks caught between high ridges of ground to the north and south. From the ruined airport complex a Ukrainian APC took me to the PTT building, the city's central communications centre and at the time a main UN base. From there onwards my UN press card lost its power. There were a couple of young Frenchmen from an aid organization waiting around at the PTT so I asked if I could ride with them back to the city centre. I tried to appear nonchalant as nothing invites refusal so fast as the smell of innocence. Though I clutched the dog-eared sketch map given to me in London by Isidora, it seemed a better idea to check into the Holiday Inn, then Sarajevo's one functioning hotel, for the first night in the city. There I could at least work out my bearings and get a feel for what was going on before I blundered into trouble. The Frenchmen eyed my baggage warily for a minute, then loaded it into their car. We roared off at speed and in silence, the city rushing past me on either side of the straight road in a dirty grey blur.

The war was the best thing that could have happened to the Holiday Inn. It had given a token vestige of character to what would have otherwise been the twin sister to a motorway service station: an empty, ugly transit centre of soullessness encased in a

square of lurid yellow and brown paint, complete with terrible food and grumpy staff. Though the southern face was uninhabitable due to the damage inflicted upon it by the Serbs across the Miljacka, it was a safe enough place to stay. There was either some tacit understanding within the Serb command that the hotel was the focal point of the media in Sarajevo and should be left untouched or possibly there was a deal to ensure its security. Occasionally a government sniper would use the top floor or roof as a position, provoking more 'educating fire' in response, but by and large it was untouched after its initial baptism. I got a room and lay on the bed smiling with delight. I was there. At last, a real full-on war and I was in it. As if on cue a burst of automatic fire rippled away elsewhere in the city. I laughed and laughed. It meant nothing to me and I did not understand what it might mean to anyone else.

I knew that I would have to get across Vojvode Putnika somehow to find Isidora's family, but was not exactly sure what happened on the other side as the details on the map were vague. However, the next morning a young man hanging around in the hotel foyer offered to take me to the address. Jasmin asked for nothing in return, and even when I later offered him a bit of cash he refused it determinedly. Those who have never been there may have the impression that Bosnia was simply a morass of hatred and killing. At times it could be. But it is the only place I have been to in the world where I know as an absolute certainty that if I stopped in a strange town, night or day, within an hour I would be accepted as a guest in someone's house, fed whatever food they had and plied with drink, with no expectation of anything in return. As long as you stayed clear of topics such as religion, war or politics, hospitality was seldom a problem in the

Balkans. But, though Jasmin may have given me my first glimpse of Bosnian warmth, he also gave me an insight into their irrational obstinacy. As we walked to the edge of the hotel, our final cover before Snipers' Alley, he told me that he would not run across to the other side, explaining that he 'never ran for those people'. Even as a newcomer I could see that Vojvode Putnika was certainly a place to run if anywhere was: not a soul in sight, the empty road littered with debris and the Serbs only a few hundred metres away on the high ground overlooking us. It would not need the skill of a sniper to kill us, anyone who could pull a trigger could have managed it.

I was in a dilemma. To run across alone would be unforgivably rude and craven in the face of Jasmin's kindness. Yet to walk the stretch and risk being shot on the first day for the sake of politesse seemed equally stupid. The compromise was uncomfortable and a little ridiculous: as he strolled slowly across, face raised to the hills, I kept abreast of him walking sideways like a crab, first one way and then the other, hoping that anyone who wanted to shoot us would take out the easy target first.

We reached the other side and, after ducking through a narrow alleyway, walked through the door of a large four-storey house, its façade a bubbling plane of peeling plaster. Inside, the stairwell was dark and cool and for some minutes we used matches to check the names on doors as we ascended the stone stairs. Isidora's parents were not overly surprised when we finally knocked on their door. The war had bred a particular ingenuity to all who remained stuck in its confines and somehow, through a Gordian knot of communication I did not really understand that involved ham radio and distant phone connections, warning of my possible arrival had reached

them from London. And as an entity from the outside world, part of a peaceful normality Sarajevo had long lost sight of, and a link to their family in London, I was welcomed like the prodigal son. They clutched at me for news from the outside and I felt the inadequacy of the half-learned language I had picked up from Mima. For the first but not the last time, I found myself moved by something in that flat. As they tore open the letters that had accompanied the small parcel, there was a few minutes silence during which I felt a strange emotion welling within me. It was difficult to define and carried with it a sense of great awkwardness and humility. Suddenly I felt very sad, a feeling I struggled to explain to myself while the skin on my back shivered as if with presentiment.

Three people lived in the flat. Isidora's father, Petar, was a Serb from Montenegro who had lived in Sarajevo for twenty-eight years. As a partisan during the Second World War he had fought everybody, he told me later, Četniks, Ustaša, Italians and Germans, and raised his hands to click the trigger of an imaginary rifle as he explained. He was sixty-eight years old, but could have passed for much younger, small and compact with fitness, his black hair betraying hardly a trace of grey. His eyes shone with an energy I never saw diminish until a moment three years later. Even then it was only to dim for a second. He was a mathematician, as eccentric and stubborn as anyone in the Balkans. There was no way he was leaving his house for any war, even if it was on his doorstep. Yet it was obvious even in those first few minutes of meeting that his wife, Yelena, was not so easily able to resist the pressures of the conflict. She was a Serb born in Croatia, and there was a great sadness about her, visible in her downcast eyes, the paleness of her skin, and the way she

tilted her head wistfully to one side as she spoke. Afraid and deeply depressed, she had only left that little street twice in the eleven months since the war had started.

With a face like a young decadent David Bowie, thin frame and slick mop of black hair, the third figure in the room lounged in a threadbare armchair, cigarette dangling precariously between long fingers, looking like the Thin White Duke obscurely transplanted from an underground Berlin nightclub. Momćilo was some kind of cousin, thirty-five years old, a natural ally who for me came to embody the spirit of resistance to the war and its madness, a quality that you found in ever dwindling numbers of people as time went by and most were forced into taking one side or another by the erosive propaganda, or else just ground down by the energy and pain required to keep an open mind. He had fled from his hometown of Cisak in Croatia when the war started there in 1991, for although he was a Serb, Momćilo wanted to fight for neither side. He had escaped to Sarajevo, seeing it as a bastion of multi-ethnicity that no war could ever reach, a misjudgement he still laughed over when I first met him. He spent his mornings selling copies of *Oslobođenje* at a point near the state hospital, which meant he had to run the gauntlet of Vojvode Putnika every day, though ironically the bullet he had taken in the calf he had gained collecting firewood on the other side of the house. In the afternoons he hustled for black-market deals or short cuts in the handout of aid, always with one eye cocked for opportunity, the other for the approach of the army press-gangs that stalked the city. He was one of Bosnia's natural survivors and quickly became my 'droog', comrade, my guide and mentor.

Their flat was a one-level affair with seven rooms, two of

which had a direct view of the front line. These were bullet-scarred and had been unused since the start of the fighting. The main room, in which we spent most of our time, moved in an L shape through an incongruous circular arch of Sixties-style architecture. At one end of it was a small kitchen and dining area, around the corner some chairs and a gas stove. Outside, snow still lay on the ground in icy grey scabs. The warmth of the small stove with its sometimes feckless flame became the focus of our conversations with the coming of darkness each night.

The local community was predictably close-knit under the circumstances and of such mixed religious definition as to deny you the possibility of making any judgement as to who – Serb, Muslim or Croat – made up the predominant group. At this stage of the war there were still up to 60,000 Serbs living in Sarajevo, a little under a quarter of the total population that remained. Some had joined the government army and fought bravely alongside their Muslim neighbours against what they saw as the forces of nationalist aggression that threatened their beloved city; others, including Petar, remained because they did not want to leave their homes and hoped the war would end soon; a lesser number actively sympathized with the men who shelled the city but were trapped in their houses by the gelling of the front lines that had encircled the capital.

Our discussions around the stove were a forum for arguments from every strand of the spectrum and frequently became hot-tempered affairs of raised voices and wild gesticulations. At this time I had no real foundation for an opinion of my own concerning the war. Of course it was obvious that the city was suffering, and that terrible deeds were being committed elsewhere in Bosnia. Yet my impressions of the conflict

prior to my arrival had been moulded by Mima's tutoring and in general she blamed all sides equally. So in debates I acted as a kind of muted umpire. Angrier exchanges were often halted as if to protect my sensibilities, bestowing me somehow with a passifying role. I listened with interest to what I heard.

Momćilo was in favour of foreign intervention and massive air strikes upon the Serb forces around the city. He was convinced that this would bring the war to an early close, leaving some hope for a continued form of co-existence between the various religious denominations. He was supported in this opinion by Endre, a friend and neighbour whose knowledge of the English language helped me to grasp details in the debates that otherwise would have been lost on me. However, Endre was not in favour of lifting the arms embargo that hamstrung the Bosnian government's ability to fight. He believed that the consequent withdrawal of UN troops would lead to an immediate Serb retaliation that would swiftly overrun Sarajevo's fragile defence lines. Petar opposed both air strikes and the lifting of the arms embargo. He said either move would lengthen and intensify the war. Though he was no lover of the political or military strategy that emanated from Pale, the ski resort town east of Sarajevo that the Bosnian Serbs had styled their 'capital', in his heart he was a Yugoslav, and division of that creation was not something he saw as desirable. If pushed, his loyalties lay ultimately with the Serbs.

The city's war was a strange experience, far more abstract than I had expected. First, you never saw the 'enemy'. The metal that scythed through people's lives came as sudden barrages of noise and dust, combustions of energy that it was hard to equate with

invisible men pulling triggers or cords. As the days slipped into weeks there were times when we could laugh it off from the sanctuary of our seven-room womb. Petar would chuckle and nod his head from side to side as a gunbattle grew in intensity outside, while Momćilo would roll his eyes and smile, as if to say 'same old shit again'. We were seldom hungry, though the quality of the food we had varied tremendously. Sometimes, if Momćilo had linked up with one of his contacts inside an aid distribution centre, we would find a meal of pasta, meat and eggs as we gathered in candlelight around the dining-room table. At others we supplemented the handouts with whatever we could gather in the overgrown gardens that bordered the surrounding buildings, on one particular evening enjoying a real delicacy of boiled stinging nettles and fried snails. There were nights when Yelena could offer little more than a lump of hot fat, and we would slither the greasy chunks onto our plates trying not to catch each other's eyes.

But war is not dismissed so easily. There were times when our feelings changed, as if synchronized by a hidden clock, and the noise of the fighting outside reached into us. Except for Yelena's murmurs we would stare at the burning ash of our cigarettes or into the gas stove as bullets and shrapnel whacked into the walls of the house, clawing at our moods, drawing us into a dark shadowland where we existed only as helpless beings whose sole aim seemed to be to shoulder the grim, sometimes fearful tedium of just getting by, carry on living until something so far away as to be invisible arrived and altered things.

For me there was always a way out. I could go to the airport, flash that UN ID card and get on a plane to Split. I could be in

London the same day if I timed it right, and that knowledge protected me from the despair that affected Sarajevo's people. But it was not a move I wished or chose to take, and in the close proximity of that flat, sharing their life with them, I found myself susceptible at least to the moods and emotions of the people with whom I lived. After a time I discarded the bullet-proof vest I had bought in London. I had worn it because I was aware that it was easy to die in those streets – especially as a stranger new to the rules of the fighting – and realized that life was not something to be treated flippantly there. Yet I soon found it more of a barrier, in my own mind at least, between myself and those who befriended me than between my body and bullets. Its heavy weight ceased to be reassuring and instead brought only shame to me in the presence of people I knew, people who had no avenue of escape. I began to leave it in the room in which I slept, where it finally gathered dust.

On the streets outside, however, the war's lessons were less subliminal; harder, more immediate physical entities. Within a few days of arriving I was shot at. With my growing confidence I had walked off alone to see the old town. Sarajevo was then only a vague series of impressions in my mind. I wanted to know it better. Names of places and hills were still alien, as was the overall physical perspective of the city, which I had only glimpsed during the first day for a few seconds through the window of the Hercules. As a pedestrian you seldom travelled anywhere directly, but took instead a zigzagging route that gave you cover from fire.

I approached a junction where two old women were preparing to leave the corner of a building. They presented a fairly comical sight, both small and round with fat, slightly bowed, their bodies

encased in thick black coats drawn across their stomachs with long belts of material to keep out the cold. Between them they pulled a child's wooden cart laden with potatoes.

Their shuffling pace did not alter as they left the cover of the wall and stepped into the open intersection. Momćilo had already advised me to run across this area because it presented a clear gallery to the Serbs in the buildings to the south. I broke into a jog and had nearly drawn parallel to the old women and their cart when around me the still winter air broke into a cacophony of fluttering zings, smacks and whistles. There were sparks on the tarmac, a sudden cloud of dust from the wall that provided a backdrop; a small wheel blew off the cart and chips of potato flew everywhere.

It was over in seconds. I passed the old women at speed. They seemed incapable of going any faster and steadfastly refused to relinquish their grip on the cart which now scraped along the ground on three wheels. Puffing and swearing indignantly, they joined me as I stood on the leeside of the distant wall. I felt outraged. Someone had just tried to kill me for no reason at all. I was not even carrying a gun. They had also shot at two people whose silhouettes, whatever the range, can have suggested nothing other than what they were – a couple of old bags pulling a go-cart. I expected the women to share my surprise, recrimination and anger. Yet they barely looked at me. They examined their cart for a second, said 'yoy' and 'fuck', 'fuck it', 'fuck him' and 'fuck his father', swore 'on his mother's cunt', then said 'yoy' again a few times before trundling off dragging their scraping burden behind them. The women's indifference annoyed me even more than the gunman's bullets but when I told the story to Momćilo he

simply smiled tolerantly, shrugged and opened out his hands, palms up. 'It's like that now,' he laughed. 'It's … normal.'

Sarajevo's 'normality' came in many guises. The city was full of hidden traps, structures of power and allegiance that were far from obvious, even to those who lived there. The fighting had first broken, then obliterated the old hierarchy of authority and social structure. Within weeks of the outbreak of war, while the lines of confrontation were still fluid, thousands of people had fled the city, to be replaced by refugees from rural areas who brought a new brand of culture to the capital and with it new tensions. In the absence of a professional army, the only groups with any real organization, weapons or structure were the city's criminal gangs, and so they took over the task of defence. For a long time the government's strategy was in the hands of men like Juka Prazina, Ćelo and Saco: hard, enigmatic criminals with localized cult followings and a taste for killing. Later that year, battles would be waged not across trenchlines with the Serbs, but within Sarajevo itself as the government sought to wrest control from the hands of these splintered mafia groups by establishing a central, legitimate body using loyalist special forces and police groups.

In the meantime these urban barons and their subordinates held supreme power. Usually it was easy to spot the men of authority as they moved around the city with their cortèges of bodyguards, but there were exceptions. One afternoon, as I returned home from my wanderings, the streets' atmosphere changed – as it so often did before something bad happened. Sometimes the change came with no warning at all, but usually there was a sudden sensation of unease, a brooding electricity that emptied the pavements of people. The sense of foreboding

mounted in intensity, like the gathering movement of an orchestra, the pressure and silence cranking your nerves until you were almost desperate for the noise to rend it all open again. The feeling was soundless but it crackled. You could not see it, but it was black. Then it would come: the double concussion-sound kerrump of shellfire and the air-cutting crack of bullets. It almost brought you relief but it had a reverse side: times, stretching to a week, when as if by unspoken agreement everybody knew it was safe to promenade down Sarajevo's thoroughfares in full view of the Serbs. Such periods would inevitably end in blood and weeping as the resumption of fighting would reap inordinate casualties among the vulnerable crowds.

I hurried into the ruined Bosnian parliament building for cover, lit a cigarette and waited. Inside there was the usual huddle of soldiers – they too silent and smoking – and a new unit of men in black uniforms who formed a group of their own in the shadows. Explosions erupted from behind the twin Unis towers to our north, followed quickly by heavy automatic- and rifle-fire to the east. Once it had begun the tension subsided and the soldiers began to talk in lowered voices among themselves and someone laughed. A couple of the black-clad strangers approached me to ask who I was and what I was doing. There was no menace in their words, merely curiosity, and they seemed happy enough with my answers. But then a small fat man wearing a pink T-shirt, camouflage trousers and bedroom slippers walked up. He was unarmed but carried a walkie-talkie. He jabbered away at the two fighters too quickly for me to understand, stabbing his finger in my direction to emphasize his words. The two soldiers changed, becoming cold and formal. 'Where are your papers?' they demanded. I showed them my

passport and a Bosnian accreditation card I had picked up but this did little to satisfy them.

The fat man in the pink T-shirt continued talking. It seemed obvious to me that he was just some insignificant troublemaker who had nothing better to do than sow suspicion in the minds of bored troops. I weighed up the odds and decided that a display of resolution might restore things in my favour; he seemed the sort of loud-mouthed bully who would wither in the face of confrontation. I took a breath, rounded on him sharply and told him to 'fuck off'.

The bullets were still raining down outside as two of the soldiers carted me off to the police station. As the fat man's shouting receded into the distance the men dropped their hostility, though there was no point arguing with them. One held my arm above the elbow but his grip was not hard, more like that of a B-movie villain hustling someone into a car, knowing that he has a gun in his pocket to back up the authority of his fingers.

The door to the police station was on the other side of the road. Behind us was the ongoing gunfight, and the overspill of Serb fire smacked around the doorway and pavement outside. A car slewed round the corner with a mixture of policemen and soldiers inside, took two rounds in the door, then bounced off the kerb as it squealed away. We stopped and my arm was released. The soldiers looked at each other then across the road at the doorway. I could not believe that they were considering crossing the road to reach it. 'Listen,' I said, realizing the whole misunderstanding was getting out of control, 'we can sort all this out later. Why don't we just go back to the parliament building, have a smoke and return when this is all over?' The man who had held my arm looked like he might have gone for

my suggestion, but the quizzical glance he gave to his companion drew only a shaken head in response. Whatever authority the little pink shit had was obviously greater than the fear of the Serb fire. No-one said anything for a second as we all looked at the far wall and its narrow door while the fire still sung around us. 'When we say run, then run, you understand?' one of the soldiers said. I immediately thought this was a sick plan conjured up by the fat man; on the given word it would be me alone who ran out into a hail of bullets – a bit like the final scene of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.* But I had little choice. You can only argue so far with armed men. I grumbled without much hope that they had both better come with me, before one shouted, 'Run.'

The three of us belted across the road, for a second jamming together in the doorway in a tangle of thrashing limbs. It must have looked hysterically funny to the Serbs. Inside, anger lending me strength, I turned on them: 'I don't fucking believe you made me do that.' They just laughed, though the tinge of relief in it spoiled their display of bravado, offered me a cigarette and escorted me upstairs to an office.

I was invited to sit down by a stern-looking grey-haired police officer who sat the other side of a large wooden desk. He was wearing an immaculately pressed shirt and seemed to be of some rank, though since pink T-shirts and slippers obviously carried such clout I could not be sure whether the bars on his epaulettes meant anything. He asked me my name and a few other mundane details before starting to talk about London. He had a daughter who lived near Islington, he said, and had visited the city in the late Eighties. He asked if I liked Sarajevo and what I thought of the war. We talked in this way

for about an hour before he smiled and said that unless there was anything else, I could go. Puzzled, I told him that I thought I was under arrest, explained to him what had happened, right up to the road crossing, and said that I would need at least a letter from the police, some document I could produce in case of a similar incident. He waved a hand dismissively and shook his head. But what about the fat man, I said, who was he anyway? 'The commander,' I was told, as though that explained everything. As I got up, shook his hand and turned to leave, I asked who was in fact responsible for the parliament building area. He just looked at me, smiling like I was a dumb child too young to understand, and shrugged. 'Listen,' he told me with slow deliberation, 'these are difficult times here. Some of today's heroes are yesterday's criminals.' Then came the words I was to hear a thousand times during the conflict, the short-circuit dismissal of any attempt to analyse the confusion, the air of resignation accompanied by hunched shoulders and raised hands: 'What can you do?' he said. 'It's war.'