

*We come
into
the city
in an
armoured
car,*

young soldiers point out the limits of the "occupied zone." As a student, I spent several years in Sarajevo, I know it down to the tiniest alleyway. I can't imagine it divided by borders. Night has fallen, I can just make out, as we go along, the forms of the buildings. The images we have seen on our TV screens had two dimensions, were without relief, sometimes mutilated. When we get out of the car several friends are waiting, they heard about our arrival through the newspapers which, in spite of everything, still come out. I hold a friend in my arms, then a second, a third, I recognise none of them. A woman with grey hair, thin, wounded in the leg, comes up to me. I recognise this one by her voice: she was in school with me, we were all in love with her. I take refuge behind a wall, or a pillar, so that they can't see my face. They don't need our tears, they have enough of their own.

I asked not to be in the hotel. The only one still open, although damaged by the bombs, and without heat. I wanted to

share daily life in Sarajevo. A few taxis are still circulating in the city, in spite of the snipers lying in wait in the surrounding hills. I can't explain, either to myself or to others, what leads them to do this... The taxi takes me to the road that still bears the name of the Croat King Tomislav (in the areas occupied by the Serbs and the Croats, the streets no longer have Muslim names). How much is it? "Whatever you wish." The gesture touches me. Here, there is poverty, but not necessarily greed.

I sleep next to a window without glass, like my hosts; the temperature has fallen below zero. The first night, I don't sleep at all. At dawn, I go out, I see the demolished homes. Not all the trees have been cut down in the park, now transformed into a cemetery. There are fewer ruins here than in my native town, the right bank of Mostar, which has fared even worse than Vukovar: it's the Hiroshima of Europe. I visit several families in Sarajevo, I have brought them medicine from Paris. (They ask mainly for anti-depressants.) The lack of water and the frost have plugged up the pipes: it is so cold that one cannot go outside to relieve oneself. The stench spreads throughout the house, humiliating.

I make my way towards the Makale market and Vase Miskina street, where several dozen people were killed while waiting in line for bread and salt. You can still see the traces. The Christians burn candles, the Muslims lay down green-bordered death notices. There are no more flowers in the city. From time to time, the current comes back for a moment, and a street or a window lights up, a stalled streetcar takes off. I get on one, no-one has to buy a ticket, "public services" are now free. A kind of "communism of war"? I've known for a long time that communism generates misery, now I realise that misery also generates communism, a better one than the one we knew. Three or four stops down the line, the current has been cut off again: the only thing left of the "Streetcar Named Desire" (as they call it here) is the desire. It is raining, a cold and heavy rain, but the rainwater is welcome, particularly for the toilets. In the streets the gutters are blocked, the water doesn't drain away, in Tito Street (it's still called that) the water comes up to my ankles. This city's back is broken, but it lives. "The tissue is fragile, delicate, but it will heal itself quickly," someone said to me.

The stores are open during "work hours." There are no shoppers, no-one has any money. The German mark is the only

currency accepted. Hardly anyone receives a salary or a retirement payment anymore, there is only the semblance of a State – it can barely manage to defend its people. I ask a young salesgirl why she sits there freezing all day long, in vain. “It’s our duty, how else can we keep on...” In a bookstore several people leaf through books, without buying them. “What we have been through is stranger than any story, and each of us has his own story.” All of the mosques of Sarajevo have been damaged to a greater or lesser extent. In the largest – the Bey’s Mosque – there are no more services held. The Catholic cathedral and the big Orthodox church remain intact. “A city with four houses of worship right in its centre, one Muslim, two Christian, one Jewish, no more than one hundred meters away from each other, like nowhere else in the world –” said Kahmi, a Sephardic rabbi, before this war. The Bosnian Muslims have not damaged one church in the area that they are defending. Most of the mosques in Bosnia-Hercegovina have been destroyed, sometimes completely: I remember the splendid Ferhadija in Banja Luka, the Aladza of Foca, the medersa of Pocitelj. During the second World War, the occupier was more sparing.

I go towards the Library, where several millions books and who knows how many ancient manuscripts were burned. For two years now I have wandered throughout the world, in twenty or thirty cities I’ve spoken about Sarajevo, and its Library. At another time in my life I worked there, it was there that I started to write. Nothing is left except the facade, like a huge stage set. Inside everything is burned out. According to the experts, it will be impossible to rebuild. Under a pile of rubble, I find two tiny fragments of an ancient fresco. I don’t know for how long I stood there, leaning against the stump of a column. Near the entrance, a plaque is still there, intact, with the inscription: “On May 3 1906, a bloody conflict broke out between the workers of Sarajevo and the Austrian police. On this occasion, the new unions, recently formed, organised a general strike, which spread to all the workers of Bosnia-Hercegovina... On May 3, 1953 this plaque was laid down by the Sarajevo Council of Unions in memory of the victims.” What will remain of this memorial, will it be reinstated in a new Bosnia, God knows when, some day after the war?

Not far from there is the spot from which Gavrilo Princip shot at the heir to the Austrian throne, in 1914. There is also a modest museum. The windows are broken, but the inscriptions on the wall remain: "As a sign of eternal gratitude to the young fighters for liberty, for the independence of the Yugoslavian peoples." Near a bust of Princip, are his mottoes: "We loved our people." "The most comprehensible language in the world – is the language of liberty." The footsteps of the young conspirator are printed near the entrance, but I couldn't trace them on the sidewalk smashed by shells, flooded by mud, by the incessant rain. What will future generations retain of all this, what will they reject. In front of the museum, flow the troubled waters of the Miljacka.

At the Collegium Artisticum Gallery, they are inaugurating an exhibition of "instruments for survival"; there is also a series of paintings with tragic associations, without any rhetoric of *commitment*. The collection of photographs taken by foreign reporters over the last three years is still growing. Life will win out sooner or later. At this exhibition, I meet one of those singular men who, under such conditions, redeem humanity. A doctor, a foreigner, whom I met once before in autumn 1994 at a conference of *Médecins du monde* in Seville; I don't know his nationality. He tells me: the population is at the end of its rope; humanitarian aid cannot even provide one half of the food that is necessary; what comes into the city by the tunnel carved out by the forces defending Sarajevo is expensive, out of reach for the great majority; people are starving and exhausted, their organisms weakened and vulnerable to disease; many children are traumatised. I have heard, myself, that every morning, certain elderly people can no longer go out to find food and water, and they die there, quite simply: their neighbours find them later and bury them. The victims can no longer be counted, God knows how many there are. It's the same for Gorazde, Srebrenica, Bihac – we don't know. I've seen children playing at soldiers, aiming at each other with pistols, wooden Kalashnikovs. Just like adults. The schools are not open in winter. In spring and in autumn many parents don't let their children go to class: because of snipers. In the beginning, I remember, everyone told me that one must at all costs stay. Now, in the end, everyone wants to get out. Is this really the end – of the war, or of Sarajevo?

At the Little Theatre, young actors play Giraudoux: *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*. In wartime, every line sounds different than in peace time. Even under the bombs, there are large audiences at all of the cultural events. The girls dress with good taste, their hair done up, as a kind of challenge. The boys are in jeans, like anywhere else in Europe, or else in uniform. At the big theatre, the Sarajevo Quartet is giving a concert, the 147th since the beginning of the siege: *Death and the Maiden*, by Schubert. The "Tom Thumb" children's choir has kept up its rehearsals throughout these last three years; they captivate the audience. Many cry. These children's faces, they are the faces of my own childhood; this is how we were ourselves, the same, at school and at play, in Mostar when it existed. I am overcome by a sense of belonging to that which, in Bosnia, resists evil. In the bar of the theatre, in the basement, I abandon myself to the kind of sentimentalities which, in other circumstances, would make me ashamed. At ten, the lights go out and it is forbidden to go outside. The cold nights are the longest.

I meet informally with writers, friends of the transnational P.E.N. Club founded here under the grenades (literally). Most of those whom I meet are tired. It's gone on too long. During the siege, Abdullah Sidran wrote one of his best collections of short stories, *Sarajevski tabut (Sarajevo Coffin)*, already translated into several languages. At another time, we had tried to form an alternative movement together – "The Democratic Initiative," for all of Yugoslavia. We failed. Sidran speaks slowly: "Our state of mind is resignation, resignation concerning everything in which we once believed. Total resignation: the world doesn't exist, democracy doesn't exist, the idea of Europe doesn't exist, nothing exists which could serve as a basis for the arguments used on the outside... We here, in Sarajevo, we feel that even this discourse itself has no more meaning. Words are not necessary to us anymore, we understand each other tacitly... The psychology of the camps rules here, with all its symptoms... That our long sufferings should lead to the forgetting of their causes, this is the wish of many..."

I look at my colleagues, each one of them different, yet with certain similarities. Some have become indifferent to everything, at least on the surface. Others have become terribly sensitive to the slightest sound. A glass breaks, a key falls to the ground, a

door slams, each time they start. Last night, in spite of the cold, I dropped off. I was woken by the mere expectation of sound: by an untranslatable verse – “*a suppressed trinket of sonorous inanity*” – this inanity is open to hallucinations. Some of them are real. In the street, some friend is always pulling at my sleeve: “Go this way and not that way, you’ll get killed!” When this is all over, will they, themselves, walk normally? People don’t talk among themselves, understand each other without words. To us, from the outside, they make an effort to say as much as possible. I listen to them, I remember.

On my way back, I took the UNPROFOR plane. I was cold down to my bones, and sorrowful down to my soul. I can see no solution to offer the reader. For days I couldn’t write one single line.

Rome, 1995