

Difficult
gloomy
times.
Everything
at a standstill.
War time.

I have tried to tell you what it's like, to make you live it for a few moments at least while reading these lines. The city has been ruined, then mended again just enough to give an illusion of life. And the people? They are in the streets, going out, walking, getting ready for a new massacre. You ask me where they are going. To tell you the truth, they are going nowhere. They are all waiting for something – the end of the war, escape from Sarajevo, humanitarian aid, electricity. Moving is a way of survival. Physical motion as the only proof that one is still alive. Most people have lost everything but hope. One must lie to oneself and to others, pretending that there is something more important than the elemental fear of death.

The marketplace, with hardly anything for sale and goods at exorbitantly high prices, is crowded with people. They are in a hurry. Some of them are going to work. What are they doing? Nothing of real importance. They are building houses of cards. That's life in Sarajevo. There are plenty of cultural events every day – theatre performances, poetry, painting exhibitions. Actors recite poetry while their teeth chatter with cold. Imagine: you are sitting and listening to the voices of the actors or poets. Though you are losing your concentration with every murmur, you feel proud and defiant. But these actors and poets are not the great heroes of the city. The heroes are up there in the front lines. Our fathers, sons, brothers, friends, our lovers. In the mud, in the snow, carrying arms. They don't know that no one will be able to understand their story, the ways in which their hearts have been marked forever. When you think of him, your hero, you don't care about poetry, food, or anything else. Only pray for him.

All communications have been cut. You don't know where you are, which century you live in, whether your favourite director is making a new film, what the latest fashion is, what is new on MTV... You don't know anything and you aren't interested in anything. The only thing you want to do is to ring your friend in the other part of the city and find out if he is still alive. But you can't. All communications have been cut.

A famous group of performers is singing

I was born in Sarajevo

I'm looking out through a plastic film...

with the music from Bruce Springsteen's song "Born in the USA" in the background.

The plastic film is a grey, untransparent window glass substitute. Looking through that window, children cannot see the beautiful colourful world. They can only see an immense grey nothing. And you are shocked again every time they ask: "A pineapple, what's that?" or "What's mineral water?" Children tremble listening to the sound of shooting. Holding them tight in your arms, you can feel their cold hands, cold

because of fear. The old people leave Sarajevo quickly. Not by plane. They simply say they have lived enough and have no more reason to suffer. One evening they fall asleep and they never wake up. Bent old women are standing at the corner of your street asking you only to bring them one litre of water, immediately turning red after these words. They do not feel strong enough to do it by themselves. There are puppies on the sidewalk, just a few days old. Starving, they are helpless. They will be dead in a week or two.

Do not ask me to retell you the story every citizen of Sarajevo is familiar with: you go down the street with your friend, arm in arm. A shot. You turn around and you see him lying on the street, not moving. Please, do not ask me. You wouldn't understand that.

Sarajevo doesn't hate anyone. Nobody has ever hated here. It has happened that people from Sarajevo have played bad jokes on others who have visited their city. But anyone who has been here must admit that he has experienced marvellous nights, as well. I have the honour of having been born in Sarajevo, with a view of the cathedral, the orthodox church, the mosque, and the synagogue, to live with all kinds of people, and to feel an alien nowhere in the world. Have you been here? Have you ever stood in a street where there are numerous little craft-shops oriental-style on the left, and high, massive Austro-Hungarian buildings on the right? If you have not, do come after the war. It will be the same – ruined, but indestructible. Give a hand to these people, a smile, help them to renew their city. You may chat with them about anything you want. They are all "experts" at different things, always in top form. Do not ask them if they are Serbs, Croats, Muslims, Jews or "mixed" ! Remember, never ask them if they can live together, because they don't know any other way, and they will turn their backs on you, and you will be alone forever in the city with the friendliest people on earth.

Sarajevo, March 1993