

**Waiting, Part One of a Sarajevo Novel**  
**The Figure of the Siege and the Refugee**  
**in a Selection of Twentieth-Century Siege-Exile Literature**

Priscilla Morris

PhD in Creative and Critical Writing

University of East Anglia

School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing

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## ABSTRACT

*The Painter of Bridges* is a hybrid siege-exile novel about a landscape painter, Zora Buka, who loses her life's work in a fire during the siege of Sarajevo. Part One, presented in the creative paper, is set in Sarajevo and depicts Zora's experience of the first ten months of the siege. Part Two is set in England: Zora recollects her escape from Sarajevo, and waits for her asylum claim to be accepted. The novel is therefore concerned with portraying the exceptional states of life under siege and of being a refugee.

The critical paper shares these concerns and follows the movement of the novel from siege to exile. Beginning with a discussion of the siege in post-war literature, the critical section then looks at the double figure of the siege in Camus's *The Plague*, before turning to themes of siege and exile in Susan Sontag's 1993 Sarajevo production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It finally examines Slavenka Drakulić's representation of the refugee in her Bosnian war novel, *As If I Am Not There*.

The critical paper thus offers close readings of two war novels and a wartime theatrical production. These texts are seen as 'works of exception' which illuminate the liminal spaces that Giorgio Agamben terms 'zones of indistinction'. The readings of *The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot* draw on Agamben's theory of modern life to analyse their depictions of the refugee and the state of exception. Postcolonial questions about the representation of others, meanwhile, are addressed in the second reading of *The Plague*, where, going against much postcolonial criticism, it is argued a hidden allegory of anticolonial uprising is at work, and again in *As If I Am Not There*, where the uprooted, violated protagonist is found to have an ethically and artistically flawed doubled consciousness.

## CONTENTS

	Creative Paper: <i>Waiting, Part One of a Sarajevo Novel</i>	
	<b>Chapters One to Twelve</b>	7
	<b>Afterword:</b> The Siege of Sarajevo; Background to the Novel	148
	Critical Paper: <i>The Figure of the Siege and the Refugee in a Selection of Twentieth-Century Siege-Exile Literature</i>	
1	<b>Introduction</b>	157
	The Siege and the Refugee; The Siege in Post-War Literature: i) Characteristics of Siege Novels, ii) Differences from Other Forms of War Writing; Giorgio Agamben, <i>The Plague</i> and <i>Waiting for Godot</i> ; Representing the Other	
2	<b>Giorgio Agamben's State of Exception, <i>Homo Sacer</i> and the Camp</b>	179
	Theory of Modernity; Bare Life; State of Exception; <i>Homo Sacer</i> ; The Camp	
3	<b>The Double Figure of the Siege in <i>The Plague</i></b>	194
	i) <i>The Plague</i> as Totalitarian Allegory: State of Exception; The Camp in <i>The Plague</i>	
	ii) Hidden Allegory of Anticolonial Uprising: Re-reading Postcolonial Criticism	
4	<b><i>Waiting for Godot</i> in Sarajevo</b>	222
	Sontag's Production; Sontag's Adaptation; <i>Waiting for Godot</i> as Space of Exception	
5	<b>The Strange Doubled Consciousness of <i>As If I Am Not There</i></b>	241
	Strange Doubled Consciousness; Representing the Women's Collective Experience through S.; Strange Doubleness of Ending; Migrant Text	
6	<b>Conclusion</b>	265
	<b>Critical Afterword:</b> The Influence of the Primary Texts on the Novel	268
	<b>Appendix 1:</b> The Beljkašić's Asylum Application (Abridged)	271
	<b>Appendix 2:</b> <i>The Painter of Bridges</i> Sources	274
	<b>References</b>	275

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## BOSNIAN/SERBIAN/CROATIAN PRONUNCIATION

<i>c</i>	ts as in <u>cats</u>
<i>ć</i>	tch as in <u>itch</u>
<i>č</i>	ch, a little softer, as in <u>chair</u>
<i>đ; dž</i>	j as in <u>journey</u>
<i>j</i>	y as in <u>Yugoslavia</u>
<i>š</i>	sh as in <u>shadow</u>
<i>ž</i>	as in <u>treasure</u> , <u>television</u>

**CREATIVE PAPER**

Waiting

Part One of *The Painter of Bridges*, a Sarajevo Novel

## *One*

A trickle of grey light leaks from where a corner of bin bag is flapping loose over the glassless window. It spills down the living room wall, throwing shadows which deepen the cracks into canyons for a moment, and then all is black again. Her flat is blinking. The slapping of the plastic against the window frame is like the wind in the trees or the waves on the shore. The draught that slips in, rolling down off the mountains, is glacial.

Zora looks down at her hands which are curled into claws. She is sitting on a stool near the stove. A book is on her lap. The fire is nearly out – ashy embers, that is all. She shivers and remembers. Picks up the book with numb hands and opens the red paperboard cover, preparing herself to tear out the pages. Again, she stops. The pages are printed with the stories they have read to each other, voices from other times and other places blowing like warm winds into cold, dark nights like these. It is their last book. The one he gave to her. With stiff fingers, she tears into it. She feels sick, cannibalistic. She is holding a wad of ripped tales in her hands and feels as if she has torn a clump of hair and scalp from a sleeping child. Her flat is black and silent. She puts the sheaf of stories into the stove and prods it with a poker. A red ribbon unfurls along the edges of the pages, small coughs of smoke spluttering into the room.

A circle of heat grows around the stove and, shivering, Zora pulls her stool closer. Her suitcase is next to the door. She is waiting for someone to knock. Then, she will leave.

She would normally be lying close to him at this time, the still time before dawn, when there is no gunfire, no explosions, just their stomachs ticking, side

by side, in emptiness. They have moved closer and closer together on the mattress they share on the floor, close enough to feel a small pocket of warmth grow between them, but never too close. Maybe there was the once, the twice – she cannot think. But now he has gone. And the other, too. Swallowed by the void. Quite empty her apartment now, dark and cold as the grave.

Earlier, she packed in a frenzy. Blindly grabbing at things, pushing them into her battered, black suitcase. What did she pack? She hardly knows. Remembers objects in her fingers but is not sure if they went into the case or if they were part of a nightmare, a hallucination brought on by the shock and the cold and the lack of food. A clutch of gold watches winding round her fingers like serpents. Matchboxes in cheerful colours. Clothes, unwashed and crumpled – his clothes too, though why she has packed those, she does not know. Scrolls of stiff, painted paper and card. She had found some loose tobacco deep in the pockets of her mother's fur – the one she had worn at the start, last spring, before superstitious fear had stopped her from putting it on. To ward off moths, she supposed. Zora had laughed till she cried then. How the men would have liked to have found that tobacco! Had she packed candles too? But what a fool! She will hardly need candles anymore when she leaves. There will be light and warmth over there, in England.

Flames dance on the pages in the stove.

In just a day or two, she will be able to speak to her husband and her daughter again on the phone. She cannot believe it. Nine months of nothing: of the retreat of the outside world so that it seems that nothing exists beyond the circle of mountains but blackness – and now she is leaving. Just like that.

And all this – him, the sleeping close, the boy, and everything they have been through – is it all just to stop?

She adds more of the book to the stove. To the right on the wall, notches in crayon keep a tally of the days. Beneath are a child's drawings of trees, a lake,



mountains and the sky, meadows of pink, yellow and purple flowers in the foreground. On the opposite wall, deeply fissured from where the shell hit the flat next door, Zora and the girl have painted an apple tree, whose branches twist and curve with the cracks. That was back in the summer, when the apartment, shattered windows already blackened with bin bags, roasted in the heat like a blistering aubergine.

Before the fire, too. The fire which severed time in half for Zora, and which is still all that she thinks of when her mind slips back.

Now, in January, the thermometer has oscillated between minus fifteen and minus twenty Celsius for the past month. The city, unheated, is slowly freezing to death. All movements are slow, as if underwater, and thoughts, too, lack clarity and become unmoored from their subjects. It is hard to remember what was she was doing just a few seconds ago.

The flapping of the loose corner of bin bag against the window frame catches Zora's attention again. She stands up stiffly, and, drawing in her breath, starts for the far corner of the room, moving as rapidly as her frozen legs and painful ankle will take her. Icicles the size of men's arms hang from the windowsill into the room and a small pile of snow has mounded on the parquet tiles, where a pile of shattered glass once lay. She will see if she can fasten the corner of the bin bag to the nail it has worked loose from. She has to stop the cold from coming in.

But when she gets to the window, she finds she is staring down at the snow-laden city unable to move. This could be the last time, for a long time, that she will see this view. Heavy, silencing snow lies on the nearby rooftops. No lights are on, of course, but over to the east, where the old city nestles in the crook of the mountains, the underbellies of the low-lying banks of cloud are blood red and ruby grapefruit pink – whether reflecting the colour of buildings on fire, or shot through with the rising sun, Zora cannot tell. *Sarajevo Red*, that

would be the name of the colour if it were an oil paint. She pauses for a moment, listening, as if perhaps the sounds of the city will give her a clue to the time, but nothing comes. Fingers now blocks of ice, she clumsily pins down the corner of the bin bag and retreats to the warmth of the stove.

She continues waiting, suspended between the world she is about to leave and the one she is about to enter. Her mind is empty of thoughts of what is to come; nothing but the fire has leapt and crackled in her memory for months now.

She cannot even picture her husband's face.

Her black suitcase, packed with Lord knows what, waits patiently by the door.

Where is he? Who is it that is coming to take her away from here? So cold, her thoughts have frozen just beyond reach.

She catches sight of herself from a distance, as if she were him, entering the room, a coated and scarfed lady on a three-legged stool hunched over a stove made of tin. Quite old, she must be now. She senses his hesitation, his fear. The hunched lady turns, but it is not her face, not Zora's, but the heavily lipsticked and rouged face of another woman, whom Zora has not thought about in an age, and in a flash, a memory of the beginning — of when her husband was still with her, and her mother too, before the fighting had started — opens up and swallows her. Zora closes her eyes and sees three strangers arranged around the green-tiled stove in her mother's flat and hears the room echo with the woman's clanging laughter.

She was standing behind her husband in the doorway of her mother's flat, so close that she could smell his cologne, which fear was bringing out sourly, like curdled milk. Peering into the place where she had grown up, they took in what her mother's neighbour's terse phone call that morning had told them: a family

of strangers had broken in and made themselves at home. Zora's stomach tightened as she noted the intruders' things strewn around the place: kicked-off trainers, a striped tracksuit top draped over the back of her mother's sofa, several supermarket bags stuffed with clothes on the dining table, ripped-open cartons of cigarettes and half-empty bottles on the mahogany sideboard. One of Zora's paintings hung askew on the wall. A large black boom box had been placed on the coffee table, its concave speakers beating out some folk music to a hard dance beat. Boom boom boom, it went, and a gypsy woman's high-pitched voice wailed and then dipped into a whisper. The shutters were pulled, though it was mid-morning, and the only light sources were the pools of green from her mother's Art Deco lamps. The acrid smell of spilled brandy, stale cigarette smoke and body odour enveloped them. Two tall men, in their twenties, were leaning back on her mother's Viennese dining chairs, a magazine open on the lap of one, the other smoking, dripping ash onto the floor. Their eyes turned to meet Zora and Franjo when they came in, but their faces remained impassive.

Franjo pulled himself up straighter and stepped into the room. One of the men jumped up, letting the chair fall onto the parquet tiles with a clatter, and all three men started talking at once, gesticulating angrily. Zora, taking a deep breath to steady herself, peered past her husband, ice melting into his coat from their hurried journey across town. It was only then that she caught sight of the third intruder: a woman sitting at the stove, who, paying no attention to the men, was staring directly at Zora with piercing black eyes.

Zora gasped and drew back an inch. She was a dwarf of a woman, but large-chested and imposing, her dyed black hair piled high on her head as if she were a queen. Her haughty features bore such a resemblance to the men's that, despite the height difference, Zora knew she must be their mother. Her feet could not reach the ground from the armchair that had been drawn up close to the green-tiled stove, the rounded chimney breast of which took up a whole

corner of the living room. As a child, it had seemed to Zora that this monstrous stove had a presence and a character of its own, almost like a fifth member of the family. It was sometimes benign, but often malicious, especially when Zora was left playing alone in front of it, if her mother left the room for a few moments. Now this woman had appeared at its mouth and was stabbing at it with a poker, so that the flames leapt and lit up her heavily made-up face. A daub of crimson rouge marked the centre of each cheek and her eyelashes threw spiky silhouettes. Like something of the chimney, Zora thought and shuddered. The woman, not taking her eyes from Zora, laid the poker down and helped herself to a triangle of baklava from a box on the coffee table. She chewed slowly, sucking the syrup from each finger, before clearing her throat, and saying: 'She's dead, my dear, I know it.'

Zora felt something cold pass through her. She pushed past Franjo into the room.

'Who's dead?' she said. 'What are you talking about?'

The dwarf woman smiled and waved her hand around, in which a cigarette had now appeared.

'Whoever owns this fancy place, of course,' she said.

The men fell quiet when their mother started talking and now the one standing up, the elder it seemed, with sallow, almost orange skin, went over and leaned down to light her cigarette.

'My mother owns this place,' Zora said. 'She's not dead. She's very much alive.'

The woman snorted in disbelief. 'Where is she then?'

'She's ill. She's staying with us at the moment.'

'Hah! Dead, more like!' said the son who was standing up, and the shoulders of the one sitting down shook with laughter.

An expulsion of air came from Franjo's lips, and Zora turned to see her husband, normally so quiet and gentle, quivering with rage, like she had only seen him once or twice during their thirty years of marriage.

'This is absurd! You can't move into a flat just because no one's living in it!' he shouted.

The three of them looked at each other and grinned.

'Ah, but we can,' the younger son said. 'Haven't you heard? So many people are leaving right now that the government's said all empty flats are public property.'

'Up for grabs,' the elder son said.

'That'll make people think twice before leaving the city.'

'You could say we're doing Sarajevo a service.'

The three of them laughed.

Zora remembers the look of confusion Franjo shot her then. At that point – sometime in late March, it must have been – there were rumours of war, but nothing more, just uncertainty swirling round the valley of Sarajevo like a deadly vapour. No one knew what was happening. No one knew who or what to believe.

'Even if that were true,' Zora said, anger rising in her voice, 'the fact is my mother is very much alive: this flat has not been abandoned. You have no right to be here. You've got to leave right now.'

The diminutive woman smirked and dragged her finger across the wooden armrest of her chair.

'Look at the dust in this place,' she said, holding her finger up to the light. 'No one's lived here for months, years even. This is the flat of a dead woman, I know it.'

'My mother's alive!'

'She's dead!'

Zora tightened her grip on Franjo's arm, speechless.

The woman gave a smile as smug as a camel's.

'How about this, my dear?' she said. 'You say she's alive. We say she's dead. We're not going anywhere until you prove it to us.'

Zora and Franjo stared at the woman, uncomprehending.

'We'll only leave if you bring her here!'

The elder son threw back his head and started laughing and the others joined in, their leering, drunken laughter chasing Zora and Franjo back down the dark stairs and out onto the street, where they stood, in disbelief.

Zora's childhood home was in the old part of town, with views, one way, onto the roof of the old Orthodox church and, the other, over the dome of the Begova mosque and the low red-tiled roofs of the jewellery shops. If you craned your head, you could just glimpse the square tower of the Catholic cathedral to the west. But the street itself was grim and foreboding, a dark chasm between the fume-blackened facades of the Austrian buildings on one side and the high wall behind which the old Orthodox church hid on the other, trams careering by, pushing any pedestrians up against the walls, so narrow were the pavements. Zora slipped her hand inside Franjo's. He was, in fact, more shaken than she was. He was older and already retired, less used to going out and interacting with people. She gave his hand a squeeze.

They crossed the street and went up the hill to the nearest police station. Inside the squat concrete building, sleet dripping from their coats, a jostling crowd of anxious people swallowed them. Half of them were clamouring to talk to officers about shops which had been looted and robberies that had taken place in broad daylight. Mysterious ditches were being dug at the end of their streets in the small hours of the morning and no one felt safe any more. Such things would never have happened under Tito. Was it true that the doors of the prisons had been opened and all the criminals set loose? The other half had

formed a monstrous, snaking queue to the passport section, and were demanding visas to countries in Western Europe and beyond.

Only three officers seemed to be attending to the crowd, but Zora glimpsed a group of four men playing cards through a crack, where a door, a short way down the corridor, had been left open ajar. She secured a seat for Franjo, who was now quite pale, and slipped down the hallway into the room. The officers, some in uniform, some in jeans, scarcely raised their eyes from the game, as she requested that one of them come to turn the intruders out of her mother's flat. She tapped her foot impatiently. At last, one of them laid down his cards and looked up. He said he would note down the address and send someone over, but Zora should not hold her breath. The woman and her sons were right, he told her. Empty flats were there for the taking. There was very little they could do apart from file a complaint. Zora's head shot back in disbelief. The officer spread his hands and shrugged. Everything was a mess right now, he said, and they were all just waiting to see which way things were going to fall. Who knew what colour uniform they would be wearing in the morning? He turned back to his cards.

The only course of action, it seemed, was to go home and take Zora's mother to the flat. She was almost ninety and had not been outside the entire winter because of a chest infection. Squeezing her feet into her shoes took an age, as she thought Zora and Franjo were trying to get rid of her. 'But where are we going?' she kept asking, eyes wide with alarm. 'It's snowing outside! I'm not well enough!'

'Mama,' said Zora, speaking in a loud voice in the taxi, as she was quite deaf, and almost blind too now, 'we're taking you to your apartment, just for half an hour, and then we'll come straight back again, I promise.'

When they got to the flat, a bored-looking policeman had stationed himself in the corridor and evening was falling but, beyond that, nothing else

had changed, bar one or two more lights being on. The sons were in exactly the same positions on the dining chairs and the minuscule woman was seated in the same spot by the stove, a glass of amber liquid in her hand. They all raised their eyes at the same time.

Zora's mother entered the living room on Zora's arm. She stood for a moment, her eyes adjusting to the dim light. She cocked her head to one side like a bird and then, moving quickly, took two or three steps towards the strangers.

'Who are you?' she said in a quavering voice.

The mother and sons were speechless, the colour draining from their faces as if a ghost were standing before them. The dots of rouge glowed like embers on the woman's cheeks.

'Who are you?' Zora's mother said again. 'What are you doing in my flat?'

The sons looked at each other and then at their mother. She was the first to respond. Jumping down from the armchair, she pushed past Zora's mother and planted herself in front of Zora. She was barely taller than a child, but her sons leapt up at the same time and flanked her like giant playground bullies.

'All right,' snarled the woman, 'she's alive after all. Good for her! Good for you! Well, we'll keep our word. We'll leave like we said we would.'

She spoke as if she were granting Zora and Franjo a favour. Giving a queenly nod to her sons, they set about grabbing their things, stuffing clothes and cigarettes into the plastic bags and helping themselves to further bottles of whiskey from the drinks cabinet. They pushed roughly past Zora and Franjo, the boom box on the shoulders of the younger son, talking loudly about where the best neighbourhood would be to find an empty flat at that time of night. Zora's mother teetered in the middle of the room, looking small and lost in her own apartment.



The woman, the last to leave, turned to Zora, and said with a leer, whiskey hot on her breath: 'We might be leaving now, but don't think that your mother's place is safe. Others will break in just as we did. And when they do, don't count on them leaving so easily!'

They left the door to the flat open and Zora and Franjo stared out of it uncertainly for some time, until sobs from Zora's mother made them rush to comfort her. She had found her cut-crystal decanter, a wedding present from Prague, in pieces by the stove.

They took her home shortly afterwards but she never recovered from the shock. She had nightmares that the laughing, leering dwarf woman was in her bed, or in her bath, and her chest infection, which had not really been much more than a nasty cough, developed into pneumonia within the week. Afraid of the general chaos that was gripping Sarajevo, and aware of the rumours that all the good doctors had fled, Franjo said he would take Zora's mother to a hospital in Belgrade, where she would be treated properly. He would spend a week or two in the capital with a relative, and return when Emilia was strong again.

Except, of course, a week after they left, Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia. The troops that had been gathering in the hills – to protect them from the fighting that was breaking out in the other parts of the country, Zora and Franjo thought – started pelting mortar shells at Sarajevo, and routes in and out of the city were all but closed.

## *Two*

Zora adds more of the stories to the stove and watches the coloured illustrations ripple with blue and green flame on first catching light. With soft popping noises, charred furls of verse are belched from the burning mass and float from the open mouth of the squat tin stove. They spiral up into the cold air of Zora's apartment and then flutter downwards to dissolve into black ashes on the dusty floor. One lands on Zora's cheek, soft as a butterfly, and she is back in the heat of August, the air thronging with black moths that gusted this way and that in the hot bursts of wind that smelt of the furnace. Sheets of flame rushed upwards, sucked into the night. Three days later, she stared up through the burnt-out building to the blue sky above, hand tightly pressed in his, moths still circling. Nothing was left. Zora brushes the ash from her cheek, fingers rough and clumsy with cold.

Where is he? Why is he not here with her now?

The black suitcase waits patiently by the door. Did she pack it herself?

She shakes her head slowly. For a long time now, there has been no yesterday and no tomorrow, as if the past and the future – as well as the outside world – have been cut off by the ring of men surrounding the city. The flames rushing upwards into the night have been her only memory. But now this. The leering woman and her sons, her husband and her mother, crowd around her like ghosts from another time. Waiting to leave, things are stirring and opening inside her. She hears the dwarf woman's laughter and realises it has been sounding in her head from the start, clanging like a warning bell, along with the rumble of explosions and gunfire. And there is her husband – her Franjo! – with the outgrowing mole on the bridge of his nose that she loved to kiss, his warm

smell of tobacco and cologne, and the way he ducked his head when he entered a room. There is her mother, white-headed, smaller, ever smaller, but still wired through with an energy that seemed all the more raw and impressive, now that her body was failing her. The memories rise up.

She tries to picture her daughter, son-in-law and grandson in their home, near Salisbury, where she will be staying, she supposes. Dubravka, who now calls herself Dee, and Stephen and the baby. Stephen's face comes to her, with its ruddy cheeks and pockmarked nose, but the others do not. The house, broad and thatched, is all soft and shadowy inside, carpeted stairs seemingly connecting every room and the leaves of the trees in the garden brushing against the window panes. A quiet place, Stephen had told her proudly. Zora can hear his words but can no longer imagine that such a place exists, that such a hushed life is possible, her memory feeling its way around the leafy village as if prodding into a dream.

Still not dawn. The greyish light that leaked under the loose corner of the bin bag has darkened again and Zora wonders if she imagined that daybreak was approaching in her keenness to leave. She has no idea what time it is as she has packed all the watches – none of them told the right time anyway. Time is now marked by the cries of the muezzins calling the city to prayer five times a day, their voices amplified through loudspeakers since the start of the war, and by the shelling from the Chetniks in the hills. This starts up around ten in the morning – any earlier and they will still be sleeping off their hangovers from the night before – and picks up in intensity throughout the day until petering out at two or three in the morning. Zora cannot imagine a place without the noise of shelling, without the boomed-out cries to prayer, a place where time is marked instead by the regular tick-tocking of a clock on the kitchen wall.

Drawing her stool closer to the stove, something is knocked over. She bends down, groping. Her fingers close round a glass bottle sloshing with

liquid. It is the jar of turpentine she found in the kitchen drawer when packing, a remnant from her studio. The lid was so tightly screwed down she could not undo it. She tries again. The lid untwists with a pop this time and she raises the jar to her nostrils, which flare in recognition at the sweet, sharp smell of pine. With one whiff, her studio comes rushing back. She has not been there since last April.

She was painting in her studio, applying brushstrokes in time to the ticking of the clock that hung on the wall above the clutter of coffee cups and glasses, the silver Turkish coffee pot and the gas ring on the table. She leaned into the canvas with vigour, rocking back and forth on her heels, as her brush deposited thick marks of Lake Green and Burnt Umber. The smells of turpentine, oil paint, old paper and dust mingled around her. She had not opened the windows, preferring to keep out the sounds of the explosions for as long as she could bear the fumes.

The canvas, which was enormous – much bigger than anything she had painted before – was propped up with an arrangement of two easels and some bricks. Her concentration was total as she moved in time to the metronomic beat of the clock, Cadmium Yellow now catching lightly on the weave of the cloth. She was working on her painting of the Goat's Bridge.

It was the hour before sunset, and her studio on the top floor of the old town hall, glowed gold. Three shafts of light slanted in through the windows onto the paint-spattered floorboards and showed up the dust on the second-hand sofas and chairs she had gathered over the years for her students and visitors to sit on. Not ideal, a west-facing studio: the glare in the afternoons used to drive her crazy, but she had come to love the feel of the sun on her arms and her face, especially when it was wintry outside.

As she worked, Zora felt her other paintings looking on guardedly, like jealous children. She sensed them crowding around, waiting to see what Zora Buka – fifty-five, separated from her husband for three weeks, her hometown erupting in chaos around her – would produce. Why was she painting the Goat’s Bridge and why so large? A single yellow flower, spear-headed like a lupin, shot up as tall as a man from the river bank in the foreground and she could almost step through the dark emptiness that gaped under the arch. She had not painted a bridge in years, and now she was painting with an urgency that unnerved her.

When had she seen this view of the bridge lanced through by the wild flower? The summer before perhaps, on a walk along the river from the old town hall. Heading downstream, to the west, you walked into the city, but upstream, to the east, you quickly came to where the mountains drew so close together a type of gorge was formed. Sheer cliffs of grey and lilac rock, textured like thickly applied oil paint, rose up steeply from the river, with shelves of grass here and there where sheep grazed, and higher up, banks of deciduous and fir forests spread out across the cliff tops, the lime green leaves of beech trees rippling like waves in the breeze. After following a bend or two of the river, the honking of traffic and the stench of exhaust fumes gave way to the plashing of the shallow river over smooth white stones and the scent of wild flowers, and after half an hour’s walk, one came to the small, hunchbacked Goat’s Bridge, where goatherds sometimes still crouched in the long grasses on the banks, keeping an eye on their herd. It was the first sign of the city if travelling from the East along the old imperial road from Istanbul.

Now Zora imagined this route clogged up with bearded men in uniform, skull-and-cross-bone insignia sewn onto their dark woollen caps. Chetniks! Zora rubbed her eyes in disbelief when she saw these dinosaurs dug up from the Second World War on her television screen, dropping ash from their

cigarettes and talking about how Serbs needed to unite to feel safe, and how they had to stop the spread of Islam. It was as if she were watching a period drama in poor taste. Before she knew it, their rivals in resistance, Tito's Partisans, would also emerge, brushing the earth from their lapels, as if it were still the 1940s and Bosnia was still occupied by the Germans and the fascist Ustaše. She had been a little girl at the time. It had to be a joke. But no, apparently pimply Bosnian Serbs, barely out of school, were dressing up in the old royalist Chetnik clobber of their grandfathers and rushing from their mountain villages to join the absurd attack on Sarajevo.

It was the direction that Franjo and Zora's mother had taken out of Sarajevo a few weeks earlier. The mountainous road to Belgrade, which followed the curves of the river before rising up onto the high Romanija plateau, was now blockaded not more than a few hundred metres from where she was painting. The Goat's Bridge fell in newly demarcated Serb territory.

Her mother had been so frail before she left that Zora had worried her bones would snap when she put her arms round her. She rasped rather than breathed, a painful, grating sound rattling inside her ribcage. Although her vision was growing dim, her eyes still burned with resolve.

'Mum, I really think I should take you to Belgrade. I want to be with you,' Zora said.

'What – in case I die?'

'Mum!'

'I'm not going to, darling,' she said, sitting up straighter in bed. 'And I'll be fine with Franjo. You know how we get on. You've got your work.'

'I can get time off.'

Emilia waved her daughter's suggestion away and pulled her closer, so that Zora was forced to bend down, her ear close to her mother's mouth.

'I want you to stay, Zora,' she said. 'I want you to keep an eye on my flat. Drop by every day on your way back from your studio and make sure nothing's been stolen, that no other people have moved in. I don't know what's going on in Sarajevo at the moment but things aren't right and I don't want that woman touching my things.'

'Mum, she's gone.'

Her mother started coughing and a haunted look crossed her eyes. Zora knew her mother was seeing the dwarf woman and hearing her odd threat that others would come.

'Don't think about her,' Zora said. 'Look, Franjo, can always keep an eye on your place.'

Emilia's grip tightened on her arm.

'No,' she said with vehemence. 'I want you to. I trust you. He's not as strong with people as you are. And besides,' – a quick flash of her dark eyes – 'you know the place. You know where all my things are. My jewellery, my paintings, my dresses. I'll never be able to replace that cut-crystal decanter from Prague.'

She started to cough again and Zora spooned some medicine between her trembling lips. Her mother had always been overly attached to things – it was to do with her family's wealth being seized and divided up after the Second World War. Zora wanted to be with her and look after her, but there was some comfort in knowing that her mother's obsession continued: a sign of her stubborn will to live.

'Promise me, you'll keep an eye on the place,' she said, lips spotted with phlegm and pink syrup.

Zora had promised.

Zora pushed her fingers through her hair, leaving a streak of Lake Green across her forehead, and set down her brush. Indian Red clotted the creases of

her elbows and Yellow Ochre bruised the soft flesh of her inner arms. The fumes were making her head spin. She crossed the room and opened the middle window a fraction. Icy air slipped in like a knife.

She looked down on the old city that spread below. This studio of hers had one of the finest views in Sarajevo, looking westwards over the low red-tiled roofs of the craftsmen's shops of the Muslim market, the Baščaršija. The jumble of green and black domes, white minarets, church towers and spires gave way to the particoloured Austro-Hungarian townhouses, while high-rise tower blocks built during Tito's time punctuated the distance in the new part of town, where she lived.

Mountains rose on either side of the narrow valley. Dubravka, doing her homework in the window seat as a child, used to say the hills looked so close that surely, if she just leaned out a little, she would be able to touch them. That would have been in the summer, when the beeches and the oaks were round with leaves, and the firs had lost their winter mantles of snow. In the winter, they appeared to recede under thick blankets of white. The trees were now starting to shake themselves of winter like a sodden dog shakes itself of water. The sun glinted on movement high up in the hills: something metallic twitching among the trees. Tanks, pawing the snowy ground, digging themselves in; weaponry to launch shells from – God knew what. Zora did not want to know what the melting snow would reveal up on the mountain where they used to take Dubravka tobogganing.

But then surely this period of violence as Bosnia became its own country would not last that long.

With a start, she saw the sun was sinking in the sky. Glancing at her watch, a familiar sense of panic rose inside her.

Every night at seven thirty, Franjo called. Zora's life moulded itself around this evening call like an oyster growing around grit. The sound of her



husband's voice was the hinge of her day: his reassurances about how her mother was doing, and his concern about how things were in Sarajevo, came back to her the following morning and centred her. But she dreaded the journey between her studio and her flat. Evening after evening she immersed herself in her painting, until, with a gasp, she would see that the sun was setting, and that she would have to plunge into the unsafe streets at twilight again, running most of the way so as not to be late for his call.

But she really was late that evening. As she locked the heavy wooden door of her studio and hurried down the backstairs, the last rays of the sun spilled red, blue and gold through the stained-glass windows of the stairwell, throwing pools of multicoloured light on the steps, and then darkness fell.

Leaving the old town hall by a side entrance, she slid on the icy cobblestones as she rushed to join the knot of people who were boarding a tram in the mist by the river. Clattering and clanging, it swung round the pedestrianised alleys of the Baščaršija, and into the street where her mother's flat was. Zora glanced up. The lights were off and the blinds were as she had left them when she dropped by the day before. All was fine. But even so, as if infected by her mother's nightmares, she heard the dwarf woman's laughter and her words hot in her ear: 'Look at the dust in this place. This is the flat of a dead woman, I know it!' She kept her eye anxiously on the flat until it disappeared from view.

Abruptly, when two young men wearing black masks with slits for their eyes and their mouths boarded at the rear, the tram screeched to a halt mid-journey and the driver leapt down and began waving everyone off. Checking her watch every few minutes, Zora continued her journey on foot.

To thwart the snipers and the men in the hills, the street lights no longer came on at dusk, leaving the city suspended in eerie darkness. Boarded-up cafes and broken shop windows leered at Zora from the darkening shadows,

and, chest tight with foreboding, she broke into a run. Newspaper headlines, when she was not quick enough in looking away, announced that another two people had been killed crossing the street. She shuddered and took a longer route home to avoid the crossroads people said were watched by snipers. Her neck grew stiff from wrenching upwards to see if the sound she had just heard was perhaps the movement of a man lying on a roof, gun trained on her. Like everyone, she had taken to walking pressed up against the walls of the buildings, rather than in full view down the middle of the pavement.

This dusk-time journey between studio and home had become unrecognisable to Zora, a nightmarish twisting away of something known and loved. In the harsh mountain dialects and the prison slang she overheard, and in the shadowy glimpses, she caught down alley ways, of masked men and boys in uniform with machine guns, she could, for long moments of panic, find nothing familiar, only a cold ugliness alien to her city.

The relief of arriving at her tower block, the middle of three identical fifteen-storey high-rises, was immense. The buildings, which were arranged in a row, stacked like giant dominoes along the tree-lined avenue which led up the hill to the Koševo football stadium, had once been painted bright yellow, pink and blue respectively, but were now weather-faded and flaking. Fewer lights were on than usual. The lawns that linked the high-rises were strewn with boulders of greyish melting snow, discoloured grass showing through in between. The teenagers who would normally be hanging out at this hour around the dry concrete fountain and the cluster of swings, no matter what time of year, were absent, kept at home by parental curfews. The parades of shops – launderettes, mini markets, hairdressers, a gym, a bakery, a bar – on the ground floor of each block had taken to closing early now, and several had been shuttered since the start of April. Scribbled signs announced: 'Closed until life is normal', and, 'Gone to the coast'.

Zora heard the trill of her phone before the lift had quite come to a halt, and she had to make herself wait before opening the door, which would jam the metal cage between floors if opened too soon. Slamming the front door of her flat, she snatched the receiver from its cradle on the wall of the hall. She could scarcely speak at first, her heart was drumming so hard in her chest, but within moments she knew her mother was all right – she was doing better, in fact, recovering well after having had her left lung drained. She had even cracked a joke and asked after her ruby earrings today. The familiarity of Zora's flat swelled around and held her.

'And you, darling?' Franjo asked. 'I was starting to get worried.'

'Sorry, Franjo, I know,' Zora said. 'But I'm okay, really, I am.'

There was a pause as their separate anxieties subsided.

Easing her shoes off, Zora sat down heavily on the chair in the hall, and, exhausted, let Franjo speak, allowing the rise and fall of his voice, the familiar turns of phrase he used, to wash through and ground her. Rubbing her sore feet and picking flecks of paint from her hands and her arms, she imagined he was there in the flat with her.

Franjo had booked flights to London for the following week. He was taking Emilia to stay with Dubravka and Stephen, their quiet Wiltshire house being the perfect place for her to recover from her operation. Zora had been shocked by the plan when she first heard it, as it meant she would be longer without Franjo, but, of course, it made sense. A city full of explosions and gunfire was hardly the place to recuperate, and neither her mother nor Franjo wanted to stay any longer in Belgrade.

'The whole lot of them are poisoned,' Franjo had told her the other night, lowering his voice so Zora's cousin, whose place he was staying in, would not hear. 'They really think Sarajevo is crawling with Muslim fundamentalists and look at me through slit eyes for being a Croat. It's awful. I can't bear to open a

copy of *Politika* any more.’ The plan was that they would fly back to Sarajevo as soon as the situation was calmer and the airport had reopened.

‘Zora, I think you should come too.’

Zora sighed.

‘We’ve talked about this, darling,’ she said. ‘You know I’d love to but-’

‘I know, I know,’ he said. ‘You don’t want to lose your job or the flat, and neither do I, of course, but I’m worried you don’t realise the danger – the seriousness – of the situation.’

Zora shrugged her coat off and frowned.

‘*I am* here, Franjo,’ Zora said. ‘I do know what it’s like out on the streets at night. I do see the prices of vegetables and meat doubling almost daily in the shops and the panic-buying of tinned goods. Half my students no longer turn up for class and everyday more families are leaving. But they’re wrong. This is Bosnia, not Croatia. War’s not going to happen here. Especially not in Sarajevo where every other person is married to someone of a different nationality. Like us. That’s what makes Sarajevo the place we love. I can’t leave now. Come on, you know that.’

‘Of course, you’re right,’ Franjo said, ‘Sarajevo is different. But that doesn’t mean-’

‘I think you’ve spent too long in Belgrade. You’re getting paranoid.’

‘Probably,’ Franjo said, and he was the one to sigh this time. ‘You know, the truth is part of me wishes I was there, too, while all this is going on. But still, I’m not happy with you being there by yourself.’

‘Neither am I, darling, but what else can we do?’

A long pause stretched down the line.

‘Just think about leaving, will you,’ Franjo said at last. ‘Sarajevans keep arriving in Belgrade, so there must be a way.’

‘I will.’

Hanging up, Zora walked from room to room of their flat, straightening paintings and plumping cushions. Three weeks of separation was the longest time they had spent apart in their twenty-seven years of marriage. She knocked her shin against the coffee table, where his long, slippered legs would usually be resting. She was eyed warily by his razor in the bathroom. Their bed was as large and as cold as Siberia. She ached for her mother, too. The armchair where Emilia had ensconced herself, wrapped in blankets, all winter, cracking sly jokes in her hour of lucidity after her evening glass of water and whiskey, would not accept anyone else's behind. Her embroidery was left half-done on the sideboard. Part of Zora wanted more than anything to leave and be with them in the calm of the Wiltshire village where Dubravka and Stephen lived; to step out of the nightmarish streets of Sarajevo and into a safer reality.

But part of her very much wanted to stay. If she did not sign in every morning at the Academy of Fine Arts, where she taught, she would be fired as several of her colleagues had been, and flats were not empty for long before a family of refugees or criminals moved in. And it was not just because of the of losing her job and the flat – it was also because she loved Sarajevo and did not want to leave her hometown in a time of crisis. It was not to do with an obsession with holding onto things, like her mother, but more to do with the soul of the city. She knew Franjo understood that much.

But what she could not put into words for Franjo was that her love of the city and her desire to stay were also somehow bound up with the painting. She did not want to leave because, quite simply, she wanted to finish the Goat's Bridge. She had not felt so alive – so excited and so compelled by a painting – in years.

### *Three*

Indecision flickers in the room in the light that cannot decide whether it is night or day. On the brink, teetering, for so long now, that Zora cannot remember if it is dusk or dawn she is waiting for and if she should stay or go. That was the question at the beginning too. She stayed, others left.

She was sleepwalking during the whole of April, she sees that now. How could she not have realised what was going on around her? Serb families left the city daily. She remembers running into Lenka from the floor below in the lift one day. She was curled up in a ball on the metal floor of the lift, sobbing. She could not bear it, she said. Her best friend's family had just upped and left in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye or even leaving a note. Everyone was leaving. Her brother had been stranded somewhere in Canada, unable to return because there were no flights, and her mother, who could not live without him, was being a bitch. And now, Sandra, her best friend, had gone and left, and there was no one to talk to. Zora had not known what to do other than hug her and tell her things would be back to normal soon.

But what was normal? The top three floors of their tower block were empty. It seemed haunted up there with no lights on and no voices. The walls spun every time she saw someone she knew in uniform. Her neighbour Almasa's three boys had raced off to join the Bosnian Army the day after Independence and she could not get used to the sight of Adem, who she had known since he was in nappies, smoking in the stairwell with his father's hunting rifle slung around his narrow shoulders.

Surely, the Yugoslav troops would put an end to the fighting soon. Surely, the so-called Chetniks would shave off their beards and put their grandfathers' uniforms back in their dressing-up boxes.

A warm rush of friends and food towards the end of April. The clinking of cutlery, steam rising up from food, hands reaching across to pass dishes. Zora, having hardly eaten a full meal since the start of the fighting, was quite overwhelmed by so much food. Dish after dish was brought out. A tray of grilled chicken wings; roast potatoes fragrant with rosemary; a *šopska* salad of tomato, cucumber, cubes of salty, white cheese and long, thin slices of green chilli. Homemade *pita* – soft, flaky filo pastry pie, crisp on top and filled with spinach and cheese – let out warm, yeasty sighs when cut into.

There were five of them sitting around the dining table in the Markoviće's flat that afternoon. Lenka had run up to Zora's flat that morning, and, eyes shining – an entirely different girl from the one curled up, crying in the lift a few weeks earlier – had hardly been able to get her words out, as she hopped from foot to foot. 'Will you come, Mrs Buka? Will you come?' It was her father's birthday and her mother, elated by a phone call from her son after an excruciating week of silence, and fed up with eating next to nothing, had thought, 'What the hell?' and cooked up a feast. Only now there was way too much food. 'Will you come and join us? She's told me to invite Mirsad from 804, too!' And now, here they all were: Mirsad, her neighbour of twenty years and a good friend of Franjo's, herself, Lenka and her parents, Vesna and Dragomir.

'Here you go,' said Mirsad, sliding some *pita* onto her plate – and still the dishes kept coming, carried from the kitchen in Vesna's heavily-ringed hands, cigarette always on the go, until the embroidered cloth on the mahogany table no longer showed through underneath. Stewed onions and marrow stuffed with minced meat and rice. Hot cornbread rolls, steaming and as yellow

as the sun when split open. An enormous pot of rubbery parcels of spiced minced meat wrapped up in brined cabbage leaves – ‘*Sarma!*’ Dragomir applauded – was set on the table and Vesna, at last, sat down. Everything was dappled with the multicoloured light which fell from the stained-glass Art Nouveau lamp that hung overhead. A banquet of red, blue and green.

‘Eat! Eat!’ cried Dragomir, their host, and Zora and Mirsad, the guests, exchanged the smallest of glances. Where was all this food coming from? With prices on the market stalls going up everyday, how could they afford it? But Zora put such thoughts from her mind and just ate, as did Mirsad – all quiet now except for the sounds of chewing and the scrape of cutlery on china. She had not realised how hungry she was, had not really paid attention to food since Franjo and her mother had left. And glancing up, Zora saw, from the way Lenka was devouring the chicken wings and sucking the juice from her fingers, that the Markovićs could not be eating like this regularly either.

Oh, it had been good to have food inside her. A shock, too, after living off shop-bought *pita* and tinned soup.

She was stunned by company, having talked to almost no one other than her art students for the last few weeks. It was quite surreal. Vesna, blonde hair pinned on top of her head in a soft billow, like a rising soufflé, had put on one of her finest evening dresses, and was chattering away to Mirsad and her, making small talk. She helped herself to more and more wine, bejewelled rings cutting into the soft flesh of her plump hands. Her husband, Dragomir, also rotund, though solidly so where his wife was doughy, with an impressive drum-like belly that he carried in front of him as if he were about to give birth, repeatedly, patiently, held his hand over his glass, when she tried to fill it with wine, and instead poured shot glasses of homemade apple brandy. ‘Drink! Drink!’ he cried, offering them around. ‘The apples are from my uncle’s orchard. I picked them with my own hands!’



Apart from the picture of the shelled Sebilj fountain on the front page of *Oslobođenje* that had been left lying on the sideboard – a solitary pigeon pecking at the rubble of the Baščaršija landmark in disbelief – and the fact that the slatted, peach-coloured shutters had been pulled down before nightfall, it was as if nothing unusual was going on outside.

As Zora sipped her brandy, she felt her shoulders relax for the first time in an age and she started to take in her surroundings with more interest. She did not know the Markovićs that well and had never been to their apartment before. It was directly below Mirsad's flat, and was identical in layout to hers, only theirs was on the north-east corner of their block, rather than the south-west. Beyond that there were few similarities. In contrast to her white walls sparsely hung with a few of her landscapes and paintings which were gifts from her small circle of artist friends, the walls in the Marković flat were papered a dark cigar brown and almost every centimetre was taken up by souvenirs and photos from the family's numerous travels around the world.

What was it that Dragomir did again? He had certainly done well. Pictures of Lenka and her brother Saša as gap-toothed, blond-locked kids in pits of coloured balls at Disney Land grinned out from among a cluster of African tribal masks, while the legs of a pair of Balinese marionettes dangled over a family snap of the four of them posing – Lenka, at thirteen or so, with the beginnings of her stoop: she had already shot up taller than her mother – under the knock-kneed legs of the Eiffel Tower.

Ah yes, here. Jammed between an enormous red Chinese peasant's straw hat and a quickly executed caricature of Saša outside the Colosseum, an incongruous black-and-white photo. Zora tipped back in her chair to examine it more closely. A group of pale-faced workers, arranged in rows, looked into the camera inquiringly, several blinking, caught out by the flash, while two of them, in the front row, held up a stiff piece of paper.

‘It’s a literacy certificate,’ Lenka, on one side of Zora, said. ‘You know, part of Tito’s scheme to get everyone to read and write.’

Zora nodded, and it came back to her that Dragomir’s family had a coal mine – or was it a stone quarry? – in Eastern Bosnia somewhere, but that he rarely went to his village now, leaving his brothers to run things that end, while he oversaw the Sarajevo office. Dragomir, seeing her study the photo, raised his glass to her and smiled broadly. ‘Ah, how I hate the country,’ he boomed across the table. ‘So backward! No theatres, no doctors!’ He looked horrified for a moment as he considered this and then tipped his head back to down his brandy.

A sound came from her right and Zora turned to see Mirsad, bald head bent in one hand, his broad frame quivering, struggling to hold back his laughter. Zora laughed and clapped her arm round his shoulders. Mirsad owned a bookstore in the Bašćaršija and was more Franjo’s friend than hers, but Zora had always liked his gentle company. She was glad to see he was relaxing at last. There had been something guarded about him over lunch. She had wanted, naturally, she thought, to talk about their solitude – his wife and son had been stranded in Budapest when the shelling started – but each time she approached the topic, he steered the conversation away.

‘Tell me about your painting,’ he said, and she found herself opening up too much, telling him about her growing fixation with the Goat’s Bridge, and how her studio had become the only place in which she was happy. It was womb-like, in a way, she said – something she had not told Franjo – and she clapped her hand over her mouth at that point and apologised. He must think she was crazy.

He looked up then, almost sharply.

‘Not at all,’ he said.

The truth was, now that the nightly phone calls came from England, she felt a wall had sprung up between her husband and herself. Even though the line was less crackly and her husband's voice poured into her ear each night with the same cadences, the same expressions as always, rising an octave when concerned before resuming its familiar rumble when calm, she found herself listening to him critically, as if he were a stranger. The bulk of Europe that stretched between them aggravated her somehow. She listened impatiently as he told her Sarajevo was often the second or third item on the news, and proceeded to dissect the way in which it was reported. What was *Oslobođenje* – the paper he used to write for – saying, he wanted to know. Zora shrugged irritably. He knew she hardly ever watched or read the news. His voice would grow sad then. It was just that he felt so helpless when he saw their battered hometown, drabber and smaller, through foreign eyes.

It was her daughter's quick, practical questions about what she was eating and how she was coping with her classes, and her mother's incessant concern with her flat, that she looked forward to now.

'Dear, I've made a list of all my silverware,' her mother said, 'I want you to copy it down and go and check it's all still there. The trouble is I can't remember if I loaned the coffee pot to my sister before she died or not. It's keeping me up at night.'

Zora smiled and wrote the list down. She had started wearing her mother's fox fur out on the streets. It bristled around her, protecting her. She could smell her mother's smell in it. Her husband, though, was slipping away.

Vesna prodded Lenka and nodded her head for them to swap seats. She drew her chair up close to Zora and placed one hand on top of Zora's and the other on top of Mirsad's on the table. They were over-creamed, as smooth as butter, and Zora wondered what she must think of her rough painter's hands.

'So we've all been abandoned,' she started, and hiccupped.

'Mum!' Lenka said.

'No, no,' Vesna said, wagging a finger, 'it's true. My baby Saša's in Toronto. Your Franjo's in England and Mirsad, your Radmila and Samir are in-'

'Budapest,' Mirsad said stiffly.

'Two!' Vesna cried, raising two fingers as if in a victory sign, and looked wide-eyed at everyone round the table. 'Poor Mirsad! Two of your family trapped outside. Or rather, we're the ones who are trapped inside.' She took another gulp of wine. 'The question is, the very simple question is: is it better to be in' – she paused – 'or out?'

'Not this again, Vesna,' Dragomir said.

'Or put another way,' she continued, 'is it better to stay or go? Mirsad, what do you think?'

Zora saw Mirsad flinch.

'Well, I can tell you this,' said Dragomir, pouring himself another brandy, 'there's no way we're going to go and live in the village, if that's what you want, Vesna. They're in a different century! In the middle, no, the dark ages! Imagine – a place with no doctors! What about my heart?'

Lenka mouthed these last words as he said them, as if they were a refrain.

'You've got the heart of an ox, dear,' Vesna said. 'What about our lives? Do you want Saša to come back to a dead family?'

Turning to Zora, she whispered, 'We won't leave, of course, because I don't want to lose this apartment. Refugees would take it straight away. But God, I'm terrified, aren't you? Day by day, Sarajevo is becoming more Muslim-' Seeing Zora recoil slightly, Vesna put a hand on her arm and looked into her eyes. 'No, of course, we all know Muslims like Mirsad, but-'

Zora, unsettled by the turn in the conversation, was about to answer when the table top slid into her lower ribs and a resonant boom shook through the flat. The jolt her body received knocked her chair backwards. As she fell in a slow motion arc, her head tilting upwards as if in a lowering dentist's chair, she saw cracks opening up in the ceiling and heard the smack of the Art Nouveau lamp, as it – released from its mooring in the ceiling rose – slammed into the middle of the wobbling dining table. Chicken bones, cornbread rolls, glass, china and cutlery rose in the air like fleas jumping on a dog's back, before falling to join her, crumpled, on the floor. She fell in such a way, that the dining chair shot off behind her and she landed on her side, crushing one arm under her hip. Almost a recovery position, though the trapped arm was not quite right. Wooden tiles pressed against her cheek. A chunk of blue glass from the fallen lamp rolled to a halt in front of her nose.

From her position on the floor, cheek pressed to the dusty tiles, she could make out that Mirsad had dropped onto his hands and knees, spine curved, hands over his head, protecting himself like a curled-up woodlouse. Lenka was not visible from where she had fallen, but Vesna and Dragomir were washed up on the floor by the window, Vesna clinging on to her husband, head buried in his chest. There was something so intimate about the way that they held onto each other that Zora had to look away, feeling she had caught them at something untoward, perhaps discovered them at fumbling afternoon intercourse after a long, drunken lunch.

Zora closed her eyes to draw together the strength to get up, but her insides spun and she felt nauseous. She opened them again.

Mirsad was the only one who was stirring. He sat up on his haunches and was preparing himself to get up. His eyes popped rhythmically in and out behind the panes of his steel-rimmed glasses. Like panting tongues, Zora

thought, stifling a laugh. She had no idea where this thought came from. Perhaps he seemed so odd because she was seeing him upside down.

‘Mum, Dad, look at Mirsad!’ Lenka’s voice floated out from behind the upended table.

He was shakily pulling himself up and brushing broken glass from his trousers.

‘I must be-,’ he started. ‘I have to be going now. It’s been- Thank you.’

Zora watched stunned as Mirsad attempted to thank his hosts as if nothing had happened and started making his way in a shaky crab-like sidestep around the knocked-over chairs, glass from the shattered lamp crunching under foot. It took him several attempts to ease his shoes on in the hall, and then he raised his hand in a half salute and slipped out of the flat.

‘Mu-um, Da-ad!’ Lenka yelled.

‘Lenka, get down for God’s sake,’ Dragomir roared. ‘Another might come at any second!’

‘But what was it? Another what?’ Lenka said, dropping down again behind the dining table.

Zora looked out blankly after Mirsad for a moment, before giving a cry, hauling herself painfully to her feet, and hobbling out of the Markovičes’s flat, never mind the fact she had left her shoes in their hall.

The strip light was flickering in the bare concrete corridor, as Zora looked around wildly, as if Mirsad might be waiting in the shadows. She pressed the button for the lift, but then, panicked by the cries that were threading up through the building – ‘Mama, are you okay?’ and, ‘Goran? Where are the kids?’ – and the sound of opening and closing doors, she decided to take the stairs, not wanting to lose any time.

One flight up and she bent over to catch her breath in the concrete corridor they shared, a flat in each corner, identical to all the floors in the tower

block. A belt of pain was tightening around her lower chest, from where the table had slid into her ribs, but ignoring it, she went up to Mirsad's front door, which was open ajar, and pushed. The door swung open and she at once stepped back and away.

She must have made a mistake: this could not be Mirsad's flat.

She made herself step back to the threshold, and looked. A long, dark corridor, strewn with clutter: fallen paintings, a book case diagonally blocking the passage, books and broken china on the floor, a doorway, and another room where Mirsad's living room would have been if this were his flat – which it was not, for at the far end there was open space where wall should have been. She stared at the bright opening, which was greyish-white in colour. The colour of nothing – of void. It exerted a power over her and held her where she was. The noise of traffic rose from nine floors below and mingled with the ringing the explosion had left in her ears. A cold draught rushed down the corridor to whip her face. She put a hand to her cheek and discovered a warm, coagulating substance the texture and viscosity of oil paint. Absently drawing her fingers to her mouth, the taste of blood brought her back to herself.

'My God,' she said, 'his flat's been hit.'

She stood uncertainly in his hall wondering if it was an intrusion to go further in, for suddenly she had no idea how well they knew each other – she had never been to his flat before, had no idea that it was so richly decorated with kilims in wine reds and yellow ochres on the wall, like walking inside a silk purse, and she remembered from nowhere that his father had run a Turkish carpet shop where the bookstore now was and that rugs had been his family trade for years before Mirsad went into books. And now, the first time she entered the flat, it was destroyed, exploded.

A flash of dulled silver caught her eye. She bent down and picked up a shard of metal the length of a finger, and dropped it an instant later as it burnt

her fingers. She saw others embedded in the walls. She did not know the name of these bits of metal, but she started to shake violently. She sank down into a crouching position in the hall of Mirsad's flat, one side of which had been wrenched off as if with a tin opener. Racing through her mind was the realisation of how lucky Mirsad was that he had been having lunch with the Markovićes and not at home as usual, and just behind that thought, relief was flooding through her that the shell had not hit her flat.

She was crouching on the floor, temple and ribs throbbing. Had she swooned? How long had she been there? Her gaze was continually sucked down the corridor, through the living room, to the hole. The colourless beyond: the outside seeping in, ice-spiked and feral. She felt the pull of the void. She could not tear her eyes from the opening the size of a tank in the wall.

Gradually, she became aware of the sound of breathing close by. In the periphery of her vision, she saw that another figure was standing in the doorway of a room that came off from the corridor, also gazing out, hypnotised by the sky that was darkening by increments.

A misshapen moon, not quite full, a side scoured away from it, passed over the hole, as it rose in the sky. It was framed for a moment by the jagged breeze block of the torn wall and then was gone.

'Mirsad?' she said, knowing that it was not him, that this figure was not Mirsad, too slim, too upright, but who else could it be? It withdrew immediately, stepping back into the darkness of the room. Moments later, Mirsad's bear-like figure appeared. He had removed his glasses, and his eyes, no longer popping or panting, were red and subdued.

'Zora,' he said in a flat voice, and his shoulders were hunched over, everything about him pulling downwards, 'how long have you been there?'

'Mirsad, your flat,' she said. 'I'm so-'



But he cut her off, pressing his finger lightly to the side of her head.

'You need to put something on that cut,' he said. 'Let me take you back to your flat.'

Later, Zora swept up the glass that lay in glistening piles under her windows, three of which had shattered, and taped bin bags over the holes to stop up the draughts and keep out the rain until she could get the panes replaced. It was slow work as each time she bent, pain seared through her lower chest. She gingerly raised her blouse at one point to see a band of yellowish-green bruise spreading there like lichen. But she pushed on, determined to get everything in order.

It was midnight when she stopped. She helped herself to a glass of whiskey and sat down on the sofa. The lamp on the side table was throwing a low, homely glow over the room and the flat smelled of furniture polish, but Zora sat upright in the middle of her sofa, unable to relax and curl her feet up underneath her as usual. Her teeth chattered against the tumbler as she raised it to her lips and her eyes darted about the room like a bird's. It was not right.

She could not stop going over the moment when the shell had hit. One moment they had been eating lunch, the next she had been on the floor. And that slow-motion fall! All she saw was rubble and broken glass when she closed her eyes. Zora wondered who the other figure had been in Mirsad's flat, and if she had imagined him in her shock. But most of all, she saw the hole the size of a tank that had opened up in the living room just over the corridor from hers and the nausea she had felt on confronting it. No matter how they stopped up that hole, and how she blocked her broken windows, that void would always be there now.

The moment she stared straight through Mirsad's broken flat into the emptiness beyond, was the moment she first grasped that a war was going on.

Going to bed that night after her whiskey, she longed for Franjo to be there holding her. Their phone call that evening had been fraught. She could hardly bear to remember it. Still tipsy with brandy and shock, she could not explain clearly what had happened and Franjo had actually raised his voice at her at one point in concern.

‘Why aren’t you here?’ she had screamed at him. There had been a silence and when she realised he was crying, frustrated that he could not be there protecting her, she had cried too, feeling awful for both of them.

And now, a little more sober, her longing for him was more intense than she had felt in years, like when they were first lovers, before Dubravka, when it felt the world would fall apart if she was not with him, that she did not have a centre without him, and that only he understood her.

Dubravka’s response, as always, had been more practical. ‘Mum, you’re leaving. We’ll start making phone calls tomorrow.’

‘Yes, darling,’ Zora had said.

## *Four*

She woke unable to move with fear an hour later. A second boom and shattering of window panes, closer this time, tore into her sleep and she lay there paralysed, waiting for the thousands of shards of glass that were flying through the air to pierce her skin. How stupid to sleep directly beneath one of the few unbroken windows in her flat. Why had she not thought? Seconds, then minutes passed, and she still could not move, until at last relief broke in her like a wave crashing on the shore, as she realised she had again been saved and that the shell had fallen elsewhere.

Shaking, nightdress drenched with sweat despite the cool air, she pulled the mattress off the bed and heaved it into the only room which faced away from the hills: the kitchen. It took her a long time to fall asleep in the unfamiliar place, which, without blinds, was flooded with moonlight. Her line of vision skimmed the chessboard linoleum tiles, catching on a chunk of glass from one of the broken windows that had rolled under the washing machine. The tap dripped every so often into the sink, and the ceiling, sticky with dusty grease from years of rising cooking vapours, seemed unnaturally high over her head.

Exhausted, she threw herself into her painting of the Goat's Bridge the next day. It was the space under the arch that consumed her attention. She spent hours mixing up the correct colour, combining Lake Green, Malachite, Yellow Ochre and the tiniest speck of Lamp Black. She exaggerated its roundness and its depth. She wanted the hole, for lack of a better word, both to recede and to pull the viewer in, but at the same time to dominate the painting in an unsettling way, pushing outwards and grabbing the viewer roughly, so that the eye,

wanting to be drawn to the beauty of the architecture of the stone arch above, or to the gorgeous yellow of the spear-headed flower in the foreground would continually resist and slide back, half-willing, half-dragged, into the cave-like void under the bridge.

Her husband's and daughter's words from the previous night's phone call echoed in her head, scraping at her concentration, and, from time to time, she closed her eyes tightly to steady herself.

That morning, on her way to work, she had been certain that this would be one of her last days in Sarajevo. Looking around her, she was incredulous she had not made up her mind before. The normal rhythm of the city had been lost. People darted over crossroads in zigzags in order to outsmart the snipers, and tram passengers ducked their heads in a wave, as if one person, whenever they passed under a sniper's nest. If a blast was heard, everyone ran to the nearest shelter: a shop entrance, a school gym hall, a stranger's cellar. It was insanity. Yes, of course, she must leave.

Her chest ached as if constricted by a metal band.

The Miljacka, usually shallow and placid, was swollen and charging with brown meltwater from the mountains. Zora took a deep breath, pain shooting through her chest, and ran across the bridge, her eye on the yellow of the old Evangelical church that housed the Academy of Fine Arts on the other bank. Bridges were even more exposed and dangerous than crossroads. One of the first deaths of the war had happened on a bridge further downstream: a Muslim girl from Dubrovnik who had been studying here, a medical student who was taking part in the peace march on the day Independence was declared, when she was shot. Anger at the Chetniks, safe in their positions high on the roof tops, shook Zora. She entered her classroom flustered and irate. The bags

under the eyes of her students mirrored her own and she had to stop herself from telling them all to give up and go home.

‘We’ll start making phone calls tomorrow,’ Dubravka had said, but what had she meant? Phone calls to whom? Zora realised she had no idea how people left the city, though apartments were still emptying, so there must still be a way out. She supposed there were organisations she could talk to, friends she could discreetly ask. But who could she trust? She would think about it later, when her thoughts were less fragmented.

She took off her coat and prepared a palette of earthy colours for her class on brushstrokes and texture.

By the afternoon, she was calmer. The sun had come out, and walking to her studio, the beauty of the city unfolded around her. She took in every detail with the keen attention of someone who is about to leave. The glimmer of sunlight on the river, the colours of the handsome Hapsburg town houses, the mountains, growing greener, in the near distance. In a show of defiance, or perhaps simply out of habit, the old men in flat caps were playing giant chess in the square outside the Orthodox cathedral, quite as if they were not in danger, as they did every afternoon. Zora nodded at them. Passing through the network of cobbled streets that made up the Baščaršija, she saw, to her surprise, that the wooden shutters of Mirsad’s bookstore were open, and that a couple of soldiers were coming out. She wondered if she should go in, but pressed on. She wanted to be in her studio. Turning down the long, diagonal street that led to the old town hall, she saw, through the smoke that rose from the grill houses, the glass dome glowing like a golden egg in the afternoon sun. Ah. There her studio was, up on the third floor, where an enormous black swallow’s nest occupied one of the window sills. She stopped. Could she really leave this?

The old town hall was fantastically over the top – a place a child might dream up – with its layers of pink and yellow stone, like a Battenberg cake. The crenellated roof line, stained-glass windows, white Islamic arches, marble balconies and glass dome gave the impression of a Gothic castle and an Arabian palace fused together in one building. It was built on a triangular foundation to fit the valley as it tapered towards the gorge in which the Goat’s Bridge lay, the first of Sarajevo’s sixteen bridges. It was a reaching out to the Muslims of Sarajevo, an acknowledgement of the five centuries of Ottoman rule by their successors, the Hapsburgs, and a symbol of the city’s hybridity. It was the last building the archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, stepped out of before being shot by Gavrilo Princip, dragging Europe and beyond into the First World War. After the end of the Second, with the formation of socialist Yugoslavia, the seat of governance had been moved to a grey concrete building further west, and the hall now housed the National and University Library on its lower floors and several offices of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia above. Three of its large, top-floor rooms had been given over to city artists. Zora had had the keys to hers for two decades.

She loved the place. She went in through the main entrance which gave onto the Miljacka, and the space enveloped her like a sanctuary. Though she had to submit her handbag to a brusque search by the black-uniformed guards who had positioned themselves at each entrance since the sixth of April, her irritation dissipated as she passed through to the atrium at the heart of the building. Tiers of white balconies, supported by marble columns, rose up from the hexagonal central space which was bathed in soft golden light from the glass-domed roof above. People talked in hushed voices as if oblivious to the disarray outside. Zora stood still for a moment, the shock of the previous night’s shelling, her anger, her exhaustion, even the pain in her chest, easing a fraction, as though a balm were being applied. Twelve arches radiated out from

the atrium and, through these, like on any other day in the past twenty years, she could see people bent over rosewood desks inlaid with green leather, shelves of jumbled books rising high above their heads. In here, it was almost possible to believe that Sarajevo was whole and at peace again.

Dubravka and Franjo wanted her to leave. She had said yes, but would it be that easy? She would have to be careful. No one liked people who left – ‘deserters’, as they were seen here. And, of course, in a way, they were right. The more people who left, especially Serbs, the more the Chetniks on the roof tops and in the hills got what they wanted: a town of Muslims to destroy. Franjo had told her that the Serbs in Belgrade were already saying that Sarajevo was Muslim now. They did not like to think that there might be Serbs who did not want what they wanted: who actively chose to stay in their hometown and who wanted to live together with Muslims and Croats as they always had done.

Her family had lived in Sarajevo for centuries.

How could she keep her promise to her mother if she left?

But how could she stay on in such a place, where everyone was starting to regard everyone else with suspicion, and she might be killed crossing a bridge or at home in her bed at night?

The yawning void under the arch grew darker, threatening to pull Zora in. She stepped back and laid down her paintbrush. She should probably go home. She could not think straight.

Crossing the room to pour herself a glass of water, she glanced around at her other paintings, her old friends, for reassurance. Mountainscapes, seascapes, paintings of gorges and haystacks covered in snow, hung four or five deep on three of the walls, while the fourth was given over entirely to bridges.

She had trained in sculpture at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris in the 1950s. Winning a coveted scholarship in her final year at high school, and

there being no places that year in fine art, she learned to sculpt instead. Paris had been dizzying for a girl from a communist country and the rather traditional small town of Sarajevo: she had loved dancing in clubs and drinking onion soup at five in the morning, steam rising into the cold Parisian air, but had found the expensiveness of shops selling pink meringues in the sixteenth arrondissement bewildering, repellent even, and had felt much more at home during her next three years at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade. Having parted ways with Lenin at the end of the Second World War, Yugoslavia was the freest of the Eastern Block countries, and there were no demands for social realism at the end of the forties. In fact, there were no restrictions at all, but while many of her contemporaries explored surreal or abstract art, Zora was drawn to landscape.

Her year of sculpture could be seen in the rounded curves of her paintings, in the way there was something of the human body in her landscapes, so that you wanted to run your hands over the hills and bridges.

Zora Buka's heyday had been in 1984, during the Winter Olympics. She had held an exhibition and people from around the world — diplomats, sportsmen and women, and tourists — bought her paintings to take home with them to Rio de Janeiro, Vienna, Prague, Dublin, and even to Phoenix. Her bridges had been the most popular. They wanted the elegance of the Ottoman past and the symbolism of the bridge: the union of people, the meeting of East and West, that they understood Bosnia, and especially Sarajevo, to be about. Zora thought of her bridges in other climates: of the eleven arches of the bridge at Višegrad in a private, pool-side gallery in Rio and the spectacular single arch of the bridge at Mostar in an over-air-conditioned lounge in Phoenix. Most of her paintings, though, several hundred of them, were here in her studio. They kept her company while she worked. She would feel denuded without them.



Zora's fascination with bridges was nothing to do with the symbolic – that was for others to decide. For her, it was all about form. Something about the simplicity of the arch of a stone bridge meeting its reflection in the water. She thought she had moved on from bridges, yet the shape she had seen in the Goat's Bridge – a young girl dropping into a backbend, body arching so high over the river that it seemed her spine must crack – had grasped her so powerfully that she had had to paint it. There she was now in Lake Green and Burnt Ochre outline. Her long hair twisted in the currents of the river, as she waited – mocking laughter gleaming in her eyes – to be effaced by further brushstrokes. She would, eventually, be concealed, lost in other layers of colour, though something of her resilient energy would remain.

Sipping her glass of water, Zora caught her reflection in the glass that hung over the sink. The plaster that Mirsad had carefully pressed over the cut on her temple was partially hidden by her fringe and all that could be seen of her fall was a slight swelling and bruising on the left side of her face. To leave for the sake of a few bruises – surely she was stronger than that.

## *Five*

The city had grown muggy overnight, a layer of smoke-heavy cloud sealing in the humid air. Unable to sleep, Zora had woken at dawn, knowing nothing other than the desire to be in her studio, needing to be immersed in her painting. A thread had pulled her through the early morning streets which were wet from a spring downpour, but she kept having to backtrack and take different routes as barricades had sprouted up everywhere like mushrooms. She was not normally up at this hour. The boys who manned the barricades, stubble covering pimples, slit their eyes when they saw her and shook their heads, slowly, with contempt, as if to say, 'Go back to bed, old lady,' and her heel caught in one of the uneven cobblestones, her ankle twisting and tripping her, bringing her knee – already bruised from forgetting she was sleeping on a mattress on the floor and hitting it each time she swung out her legs to get up each morning – slamming down to the ground.

She was clutching a letter she had written a few hours earlier. She had hardly slept the night before, lying awake on the kitchen floor, counting the intervals between the whistle of the shells and the rumble of the explosions to tell her how close they were falling, like counting the seconds between lightning flash and thunder clap as a child. When she closed her eyes, she saw the green of the river Bosna, infused with gold, shimmering before her.

The day before had been the first of May, the Day of the Worker, one of the biggest celebrations in the not so distant past, musicians and children, bearing flowers and waving flags, marching through the streets of the city, while families picnicked on the banks of the Bosna, in Ilidža, to the west. Beyond the airport, at the end of the tram line, she and Franjo went each May

Day, Dubravka tightly holding their hands, their lunch wrapped up in foil. Every year Dubravka begged to take a horse-drawn carriage down the chestnut-tree-lined walk to the source of the river Bosna, and, when they were feeling rich, or the queue was not too long, they gave in and lifted her up onto a worn, red velvet seat, dirty with crushed chestnut blossom and popcorn crumbs. Then came the jangle of the bells on the horses' harnesses and glimpses, through the trees, of the avuncular swell of Mount Igman – some May Days still snow-capped, others not – and, on dismounting, they were greeted by the sun-dappled green of the waters of the Bosna, as they gurgled up in pools and streams from the belly of the mountain. Such a magnificent green!

Dubravka laughed and chattered as she splashed her feet in the water, while, stretched out on the grass, Zora and Franjo gazed up at the sky, which was always blue, ripe with the promise of summer to come. It was the day you let go of winter.

But none of that this year. Ilidža had been taken by the Chetniks at the start of the fighting.

Unable to sleep, she had written a letter to Franjo, about Ilidža and May Day, memories of Dubravka and popcorn sticking to her thighs. Silly things. She felt she was being stupidly sentimental, but she could not help it, and so much of what she could not say in her nightly phone calls came rushing out. She had been looking into ways of getting out, but it was not easy, and she resolved, as she wrote, to try harder. There had to be a way. What was the point of staying when the city she loved had all but disappeared? She mentioned some of her feelings about her painting of the Goat's Bridge for the first time to Franjo, telling him how her compulsion to finish it was both a comfort and a mania. She filled three sheets of thin blue airmail paper on both sides with her cramped, spiky writing. She was not a great writer – Franjo had always been better with words. She dropped it into the mouth of a yellow letter box.

When she arrived at the old town hall, after several hours of stopping and starting, sheltering and sprinting, she saw that more of the boys, this time in black uniforms, with machine guns and hunting rifles, were clustered in a knot at the main entrance which gave onto the river. Instead of waving people in after a show of identification as usual, they were turning everyone – librarians, academics, cleaners, the odd reader – away. She drew to a halt, at a loss as to know what to do. Claspings and unclaspings the key to her studio in her jacket pocket, Zora skirted round the building to the entrance on the western side. Another pair of uniformed lads. Zora hurried round to the door on the eastern side, and saw the way was blocked there too.

She swore to herself. All she wanted was for the town hall to close around her like a clam, with the quiet rustle of papers drifting over from the reading room and the head librarian lifting his head to say, ‘Good morning, Mrs Buka,’ as she smiled and nodded, and hurried on up to her painting. She took a breath, drew back her shoulders and retraced her steps to the western entrance, directly beneath her studio.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. ‘I’m Mrs Buka, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts. My studio’s up there.’ She pointed to the windowsill on the third floor with the huge black swallow’s nest spilling over its lip. ‘If I could just-’

The guard, who was enormous, almost a giant, with a hooked nose and pale blue eyes, took a long drag on the cigarette he was smoking and flicked the butt in a dramatic arc over Zora’s head. He was standing two steps above her, framed by the red brick arch of the entrance.

‘No one’s allowed in,’ he said.

Zora fought to push down the tremble that was rising inside her.

‘I don’t think you understand. I’ve had a studio up there for years,’ she said, slowly, carefully. And perhaps he really did not understand – many people, even those who had lived in Sarajevo all their lives, thought only of the

library when the town hall was mentioned, and were surprised to learn that three artists worked there.

'Lady,' he said, matching her tone for slowness, 'no one's allowed in. Do *you* understand?'

He bent down to look into her eyes and the rusty rifle hung over his chest swung forwards into the space between them, so close that it almost touched her.

'Can I ask why?' she said. She refused to step back or break the guard's gaze. She would not be cowed.

He sneered and pulled up to his full height again. The gun leapt back into position across his chest. Zora, realising how fast her heart was beating, pressed her studio key into the flesh of her palm so that the cool of the metal would calm her.

'The Serbs are up to something,' he said, spitting over his shoulder after saying the word 'Serbs'. She flinched, wondering if he suspected her of somehow helping the Serbs –but that was ridiculous, paranoia, surely. 'We're expecting trouble today,' he said. 'The town hall's not safe.'

'It's a target?' Zora said. 'But why?'

Just then another far shorter guard appeared. His face was as closed as a fist, and he seemed to be on the point of yelling at both Zora and the first guard, when instead his features opened up into a broad smile.

'Mrs Buka!' he said. 'My favourite teacher!'

He took Zora's hands and pressed them warmly in his. 'Don't you remember me? It's Faruk! Always asking questions and fooling around. I brought you flowers on my last day of school. But what are you doing here?'

Before she could answer, thrown by this turn of events and struggling to equate the uniformed guard before her with one of her former students, Faruk

had grasped the situation, and was telling the other guard, 'Relax, you great oaf, we'll give her half an hour.'

Guiding her lightly by the elbow, he brought Zora past the giant fellow and into the building.

'Your studio's this way, if I remember correctly, isn't it?' he said, and, when she nodded, he started walking her up the backstairs, his stiff, bow-legged strides unchanged from when he was her student.

Zora, who was trembling with indignation and fear from her encounter with the first guard – she had felt like slapping him, and the touch of his gun! – breathed deeply to calm herself, the panic that had opened up around her when she thought she would not be able to get into her studio starting to dissolve. She tried to focus on what Faruk was telling her. They had stopped outside the door to her studio.

'Listen, Mrs Buka, you have half an hour,' he said. 'Take everything you can.'

'Everything I can?' she said, the panic at once back.

'Paints, brushes, whatever you need,' he said. 'You won't be allowed back in after today.'

'But why?' Zora said. 'Until when?'

He shrugged and looked down. 'Just take everything you need. I'll come back for you at ten on the dot. Longer wouldn't be safe.'

He squeezed her arm and was gone.

She opened the door to her studio. Her first impulse was to lock herself in, set some coffee to boil and go about mixing colours for the Goat's Bridge as if nothing had happened: to let herself grow into Zora Buka again, surrounded by her paintings. Instead she moved around the workplace as if in a dream, trailing her fingers over the divans, the armchairs, the table where she kept all her coffee things and the dusty windowsills. She could not take in what had just

happened. Why, she should have asked Faruk, would the old town hall be a target? In the brief moment when they were inside the building, and before they had started up the stairs, she had glimpsed stacks of books lined up against the walls of one of the reading rooms. Were they preparing to empty the library? She would ask him when he came back.

She stood before her paintings, taking them in one at a time, and when she realised she was saying goodbye, she shook her head several times, and started gathering materials in a large holdall and a few plastic bags she found scrunched up in the store cupboard. She was selective at first. Tubes of oil paint and acrylic in the colours she most often used, unsharpened pencils, new bottles of turpentine and linseed oil, her favourite brushes. But her eyes were blurring with tears and her hands shaking – what would she do, how could she go on without her studio? – and she swept up anything she could reach. Glue, paperweights, primers, rolls of canvas, a sketchbook, a ball of string, a book of poems, a half-eaten sandwich, an ashtray shaped like a pair of lips, paint-clotted brushes and a pale blue sweater that was not hers. In it all went. She struggled with the zip on the holdall, and then gave up, leaving the bulging bags to spew their contents onto the floor.

She went and stood before the Goat's Bridge, where she had wanted to be since waking that morning, and everything else – the explosions the night before, the tears, the letter, the stumbling through the streets, the guard and his gun – receded. For once, her other paintings did not crowd her; they let her be. She could not take the Goat's Bridge with her, of course, though if it had been smaller, she would have risked it, abandoning the bags, and carrying it, wet as it was, under one arm. She knew it was madness to even consider carrying a painting through those streets. But it had driven her to the brink of insanity, this painting, and to leave it half-done now, well, that was unthinkable.

With a rush of pleasure, she saw herself pushing back her sleeves, picking up her palette and immersing herself once more. To hell with everything else. She glanced at the clock on the wall. Already past the hour. Well, if this was to be her last day here in God knew how long she was going to paint until Faruk came to get her.

The ticking of the clock and the sound of shells falling outside grew fainter as Zora, rocking back and forth on her heels, started to paint. She worked quickly, moving on from the void under the bridge and turning her attention to the rest of the canvas. On either side of the arch were two dark cavities. They were tubular holes, tall enough for a boy to stand in, and long enough for a man to sleep in, that ran through the width of the bridge and gave the effect of wide-set eye sockets. There were thus three circular holes formed. In the centre: the large round formed by the arch of the bridge, the slope of the steep river banks and the shallow river at the bottom, and on either side: the two smaller rounds. Preparing a whitish glaze the colour of aged bone for the smooth Ottoman stones, Zora saw for the first time that there was something skull-like about the hunchback bridge. Of course! The upper part of a cranium with two deep eye sockets jumped out at her and she stepped back, wondering how she had not seen it before.

Just as she was about to apply the glaze, Faruk knocked loudly at the door. He came in, looking anxious, and apologised for forgetting – he had been called first this way, then that, things were really getting out of hand. He scarcely gave Zora time to lay down her paintbrush, before he was helping her with her bags, drawing the door of her studio shut behind her and almost pushing her down the stairs, through the corridor, and past the guard with the rifle, who spat and looked the other way.

It was just past noon, a Saturday in early May, quite warm, almost sunny, and Zora was standing on the pavement, a heavy holdall on her back and a



plastic bag weighing down each hand, the handles of which were already cutting into the flesh of her fingers. Beads of moisture were popping out around her temples, but she could not lift her hands to wipe them away. It was unbelievable. She had been ejected from her studio at the very moment the painting was coming together, more or less hurled down the stairs and thrown out as if she were a sack of rubbish.

The street shook and Zora jumped. An enormous explosion sounded only a few streets away. She stood still for a moment longer, long enough to hear the boom and judder of several more shells dropping nearby. She would have time to make sense of this later. Now, she had to get going.

The tram seemed the best option – she could hardly carry these bags far – but when she got to the tram stop by the river, she found it deserted. Looking downstream, she gave out a cry. Great billows of smoke parted to reveal that a tram had been severed in two, like an earthworm, exposing its charred insides. She gaped. Were there people in there? Further along the river, on the other side, flames were leaping from what looked like a pile of parked cars. Reeling, Zora began to grasp that what the guard had called ‘trouble’ had already started.

More shells fell, and fear took over. Zora ran back into the Baščaršija, wondering if Mirsad would be in his bookshop, but the shutters were down and no one responded to her knocking. She left a plastic bag on his doorstep – she could not carry everything – and hurried on. In some streets, people were sitting drinking coffee in cafes, as if nothing was happening, while just around the corner, Zora glimpsed fighting breaking out between armed youths. She came to her mother’s street and saw smoke rising from the direction of the old Orthodox church. She stumbled, and turned back.

The air was threaded through with the smell of burning. Glass crunched underfoot in Marshall Tito Street: the department store, ‘Zema’, where her

mother loved to shop, had been hit. The Austro-Hungarian facade of the National Bank lay in pieces on the pavement. Smoke clawed at Zora's throat, making her choke, and she dropped the other plastic bag, casting her eyes round desperately for a way out. She fell to her hands and knees, cutting her palms on broken glass, gasping in the air near the pavement where the smoke was a little thinner.

Everything blackened. She was on the point of passing out when she felt two powerful hands clasp her and she was pulled behind a sandbag wall into the doorway of a grocery shop. A glass of water was pressed into her hand and she was brought down to the dank cellar beneath the store, where she sheltered with her rescuer, a burly shopkeeper, and several others, all strangers. They sat on upturned crates of cabbages, eyes wide in the dark, a dusty shaft of light falling through a grille from the street above.

No one spoke. As her eyes adjusted, she made out she was in the company of the shopkeeper, plus a nervous teenage girl with short dark hair, two old men, and a dog who did not seem to belong to anyone. With each explosion, dust and rubble fell through the grille, the dog howled, and the girl's eyes widened and darted from wall to wall. Not a thought crossed Zora's mind during the time in the cellar, just waves of blackness and the fear that this was it: she was going to die. She had no idea if they were down there for a matter of minutes or for several hours, before the rumbling overhead finally died down.

The dog shot out first, ears flat to his head and growling. The rest of them waited, before setting off shakily in their separate directions. Zora could not even speak to thank the shopkeeper, though she pressed his arm. Stumbling and tripping over the rubble, dust in her eyes, she picked her way home through the chaos. It was getting dark already. The bag stuffed with art things bulged on her back like a tortoise shell. In her tower block, in the lift going up to her floor, she could not raise her eyes to look in the mirror.

Finally, she was home. She dropped the holdall on the floor and, without stopping to do anything else, picked up the handset of her phone and dialled Dubravka's number. No tone. She tried again. Nothing. She pressed and depressed the clicker several times, and checked the connection at the wall, but still there was no tone: her line was dead.

She screamed. A brief, sharp scream.

In the kitchen, she poured herself glass after glass of water, hands trembling. She had to speak to her family.

She went out of her flat, and rang first at Mirsad's door, and then at those of the other neighbours, but no one answered. She went downstairs. Thank God, the Markovićs were in. Light slipped out from under their door. It was going to be okay. She was going to speak to her husband and daughter. They would know what to do.

Lenka opened the door.

'My God, Mrs Buka, are you all right?' she said at once, taking in Zora's face and clothes which were streaked with dust and sweat.

Zora held up the flat of her hand as if to say she would explain things later.

'I need to use your phone,' she said. 'Where's-'

But Lenka was shaking her head and looked as if she might cry.

'Mrs Buka, all the phone lines have been cut,' she said.

Zora stared at her.

'The head post office and telephone exchange were blown up,' she said. 'All lines out of the city have been destroyed.'

Zora's mouth was bone dry. The taste of dust and rubble lay thick on her tongue, even after all the water. She could not make sense of what the girl was saying. The post office blown up? She glanced over Lenka's shoulder for the phone.

Just then a door opened and the sound of weeping spilled into the hallway. Dragomir stepped from the room, face grim.

'It's all your fault, we should have left when we could!' Vesna's voice, hoarse with crying, yelled out after him.

Dragomir nodded at Zora and started putting on his shoes.

'My baby Saša!' Vesna cried.

'I'm leaving,' he called.

'Where are you going? No work to go to, remember! Oh, you want to get shot by a sniper, is that it?' Vesna screamed from the bedroom.

'Zora, dear,' he said, taking her hands in his for a moment as he left the flat. 'I'm so sorry.'

And she was not sure if he was referring to his abrupt departure, Vesna's screaming or her not being able to use the phone. For a moment, she wondered if he somehow knew about her being expelled from her studio and nearly choking to death on her journey back across town. She put a hand to the wall to stop herself falling. Without telephone lines, without post, without half the city's infrastructure, they were completely cut off from the outside world.

## *Six*

No one went out the next day, or the day after. The city cowered in cellars and stairwells, stunned by the intensity of the attack. Zora, hot with fever, scarcely moved from her mattress on the kitchen floor. Fragments from the letter she had written passed through her mind. The walls pressed in on her. High up on the ceiling, her spiky blue handwriting cut into the yellowish grease. Whole paragraphs peeled away from the walls, and the tap dripped into the sink in rhythm with her words. The phrase, 'My darling Franjo, I can't sleep so I'm writing to you,' chased, like whirling dust, around her head. Had they really lain, the grass tickling their necks, gazing up at the sky? Memories – the greenness of the waters, the grass under their heads, the blue sky up above, Dubravka's shining eyes – glowed hot in her brain.

She had dropped the letter into the mouth of the yellow postbox. Would it still be lying there uncollected or would it have gone up in flames with the post office that day? Sacks full of letters from Sarajevo to the outside world had been reduced to cinders, along with the telephone lines. Lying on her mattress, Zora heard the roar of their voices on fire.

When she first saw it, she thought it was a pile of old rags, a heap of clothes in the middle of the road. Dust and smoke from the explosions still thickened the air and broken glass crackled on the pavements. She looked up again when closer: a dead dog, its coat streaked grey with splashed-up rainwater. The air thinned and grew cloudy again. It was not until she was on the kerb, about to cross, that she saw that it was not a dog at all, but a person in a dirty white coat.

Blood rushed to her cheeks and her temples pounded.

A woman, back curved around a dark pool of blood, lay lifeless on the tarmac. How long had she been there? Why had no one pulled her aside? Dark hair fell thickly over her face and it was impossible to tell if she was Dubravka's age or hers. Zora looked around for help, but the few people that were there on the street did not seem to notice, passing by quickly, grey figures with hunched shoulders and bent heads. On the point of moving forwards to pull the body to the pavement, she checked herself, remaining paralysed on the kerb. What if she were hit too? What if this were some sort of trap?

Heart beating fast, Zora turned away. Pressing herself close to the wall of the street, she crossed the road further down, away from the exposed junction, waves of shock breaking inside her. Whose mother or daughter, sister or wife was she? Why had she not been moved?

'There's been a-', 'There's a -,' – she wanted to tell the people she passed. Perhaps they would know what to do, how to set things in motion to contact the woman's relatives. But everyone walked with their eyes down, intent on their own journey.

Teaching a near-empty class that day, the image of the woman in a white coat, body bent into a C shape, assaulted her again and again. The more she tried not to think about her, the more she was there. Bending down to get jars out of the cupboard, or reaching up for a book off the shelf, Zora would see her, and gasp as if punched.

On her way back, Zora automatically turned in the direction of the old town hall, before remembering, with a feeling of collapse, that she could no longer go there. Everything around her was drab and grey. Smashed windows, looted shops, burnt facades. Holes in the sides of buildings exposed rubble-strewn sofas and chairs. The only colour was the green of the mountains at the end of the streets, and looking up, Zora saw weaponry glinting among the trees on the ridges like metal teeth.

This is what the snow had melted to reveal up in the hills, where she could no longer hike: anti-aircraft guns, rocket launchers, machine gun nests, and howitzers, instead of wild flowers. She knew these names now: she had heard the kids rattling them off as they played Aggressors and Defenders in the stairwells of her building. She remembered gazing out of the window in her studio, perhaps a few days after Franjo and her mother had left for Belgrade, when the trees were still heavy with snow. Her eye had caught on the glancing of sunlight off metal. She had known what it was and yet denied it at the same time. War could not happen in Sarajevo: not there where everyone loved each other, she had told herself, with the naivety of a child.

Turning a corner, Zora saw that the body was still there, untouched. Poor woman! Zora looked the other way, her hands clenching into fists in her pockets. What type of a place was she living in? Why the hell had she not left when she had the chance?

There had been so many opportunities. She should have gone with her mother and Franjo in the first place when they went to Belgrade. A week or two off work would have been easy enough to arrange, but, of course, they were worried about leaving her mother's flat and their own unprotected, open to further intruders. They had no idea of the level of violence that was about to erupt, or that Franjo and Emilia would not be able to return to Sarajevo. But, okay, when it was clear that things were not right, when the city was being attacked nightly, when her own building was shelled, for God's sake, why had she not listened to Dubravka and left there and then? To hell with losing their flat! Zora looked at the corpse of the woman on the road and could not begin to make sense of her hesitations. Something to do with defending Sarajevo – was that it? No, not quite. Stubborn spite at not wanting to be forced to leave the place she loved? Perhaps. A madness, a compulsion to paint and finish the Goat's Bridge – the sense that this was something urgent, even great, that she

was working on? Zora felt a wave of nausea. Well, she could no longer work on it now. If only she had put every effort into finding a way out. Now, she was imprisoned. Now all ways out were closed, as if the metal jaws of a trap had snapped around her

A complete blockade was established after the second of May, the day on which the Serbs attempted to take the government building and almost succeeded in severing the city in two. They took Grbavica, a district on the slopes of Mount Trebevic, not far from the heart of the city, bringing the front line down as far as the river there. Zora's classes emptied considerably when those of her students who lived in Grbavica found themselves on the other side of the siege.

No trams ran. Hardly any people, food or medicine came in or out.

'A medieval siege, that's what this is,' Mirsad said, when he brought Zora the bag she had dropped on the doorstep of his shop. 'Except we're in a valley instead of battened down safely in a fortress high up on a hill.'

As if not quite hearing, Zora nodded and pulled brushes, tubes of paint and palette knives from the plastic bag. A powerful pang for her studio – the vast space, the dusty shafts of golden light, her paintings teaming around her – grabbed her roughly, and at the same time, she stared at the things in her hands as if they belonged to a stranger.

Darkness swallowed much of May. Without the markers of afternoons spent in her studio and her nightly phone calls from England, the orderly march of the hours broke rank and scuttled. Zora sat on her sofa each evening, painting materials spread out on the coffee table in front of her. But she did not look down at them. Her whole body was tense with waiting. The waiting was there in the stiffness of her spine that refused to soften into the cushions, in the defensive hunch of her shoulders and in the glaze of her eyes that rested on the



opposite wall. Her neck was cricked with cocking her head at an awkward angle as she strained to gauge how far off the shells were dropping. She knew she was waiting, in spite of herself, to hear the trill of the phone, for its sound to burst into the sombre flat, like a sun beam.

'My darling Franjo,' she wrote one evening, 'I miss you. How are you?' She had wanted to conjure up his presence somehow, but it all seemed so pointless. She crumpled the letter in her hand.

Zora had to pass the crossroads twice a day: there was no other safe way to travel to and from the Art Academy. The body in the dirty white coat lay there for days. Each time she approached, she prayed that the corpse would have gone, averting her eyes as soon as she saw it was still there. It possessed her: the shame, the anger, the feeling of helplessness it brought up. How stupid and blind she had been not to have left when she had the chance.

Food was running out. There was no yeast in the city and so no bread at the bakers. Zora lived off carefully rationed meals from her store of frozen meat and fish.

Her paints remained untouched on the coffee table.

Washing dishes at the kitchen sink, she felt the air stir behind her. 'Franjo?' she said, heart leaping, head turning. Nothing was there. Nothing at all. A feeling of abandonment split open her chest as if with the fall of an axe.

'My darling Franjo,' she wrote, again, 'How are you? Things are terrible here. There's a dead body that's been on the street for days, a young woman who's been shot in the chest by snipers. No one's moved her. Her family doesn't know she's there. What if that was me?' The question surprised her and she crossed it out with a thick black line. But what if it had been her? Who would claim her? Would she just lie there, passers-by hoping she would be cleared away soon? 'Why did you leave me?' she wrote in sprawling letters across the page. Then, shoulders shaking violently, she crossed the whole letter

through again and again, scoring it with black lines, pressing the pen so hard the nib tore the paper.

A week or so later, the woman's body had been moved to the pavement. Zora laid some flowers, picked from the side of the road, across her chest. Others had done the same. But the body was now close to the sacks of rubbish which were piling up uncollected on the street, as the dustmen, like everyone, had no petrol for their vehicles. Her once-white coat was sodden from rainwater, matted and mangy with dust and congealed blood. Whoever had moved her had tried to lay her out flat on her back in a funereal position, but her stiff corpse had resisted, so that she lay partly on her back, spine still curved, in an odd gymnastic twist. A black cloth had been thrown over her face. City wild flowers – dandelions, buttercups, morning glory – and roses plucked from the gardens of mosques piled on top of her, covering the bullet holes in her chest. Zora realised how many other people must have been passing her every day, experiencing the same feelings as she did. There was relief, and then a fresh burst of shame, at herself and everyone else, for covering up their guilt with nothing more than flowers.

Soon, the flowers wilted, but more and more Zora did not notice the woman's corpse, as removed from the middle of the road, white coat now a dull grey-brown, she started to resemble the sacks of rubbish stacked up around her. Zora's eye was not drawn to her anymore, the stench of the refuse making her hold her nose and look the other way. Flies circled and dogs sniffed. When one morning, quite by chance, her gaze fell on the heap of rags and rubbish, and she saw that the woman's corpse was no longer there, she realised with a small shock that she had no idea how long the body had been gone.

Towards the end of the month, an early summer heatwave settled on the city and the electricity was cut. In the middle of a class, the overhead lights flickered and went out. Zora's students looked up from their work, their concentration broken for a moment, and then continued with their still lifes, in charcoal and pastel. On the way home, traffic lights no longer flashed and the reflected gleam of television screens was absent from the windows of apartments. No music or news could be heard. Lifts halted in their shafts.

The next morning was the same. By the evening of the second day without electricity, a whiff of souring milk hung in Zora's flat and a finger's depth of greyish water lay in a pool on the kitchen floor. She perched on the edge of her bathtub and spooned melted ice cream into her mouth. The bastards had shelled one of the power stations: the damage was going to take some time to repair. The food she had hoarded so carefully in the deep freeze – the minced meat, the chicken, the fish Franjo had caught the previous autumn – was defrosting all at once. She could not cook it as her stove was electric, so she was trying to prolong its life in a bath of cool water.

The day after, a bag of dripping food in each hand, Zora hesitated outside Mirsad's flat. It was the first time she had been there since the night of the shelling. She remembered how the door had swung open that evening and she had stared straight through his flat to the colourless outside. In that moment, her life had tilted sharply and she had thrown herself into the dark space under the Goat's Bridge. For a second, she was not sure if she could go in, but there was no other way if she did not want her food to go to waste. She put down one of the bags and rang the bell.

'Zora!' Mirsad said, opening the door in a billow of barbecue smoke a few moments later. He wore a red apron and held some tongs in one hand. Taking her food, he brought her through to the kitchen. Zora noted with relief that the door to the living room was closed.

A simple camping grill was positioned under the window, a corner of bin bag raised to let out some of the smoke, though most of it stayed in the kitchen, making it as hot and hazy as a *ćevapčići* stall. The smell of grilled meat was incredible. All over the city, people were barbecuing their thawed food. There was nothing for it but to cook and eat the lot.

Around mid-morning, they carried plates of burgers, trout and chicken pieces through to the living room. Mirsad lit a candle and Zora saw that several wooden planks had been nailed over the hole and on top of those, two overlapping kilims had been hung. The furniture had all been moved to the other end of the room and an intricate pattern of light fell through the cracked wall over the cramped together sofa, armchairs and dining table. Black bin bags breathed in and out over the glassless windows.

‘Almost as if it never happened, isn’t it?’ Mirsad said, with a short laugh. ‘Only problem is it’s not watertight. The first downpour absolutely drenched the sofa and chairs. But we, I mean, I moved everything down that end, so it’s fine. Anyway, let’s eat!’

Zora ignored his awkward stumbling over the word ‘we’, and smiled. ‘You’ve done a great job, Mirsad,’ she said. Perhaps he would open up a little more, once they had eaten.

Sitting down, they began to eat, speaking little and taking their time as their stomachs were not used to large amounts of food. Gusts of breeze slipped through the gaps in the wall, pleasantly cooling Zora’s arms and face. The trout, which Franjo had caught in river up in the mountains the previous autumn, was superb. A feeling of contentment spread through the room.

Mirsad had just opened some bottles of warm beer to wash down the food when his face grew taut and a deep flush, visible even in the dim candlelight, crept up his neck. ‘What?’ Zora was about to say, when following the direction of his gaze over her shoulder, she nearly jumped out of

her skin. As if materialised from nowhere, a bearded figure in crumpled pyjamas was standing behind her. He cocked his head to one side, and gave Zora a half-smile.

‘What are you doing here?’ Mirsad said, anger lying under each word.

The man, or boy – it was hard to tell in the flickering light – did not answer but drew up a chair, sat down and poured himself some beer. He had a tremor in one of his hands, but otherwise seemed collected and at ease. He reached across the table and helped himself to a burger. Zora stared at him in astonishment. The way his jaw worked under the untrimmed beard and the set of his features – around his mouth and nose, in particular – were strongly familiar.

Mirsad threw his hands open abruptly. ‘I can’t believe you’re doing this,’ he said.

‘Relax, Dad,’ the boy said, and paused to swallow a mouthful of food. ‘It’s about time Zora knew.’

‘Samir?’ Zora said, feeling herself colour this time. ‘Is that you?’

He nodded and gave the odd half-smile again. ‘Sorry to make you jump back then,’ he said. ‘I must look awful.’

‘But what are you doing here? When did you get back from Budapest? Where’s your mother?’

Samir held her gaze for a moment. ‘I never went to Hungary with Mum,’ he said, quietly. ‘She’s still there, we think – but I’ve been here all the time.’

‘Oh!’ Zora said, looking from father to son in confusion.

The story came out. Samir spoke, in between mouthfuls, while Mirsad leant back in his chair, shoulders hunched defensively. Zora tried to follow – something about being on the peace march at the beginning of April, things turning sour, and staying at his girlfriend’s because she was scared, but small ripples of shock imploded inside her and her attention swam in and out of

focus, as she tried to take in that this man-boy sitting in front of her – so much thinner, and the beard! – was Mirsad’s son and that he had been here all along. He had helped her and Franjo when their boiler had broken the previous winter, chatting away about his studies, how he was torn between studying law because it was useful and his desire to travel and see the world: to break out of the ‘warm bowl of Sarajevo’ – his very words came back to her – and see what life was really about.

And all this time, he had been right here, next door, just a wall dividing them! She could not believe it. The hours she had spent sitting on her sofa staring absently at the living room wall, her art materials spread out uselessly in front of her, he had been on the other side, reading, smoking, hearing the same shells explode.

‘It was you that I saw on the night of the shelling, wasn’t it?’ she said, at one point, things falling into place. No wonder Mirsad had left the Markovićes so quickly: he must have been terrified for his son’s life.

Samir nodded, interrupted mid-flow. Mirsad slit open an eye and reached back to get something from the sideboard. He handed a sheaf of letters to Zora.

‘The draft notices,’ he said.

Zora unfolded one. The blue and yellow fleur-de-lis coat of arms that the Bosnian Army had adopted was stamped at the top and, beneath, a hastily typed message, with several spelling mistakes, the letters fading towards the end as the ink on the ribbon ran out. It informed Samir Halilović that he was to report to duty at such-and-such a regiment on such-and-such a date. It was dated the tenth of April 1992. The other letters, half a dozen or so, were the same, but with later dates, ultimatums and threats of increasing intensity.

‘My God,’ Zora said, looking up, attention focused now.

'I thought the first one was a joke,' Samir said. 'I know it sounds stupid but I guess I go on about my anti-war, anti-nationalist views, and I thought one of my friends was winding me up. Then, when it began to sink in, I completely freaked out. I started thinking how the hell did the Bosnian Army get my address? Why were they assuming that because I'm part-Muslim I'd want to fight against Serbs?'

'Radmila was furious when we spoke on the phone that night,' Mirsad said, leaning in. "'What, fight against people who could be his cousins and uncles?'" she yelled. "No way!"'

'Plus the thing was, like everyone else, I didn't have a clue what was going on,' Samir said. 'Not a clue. I just knew that I'd been on a peace march, that the girl from Dubrovnik had been killed a few metres away from me and my girlfriend, and that I didn't want to have anything to do with guns or fighting.'

'There was no way that my son, our only child, was going to get sent straight to the front line and get killed,' Mirsad said. 'He's only a kid!'

Zora nodded, thankful that her daughter was far away from all this.

'I'm nearly nineteen, Dad,' Samir said, and frowned, tugging at his beard. 'The point is I'm a student, not a soldier.'

'Radmila and I agreed that the best thing would be to say that he was in Hungary with her and for him to lie low in the flat for a while,' Mirsad said.

'Of course, you thought it would only be a matter of weeks, not months,' Zora said, and they nodded.

'Zora, I'm sorry I didn't tell you,' Mirsad said, 'I haven't told anyone. We've been raided twice. Samir squeezed into the cubby hole in the bathroom, and I pulled a chest of drawers over it, while these boys, even younger than him, grilled me about where he was, turning the flat upside down, looking for him and hidden weapons. I guess I've got quite-'

'Paranoid,' Samir put in.

'Okay, paranoid,' Mirsad said, 'about people finding out, but, of course, I know you would never-'

Zora put her hand on Mirsad's arm.

'I'm glad I know,' she said. 'Don't worry. Who on earth would I mention this to?'

He took off his glasses, wiped his eyes, and smiled, at last. Samir lit another cigarette and poured some beer for them all. A silence settled over the half-eaten food, the warmth of the day thick in the air. The bin bags hung limply, no breeze at all outside.

Picking at the cold chicken and burgers, the three of them held onto this afternoon which seemed a moment of connection, outside of time. The jigsaw pieces of light that fell, through the chinks and crevices, over their arms and faces, glowed golden then rose and slowly faded, as Mirsad and Samir laughed from time to time and Zora, lighting more candles, felt, for the first time since being cut off from her family and her studio, almost herself and at ease.

That night, back in her flat, Zora wrote another letter to Franjo. In the wavering candlelight, she asked him what he was doing and imagined the walks he might be taking across the fields and through the woods close to Dubravka's house. There was a brook she remembered. She told him not to worry, that she was okay, that things were probably better than they seemed on the news. When she put her pen down, she sat quietly for a moment. It was almost as if he were there, resting his long slippered legs on the coffee table, just beyond the circle of light the candle was throwing. He had nodded off and all she had to do was put a hand on his shoulder to rouse him. Folding the letter, she placed it in a drawer to send when she could.



## *Seven*

The tree had not started out as an apple tree but as a childish grafting of several trees onto one: the upper part was perhaps a broad-trunked oak, sturdy branches spreading to the corners of the shell-cracked living room, a canopy of leaves covering part of the ceiling. The roots were raised from the ground, knotted and snaking above the skirting board, like a mangrove holds its roots above water. The apples, pears and plums had been added later, in the autumn. A fantastical, hybrid tree; an arboreal centaur or griffin. The patterns of twigs that forked out from the branches were as intricate as the fine geometric patterning in Arabian palaces, full of stars and hexagons – Una took pleasure in detail, painting with a delicate, patient hand for an eight-year-old. She was not so concerned with the realistic use of colour: the brown of the trunk graded into purple and green higher up and the leaves were red and blue in places. The colours were all faint, in any case, as the paints had been watered down, or tempered with agents, to stretch them out. The effect was that of age – as if this were a faded fresco on a medieval monastery wall.

Una was a girl from two floors below who spent a few afternoons a week at Zora's. Her parents, Anto and Milka, were anxious to keep her occupied, arranging for her to have maths lessons with the old primary school teacher on the first floor, and to rehearse a play, or perhaps it was a band practice, with a group of the other children in the adjacent blue tower block. She was milky-skinned and dark-haired with almost-jet-black eyes, tough little arms and a taut pot belly. Though younger than most of the other kids she hung out with, her laughter had always been the loudest when they used to collect round the

swings between the blocks. Anto and Milka had been alarmed by her abrupt change in personality when war broke out: from sunny and extrovert, she became sullen and brooding overnight, and, doting on their one child, they were doing everything they could to get their Una back again.

Zora also wondered if Anto and Milka had her own welfare in mind when they arranged the classes. When the Academy of Fine Arts broke up for the summer, the sweltering hours had collapsed into one another, sagging and shapeless. She had no idea what day, or even what month, it was, and the letters she wrote, more or less every evening now, to Franjo, Dubravka and her mother were left undated, a jumble of memories and diary-like snippets piling up in the drawer on top of the biros and rolls of sticky tape. One day, Milka had come across Zora half-way up the eight flights of stairs to her flat. Overcome with fatigue and dizziness, she had sat down on a step and rested her cheek against the humid concrete of the wall. She was not sure how long she had been there, when she felt Milka's hand on her shoulder. The following day, Una arrived, clinging shyly to her mother's legs, not at all the tough little tomboy Zora remembered.

They painted side by side, in silence at first. Zora had not unscrewed the cap from a tube of paint since being barred from the old town hall, and the cool feel of the it between her fingers, the soft, unclasping pop of the lid and the sudden release of the odour of linseed oil had brought her studio back so powerfully that she could not speak. Una, thumb in mouth, watched intently. Zora screwed the lid back on. Madness to use oil paint with a child, what had she been thinking? They would start with acrylics.

Una pushed out her red lower lip, and, as she leant over her paper, her eyes shifted from Zora's hand to her own as she tried to copy Zora's brushstrokes. Zora was amazed at the concentration of the girl, whom she had imagined would be rather clumsy when it came to art. It was as if Una had

sensed, in the way children sometimes do, the significance of the moment when Zora had opened the oil paint, and this had focused her, bringing her out of her shyness. They painted for several hours, Zora glancing over, every so often, at Una.

Within a few afternoons, they had used up all the paper. The bag Zora had dropped amongst the rubble and smoke in Marshall Tito Street, back in May, had been the one with the rolls of canvas and the sketchpads and now she had nothing else to paint on. She was wondering what to do, when Una grabbed her arm and said: 'Let's paint on the wall.'

Zora followed the direction of Una's pointed finger and then looked at her, eyebrows raised. Una held her gaze. She squeezed Zora's lower arm and bit her lip. Something of Una's old boisterous self flashed in her eyes. Zora gave a laugh and nodded.

'Yes!' Una said, and jumped up and down.

'What shall we paint?'

'A tree,' Una said at once.

*Darling Dubravka,*

*Your name means 'oak grove'. When you were born, Dad and I had a list of twelve possible names for you. Some were the ethnically 'neutral' names that became popular during Tito's years, ones like Vedrana, Zlata and Goranka. They could be given to a child of any nationality and you would not be able to tell if they were Serb, Muslim or Croat. We liked that idea. Some were old-fashioned Serbian names after my string of great-aunts: Bogdana, Dobrila, Slavica and so on. Some, we just liked because they were pretty, like Snežana, snow white. We tried each one on you and none of them fit. For six weeks, you were nameless. Then we went for a walk in the park near Sarajevo zoo and*

*an acorn fell into your pram. Your fingers closed around it and you wouldn't let go, no matter how much we tried to prise your tiny fist apart. You had chosen your name.*

*I know you've heard this story a hundred times before. "Mum, please, that's not true!" you always say, embarrassed. But it is. It really did happen just like that. Something I haven't told you, probably because I feel embarrassed, is how, when you were old enough to stand in your cot and hold onto the bars, I'd come into the room and mime being an acorn growing into a tree. Your paint-stained Mama would crouch on the floor, curl up her limbs, and then slowly grow, straightening up and extending her arms until she was a proud, firm oak tree, fingers reaching up to the ceiling. Your eyes grew round and you gurgled, the start of your wonderful laugh.*

*I'm painting a tree on the living room wall with Una from Apartment 603. Do you remember her? A beautiful, dark-haired little girl. She would have been a toddler the last time you saw her, but she's almost nine now. Anyway, the tree's taking shape – branches are twisting everywhere. I can't tell you how much I look forward to Una's visits.*

*Meanwhile, as the tree grows in here, all the trees outside are vanishing. The trees in the park near the zoo (where the animals are starving to death, I heard on the radio yesterday) have been cut down for firewood. The boughs of the great plane trees that line our avenue are being lopped off one at a time. Park benches, children's see-saws and the seats from swings are all disappearing. Sarajevo is no longer a 'city of gardens' – who was it who once called it that?*

*Look after your father and grandmother for me, and take care of yourself, my angel. A kiss for Ollie and Stephen.*

*All my love,*

*Mama.*

Four narrow columns of black-and-white boxes filled with text, some with passport-style photos, others without. Zora watched Samir scan the death notices, moving his ring finger up and down the page, a cigarette between his index and middle fingers. He shook out the paper from time to time, flakes of ash crumbling onto the floor. A deep crease divided his forehead that she wanted to smooth away. She wanted to say: 'Stop, put the paper down,' because what good would it do? On the days he found the name of a friend or acquaintance who had been killed, he would close his eyes and sink into silence, which he broke only with a word now and again to offer Zora a memory of the dead person, which would hang, disconnected and empty of meaning, in the smoke-filled air of the flat. On the days he found no one he knew, he would slap the paper with the flat of his hand and read out the names of the dead and the few sentences that accompanied them in a voice that quivered with anger: "Date of burial to be announced." What the hell does that mean? That there's no place to bury them, or that no body has been found?

*Dearest Franjo,*

*You wouldn't believe who was selling the paper on the corner of the street at seven this morning – your old friend, Eso. The queue was enormous – as all queues are here, we spend two thirds of our time waiting in line – but when I got to the front, I asked him what was going on and he told me that 'Oslobođenje' hasn't got the money, the people or the resources (i.e. the petrol) to distribute papers to shops and kiosks anymore, most of which are shut anyway, so it has its own journalists selling the paper on street corners. "Make sure you read my article on page five," he said, "I finished it two hours ago!" He had huge bags under his eyes, but was crackling with energy – and he must be, what, sixty now? We chatted while he sold the paper. He asked after you and sent his regards.*

*It's left a deep impression on me that he's still doing his job – more than his job! – in this city of unemployed people. Life has all but halted here. Half the people can't get*

*to work, because it lies on the Serb side or has been closed down due to shelling or the lack of supplies and electricity. Dragomir lost his managerial job when his office went up in flames in May and the whole family seems to have fallen apart. Vesna stays inside, depressed, while her husband's sent out to queue for food rations. He dresses in his best suits and ties as if going to a 'power breakfast', poor man. Lenka, thinner, inches of black root showing through because she can't afford hair dye, is desperately searching for translating or teaching work to support the family – anything that uses her languages.*

*A halted, unemployed city with who knows how many young men hiding, in fear of conscription, behind battered walls. Everyone's waiting for normal life to return. The fact that your old paper's still running, keeping people connected through its voice – some journalists sleep overnight in the 'Oslobodenje' building, Eso told me – gives me some hope.*

*The paper, mind you, is getting smaller and smaller. They reduced it to a tabloid format and then to half that size again, with only four or five sheets. The articles are tiny and cramped. Paper, like everything else, is running out.*

*Good to feel connected to you today through dear old Eso. Can't think any more in this putrid heat. Even this page is limp with it.*

*I love you and miss you,*

*Zora.*

Zora dropped in on Samir several afternoons a week, when Una was not painting at hers, bringing him a paper whenever she managed to get one. Samir's mood swings were severe. Some days the apartment would be stale with cigarette smoke and, depressed, he would talk about his girlfriend, who had fled with her family to Croatia, and his mother, whom he had not heard

from in months. When talking about his mother, his sadness could slide into anger at any moment – ‘Surely she must be able to get in touch somehow! How can she just leave us?’ – and Zora would have to look away, unsettled by the way his outburst raked up her own buried resentment at Franjo’s absence, which, of course, was not his fault.

‘Your mother will be thinking of you, worrying about you, every second,’ Zora said. ‘Don’t be angry with her.’

Samir sighed and tugged at his beard, which now curled over the lower part of his face and spilled, matted and bristling, down his neck like a tramp’s, though his eyes were wet and starting like a child’s. Mirsad’s rations of food had to stretch between the two of them, and Zora noticed that Samir’s collar bone was becoming prominent.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘You’re right.’

And just like that, his rage would be gone and, in its place, a gleam entered his eyes.

‘The truth is I’m going stir crazy in here,’ he would say. ‘Some nights I tell Dad that I’m going to join the Army just to have the chance to stretch my legs.’ Seeing her expression, he would add: ‘Don’t worry, Zora, I’m joking!’

On other days, he would open the door quietly, hanging back in the dark of the flat – she would ring the doorbell three times, lightly, in quick succession to let him know that it was her and no one else – and would draw her in, whispering in her ear: ‘Ah, this wonderful war! Without it I’d never have discovered-’ and here he gave the name of the latest author he was reading. ‘Dad’s been going on at me to read him for years.’

On these afternoons, he would sit on a nest of cushions he had made for himself on the living room floor, close to a breeze that slipped in through a crack in the wall and under a ray of light which fell, through a chink onto the pages of his novel.

'Natural air conditioning and light!' he said.

As if to make up for his murderous mood on other visits, he would read aloud passages of particular resonance or beauty he had earmarked during the day. Energised, he showed her how to connect an old car battery, that Mirsad picked up at the market, to her radio so she could listen to the few stations that were still on air. He knew a way to thread cotton through a cork and float it on oil and water in a jar to make a rudimentary lamp. In exchange, she told him the recipes that were swapped in the city's endless queues: rice pie ('no meat, just rice!') and bread paté ('er...bread crumbs mixed with water and spread on top of bread').

They now lived off 'food from the sky', as Una called it: packages of beans, flour, sugar, salt, tinned meat and fish, pasta, and so on that were flown in, every so often, in huge military planes. The airport had been handed over by the Serbs to the United Nations. The boxes of humanitarian aid were a blessing and a joke. They were being kept alive, but rumours of tinned mackerel dating back to the Vietnam War and foil-wrapped ham sandwiches suggested not much thought was going into feeding the largely Muslim population. And there was still not enough of anything. All over Sarajevo patches of lawn, flower boxes on balconies and the corners of children's playgrounds were sprouting vegetables: chard, peas, beans and marrow.

Then, in July, the water was cut and the city opened up like a sore. The streets festered in the sweltering heat, dense with the smell of unflushed drains and mountains of rotting rubbish. Sticky with dirt, hair lank and clothes stinking, people clutched plastic canisters and empty Coke bottles to their sides, as they queued for water at the few points where there were hoses snaking up from manholes or at the Sarajevo Brewery in Bistrik, which had its own spring.

'We've become refugees in our own city,' Zora wrote to Franjo.



Una and Zora, in t-shirts and shorts, worked on the tree, one section at a time, in the roasting cave of her living room. Even the glow of a candle added to the heat and Zora unpinned the lower corners of the bin bags to let in a little breeze and light. Una was a slow and careful painter on the whole, with sudden leaps of brilliance. The mangrove roots were her idea, when some watery paint dripped from a bough. Watercolours, oils, acrylics, charcoal and pastels were all used. Una guided the painting, a stream of chatter falling from her lips as she described the trees in her grandmother's orchard near Banja Luka and ones she knew from the picture books her other granny used to read to her.

One day, standing on a chair to work on a patch of purple leaves, Una said, 'Zora, have you got any Muslims in your family?'

Zora, who was blending a burnt orange colour on her palette, looked up, surprised. 'Only through marriage,' she said. 'My brother was married to a Muslim.'

'Oh, what happened?'

'Well, he died a long time ago. She's remarried, living over in Vratnik.'

'I'm sorry.'

'He was a lot older than me and he was ill for a long time, so it was a relief in the end,' Zora said. 'But why do you ask?'

Una did not answer, but a while later, she said, 'Do you know why I'm called Una?'

'After the river?'

'Yes!' she said. 'Because the Una runs between Bosnia and Croatia, and Dad's Croatian, from Split, and Mum's Bosnian Serb, from Banja Luka. I've been there, but I can't remember it.'

'It's a beautiful river,' Zora said. 'One of the most beautiful in Bosnia. Green as a forest.'

Una turned to look at Zora with glowing eyes. 'That's just what Mum and Dad say!' Then, turning back to the tree, she said in a low voice, speaking more to the wall than to Zora, 'Still, it's no good. I wish I was Muslim.'

That evening, when Milka came to pick Una up, Zora drew her into the kitchen and told her about the conversation as Una cleared up in the living room.

'Oh, she said that, did she?' Milka said, and sighed. 'Well, it's a good sign that she's opening up to you, Zora. The other kids pick on her for having a Serb mother, you see.'

She told Zora how she had thrown a tantrum when she found out she did not have even one Muslim relative. 'What, not even a great-uncle or a cousin of a cousin?' she had shouted. She had never realised she was different: she wanted to go to mosque like all her friends had started to do. She sat for hours at a time, cross-legged, in the airing cupboard, with a tea towel covering her head. 'Darling, your Mum and I are atheist,' Anto told her at last, 'we don't follow a religion, but if you're interested, you can ask Granny Marija about being Catholic.' Anto's mother lived with them and, after showing Una how to kneel and pray, she took her to mass the following Sunday. Una fidgeted the whole way through and announced when she came back that, 'the stories the funny man told the audience were ridiculous.' She did not think she was Catholic.

Milka laughed and Zora smiled.

Una came into the kitchen, her hands and face streaked with paint, and Milka placed a hand on her head, tucking a lock of her unwashed hair behind her ear.

'Are you ready to go, darling?'

Una nodded and went to kiss Zora goodbye.

'Thanks so much, Zora,' Milka said. 'She loves coming here.'

That evening, Zora held a candle up to the mural of the tree which was growing in all directions on her cracked living room wall. The wet portions of paint glowed in the soft light, and Una's purple leaves quivered as the flame swelled and dipped with the movement of Zora's hand. The girl was talented. It is what she had hoped for Dubravka, who, despite her artistic mother and intellectual father, had always been profoundly practical, firmly rooted in the everyday business of the world, attached to things like her grandmother. Good for her for having the foresight to leave Yugoslavia before it fell apart! She had fallen in love with Stephen when he was over on a business trip during the Winter Olympics and could hardly wait to move to England. She wanted to leave communism far behind.

Zora could not write that evening. She started several times, but the line that her letters normally extended to her family, did not catch. She felt no tug, as she tried to haul their presence into the room. Instead, she saw Una's white face and dark eyes, her red lower lip jutting out as she painted. She could not bear to think of her being bullied. The image of her sitting with a tea towel on her head, or squirming on a stone seat in the Catholic cathedral, sat as heavily as an undigested meal in her stomach. Putting down her pen, she went through the drawer of unsent letters, and pulled one out that she had written several weeks earlier.

*Dearest Mama,*

*How are you? Feeling stronger every day I hope. Sorry for not writing sooner. I've been meaning to, but it was only today that I managed to drop by your flat after quite some time.*

*First, I went to the old Orthodox church to get some candles. All the shops have sold out, but the church hands out bundles of six to us (well, to those of us who are Serb): two sturdy beeswax ones, which burn for a good long time, and four of those slim white tapers they light under the icons of the saints. They go within minutes. I can't remember the last time I went in there, but the priest remembered me and asked after you. It was sad, really. He seemed shrunken and old, hardly stepping out of the dark shadows – so different from the terrifying, bearded figure in purple robes and a cloud of incense that towered over me as a child! I think I believed the incense emanated from his very being, rather than from the golden censer he swung out in front of him.*

*Now, the church, which has been quite badly shelled, is unlit and smells only of must and damp. All the religious buildings have been shelled. The Serbs in the hills make no distinction and maybe that's why the priest looks so lost and so scared. Or maybe it's because no one likes Serbs any more and he can't think what he's still doing in a city where most of his congregation, and all of his fellow priests, have already fled.*

*Mum, Sarajevo is not the city you knew. Your illness was a blessing: it took you away just in time.*

*But I know what you really want to know is if your flat is still all right. I dropped in afterwards. I hadn't been for a while because it's such a long walk from my place but everything was fine. In fact, it was remarkable. It was as hot as an oven in there because the shutters have been down all summer and a thick layer of dust coated everything, but otherwise, it was all exactly as it should be, not even a window-pane broken. The Singer sewing machine, the Viennese dining chairs, the Art Deco lamps, the glass-fronted cabinet of china and cut crystal, the napkins and tablecloths folded neatly in drawers, your embroidered cushions here and there on the sofas. I even found a box of those chocolates you love, with dark cherries suspended in liqueur, at the back of a cupboard. Half-melted and with a whitish bloom on them, but delicious. I shared them with Una – Anto and Milka's little girl. Mama, it's all there preserved in one piece as if in amber. No one has moved in or stolen a thing.*

*I love you and miss you very much,  
Your Zora.*

Zora folded the letter and put it back in the drawer. The truth was she had not wanted to go all the way to her mother's street and the old Orthodox Cathedral that day, but the nearby Catholic church would not give her candles because she was Serb and, of course, she had not dared try at a mosque. Candles from a place of worship were one thing, but she had also seen bread being given out of the backs of vans only to those of a certain nationality. Religious charities ran these operations. It made her blood boil. Divisions that had never existed before were springing up between them. The message seemed to be: Become Orthodox, Catholic or Muslim – or starve! Sarajevan women had never worn headscarves – not in her lifetime, at least – and now clusters here and there were starting to do so. She knew that Anto and Milka refused to go to either the Serb Dobrovtvor or the Catholic Caritas for any of the handouts they might get there. They believed in a secular, multiethnic Sarajevo, perhaps even more strongly than she did, and looked down on those who 'deserted' the city. But what would happen to Una? That was what Zora wanted to know.

The tree used up all of Zora's paint. She slit open the metallic tubes with a sharp kitchen knife and Una scraped out every last drop of colour. Zora gathered up the tubes like discarded fruit skins and pushed them together, working with her hands, till she formed a sculpture of the human form, reminiscent of a Giacometti statue.

Una watched her, sitting on the sofa, thumb in her mouth.

'Cool,' she said. 'Where did you learn to do that?'

'I don't know. It just came to me,' Zora said, then, after some thought, added, 'But maybe I learnt it in Paris. I studied sculpture there a long time ago.'

'Paris,' Una said, turning the name over in her mouth as if she were tasting an expensive sweet.

Zora, continuing to work on the figure, told Una about her Paris days. She found herself talking as she had once imagined she would tell her story to her daughter, but Dubravka had never asked. She told Una how she could have perhaps settled there – or in Belgrade – but Sarajevo had always called her back.

'I must take you to my studio when-' she said, and Una had nodded.

She rested the sexless, human form of the spent paint tubes against the wall, as if it were leaning against the trunk. It was a knee-high, featureless figure, propped up against the tree.

They stared at it for a moment. Una shifted on the sofa and flicked some paint from her knee. She had grown quiet again these last afternoons, as the last of the paint ran out.

'What are we going to do now?' Una said.

'We'll think of something.'

## *Eight*

Moments of blackness. Zora comes to with a jolt, head heavy. Where is she? Why is she alone? Who is she waiting for?

The fire has burnt down to a few glowing embers. The temperature has dropped and everything has slowed down almost to a halt. The coldness of the air sears her eyes and freezes her lips together. Normally in his arms now, sleeping through this. If she surfaces, she falls back again quickly, blackness holding her, swallowing her, so that only the faintest memory remains. Now, though. Now she must not sleep, cannot sleep. She might not wake.

An old man had lain frozen, three floors below, for two weeks before he was found.

Zora is holding the jar of turpentine in her hands. She unscrews the lid again, lifts it to her nostrils and inhales deeply to wake herself – like smelling salts. The sharp, sweet smell of resin takes her back to childhood walks through pine forests on the islands where the trunks had been scored and tapped, sticky yellow globules oozing out to seal the wounds. Needles crackle underfoot, and then her studio forms around her, the dust and the floorboards and the beams, her paintings hanging like ghosts in the wings of her vision, four or five deep, as if waiting to come closer, draw round and take form, but she knows better than to look directly at them, to try to pin down hallucinations which fade to nothing. They mill, in the corners of the room, rustling and whispering. A heady note of liquorice comes in over the pine. When she first painted, she could not take the fumes. The headaches, the mood swings, the irritability, but she forced herself to grow accustomed, to lose her sensitivity. You get used to anything in the end. Even this. But her head's swimming now and the rustling

of her paintings grows louder in the wings, like the dry skin of an old person's fingers rubbing together, urgent, gathering pace. The room is starting to spin and the stool lurches underneath her.

A jabbing thrust. A spurt of liquid leaps through the air and, for a split second, a bridge forms between the mouth of the jar and the mouth of the stove. Zora – from a frozen corner on the other side of the room, it seems – looks at her outstretched arm, her fingers clenching the empty jar, incredulous. What has she done? Is she insane? The rounded glass of the jar glows dully for a moment, reflecting the last of the embers, before all becomes black.

She has doused her only source of heat and light.

This must be it. She cannot move at all. Just the rustling now.

Colder and darker and stiller, until things stop.

A solitary flame springs up in the stove and leaps high. Then another, and another. Heat pulses towards her and there is movement all around, as shapes rearrange, growing and shrinking behind her, shadows looming on the walls, and the rustling – the rubbing of the old person's fingers – is picking up rhythm and momentum, so raspy and papery that Zora wants to swat it away, but she is scared to turn around, to tear her eyes from the fire which has miraculously reignited. A miracle, no less, she thinks, and the overpowering odour of turpentine is released into the room, making her eyes smart and her hand fly to her mouth and her nostrils. Pushing her stool back, she remembers the extreme flammability of the paint thinner and sees that the damp paperboard covers of the book of stories have caught light. Something deep within her frozen being leaps in response.

She will be all right now. She had almost slipped over, but now she will be all right.

Slowly, she unwinds her scarf from round her neck and pushes it into the mouth of the stove, her cheeks numb, her forehead aching, everything glowing



orange. She will feed all her clothes to the fire, if she has to, to stop it from going out. Smoke billows into the room as the soft fabric of her scarf burns. Time has stopped. She cannot think of anything beyond the fact that she must not let the fire die. The rustling has reached a crescendo.

In it bursts. Here it comes.

The power came on – pop, just like that – in the middle of the sweltering August night. Zora did not move at first, her eyes adjusting to the glare of the kitchen light. She listened to the hum of vacuum cleaners and the whirr of washing machines starting up in the flats above and below hers; the *da da da* of popular music on radios; the rustle of electricity pouring into their lives. It could have been five o'clock in the morning and the response would have been the same. Soon, the smell of baking pita and bread would rise through the tower block. As she was heaving herself up to join the frenzy of cleaning and cooking – the power might only last a few hours – there was a loud knocking at the door. Someone had been knocking for quite some time, perhaps, and she had not noticed in all the commotion.

'Who is it?' she called, knotting her dressing gown tightly round her waist.

'Mirsad!'

'Oh, Mirsad! What is it?' she said, opening the door, and then immediately adding: 'What's happened?' because he was out of breath, leaning forward, hands on his knees, bald head streaked with black as if with an artist's charcoal.

'You haven't seen?' he said.

'Seen what?' she said, but he grabbed her and pulled her out into the corridor, ignoring her protests that she was not dressed and that the oven was on. He more or less dragged her to his flat. Sweat was streaming down the back of his neck. His suit, crumpled and sooty, smelled of bonfire. And when he stopped, fumbling with his key, and turned to look at her, Zora saw his eyes were red and smarting.

'I've just come from the town hall,' he said. 'It's on fire.'

All thought and feeling flew from her then.

'The town hall?' she said.

'Yes,' he said.

'On fire?'

He nodded.

Had she laughed? Certainly, she had not taken it in.

They went into his flat and he sat her down on the sofa in the living room. Samir was there, pacing the few steps between the sofa and the television like a caged animal.

'Fucking philistines,' he said, shaking his fists at the screen.

The news was on. Enormous sheets of orange flame were bursting through the gridded windows of the library into the night. Zora opened, then closed her mouth. The iron window-bars glowed white. Words running along the bottom of the screen announced that the old town hall had been hit by thirty incendiary shells, aimed at the glass dome, at eleven o'clock that evening.

‘Firemen arrived as soon as they could,’ – a reporter’s voice was struggling to be heard over the roar of the flames – ‘but it looks as if there will not be enough water to save the hundred-year-old building, home of the national and university library. Shells are continuing to fall.’

Zora glanced around, a hard knot of something growing inside her, emotion and thought clotting there.

To her right, on the sofa, Mirsad had collapsed, all energy expended now that he had brought her there. His shoulders were hunched, quivering, as if he were on the brink of tears, and his blackened head, bald as an egg, was in his hands. He had taken off his spectacles to wipe them clean of soot, Zora supposed, but had forgotten to do so and they had slipped from his lap onto the floor.

In front of her, Samir paced and cursed. ‘Unbelievable! No fucking water in their fucking hoses!’ he shouted, and struck the side of his head violently. Zora flinched – she had never seen him so worked up.

Mirsad raised his head, his eyes small and lost without his glasses, to say: ‘Son, the neighbours. Calm down.’ Samir nodded, face taut, and ground out his cigarette, the butt coming apart – orange paper, the filter, and the last scorched crumbs of tobacco – in the ashtray. He lit another straightaway.

Mirsad put a hand on Zora’s arm. His eyes were thickly filmed with tears. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he said.

Zora gave a terse nod, her gaze returning to the screen.

He poured Zora a few fingers of the whiskey he was drinking but she pushed it away. Perhaps it was because she was watching it on TV that it would not sink in.

They watched, the three of them. Samir clenched and unclenched his fists, smoking one cigarette after another. Mirsad, broken with sadness, it seemed, sat back, limp, on the sofa. Footage from a few hours earlier was now

being shown – a chain of people in silhouette were reaching into the mouth of the burning building and passing back blackened objects from the flames. They were rescuing books, the news reporter said. They were trying to save the culture and identity of Bosnia.

Mirsad sat forward. 'I was there,' he said, and waved at the screen. 'I tried.' He shook his head and sat back again. 'There'll be nothing but ashes in the morning.'

More news items came on. The enterocolitis epidemic was spreading and the hospitals were now completely out of antibiotics. The airport was closed: the air bridge had been suspended for nearly three weeks now. There were great hopes for the peace conference in London the next day.

Zora was finding it hard to breathe. She wished Samir would sit and calm down: how was it that he had so much anger? And Mirsad's sadness was crushing her. What right had either of them to feel so much when it was her paintings that were burning? Her bridges, her landscapes, her sketches. The three voids under the arch of the girl's back. It was her studio that was on fire. Her throat was closing up. She really needed some air.

'Zora, are you okay?' Mirsad said.

She had sprung to her feet, fists clenched tightly. She looked wildly around, her eyes not settling on any one thing. She had to get out, to be alone. Something was building up inside her, a feeling of some sort, that scared her. She nodded, unable to speak for the moment, and made to leave. Mirsad half-rose from the sofa and Samir stopped his pacing of the room and started towards her but she put out a hand to halt them and left.

The cool concrete wall of the corridor pressed against her cheek. Her heart was beating fast. Her paintings? Gone? All of them? She could not believe it. Part of her, they were, like children. She might have sunk to the ground, but the feeling that was building inside her like a fury propelled her to move. She

could not go back down to her flat and continue vacuuming and baking now, as if nothing had happened. She started to climb the stairs, up to the roof. She needed air. She needed to see the fire, to actually see it. She never came up this high, had never been beyond the thirteenth floor. The tang of urine and scrawl of graffiti were the same in the concrete stairwells and corridors, though the flats here were mostly unlit, and empty, from when the Serb families had left them at the start of the war. One front door hung open, a black cavity beyond, and Zora wondered if it had been forced open by people trying to get in or left open in the occupants' haste to leave. A family of refugees, all female, from a mountain village in Eastern Bosnia, had lived somewhere on the top floors, perhaps in that flat, for a couple of weeks in May. Frightened of the city, they had not known how to negotiate the streets or cross busy roads. They had found living so high up unnatural, so spent most of their time squabbling in the stairwells of the lower floors, wailing for their lost men. Then, in June, the whole extended family – aunts, grandmothers, sisters and cousins – had simply vanished overnight, leaving the top floors ghostly and echoing again.

She came out onto the roof of the building, a space where no one came. Rusted TV aerials and some piles of bricks were all there was. The night was warm and close and, even though she was sixteen storeys high, there was very little wind. She bent over, hands on knees, and drew in great lungfuls of gritty air. She had not been outside at night in months, not even daring to step out onto her balcony, in case her movement attracted a viewfinder up in the hills. Now something was driving her out of herself and she did not care. She was no longer herself. She straightened up and looked over to the east.

There. There it was.

The fire leapt up, two or three times as high as the old town hall. Even though several districts lay between Zora and the blaze, it seemed larger and somehow closer than on Mirsad's television screen. It lit up the eastern end of

the city – the Bašćaršija and the amphitheatre of old Muslim *mahalas*, neighbourhoods which rose steeply up the sides of the hills – their minarets and domes glowing orange with the reflection of the flames. Soft, black smoke blotted out the moon and the stars. Some type of bird – crows, were they? – circled the burning building, swooping down and soaring up, riding on the flames.

Through the lens of the camera man, the flames had twisted and flailed separately, their oranges, reds and yellows distinct, but from up on the tower block, they flowed together forming one creature, rising and falling, howling and hissing. Zora watched, electrified. A strong wind picked up, blowing hot air that smelled of the furnace towards her, and at the same time, the enormous fire hollowed in the middle, its sides rearing up perhaps nine- or ten-storeys high so that it formed the shape of a mouth, jaws opening to devour the night. Beads of sweat began to trickle down her spine and the backs of her legs and she unbelted her dressing gown and let it blow open, the damp cotton of her nightgown pressing flat to her skin.

The wind, which had sprung up from nowhere, brought both relief and delirium. The madness that had been rising inside her, as she climbed the stairs, now came out as joy, now as desolation. She could not tear her eyes from the burning building. Polyvalent and pagan, it was a thousand things at once. It was an offering to the sky – but what exactly was being sacrificed? It was a cry for help, a smoke signal to the rest of the world. It was nothing more than mere entertainment for the Chetniks. A fiery spectacle to break their boredom at the dog-end of this fetid summer. Shells were continuing to fall, the reporter had said, and Zora pictured the soldiers in the hills sliding bombs into mortars and firing them, a screaming arc over the city, to drop through the roof of the town hall. She saw them slap each other on the back with each strike, bellies shaking with laughter.

She let out a cry, her dressing gown blowing open, as she stood brazenly on the roof top, a clear target. She might as well have shouted, 'Take me!' – throwing her arms up in the air. 'Take me too!' What was she without her paintings? Nothing was her choice or her will. She had no control over her life, whatsoever, it seemed.

'You win!' she yelled to the hills. And then she started to laugh, bending over double, dropping to her knees, and laughing. And there, mixed in with her laughter, she heard the clanging laughter of the dwarf woman, and she thought of Franjo, Dubravka and her mother watching the fire on the breakfast news in England the next day – her family whom she could not contact, whom she had not spoken to in three and a half months, who would be besides themselves with worry – and, still, she could not stop laughing.

The wind dropped as abruptly as it had risen.

Zora felt something alight on her arms. It was the lightest touch on her bare skin. The first time she thought it was nothing, that she had imagined it, but then it came again, and again, like the patter of rain, except it was as dry as dust. She took her eyes from the fire and looked up. It was difficult to see at first because the whole valley was clogged with black smoke, but, gradually, Zora made out that dozens of black fluttering objects were gusting this way and that in the air. She snatched at one and it crumbled into dust in her fingers. Another settled on her arm and she fancied she glimpsed the loops and dots of Arabic script before it dissolved into the sweat on her skin. She pincered a third between her thumb and her forefinger and gently teased open the curled-up scrap: Latin script and pencilled annotations in the margin of a yellowing page. They were the burnt leaves of books. She gasped, as if winded. Looking back to the fire she realised that what she had taken for crows circling the old town hall were the charred pages of books on fire. Her paintings would be there, too, rising and falling over the pyre.

Zora washed herself slowly and carefully of the black marks which had been left on her arms, her cheeks and her forehead. She used just one glass of water from the litre she had queued for hours to get from the open pipe by the butcher's. Black butterflies, that is what people were calling these charred pages which continued to gust over Sarajevo for days after the fire, fragments of poetry catching in people's hair.

Mirsad visited the next day. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a blackened object: the burnt carcass of a book. Soot came away in his hands. He told her the story, how he had found himself in the chain of people rescuing books from the library, the flames scalding their faces as they worked. They were passing back books each with a title in a different script to the one before – Latin, Arabic, Cyrillic, Hebrew – and it had overwhelmed him and made him want to cry.

'I dropped this book, Zora,' he said, 'and on straightening up, after bending down to pick it up, the people, the burning building, the glowing walls of the street, the cobblestones, the smoke-filled sky began to spin as violently as if I was at sea.'

He excused himself and staggered away from the chain. The heat, the hissing and the crackling, the air that was increasingly choked up with burnt pages, were all too much and, just as an hour ago the fire had bewitched and pulled him to her, now he felt coldly dismissed and pushed away. He left quickly, shamefacedly, as if he had been disloyal. He could not look back at the flames.

He looked up at Zora on finishing his story, blue eyes flashing behind his spectacles like fish jumping out of water. He was reaching out for some sort of understanding.



'I'm sorry, Mirsad,' was all Zora could say.

When she was clean, she lay on her mattress on the kitchen floor for three days, not eating, not responding to any further knocks on the door.

Three days later, Zora went to Mirsad, and said: 'Take me to the town hall. I have to see that there is nothing left with my own eyes. I can't go alone.'

They walked slowly through the streets. Humid walls pressed in on them, and the sky, still black with smoke, closed like a lid over their heads. Zora, feeling frail, held onto Mirsad's arm for support, and leant into him from time to time, taking care not to stumble. The other people they passed were pale and thin, a layer of grime and sweat stewing on their brows as if they were suffering from a fever which had just broken. Their movements were either languid – stunned from the relentless, trapped heat – or jumpy and erratic, and Zora wondered what tragedies they had each suffered. They saw an old man walking in his socks down the middle of the street, a bandage over the left side of his face, talking softly to himself and shaking his head.

It was strange to be linking arms and walking together, as if they were a couple promenading up and down Marshal Tito Street on a Saturday evening in peacetime – 'Careful, what will people think?' Zora said, attempting a joke – and then, wordlessly, to separate in order to scurry in single file, heads bent, pressed up against the wall of an exposed stretch of street or to sprint across a watched crossroads.

The further they got from their tower block, the more Zora leaned into Mirsad and let him lead the way. She realised she had not ventured more than a few hundred metres beyond her home since the Academy of Arts closed for the summer. She came down from her flat to fetch water from the open pipe and to pick up her humanitarian aid packages from the butcher's, but that was about it.

‘Samir has been behaving oddly these last few days, ever since the fire,’ Mirsad said. ‘All he does is pace the flat, refusing to study, not bothering to keep his voice down when he speaks to me. It worries me, like something has snapped inside him.’

It felt as if the air was getting hotter and closer, and the people more shell-shocked and heat-stunned, the nearer they got to the Baščaršija, though Zora was not sure if this were true, or if her mounting apprehension was making her see things this way. Certainly, the buildings had more craters here. Paving stones were chipped and the tarmac, bubbling in the heat, was riddled with holes. Glass lay on the streets, calf-deep in places.

They entered the first cobbled street of the old bazaar and saw that not one of the gold or silver shops was open, and that the cafes selling baklava and tulumba on Sweet Corner were shuttered and padlocked. Zora raised her eyes. Where the golden dome of the town hall could once be seen glimmering over the red-tiled roofs, there was now nothing but smoke. Mirsad turned to her, squeezing her arm in the crook of his, and said quickly, in a low voice: ‘It wasn’t *all* of your paintings there in your studio, though, was it?’

‘Almost everything,’ she said.

‘Oh, Zora.’

They had stopped for a moment, but now started walking again. The air was getting thicker with grit and smoke. The occasional charred page still fluttered three days later. It was as if they were entering another zone, a separate area of the city over which a mourning veil had been thrown.

A thick layer of dust had settled everywhere: on the cobblestones, on the shuttered wooden shops, on the baskets of dead geraniums that hung outside them and on their tiled roofs. Hardly any sunlight filtered through: everything was monochrome. Zora pulled down the sleeve of her blouse and held it over her mouth to make breathing easier. As they got closer, dark shapes emerged

from the smoke up ahead. They were pushing prams and trolleys which seemed to be weighed down with something heavy from the way the figures heaved and shoved, the wheels of the vehicles catching between the cobblestones. As they rounded the corner and entered the street, at the bottom of which lay the smoke-shrouded town hall – it was hard to tell how much of it was still standing – they saw dozens, perhaps scores, of people labouring away, coming to and fro, disappearing into the smoke with empty trolleys, and coming out with them laden.

‘What are they doing?’ asked Zora, but as soon as she asked the question, a pram was pushed out of the smoke in front of them. Inside, a pile of coal glistened softly

‘They’re helping themselves to the coal cellars,’ said Mirsad. It was a statement but there was a waver of incredulity in his voice.

‘The coal cellars?’ Zora said. ‘They really think the siege will last into winter? Couldn’t they at least have waited?’ Zora said, and felt Mirsad glance at her.

‘It’s like picking the bones of something before it’s dead,’ she said, but she was not sure if she meant that. She had just expected to be alone, for it to be just her and the old town hall; to be able to say goodbye to her studio quietly.

The sun shone strongly now and, for the first time, the facade of the building was revealed. So it was still standing after all. It was scorched black and sections of coloured tiling had dropped away here and there. All of the windows, including the stained glass of the stairwells, had gone, leaving blackened holes. A toothless old woman. Zora dropped her eyes. Perhaps it would have been better if it had been razed to the ground rather than so disfigured.

But no, what was she thinking? She slipped her hand from Mirsad’s arm and approached. Where was her studio? Her eyes kept passing over the row of

burnt-out windows on the third floor, until she realised that she was searching for the swallow's nest, which, of course, would have been one of the first things to burn away. Oh, she had never thought of that! But she was here now and had to see what was left. She counted the windows and stood on the pavement, below where her studio had been.

She looked in through the gridded library window on the ground floor. Mounds of charred embers were piled as high as the windowsill, and higher, still giving off heat, orange sparks glimmering here and there, smouldering pages spiralling and falling. Her eye followed a page upwards as it rose lazily on some heat, and she saw there was no ceiling, that the timbers had burnt clean through. It continued upwards and, as Zora's gaze rose with it, a patch of blue sky appeared as the smoke thinned and the sun shone through: blue sky where her studio should have been.

No, there was nothing left at all. She started to feel dizzy, a type of vertigo in reverse, and she would have fallen, but Mirsad was there, just in time, holding her up.

She felt as if a small key had turned and quietly clicked somewhere deep inside her. That was that. The door would not open again.

'That's it,' she said. 'Zora Buka, the painter of bridges, no longer exists.'

Mirsad drew in his breath sharply, but said nothing.

After a while, they turned and made their way back.

## *Nine*

It was the unfinished painting of the Goat's Bridge that came back to her night after night. Her eyes would flick open in the darkness of her kitchen and, for a moment, the bone-white asymmetrical arch of the bridge would rear over her, its aged stone sputtering long tongues of orange flame, a residue from her dreams which threatened, at any second, to come crashing down on her and flatten the breath from her chest. But the moment of impact never came. Instead, the ghostly bridge slowly faded, leaving her with staring eyes and racing heart.

What had she done wrong? Her other paintings never came to her. She could not even picture them – her children – now gone. No, not children, never children. Just canvas and pigment and oil. The feeling of guardedness, even malice, she had sensed emanating from them as she had laboured over the Goat's Bridge – battled with it, she had never painted anything with such fervour – came back to her, and she wondered, at times, if somehow that painting had been a curse and that the others had known.

If only she had finished it!

Had it really gone? In between waking and sleeping, she asked herself if she had *really* looked, if, perhaps, under the soft mountains of embers, it might still be there.

The days that followed were raw and smoke-streaked, as if they had been scoured with dirty wire wool. A cooler wind picked up yet still the smell of burning hung in her hair and her clothes, in corridors and stairwells. Zora felt

hollowed out of her memories. She apprehended everything around her as if it were happening miles away.

There was nothing to hold her together anymore.

No husband, no mother, no daughter, no paintings, no studio. She could not think of painting again. Her life's work. Gone.

Mirsad came one morning with the news that he had heard a rumour of a place where, if you paid enough money, you could make a phone call to the outside world.

'What, to England?' Zora had said blankly.

Mirsad nodded and bit his lower lip. It cost a lot, he wanted to emphasise.

Zora stared at the chessboard linoleum tiles on the kitchen floor. She wanted to go straightaway, she told him.

That afternoon they found themselves in the stairwell of a smart apartment block near her mother's place. Zora could not understand why it had a telephone that still worked, but the long line of people waiting on the stairs assured her it did.

They queued for hours before being told she could only speak for five minutes because the connection cut all the time and it would not be fair to the others who were waiting. The appearance of the man who was telling them this – whose flat and phone line it was – took some getting used to. He had fat baby cheeks, bulging like a gerbil's, which made him seem younger than Samir, though his mannerisms were more worldly, and he had a stomach that spilled in layers over expensively belted trousers. His hair was carefully oiled and he was dressed in what looked like a freshly pressed suit. Zora, who had not seen anyone looking so obviously, even ostentatiously, well-fed in months, could not hide the look of distaste that came to her face, but he only responded with a

smirk, his small eyes glinting while his soft, white hands unfolded to wait for her money.

She counted out half a month's salary in German marks.

He smoothed the notes, licked his fingers and counted them out again.

'Five minutes,' he said. 'You call whoever it is you want to call. They call you back. If they're not in, that's not my problem. If the line is cut half-way through, that's not my problem either. You can come back and try another time but you'll have to pay again. Okay?'

Mirsad's eyes were beginning to pop behind his glasses, but Zora nodded, and the gerbil-cheeked man smirked again and pointed to the phone. He and Mirsad withdrew from the room.

After the first drink, Dubravka picked up. Zora, despite the hours of queuing to speak to her, was not at all prepared for the familiar sound of her daughter's voice, the way she sang, 'Hello, Fovant three-six-four-five,' into the phone, with just the same melodic intonation that she used to answer the phone with as a child, though now, of course, she spoke in English. She was even less prepared for the onrush of the quiet part of England where she lived – the patter of drizzle, the scent of toast and clods of fresh mud on the underside of boots, the cough of radiators – that charged towards her upon hearing her daughter's words. This world could not be existing at the same time. Zora could not speak: tears were streaming down her cheeks.

'Hello-o, Dee speaking. Who is it?'

She must not cry. Not now, with so little time – but she could not stop the tears from falling, the first she had cried since the fire.

A silence.

'Mum? Is that you?'

A broken edge had entered Dubravka's voice and she was half-crying, too, now, the cheer with which she had answered the phone instantly gone.

Question after question tumbled out in panic. 'What is it? Are you okay? How are you calling? Where are you?'

She called out to her father, and then gave into huge, heaving sobs – something Zora had never heard from her daughter before.

'I'm okay, darling,' she said. 'I'm okay. I just wanted to hear your voice, to speak-'

The door opened and the gerbil-faced man stepped in, face set in anger. 'Tell them to call you back or you'll have to pay again,' he said. He looked at his watch. 'Only four minutes now.'

When Dubravka grasped the situation and rang back, Franjo had joined the conversation on a separate line. His voice sounded older than Zora remembered, and he kept stopping for breath in odd places, so that what he was saying came out broken and confused. All three of them cried, and then, aware of time running out, a rapid exchange of information began, in which they asked her if she was well, what and how much she was eating – 'Pigeon, what really?', if she had enough water to drink, and if friends were looking out for her. They had watched the fire on TV and they could not bear to think of her loss – it was unthinkable – but they were working on ways to get her out. Maybe she could get a place on a convoy or return in a lorry that brought donated clothes and blankets to the city, that sort of thing. They had talked to the Home Office about getting a temporary visa. They wanted to make sure she got out before winter came.

Her mother was not doing badly. Zora was not to worry.

Dubravka was launching into a recipe for pigeon stew, which involved garlic cloves and bay leaves, when the man stepped into the room again and tapped his watch pointedly. Zora bristled. She had been enjoying hearing the warmth return to her daughter's voice, as Dubravka stepped back into her usual role as the practical one in the family, and had not had the heart to point



out that neither garlic nor bay leaves could be bought for less than a week's salary at the moment in Sarajevo. Zora, Dubravka and Franjo exchanged rapid goodbyes and hung up.

The gerbil-faced man scowled and called over Zora's shoulder to the next person in line, but, to her surprise, Zora realised his disagreeability could not take away the growing feeling of elation that the few moments of contact with her family had brought. She had spoken to her daughter and her husband! For a few minutes, a bridge had opened up between here and there. She stepped around an underweight woman with a sickly child, sitting on the stairs, awaiting their turn, the stench of rubbish coming in from the streets, and even as the broken world of Sarajevo closed around her again, she felt buoyed up.

Mirsad was there, leaning against the wall, dark grey suit crumpled, bald head bent. She suddenly felt very warmly to this man who was helping her: without him she would be quite alone.

He put an arm round her shoulders and squeezed. 'You look better for having spoken to them,' he said.

'Thank you for sorting that out,' she said.

They walked back. The words of the phone call went round and round in her head, and she hugged first one phrase, then another, close to her. They had been looking for a way to get her out. They wanted to get her out before winter came. Convoys, lorries with blankets, that sort of thing. She had not thought it possible any longer. It had not crossed her mind.

'But is it possible?' she asked Mirsad, who looked at her in confusion, and she realised she had been talking in half-sentences, stopping and starting, not explaining herself.

'To leave, I mean, just like that?' she said. 'Dubravka and Franjo were talking about getting me out of here, arranging visas, places on convoys and so on, but I don't know what to think.'

Zora had stopped and so Mirsad stopped too.

'I don't know, Zora,' he said. 'Perhaps.'

It was like a chink opening in the ceiling of her prison cell. Almost painful, the brightness of the hope that streamed in.

They had come to a halt in front of Markale marketplace where the stalls were more or less empty of food. It now resembled a bric-a-brac market, as people tried to exchange their trinkets, clothes, books and ornaments for a few chicory leaves or a handful of under-ripe plums. The sight usually depressed Zora – she had watched a man barter a fine oil painting of a thoroughbred horse for a sack of dried beans the other day – but now a string of purple garlic, hanging high up on an awning, caught her eye and her heart leapt.

'How much?' she asked, pointing.

'Ten Deutschmarks,' came the swift reply.

It was as much as a kilo of meat and twice as much as her salary. Mirsad blew out his cheeks in disbelief and tugged at Zora's arm to move her along.

'I want it,' she said.

'Zora, that's a ridiculous price,' Mirsad said. 'Surely you can't afford it.'

She raised her hand to her throat, and rested her fingers for a moment in the soft folds of her Hermès silk scarf, a gift from Franjo when they had visited Paris on their tenth wedding anniversary. What good was it doing her now? She unwound it from her neck and exchanged it for the garlic.

Walking back, she could not stop smiling. Let Mirsad think what he liked! She could already taste the pigeon stew Dubravka had described and was imagining herself back with her family in England in a few weeks time, telling them how she had made the stew and how good it had tasted.

The pigeon had been eyeing the scrap of bread under the upturned bowl on the windowsill for a while. The bowl was propped open on one side by an upright

fork. When the pigeon, hungry eyes bulging, darted at the bread, it knocked the fork aside, and the bowl clunked down and trapped it. Zora, who had been waiting to hear the clunk and squawk for a long time, who had seen several pigeons manage to peck at the bread without knocking over the fork, clapped her hands. Raising a flap of the bin bag, she carefully drew the bowl into the kitchen, sliding it onto a chopping board. Getting a firm hold of the clawing bird with one hand, she removed the bowl and grasped its head and beak firmly in the other, and gave a sharp twist. The first time she had done this, a few months back, she had made the mistake of pitying the bird, and hands shaking, it had worked its way free and flown straight out of the window again. But not now. Neck cleanly broken, she weighed its warm body in her hands: nowhere near pre-war size, of course, but not bad. It was the cleverer, stronger ones that remained.

When she had caught two more, she plucked the birds and prepared them with two cloves of the purple garlic. She would have to do without bay leaves. She cooked them over a small makeshift stove in the stairwell that their floor shared. Anto had made it from two bricks which supported a grill over rags soaked in leftover cooking oil. The fat reeked and filled the stairwell with acrid smoke, but it cooked meat excellently. She shared the meagre meal with Anto, Milka and Una, inviting them into her kitchen.

'Zora, we're so sorry about your studio,' Anto said, and Milka glanced up with kind eyes, just a shade lighter than her daughter's.

Zora nodded. It was the conversation she had with everyone nowadays and, although she knew they meant well, each time the fire was mentioned, she felt as if all hope was being squeezed from her and the feverish state of her sleepless nights would close around her like a tomb.

'But it's okay,' she said, struggling to claw open a crack so she could breathe again. 'My daughter's trying to arrange a way out.'

Then, remembering Anto and Milka's disapproval of those who left, and annoyed at herself for revealing her hopes, she looked down at the tiny pigeon carcass on her plate, sucked of every last piece of flesh.

'I'm not surprised,' said Anto.

'Awful to be here alone – after losing everything,' Milka said gently, putting a hand on her arm.

She had not expected this. Tears welled up – it happened so quickly at the moment – and as her shoulders heaved, Anto said, 'You're down on the list for the Red Cross convoy, of course?'

She looked up.

'Yes,' Milka said. 'When was it leaving? Next month, was it?'

Just like that hope was handed to her again. Zora had no idea about the Red Cross convoy. They told her it had been in the papers and on the radio: forty coaches or so, half leaving for Croatia and half for Serbia in October.

'Talk to Lenka about it, I'm sure she'll know,' Milka said and smiled.

Only Una scowled, sucking her thumb, black eyes wet with tears.

During the day, hope flowered extravagantly. Talk to Lenka, they had said, and Zora waited impatiently for the weekend when she would get back from the job she had at last found: interpreting for the French UN officers at the airport. She slept there five nights a week now. Anto and Milka thought she would know the people who could make sure Zora was at the top of the list.

But the fire kept visiting her at night. At first, it would glow orange on the rearing stone arch of the Goat's Bridge. Then, it would leap out of its reflection, fiery tongues crackling, roaring and hissing all around her, as the white of the Goat's Bridge receded, growing dimmer, until it was no more than a faint skull-like image in the flames. She woke up, clawing her throat and gasping for water.

Lenka answered the door and, for a moment, Zora had no idea who she was. Her hair was swept back in a soft French pleat, pearl earrings clasped her ears and she wore a navy skirt and jacket, which though too big for her around the hips, was certainly very chic.

'Zora, it's me!' Lenka said, and gave a laugh.

'My mother's clothes,' she said, with an embarrassed wave of her hand. She brought Zora, stunned at her transformation, through to the living room where they had eaten such a feast back in April. Zora noted that the cigar-brown walls were stripped of all their knick knacks and photos and she wondered if they had been exchanged at the market. The Art Nouveau lamp had not been replaced.

Lenka was smiling and chattering, offering Zora a seat and some coffee. 'Real Italian coffee! They have everything at the shop at the airport,' she said. She had just that moment come back from her second week. She loved her job. The Colonel – the man she mostly worked with, interpreting from Serbian to French – was wonderful. Her parents were out but if Zora wanted to wait that was no problem at all. 'I'm really sorry about your studio,' she added.

Zora took a breath. 'Actually, it's you I wanted to see. Do you know anything about the Red Cross convoy that's leaving next month?'

Lenka put her head on one side. 'Yes, there are plenty of places still. They're evacuating up to three thousand people before winter sets in.'

'Do you know how I can get a place? Is there a list?'

'It shouldn't be a problem,' Lenka said. 'I'll speak to the Colonel. He knows everyone. It's supposed to be for the over-sixties, the sick and children, but I'm sure you'll get a seat. Belgrade in a month!'

For the first time in a long time, since before the fire, before the stumbling and choking on Marshall Tito Street, before the shelling, Zora felt she could breathe freely. Was this really all it took to leave? She sipped the strong coffee

Lenka placed in her hands. Its fresh scent and rich taste brought back memories of when life was normal, and seemed to seal some sort of promise.

Sucking on garlic cloves to help beat her hunger down and keep her strong against autumn colds, Zora began preparing to leave the next day. She emptied her bank account of what little money there was – there had been talk of freezes and everyone losing everything – and separated her life savings into several piles, which she hid in rolled up socks in her chest of drawers and in silver foil in the freezer compartment of the fridge. If she were robbed before she left, there would be less likelihood of it all being found and taken.

She went back to Markale market with a trolley of items that could not be used as fuel, worn or eaten and exchanged them for tins of food, pasta and lentils that would last a month. Turning to leave, a shoebox of half-used paints, brushes and palette knives on an adjacent stall caught her eye. A table-easel and several primed canvases were next to it. She walked on, eyes flicking up momentarily to take in the middle-aged woman who was selling them. By the time she got to the street, she knew she had to go back.

She asked the woman why she was selling her paints.

‘Oh, they’re not mine,’ the woman said. ‘They’re my husband’s. He’s very good. Landscapes mostly. But he’s going blind. No medicine, you see, for his condition.’

‘Oh?’ Zora asked.

‘Glaucoma,’ the woman said. ‘He’s had a mild version for years – completely controllable with the right drugs, but now, with no medicines coming through...Well, last week he faced the fact he would never paint again.’

‘I’ll buy them all,’ Zora said abruptly, surprising herself.

The woman blinked.

‘The paints, the easel, the canvases, everything,’ Zora said.

The woman named the price her husband thought was fair and though Zora knew it was twice as much as these half-used tubes of oil and acrylic and second-hand easel would have fetched before the war, let alone now, she could not bear for this unknown painter to lose his sight and feel his dear friends – his paints, brushes and canvases – were being undervalued. Heart hammering, afraid both of what she was about to do and that she might not do it, she pulled out the German marks she had recently withdrawn from the bank and counted out a quarter of them. A month's salary.

The woman, eye on the money, seemed to hesitate as if about to say it was too much, she had expected Zora to barter, but Zora pushed the money into her hand and closed the woman's fingers over it. The woman looked down for a moment longer, and when she looked up her eyes were wet with tears.

'Thank you,' she said.

Then, as Zora collapsed the table easel and slid it under her arm with the canvases, the woman asked: 'Are you a painter?'

'I was,' Zora said, then seeing the confusion on the woman's face, she drew in her breath. 'I am,' she said.

That night when the crackle and spitting of the fire surrounded her, she threw back her duvet, and went into the living room where she had left the art materials on the dining table. She lit a candle, opened the shoebox and examined the paints of the unknown painter. She could tell he was a landscape painter as he had more or less the same selection of colours that she used and, just like her, his favourites were the ochres, blues and greens, while the still plump tubes were the ones filled with brighter pigments: the yellows, oranges and reds. She sat staring at the paints for a while, squeezing the cool metallic tubes gently between her fingers. Then, she unscrewed the cap off the Cadmium Yellow, and slowly at first, then gathering pace, she started to paint. She painted again and again the wave-shaped rearing flames she had watched

on the roof that night, that visited her each night when she closed her eyes. The canvas was unpainted at the white core of the flame, then yellow, orange, rose and incarnadine washes leapt up from it, twisting and flailing into one bestial shape. She had never really painted fire before – the other elements, yes: water, stone, earth and air – but not fire, and now she was entranced by its formlessness; its anarchic, elemental power.

As she painted, the hissing and roaring in her head subsided and, for the first time in a long time, the night grew hushed and still.



## *Ten*

Mirsad, head in his hands, face collapsed, sat across the kitchen table. Shoulders hunched, he told Zora that Samir had woken up a few mornings before, got dressed and gone out into the street. When he returned home several hours later, he was in uniform. He had enlisted in the government army: the sixth regiment of the Bosnian Territorial Defence Unit. He was on immediate duty, reporting to General so-and-so at such-and-such a place that very evening. They had sent him straight to the front!

Zora's hand went to her mouth. The first shivers of autumn were gusting outside, slyly darting into the flat here and there through the cracks in the wall. They sat in their coats and scarves, hands wrapped round cups of hot water flavoured with nutmeg, all that Zora could offer in the place of coffee.

Mirsad's shoulders shook and Zora reached across to touch his hand. 'Why?' she said, softly.

Mirsad shook his head. 'I don't know,' he said. 'It just doesn't make any sense.'

He could not speak for a moment and Zora, squeezing his hand, saw images of Samir, chain-smoking, beard curling down his chest, green eyes glazed with boredom, cooped up in that darkened flat all summer. She thought of his mood swings and how he had joked that he wanted to join the army just to stretch his legs. She remembered how angry he had been on the night of the fire: perhaps that had pushed him over the edge. But how stupid, how selfish.

'We had a huge row,' Mirsad said. 'He was opening and closing drawers, pulling out clothes to take with him, shouting all the time that it was the right thing to do. He said he finally understood who the aggressors and who the

victims were and that he wanted to defend his city. He couldn't hide any more like a coward while Sarajevo was being destroyed around him.'

'Oh, Mirsad,' Zora said.

'It was as if I didn't know him. One moment he would be blaming himself, saying he was a parasite, eating all my food rations and that we would both starve, and the next, he would lash out against me and his mother, saying we don't take him seriously, that we wanted to keep him as a child, locked away, when all the real men are out defending the city.'

'God, what would Radmila say?'

'That's just what I asked him. "What about your mother?" I said. "What would she say about you fighting Serbs?" and he shot back: "What about her, Dad? Where is she anyway? She's left us." In the end, I stopped arguing. I didn't want him to go off angry.'

Zora shook her head. 'You must be so worried. How long has he gone for?'

'Four nights,' Mirsad said. 'They spend four or five nights at a time up there. He'll be back tomorrow.'

'You know you can always come round here, any time you want, if you need the company,' Zora said. 'That is, I mean, until-'

There was a silence and Zora closed her eyes. She was leaving in a couple of weeks – Lenka had confirmed her place on the convoy – but she could not bear to think of Mirsad alone in his flat or Samir up on the front. She felt giddy with the sense of vertigo that unbalanced her regularly at the moment: half of her already with Franjo, Dubravka, her mother, Stephen and the baby in the quiet warmth of England; half of her yanked back into the worsening reality of Sarajevo, where panic was starting to flicker across people's faces at the thought of a winter without heating.

Mirsad gave a small smile. 'Thanks Zora, I know.'

He sighed and shrugged. 'I suppose, at least, he'll be better fed in the Army. He's been getting so thin.'

On his way out, he stopped and nodded to the new artwork that lined the walls of her hall. 'Anyway, it's really good to see you doing so well now,' he said, kissing her on each cheek. 'You're a strong woman.'

Zora, having thought she would never paint again, found herself painting prolifically. Her series of fire paintings was executed rapidly, night by night. She was intoxicated by the brightness of the colours and the formlessness of the flames, which seemed to unleash a new impatient energy in her. She had always painted slowly, building layer upon layer, most paintings taking months to complete, but now she finished her artworks in one sitting. Perhaps it was the destruction of her studio, perhaps it was the knowledge she was leaving in a few weeks, but she had never been so productive.

When she had used all her canvases, she tore pages from books and used flattened humanitarian aid boxes. When her paints started to run out, she started incorporating other materials into her paintings – anything that was to hand: pigeon feathers, spent bullets, twisted bits of shrapnel, shattered glass. Una joined her again in the afternoons and they experimented with using the green, blue and pink food dyes from the back of Milka's kitchen cupboard, grinding the rubble from bricks and breeze blocks into powder and binding it with a little water to make stiff coloured pastes. Una painted lumpy apples, pears and plums onto the twisting branches of the tree.

Soon works of art were covering the walls of her hall and most of the floor in her living room. They were not landscapes like before, in fact, they were nothing like anything Zora had painted before. Some could be loosely described as cityscapes; several focused on dirty, torn skies; but most were

nonrepresentational, experimenting with shape, texture and colour. At the age of fifty-five, she had broken free of landscape.

Making art out of the destruction around her seemed to be the only way she could make any sense of it: newspaper articles and radio reports with their endless speculation about promises of Serb cease-fires and Western intervention told her nothing.

Now she stood in her hallway, walls bristling with feathers, shrapnel and bright tongues of flame, and turned over Mirsad's news. She felt for him, poor man. In his wife's absence, he had grown almost motherly, his life centring around his son's well-being, but part of her also wondered if some small good might come out of Samir's decision. Not just because there would now be more food, but because they would be able to talk to others. Zora would not be leaving them so alone: an insular father-son pocket within the pocket of the siege. She had worried about leaving Samir in an increasingly cold flat, empty afternoons gusting around him, doing nothing but waiting for the war to end.

She shivered and the sensation of holding her grandson Ollie in her arms, his warm body close to her chest, the clean shampoo smell of the top of his head, came to her from nowhere, accompanied by her usual feeling of giddy elation mixed with guilt. She would be there soon. This would all fall away.

It was the same at the Academy of Fine Arts, where teaching had started up again. She would be demonstrating a technique at an easel, at the front of the class, when all of a sudden she would feel split: part of her was there with her exhausted students, as depressed as they were, while part of her was in a warm English pub with her family, Stephen ordering food for them.

'Are you all right, Mrs Buka?' one of her students would ask, concerned at the loss of colour from her cheeks and the way her fingers gripped the side of the easel.

She nodded. They adored her now. Impressed by her energy and that she continued to paint despite the loss of her studio, more and more students were turning up for class, inspired by what they took to be a show of resistance. The thing was to carry on as if everything was normal. The girls came carefully made up, hair twisted into styles that hid their lack of dye, wanting to show that they were still proud of their appearances. The boys came in between shifts on the front, trying to shake off what they had seen and done. Many of them lay down on the floor as soon as they arrived to conserve energy after their long hikes across town.

She had not told them she was leaving, of course, and her stomach turned when she thought of their disillusionment.

The convoy was postponed by a week, and then by ten days, as the Bosnian Army was convinced that potential fighters were using it to flee the city. Around the beginning of November, the temperature plummeted to below freezing. No one was prepared for that and, for a brief while, all neighbourliness and camaraderie disappeared, as the shock drove everyone into themselves. Zora began to worry that the mountainous roads would be too icy for the coaches, but then an announcement was made in the papers: the Red Cross convoy would be leaving on the fifteenth of November, no matter what.

The night before, Lenka visited, face pale. There was no space.

‘What do you mean?’ Zora said, looking at her suitcases that were packed by the door.

Lenka’s teeth were chattering from the cold. She had just got a cab from the airport, but she had to go back in a few minutes. She was so sorry. There had been plenty of seats but with all the postponements, the notices in the

paper and the sudden drop in temperature, there had been a huge rush of people at the last moment.

‘But I have a place,’ Zora said. ‘I’m on the list.’

The fact was she was not old enough. The first places went to the over-sixties, the ill and the children. Lenka and the Colonel had never imagined that all the seats would be taken. Zora had been at the very top of the list. They had been so sure.

Zora could hardly hear what she was saying. The girl’s lip were blue with cold. A bottle was being pressed into her hands. Whiskey. But how could she not go? She had said goodbye to Mirsad, Samir, Una – everyone. She had given the keys of her mother’s flat to the neighbour. She had a visa arranged. Her family was expecting her.

‘My family’s expecting me,’ she said, in an overly loud voice.

Lenka started to cry. She was so sorry. She could not bear it. She would call Franjo from the airport on the Colonel’s line and let him know.

She left and Zora sank to the floor.

Under a heap of duvets, blankets, eiderdowns and coats, Zora shifted on her mattress on the kitchen floor. Her mother’s fur slipped from the pile, and, in doing so, her nose and her cheeks were exposed to the air which, though cold, was not as icy as it had been when she had burrowed like an animal under the covers the night before. Then, it had seemed each breath would lacerate her throat and her lungs, and that any mucus in her nostrils would freeze as hard and as painfully as grit. Now, the air was softer and the mound of covers pressed down on Zora pleasantly, with quite some weight and even some warmth. A strange whitish light was seeping in around the edges of the bin bag curtain. Zora blinked slowly, listening for a clue to the time. It was as quiet and as still as the hours before dawn, yet it seemed day had already broken.

There had been photos on the front page of *Oslobodenje* of the convoy leaving. Apparently gunshots had whistled out as the fifteenth coach set off but no one had been hurt. Forty coaches: twenty to Split and twenty to Belgrade. Over two thousand people evacuated. She had gone to her class the next day, glad she had not told anyone. She was trapped in this city like they were. Why had she thought she was different? They adored her. Maybe she was the person they thought she was after all.

Had she ever truly believed she could leave?

Now, a strange feeling of relief: the gentler air, the hushed light the colour of pearls.

She pushed back the heap of covers and padded across the kitchen floor, breath coming out in white puffs, but not grating as before, when she breathed in. Peeling back a corner of the bin bag curtain, a wall of white presented itself. She drew back in surprise, but then saw that it was not solid: the wall had depths and shallows and was moving. It was as if she were looking into a river, or rather a slow-moving waterfall, as, on the whole, it was moving downwards – slowly, silently, downwards – pale light glimmering through here and there.

She lifted the bin bag up further and a cool draught slipped in, rubbing up against her like a cat. A few specks of white detached themselves from the downward moving wall and danced, in no hurry, into her kitchen.

It is snowing, she said to herself. Look, there was already a layer of snow a hand's span deep on the windowsill. It was snowing! And, as she found herself saying this over and over again, sometimes in her head, sometimes out loud, a feeling of joy – it could only be described as that – rose unsteadily inside her.

She hurried to the living room and, holding back the edge of the bin bag that covered the nearest window, saw that the same wall of white was falling there too. And in front of her bedroom window, and in front of her mother's.

Zora laughed. For the first time since the war had started, her building was no longer a target, but hidden behind these walls of snow. She could stand before an open window and not worry. She could imagine she was anywhere in the world right now – anywhere that was snowing, that is. Somewhere, say, where she could just pop down to pick up some groceries from the shop and stop to watch laughing, round-cheeked children throw snowballs at each other in the park.

Somewhere behind the walls of snow, the sun must have been shining quite brightly, because her flat, normally as dark as the grave, was almost radiant with soft white light. She had felt that it was warmer – the temperature must have climbed to at least zero for it to snow – and everything seemed more manageable now. Soon the holes and the craters in the buildings and the roads would be masked and Sarajevo would give the appearance of being beautiful again.

Zora set about gathering the snow from her windowsills and balcony in buckets and saucepans. She was humming, almost beside herself with delight. The open pipe that she went to by the butcher's had frozen and she had been living off the bare minimum of water for the past week, which she was rationing just for drinking. She had not washed herself, boiled any rice or flushed the loo for three days. Now, once the snow had melted, she would have more than enough. She threw two bucketfuls of snow into the toilet, set down the other pans and pails in the least cold part of the flat, and waited.

The disappointment was swift and cruel. By evening, the snow had melted down to a fifth of its volume: brackish water that would be undrinkable without boiling. The unflushed contents of the toilet had frozen into a mound of faeces and ice which now blocked the toilet bowl. The falling curtain of snow had, by degrees, as the temperature continued to rise, turned first into slush and



then rain, and so she had nailed the bin bags back in place. Shelling had resumed aggressively somewhere to the north. Everywhere was brown and dark, dripping and broken.

Zora curled up on her pile of unwashed covers, purple fingers painfully thawing from handling the snow. She did not have the strength to move. She did not think she could go on. Not like this. Not into winter.

## *Eleven*

Mirsad and Samir arrived with loud voices, blowing onto cold fingers and stamping the slush from their boots. They had carried an old-fashioned tin stove between them for some distance, its rusty sides dripping sleet, and they set it down in the living room, regaining their breath after the eight flights of stairs. Samir had found the stove in the attic of an abandoned cottage up near the front and, now that he had two days' leave, they would have plenty of time to install it in Zora's flat.

'My flat?' Zora had said, and hurriedly closed the door to the bathroom with the blocked toilet bowl, which must reek, though she could not smell a thing as her nose was so blocked. She had no idea how long she had been lying on top of the heap of covers and coats, unable even to get under them, cold dank air chilling her. She must look and smell awful, but Mirsad and Samir did not seem to notice.

'Yes!' said Samir. 'It's freezing in here and we thought you'd like some heat.'

He spoke with a cheerful forcefulness Zora had not heard in him before. His cheeks had rounded out a little since becoming a soldier, and he held himself more erectly.

'But don't you want it?' Zora said, not quite able to believe what they were proposing.

'There's nowhere to put it at ours,' Samir said. 'The living room's so messed up from the shelling that the rain and the wind blow straight through it as if you're on a mountain top. And the only warmish room – the one where

Dad spends most of his time – is the bathroom, and that's no use as it's windowless. There's no way for the smoke to leave. We'd choke!

'Oh,' Zora said.

'We need a south-facing flat, ideally,' said Mirsad gently. 'One that is less likely to be shelled' – Zora nodded – 'and we thought we could pass the flue through one of your living room windows. I could then come and join you from time to time – if you don't mind, that is.'

Zora gave a small smile, her chapped lips cracking. 'Of course not,' she said. It was so long since something good had happened.

It did not take long to install the stove. Working quickly, they ripped the bin bag from the living room window closest to the kitchen and nailed a sturdy sheet of MDF – the back of a wardrobe, Samir told her – across the hole. They positioned the stove beneath the window and ran the flue, rusting but in good working condition, out through a circular hole they had already cut. Samir used duct tape to seal any gaps around the neck of the chimney, where the wind might slip through, and Mirsad drove in a few more nails to make sure everything was secure.

Zora watched, hands clasped.

The stove stood on four stout legs and had a rectangular belly with a door that creaked lustily when opened. It was no great beauty, constructed from crudely hammered-out and melded-together sheets of tin, but there seemed to be something proud, almost boastful, in its squat stance and ugly but functional looks. Zora ran her fingers over the stove top, where a kettle or saucepan could snugly sit. She would no longer have to use the reeking oil-rag stove in the stairwell. She would have a source of warmth.

Samir and Mirsad made several trips from their flat, bringing back armfuls of splintered wood: the rest of the wardrobe. Zora fetched some newspaper from Franjo's desk to use as kindling and, within a matter of

minutes, a fire was crackling and waves of heat were pulsing into the cold, dank room. The three of them stood around the little stove, warming their hands and the fronts of their legs. Something began to ease.

Since the convoy had left, Zora believed in nothing, thought of nothing. The Academy of Fine Arts closed its doors for the winter soon after the first snowfall. It was too icy for all but a few students to get there and there was no way of heating the high-ceilinged rooms of the old Evangelical church. So be it. She lay beneath her heap of covers on the kitchen floor, excising her mind of all thought.

It was too painful to think of her husband, daughter and mother, so she made herself stop. She took photos down from the walls and put them away in the drawer with the letters. Even if she had wanted to write – and she had not for a long time – her fingers, grown into stiff claws from washing dishes and underwear in icy water, could now hardly hold a pen.

Standing in her mother's flat a few days after the convoy had left, she had looked into the cracked face of a woman who was nursing an undersized baby at her breast. One of her mother's blankets was wound over the woman's shoulder and round her child, and if the top of its head had not been peeping out, Zora would have not known it was there. The woman's head was covered with a scarf, like the ones the peasant women who sold handfuls of dried herbs at the market wore, though she was not a peasant. Her husband had said he was an oculist. Wrinkles and exhaustion radiated out from her eyes, as she glanced up at Zora and then down again at her feeding child. Two young boys and a sad-looking girl in her teens sat quietly at the mouth of her mother's green-tiled stove.

Everything of value was gone. The jewellery, the crystal, the china, the Art deco lamps, the paintings – her own included, and the Turkish rugs. There were gaps in the floor where the parquet tiles had been pulled out like teeth to be used for firewood.

‘Please, sit down,’ the woman said, flushing at having asked Zora to sit down in her mother’s apartment.

Zora sat. Raised voices slipped out in snatches from the next door apartment, but she did not try to make them out. She wondered how old the woman was. Her sudden colouring and timid manner made her seem younger than the lines that cut through her face suggested.

Zora closed her eyes. She had come with Mirsad to get the keys back from her mother’s neighbour and to take some of the things to sell: thinking she was leaving in November, she had spent most of her money and the Academy had not been able to pay any of its staff for the last two months. Opening the door that morning had been a shock. Just as the dwarf woman had said would happen, others had moved in. Nothing was left.

She had failed her mother.

She was not sure how she was going to eat.

‘We didn’t take your mother’s things,’ one of the boys piped up. ‘They were gone when we got here.’

‘Be quiet!’ his sister said.

‘But we didn’t,’ the boy hissed to his sister. ‘Are they going to throw us out?’

Their mother threw a look that silenced them, and shifting the baby and the blankets so that it was feeding from her other breast, she looked at Zora and said, ‘I know how you must feel having strangers in your mother’s place. We’ll move if you want us to.’

‘What happened to your home?’ Zora said.

But the woman shook her head and would not speak any more.

Mirsad, who had been talking with the woman's husband and the neighbour, came into the room. He spoke in a low voice to Zora, telling her that the man said they were refugees from Zvornik. Serbs had taken over their house for a week in April, forcing them to live in the basement. Terrible things had happened. When the soldiers left, they burnt their home to the ground. The family had come to Sarajevo at the end of the month, just before the city was closed off, and had been living in abandoned flats ever since.

'What do you want to do?' Mirsad said. 'He insists they haven't sold a thing, though your mother's neighbour keeps crinkling up her face as if she doesn't believe him.'

Zora thought there was a good chance the neighbour had sold the things herself: she had always had a covetous eye on her mother's belongings. She had no idea why she had left the key with her. But who knew what the truth of it was? Everyone was starving, desperate. Anyway, there was nothing that could be done now.

She let the family stay. She gave them the key, asking that they give back the flat when the war was over.

With the installation of the stove, Mirsad started to spend more time at Zora's. Being careful to ration their fuel, they would light the stove around dusk and keep it going till nine or ten in the evening. That way they were able to cook one hot meal a day, which they ate together, and to keep warm in the early hours of the evening. Like everyone in Sarajevo, they went to bed early to conserve energy and because there was very little to do without television or radio, and barely enough light to read.

Zora's flat, or, at least, the part of it which could still be lived in, had shrunk to a third, even a quarter, of its original size. The bedrooms had long

been abandoned to the wind and the snow, which persisted in working their way round and under the sides of the bin bags, while the bathroom, devoid of water and reeking of blocked drains, was also avoided. The doors to these rooms were kept shut, rolled up rugs wedged against them to keep out the icy draughts from one side and the stench from the other. Consequently, the narrow entrance hall was now not so much a corridor as a tunnel, which, bristling with Zora's artworks of rubble, shrapnel and feathers, channelled guests directly from the front door to the living room at the far end of the flat.

The kitchen, the favoured room in the flat in the spring and the summer, as it was entirely south-facing and so the least likely to suffer damage from the shells which came from the hills to the north, had now lost its former status due to the cold. It might have been the only room to have an intact window, but without a source of heat, its temperature fell just as in the other rooms. Ice spiders crawled over the inside of the window pane and icicles hung from the windowsill. Mirsad helped Zora drag the mattress from the kitchen to the living room so that she could sleep near the stove. The kitchen was now used mainly as a place to relieve themselves, using a bucket as a chamber pot, the contents of which were disposed of outside on their way to collect food or water the following day.

The living room was the main dwelling place and even then it was only partially used. The area close to the stove, around which the mattress, a stool and cushions had been arranged, was, of course, the hub of the flat. Almost all activity took place there: cooking, sitting, eating, talking, washing with a glassful of icy water over a bucket, and sleeping. Each night Zora, Mirsad, Samir, if he was there, and sometimes others pressed up as close to the stove and each other as possible, leaving a dark emptiness on the other side of the living room, below the east-facing window.

The flat was drawing in on itself. It was being taken over, room by room, by the ice, the wind and the snow; by the outside; by the war.

Everything had gone. Zora was empty, emotions blowing through her as if she were a rag doll. She had periods of blackness. She would come to in the middle of a conversation or in the middle of a room, without remembering what she had said or how she had got there.

‘Every night people try to run across the tarmac,’ Lenka told her. ‘And every morning there are dead bodies to be cleared. Often dead cows and goats too – people trying to escape with their animals.’

‘Where?’ Zora said.

‘At the airport,’ Lenka said, giving her a concerned look. ‘I was telling you about my work, Zora. Are you okay?’

‘Yes, dear.’

Lenka looked down. Feeling bad about the convoy, she brought Zora gifts each weekend: medicine, a bottle of French wine, a copy of *Vogue*. She told Zora about other ways of leaving: the tunnel that people were talking about digging under the airport; or returning on a humanitarian aid plane, after it had delivered its cargo. This latter option cost thousands of Deutschmarks. Zora patted her hand. She did not blame her. She simply no longer believed in leaving.

The book had a red paperboard cover. The words *Yugoslav Short Stories* were embossed in gold lettering on its spine. Zora turned it over in her hands. She had asked Mirsad to bring a book, something they could read to one another, something to do. She opened the cover and drew the candle closer to read the inscription: ‘With all my love, 11th October 1972, Radmila.’

‘You must miss her,’ Zora said.



Mirsad, sitting on the sofa, which had been drawn up close to the stove, shifted. His face was in shadow, but Zora could imagine the small crease that had come to his brow and the almost imperceptible freezing of his features that happened every time his wife was mentioned, as if he were holding his breath until the moment had passed and he could move onto another topic.

He surprised her this time by answering directly. 'I don't think about her much,' he said. 'It's hard when I can't even picture where she is.'

'I thought she was in Hungary,' Zora said quietly, not wanting to appear too interested which might seize up the flow of his words.

Mirsad sighed. 'We don't know where she is. The last time we called, back in April, the friend she was staying with told us she'd moved to a hotel for some reason. It sounded like they'd had a row. She could be anywhere.'

Zora waited, turning over the pages. There were coloured plates illustrating the stories like in a children's book. She ran her fingers over their smooth surface.

'It's hard anyway,' she said, when he did not speak. 'I mean I find it hard thinking about Franjo even though I do know where he is.'

'No, Zora, it's not like that,' Mirsad said with sudden assertion. 'We weren't getting on. We hadn't been for a long time. It was a type of separation we were trying when she went to Budapest.'

'Oh!'

'The friend she was staying with was more of a-. Well, someone she thought she might like better than me.'

'Oh,' Zora said again, more softly. 'Does Samir know?'

'No, but he probably suspects. Hard to hide screaming rows from a child – what am I saying? – a young man. But we wanted to see what would happen. Maybe she would come back.'

'You still love her?'

‘Yes,’ he said, and then paused. ‘Well, I did. What I mean is: she’s Samir’s mother.’

Zora nodded.

Mirsad stayed the night now. His unheated flat was uninhabitable. Small flurries of snow chased round his living room and icicles hung from his windowsills. They slept side by side on the mattress they had brought through from the kitchen under their individual mounds of coats and blankets, back to back, not touching.

Not touching, but more and more, they lived like an old married couple, sharing food, taking turns to fetch water and bread. For days at a time, Zora would feel too depressed to stir from under her heap of bedclothes and Mirsad would look after her, spooning boiled rice flavoured with a shaving of garlic into her mouth and going next door to bring more of his furniture and books from his flat to burn as fuel. Then, the see-saw would tilt the other way, and Mirsad would stare vacant-eyed at the living room wall, while Zora was the one to make the trips to fetch water and food and keep their spirits up. Samir joined them every fourth or fifth night when he returned from his stint on Mount Trebevic.

‘The Coward’, ‘Ibrahim-Bey’s Corner’, ‘The Dead Man’s Wife’, ‘Through the Storm’, ‘The Bridge on the Žepa’, ‘The First Mass of Alojz Tiček’, ‘The Guest’, ‘The Old Apple-Tree’, ‘The Bone Stars’, ‘The Red Scarf’. The titles on the contents page of the collection of stories almost read like a poem, Zora thought. Were those the things Yugoslavia had been made of?

They took it in turn to read stories to each other, the candlelight throwing dancing shadows across their faces. Lenka stayed late once to listen to Samir, their eyes gleaming in the dark. She had – everyone had – swallowed the story

that Samir had somehow broken back into Sarajevo, running across the airport landing strip at night, wanting to be with his father and to defend the city he loved. Or maybe they all had their suspicions, but what did it matter now?

Zora could not imagine what Samir did on the front, where he went exactly when he left the flat with his denim backpack containing a bottle of water and the sandwiches she had prepared. The Bosnian Army had no money and his uniform consisted of an old pair of tweed trousers that Mirsad had worn in his twenties and an army surplus jacket from the Vietnam war. Zora had sewn a patch onto the shoulder: six golden fleur-de-lis on a royal blue shield, which was the old coat of arms from the medieval kingdom of Bosnia and the country's new flag. Like two-thirds of the other defenders, Samir did not have a gun. When he left, in his ill-matching assortment of clothes, trousers slightly too small in the leg, socks exposed, Zora felt her chest constrict. He was a grown man, she knew that, but what she saw was a school boy who had outgrown his hand-me-down uniform turning and raising his hand to wave to her. 'Back soon,' he said. And then he disappeared, swallowed up by the war for another four nights.

At first, when he returned from his trek up the steep side of Mount Trebevic to wherever the front line was, he had exuded a cheerful purposefulness and moved around the flat fixing things here and there. His words came quickly, a schoolboy's chatter on returning from an excursion, as he nailed some loose board back to the window near the stove and made sure the seal was tight around the chimney so that no smoke came in.

It felt good to be doing something at last, he said, rather than just sitting and waiting, hiding like a scared little child. It was good to stretch his legs on the hike up the mountain; good to put his back into digging more trenches; good to lop the branches off trees, shake off the snow and chop them up for

firewood. He enjoyed the camaraderie. Holding the Chetniks back, he could hold his head high for the first time since the war began.

Mirsad and Zora would exchange glances when he talked like this. 'His mother wouldn't recognise him,' Mirsad said afterwards, but they were both happy to see him so transformed, his depressions of the summer months long gone.

Later, though, as the snow and shells continued to fall, he would often be too exhausted to speak or even to sleep when he returned. He chain-smoked the cigarettes he received in lieu of pay sitting on a kitchen chair, legs apart, staring a few feet before him at the ground. There was something coiled up inside him, which made him seem somehow both older and younger, and Zora wondered what was behind such a change.

But she never asked. She always waited for him to speak.

It was as if he had returned from the void – the darkness that hemmed in Sarajevo, – and he needed a few hours of silence to reacclimatise.

The days got shorter and colder and the dark, when it came, abruptly at the end of the afternoon, was absolute. On nights when there were no stars and no moon, and not a single streetlight or house light to illuminate the valley, old childhood fears of the dark returned and, with them, the need to gather close. Then, there would be the fizz of tracer bullets as they cut across the sky. Tower blocks and mountainsides, mosques and churches, were lit up eerily for a moment in flashes of red or green, before darkness flooded back, blacker and deeper than before, resonating with the explosions of shells.

'How long have we been here?' Una asked one evening. She was there with her parents.

'Where?' Anto said.

'In Zora's room.'

'A couple of hours perhaps.'

'No,' Una said. 'I mean how long have we been coming here?'

They looked at each other in the semi-darkness. Not one of them had any idea of time any more. The days were so short and so dark that it sometimes felt they would never grow long again, that perhaps this year they would continue to shrink, until Sarajevo was lost, buried in snow and cloud and gunfire.

'Quite a while now, darling,' Milka said.

'Weeks? Months?' Una asked, and then when she was met with silence: 'How long has the war been going on for anyway? How old was I when it started?'

'It started in April, Una,' Anto said. 'You were still seven.'

'Still seven,' Una said. 'April.'

She frowned, her dark fringe falling over her pale face, and started counting the months on her fingers but stopped, confused. Zora laid aside the charcoal sketch she was making of Milka and went over to Una.

'Here,' she said, and made a tally mark on the wall. 'Let's count together. Day one was the sixth of April.'

She handed the bit of charcoal to Una. 'Make a mark for each day I say. The seventh. The eighth. Go on. That's right. We'll group them in weeks and months.'

Anto brought a candle closer to light up the wall for Una. April. May. June. She worked slowly, standing up, breathing heavily through her mouth as her nose was blocked with cold. The others watched, calling out the dates, attention grimly held by this game. July. August. September. Una had covered the wall at her height with tally marks, grouped in sixes and slashed through with another cross to make seven days: a week. She crouched down to mark the next months below. October. November. December. None of them were certain

of what date it was that day, until Milka remembered she had overheard that it was a week until Christmas in the line for bread the morning before.

When all the marks were on the wall, they counted them.

'Two hundred and fifty-seven days,' Una said. 'Nearly thirty-seven weeks.'

The game had taken up the whole evening. It had held them oddly captive, watching the dark haired girl, pot belly long gone, making an abacus of the days on the wall. Now it was over, they stirred irritably.

'The thing is I can't even remember what it was like before the war, when I was still seven,' Una said.

They slept in one another's arms now. How else to preserve warmth in a city where the temperature had fallen below minus twenty? He enfolded her in his embrace and they moved as close as they could to one another under the stinking heap of coats and blankets. They were both much thinner than they had once been. When parts of their bodies touched – her head and his chest, their hips, their legs – it was in search of heat and to seal the feeble warmth they found. They had more chance of surviving the night if they slept as one.

In the morning, they pulled away from one another and blew into fingers that were purple and numb with cold. The flow of the blood round their bodies would have almost come to a halt and they moved in slow motion, raising themselves up from the mattress in increments, their frozen joints cracking. Sometimes, when half-risen, the desire to sink down again onto the heap of coats and blankets and close her eyes to the day was so powerful that Zora had to claw at Mirsad's arm with her ragged nails: a sign that she needed his help to pull her up. If she lay down again, there was the danger that he would sink down next to her too and then there would be no getting up. They would lie there feebly, their stomachs so empty that they felt like they were made of the

same stuff as the unwashed heap of rags and that, no matter how their hunger whimpered and snarled at them, they would not have the strength to pull themselves up and go out to queue for food.

The airlift was suspended for three weeks in December. People moved more and more slowly around the city, backs bent low to the ground. They pulled empty trolleys behind them. Everything was running out: food, wood, medical supplies, candles. Starving dogs that had been abandoned by fleeing owners back in March and April, or set loose because they could not be fed, roamed the streets in packs, hunting cats and fighting over the limbs of people shot down on bridges or other exposed places that no one had dared to collect the bodies from.

Lenka worked for twelve days in a row at the airport, interpreting negotiations between the United Nations Protection Force and the Serbs. Catholic Christmas passed with no food. Samir came back from the front a few nights after and sat on the kitchen chair by the stove, chain-smoking and staring at the floor. He had brought no wood, nothing, in fact, with him that time. His cheeks had sunken and the skin across his forehead seemed to be stretching to tearing point. He left the next morning without having said a word.

Zora sketched Samir the next time he came back. He had brought wood this time and already the flat was warmer, the cold held back for a moment, yet still he scarcely talked. She worked quickly, almost urgently, cursing under her breath as the charcoal stub slipped repeatedly from her frozen fingers and she had to bend stiffly to pick it up. She had not made a portrait of Samir yet and she wanted Mirsad to have this: a gift from her to him. How this might please or help Mirsad, she could not think. She could not think at all now, as if the cold had frozen the synapses in her brain. It was all a jumble in there, in her mind. In place of memories, hallucinations. Like now, looking at Samir, she saw two of

him. One was fainter than the other and sitting cross-legged by the other one's feet. If only she could reach out to both of them and draw them to her. At night, the walls of her flat breathed in and out, and people and things slipped out through the cracks, invading their living space, while the boom of grenades and gunfire beat out from the flexing walls. Boom. Boom. Boom. In perfect time with the ticking of her shrinking stomach. No food in four, maybe five, days but at least the flat was growing warmer again.

'Zora?'

It was a soft voice. Lenka was standing there in front of her. She looked beautiful. Newly blonde hair shone around her face, and she was holding something out in her hand. Zora glanced at Samir and saw, from the way his face had opened, that he saw her too. She closed her fingers round the charcoal stub Lenka was holding out. She had not realised she had dropped it again.

'Lenka,' – it was the first word Samir had spoken in Zora's flat in a while – 'it's good to see you.'

And then Lenka was turning around and unpoping the latch on a small suitcase she had brought in with her and pulling out a bottle of wine and a package of something wrapped in waxed paper, chattering all the time, a smile on her face, something to do with the Colonel and late Christmas presents and her saying that was okay and a joke about it being in time for Orthodox Christmas, which had to be explained, and look, this was real French wine and camembert.

The scent of the cheese leapt into the room like a roar the moment the waxed paper was peeled back making Zora's eyes smart and bringing water to her mouth.

They could not believe it.

Mirsad, who must have let Lenka in and who now appeared with a corkscrew – a corkscrew! – from the kitchen, was saying something with a smile



that kept slipping to the floor. With shaking hands, he set about opening a bottle, but Zora, to her shame, before she knew what her hands were doing, had set down the charcoal and, without pausing to wipe her black fingers clean, had broken away a chunk from the end of the camembert and placed it in her mouth. The skin had the texture of rough silk and the inside oozed. It was so long since she had tasted cheese, she had forgotten its existence. Her stomach growled and, brought to, she glanced around, wet-eyed and embarrassed. She had eaten so savagely! Though, in reality, it had only been the tiniest portion.

Lenka smiled. 'Eat,' she said. 'I've brought this to share with you. I've already given some to Mum and Dad.'

They ate. Samir fed more wood to the stove and the air around them continued to warm, pushing away the past few days, when Zora had felt on the threshold of something, not insanity, more a slipping over. She had nearly slipped over. Now, the void was held safely at bay. She tipped the last of her wine into her mouth and set the glass down carefully on the coffee table. Just a few mouthfuls of cheese and wine had sated her, made her a little tipsy, in fact.

Mirsad opened the book of short stories and read 'The Guest'. Samir put his arm round Lenka's shoulders and Zora let the words of the story, dear and familiar to her now, run their fingers over her, lulling her to sleep.

It is light now. Quite suddenly, like an eye opening, dawn has arrived, and it seems that Zora must see it for herself, after this long night. Maybe it will erase the uncertainty, bring clarity. She hesitates a moment by the stove where the last of the stories are smouldering bright orange amongst the cinders, part of her reluctant to leave this last bit of heat, scared even, for what if it were to make the difference between living and dying? But she is, in fact, already moving, with a slow, painful gait, making her way across the room to the window again, moving towards the light.

Half-way across, she halts, the pain in her frozen legs seems too much to go further forwards, yet nor can she go back. Her mind is blank with cold. Thoughts when they come scrape at her consciousness, but she cannot get at them, cannot see into them, only feels the furrows of pain they leave behind. She cannot think what she is doing, where she is going, what will happen, if she is waiting for someone. Long drawn out moments of blackness. She should get back to the stove. She has gripped in her hands, clenched between her red raw claws, which will surely never uncurl, a piece of red cardboard covered in morocco leather. She hears something. A sort of fluttering or distant beating. Her head moves so slowly now, her eyes straining to get there before it turns. But which way is the sound coming from? Is it the very blood moving round her body, slowed down and frozen, she is hearing? A flash of light fills the room like a scream. She looks to the window. The bin bag has been yanked away, and is blowing into the room, strangely static in the breeze, like a lifted tent awning. Daylight enters.

She moves quickly, irritably, picking her way over a knocked over paint tin, around a stepladder, and is at the window before she thinks about getting there. The bin bag slaps damply around her hands as she looks out at the gap-toothed buildings of the bald city. The only trees are the ones she and Una have painted on the wall of the flat and those high up on the surrounding hills, marking where Serb territory begins. Nature has been emptied from Sarajevo.

Once a former student had come across her dragging a branch from a tree across a park, 'Hello, Mrs Buka! How are you?' he had said, quite as if greeting her before the war, when she had been a painter, and she had been so ashamed, so humiliated that she had been reduced to this, that she had not been able to answer him, had stood stock still and looked at the ground until he went away.

The sound rattles in her ears again. It is persistent, will not give up.

Colourless sky, colourless snow everywhere. More moments of blackness. A canvas before it is painted on, or after it has burnt to ashes. A tiny scratch bleeds blue in the corner as if left by a nasty claw.

'Hello! Zora!'

She turns towards the door, is feeling her way down a dark corridor, pigeon bones, spent shells, a dried rose crumbling beneath her fingers.

'Zora! Are you there?'

Knocking. It is knocking she has been hearing.

## *Twelve*

The colours of the tree had started to fade and trails of damp, where the rain and sleet had worked their way into the cracks and crevices, hung from its branches, dribbling down the smoke-blackened walls. Icy vines and lianas reached down to brush against the raised roots. The bright reds, purples, greens and blues of the leaves had lost their former intensity. Everything was becoming undifferentiated; a uniform cigar-brown like the wallpaper in Vesna and Dragomir's dining room.

Zora, waking that morning in a good mood, felt it was time to restore the tree.

Lenka, the last time she had visited, had brought a tin of white house paint and several tubes of children's poster paints in bright primary and secondary colours that she had picked up in a market on the other side of the siege. She went there quite often with the Colonel and, although prices were still high, there was always a wider range of things on sale there than in Sarajevo. Zora prised open the tin and set about mixing colours, while Mirsad, caught up in Zora's enthusiasm, brought a stepladder through from his flat and called on Milka to bring Una round when she was ready.

It could not have been more different from painting in the summer, when her flat had been a roasting cave and Zora and Una had painted in shorts and t-shirts. Now, coated and scarfed, Mirsad and Zora, breath coming out in short, ragged puffs, scrubbed the unpainted sections of the wall with melted snow and vinegar to remove the smoke stains, fingers red and throbbing. The paint in the tin was clotted with cold. It shrank away from the sections of wall that glittered with ice and, where it took, Zora knew it would need days to dry.

Una burst in, Milka just behind.

'Zora, Zora!' she said, panting. It was clear she had just run up the stairs. Milka, too, flushed, the colour of strawberries spreading across each cheek, was bending over to catch her breath, black hair, like her daughter's, falling over her face.

'What on earth is it?' Zora said, and Milka waved to Una, who came towards Zora and, with a flourish, presented her with a folded slip of yellow note paper.

'What's this?'

'A TV lady gave it to us!' Una said.

Zora looked at Milka, puzzled.

'She means a foreigner,' Milka said, straightening up. 'She gets them confused: she thinks foreigners and TV journalists are the same thing.'

Mirsad gave a laugh.

'We were just coming back from getting some water, when a jeep drew up alongside us, the window wound down and a lady, American, I think, leant out-'

But Zora, impatient, was opening the message. It was hand written on a sheet of lined yellow A4 paper. Wide, looped blue handwriting like a teenage girl's – she would not have been surprised to see circles instead of dots floating, balloon-like, above the 'i's – relayed in a brisk, official format:

*FAO: Mrs Zora Buka.*

*Telephone message from: Mr Stephen Briars.*

*Date: 10 Jan 1993.*

*Time: 11.26.*

*Just arrived at BBC centre outside Sarajevo. Coming into city first thing tomorrow morning. Leave immediately. Pack. Love Stephen.*

The words swam in and out of focus. Steadying her hands, which had started to tremble, she read the note again. It was in English: she was not quite certain if she had understood it.

‘What does it say?’ Una said.

Taking a breath, she read it a third time. Her son-in-law was outside Sarajevo. He was coming to pick her up the following morning. Is that what it meant? She turned the note over as if looking for further clues, but there were none. She held the note out to Mirsad.

He took it and read it aloud, Zora looking closely at his face to see how he responded. There was a silence, a drawn-out pause, and then Mirsad’s face was colouring, flushing deep purple, as if he were angry, but no, he was getting to his feet — he had been kneeling on the floor to paint the roots — and was coming towards Zora, saying, ‘This is great news!’ while Milka clapped her hands, and sighed, saying, ‘Thank God,’ she had been worried that it might have been something awful, and how incredible, how unexpected, and Una, eyes flashing, was jumping from foot to foot, tugging at her mother’s hand, and saying: ‘Tell me! Tell me what it says!’

But this was insane. How could Stephen be outside Sarajevo? And what did he have to do with the BBC? She felt a wave of nausea. The room was swaying, hands holding her.

Later, on the stepladder, heart beating fast, but her breath coming more regularly now, she focused on the pull of the brush across the branch, layering green onto faded red. She had wanted to continue painting. Mirsad was lying on the floor working on the roots, and Una, eyes bloated with crying, was standing on a chair, painting the leaves a brilliant sapphire blue. Milka had

wanted to take her home after the tantrum she had thrown when she found out what was happening, but Una had managed to calm herself. She wanted to stay and paint.

Zora glanced down at Mirsad and caught him looking at her, his face grey and taut.

‘You’ll be okay, won’t you?’ she said softly, and he nodded.

She could not take it in. She had given up believing that it was possible to leave. She would only believe it when she saw Stephen standing there outside her door, and then how would he get her out? What was his plan? ‘Leave immediately,’ the note said, so he must have something in place. ‘Do you want help packing?’ Milka had offered, but her case was still packed from before. She would just have to take a few things out and put a few things in, that was all.

And what about Samir? And Lenka? Both away. One up a mountain, the other at the airport. How could she leave without saying goodbye?

She had placed a candle on top of the stepladder and, as she reached up to paint the higher leaves, she had to tilt her neck so that the ceiling did not press against the top of her head. Shadows leapt over the walls, as she focused all her attention on the smallest details, adding depths of red and blue to the cluster of purple leaves up here. Was it Una who had painted these? Things were stirring up, opening inside her: faint traces of the past year were trembling. For so long the hunger and the cold had kept her locked into the present, and the fire in August was all that had seemed to exist in her memory: the night when she went up on the roof, her dressing gown blowing open around her, black butterflies alighting on her arms, her face, her hair. Layering burnt orange on to faded green, an odd memory of splashing in green waters came to her, but she shook it away. A woman’s clanging laughter was there wrapped up in the sound of her own breathing, which, pressed into this corner,

was coming out fast and shallow, bouncing back off the walls. Her thoughts reached forward to what might happen the following day and the day after, and, as if coming up against a wall in her mind, she realised, with a sense of panic, that she could not even picture the faces of her daughter and husband, let alone Dubravka's house in England. How would she ever fit into that world now?

But, still, she was going, though she could not believe it, would not believe it until it happened.

Mind spinning, she lay down her brush and took a step down the ladder, straightening her head, putting her hand on her chest to slow down her heart, to calm its fast pattering. Here. Here they were: the people she had grown close to. Mirsad, lying stretched out on the ground, patiently painting the roots. Una, red lower lip jutting out, as she painted a blue snail, it looked like, onto the trunk of the tree. They were what was real for her now.

Night fell, but the three of them carried on painting, mostly in silence, not wanting to bring this time to an end, Mirsad and Zora putting off the moment when they would have to say goodbye to Una, and Zora would have to pack. Mirsad lit the stove. He hoped Samir would bring some firewood with him when he came back because there was nothing at all left to burn now. His face, in the reflection of the flames, was pale and drawn and Zora wondered how they would bear the dark hours of the night that stretched ahead of them.

Her cheek was seizing up with cold. A thin stream of icy air was blowing in through a crack in the wall. They had stopped up most of the chinks with old socks and bits of newspaper, but turning to prod this one with the end of her paintbrush, she saw that the cloth stuffed into it had grown sodden with rainwater and slipped, leaving an opening no bigger than a pinprick.

'Pass up some paper, Una, will you?' she said, pointing to the copy of *Oslobođenje* Mirsad had bought the day before. 'Just one sheet will do.'



Una picked up the paper, tore off the back sheet and passed it up. As Zora crumpled it into a ball, a photo caught her eye. Oh, she thought, heart sinking for the boy's parents, such a likeness to Samir. She caught her thought and stopped. Unfurled the paper and spread it out. Drawing it closer to the flame of her candle: columns of black boxes, tiny cramped text. Samir's photo when he was clean-shaven, in school uniform, stepped out from the other photos as if under a bright, white light.

Samir Halilović. Killed in action on 8th January 1993. Burial to be announced.

Her foot slipped from the ladder.

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'Coming,' she says, but splinters of pain are shooting up her frozen legs from her twisted ankle, and she stumbles, holding out a hand to the wall to steady herself. Something sharp and delicate – dried twigs or small bones, perhaps – cracks under her touch and she drops her candle. The knocking swells in volume.

'Coming,' she tries to call out again, but she cannot tell if she has spoken out loud or if the mere intention of doing so is echoing in her ears. Feeling her way now, she edges towards the door, the rustle of dead leaves beneath her fingers.

He has come back at last. She knew he would. If only he does not give up before she gets there. The shouting, the tears, the clinging to one another, she begging him not to go – or to let her go with him – come back to her now: a dark clot of emotion where nothing is distinct but the pain. Why had he let her

spend the night alone? Una, face white with shock, had been standing nearby, back pressed to the wall. 'I'll be back in a few hours,' he had said, pushing the book of stories into her hand.

Her fingers are fumbling with the chain. The knocking on the other side has stopped and she knows he has heard her and is waiting. She can hear him breathing. The ghosts of her long night mill behind her in the murky half-light of her flat at dawn – the dwarf woman and her sons, the huge guard with the hooked nose, dear old Eso, the Goat's Bridge – and she wants to press herself to him and tell him all she has remembered, before she forgets it again.

Something awful happened. The newspaper, the fall. Her thoughts will not go there, repelled like water from mercury.

The bolt gives at last and the door opens and there he is: a bulky figure in a long coat, several scarves wrapped round his neck, a skiing hat pulled down low over his ears. A torch, held in one hand, spills a pool of light onto the concrete floor of the corridor.

'Mirsad?' she says, but there has been some mistake, because the man is looking at her as if he does not know her, his head jerking back in surprise, and she realises that this is not Mirsad: he is taller, does not wear glasses, looks nothing like him. A different man altogether. For a long moment, they stare at each other, confusion and shock mirrored in the other's eyes.

'Zora?' he says, with a crack in his voice. 'My God.'

He is speaking English. His pockmarked cheeks grow ruddier as a flush charges into them. He opens his arms and draws her to him, crushing her against what feels like a bulletproof vest.

'Zora,' he says again, drawing back, holding her shoulders gently, his eyes wet with tears. 'Are you all right? Did you get my message?'

She looks at him blankly. Then, a chink opens in her memory and she sees herself opening a folded piece of yellow notepaper, and later, packing in a

frenzy, hardly knowing what was going into her case. He has come. She cannot believe he has come.

‘Stephen,’ she says.

The sight of her has shocked him, she can see it in his eyes. She has lost so much weight that her clothes sag and flap around her, and her undyed hair spills haywire over her shoulders. She puts a hand up to stroke his cheek, her lips cracking.

He offers her coffee from a flask and chocolate from a large bar in a purple wrapper. ‘Have you packed?’ he says. ‘We have to leave straight away, I’m afraid. In a bit of a hurry.’

He comes into her flat, recoiling, for a second, as the stink of the place hits him. Zora, waiting limply by the door, looks down. The beam of his flashlight is everywhere, taking in the strange artwork on the walls, the icicles, the squalor of the place. ‘My God,’ he says again.

‘Your things?’ he says, and she points to the living room. She wonders what he will make of the tree spreading its branches across the cracked walls and the ceiling, and the heaped up covers on the mattress.

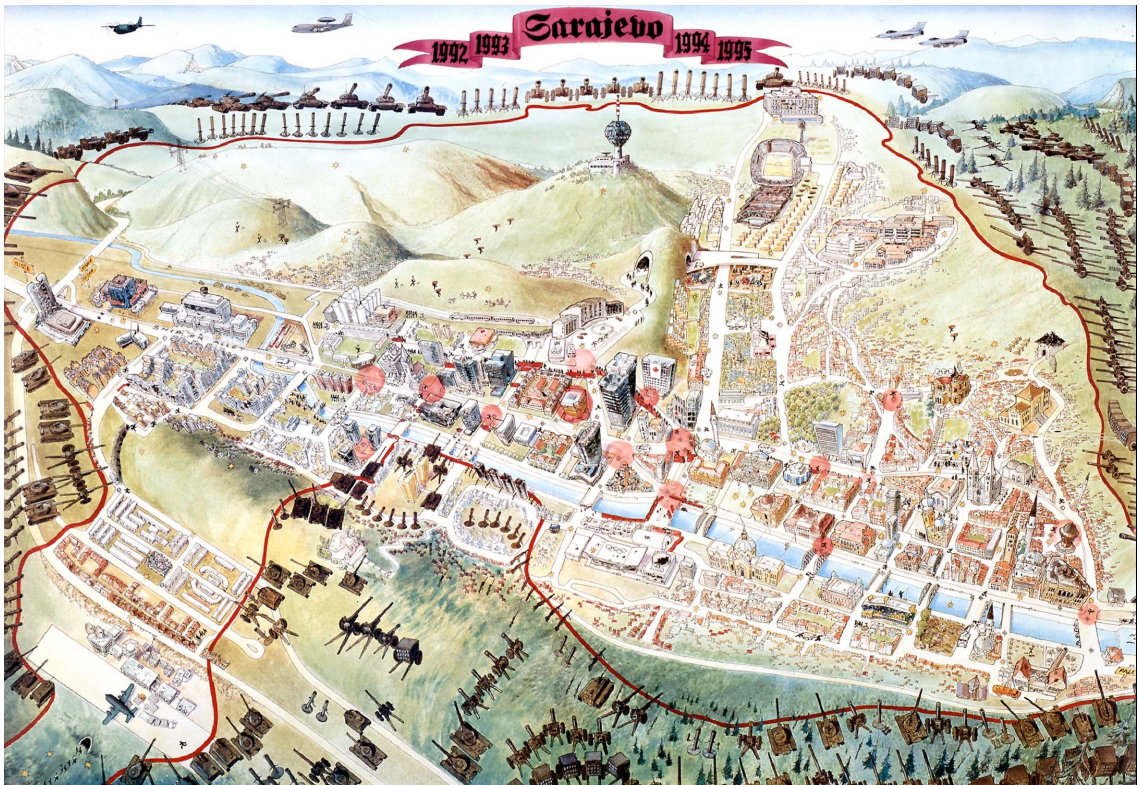
But he has come. He is here. She puts a piece of chocolate in her mouth, sweetness exploding.

‘Wait here,’ he says at the door. What else has she been doing all this time? He takes her suitcase down and comes back up. When he does, she is standing in the corridor outside another door, leaving keys under the doormat.

She gives a nod and they are leaving. She does not look back. He half-walks, half-carries her down the stairs.

## AFTERWORD

### The Siege of Sarajevo



1

The siege of Sarajevo, which lasted almost four years from 6 April 1992 to 29 February 1996, was the longest siege in the history of modern warfare.<sup>2</sup> The aggressors in the hills were nationalist Bosnian Serbs while the besieged

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<sup>1</sup> The map was designed by Suada Kapić, FAMA publishing, Sarajevo. <<http://strangemaps.wordpress.com/2007/10/17/182-sarajevo-siege-map/>> [accessed 10 January 2014]

<sup>2</sup> Laura Sibling and Allan Little, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, rev. edn (London: Penguin Group and BBC Worldwide, 1995), p. 369.

population was mixed: Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats were trapped in their hometown and subjected to constant shelling and sniper fire. The head Post Office, which housed the telephone exchange, was shelled in the first month of the siege, severing telephonic and postal communication to the outside world. Power supplies were cut and the population of four hundred thousand was left with no heating in winters of minus twenty and only sporadic water and electricity. Sarajevans depended on UN humanitarian aid to survive: food and medicine were flown into the UN-controlled airport from June 1992. Within the first year of the siege, Sarajevo had been stripped of its trees, which were cut down for firewood, and depleted of its pigeons, which were trapped and eaten.

In as simple terms as possible, the siege started after Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from the Serb-dominated 'rump' Yugoslavia, which in April 1992, consisted of just Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>3</sup> Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia had seceded in 1991. Bosnian Serb nationalists wanted to divide Sarajevo, with one part for Serbs and the other for non-Serbs. The Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić talked of the need to run a 'Berlin Wall' through the heart of the ethnically-mixed city.<sup>4</sup> The defending Bosnian government, led by Muslim president, Alija Izetbegović, with representatives from all three ethno-nationalities, wanted an undivided, multicultural Sarajevo and Bosnia. Many Bosnian Serbs, however, feared that the Bosnian government's talk of multiculturalism was a smokescreen, designed to appeal to the international press and politicians, which masked the intention of creating an Islamic state. Serbs in Serbia believed that 'Muslim fundamentalists' and 'Croat fascists' were the real aggressors in Bosnia.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 238.

<sup>4</sup> Sibling and Allan, p. 232.

<sup>5</sup> Sibling and Allan, p. 263.

While around Sarajevo and in Eastern Bosnia the fighting was mainly between Serbs and Muslims, in western Herzegovina it was between Croats and Muslims. Both Serbs and Croats embarked on programmes of 'ethnic-cleansing', with the initial aim of carving Bosnia up between the nations of Serbia and Croatia, which would have left Bosnia's two million Muslims – roughly half of Bosnia's population – as second class citizens.<sup>6</sup>

A UN-imposed arms embargo on all countries of the former Yugoslavia meant that the Bosnian army, made up of all three nationalities, though predominated by Bosnian Muslims, had very few weapons with which to break through the siege.<sup>7</sup> The Bosnian Serbs, by contrast, had a vast array of weapons at their disposal – handed over by the Yugoslav National Army when it had officially retreated from the siege in the first few months – but far inferior manpower.<sup>8</sup> This produced a lengthy stalemate which was only broken with eventual UN intervention when NATO bombed Serb positions in August and September 1995. Many commentators and Western intellectuals, including Susan Sontag, called for a military response from the West long before it happened, pointing out that by not lifting the arms embargo and not intervening, the West was colluding with the aggressors and maintaining the daily massacres.<sup>9</sup>

The much commented on sadness and irony of the situation was that Bosnia had been held up for decades as an example of the European ideals of

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<sup>6</sup> Sibling and Allan, p. 254 and p. 387.

<sup>7</sup> Sibling and Allan, p. 243.

<sup>8</sup> The withdrawal of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) was only cosmetic as nine tenths of the JNA soldiers stationed in Bosnia in 1992 were Bosnian-born, predominantly Bosnian Serb. They remained in Bosnia and continued to fight against the Bosnian Army. Robert J. Donia, *Sarajevo: A Biography* (London: Hurst, 2006), p. 293.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm sees the refusal to lift the arms embargo as 'the biggest single contribution by the West to the destruction of Bosnia', p. 242; Sontag aligned herself firmly with a call for intervention: Sontag, p. 87.

unity and multiculturalism.<sup>10</sup> Sarajevo, whose main mosques, Catholic cathedral, Serbian Orthodox churches and synagogue were all within a stone's throw of each other, had been seen as the epitome of pluralism. The continuing sadness is that the 1995 Dayton Agreement, which halted the war, agreed the separation of Bosnia and Herzegovina into two political 'entities': the Republika Srpska for Serbs and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Muslims and Croats, and thus institutionalised many of the ethnic divisions brought about by the violence. Bosnia and Herzegovina today is still very much a divided country, overwhelmingly dominated by three nationalist parties which are repeatedly re-elected.<sup>11</sup>

### Background to the Novel

My mother is a Bosnian Serb from Sarajevo, though she left in 1968, long before the 1992-1996 war. She studied in Paris and then worked in London, where she met and married my father. As a family, we drove across Europe every other summer to spend time with my grandparents in their Sarajevo flat and their cottage in the mountains. Many of my earliest memories are woven into *The Painter of Bridges*: walking down the chestnut-tree-lined avenue to splash in the green waters of the Bosna at Ilidža; the cobbled streets of the Baščaršija, spicy with the smell of grilling *ćevapčići*; the cool, concrete corridors of my grandparents' tower block and the homely embrace of their flat, rugs and paintings covering every inch of wall.

When war broke out, my grandparents, along with most of my mother's relatives, were trapped in Sarajevo. Just after New Year's Eve 1992, my father

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<sup>10</sup> David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (London: SCM, 2001), p. xiii; Sontag, p. 101; specific to Sarajevo: Donia, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup>Donia, p. 335, p. 352.

bought a bullet-proof vest, borrowed a press pass and spent three weeks in the freezing city arranging to evacuate my mother's parents. They had lived through nine months of the siege and arrived in England weak and in a state of shock. I was nineteen and away most of that year, travelling and working before university. My father wrote up a diary-style account of his trip to Sarajevo for *The Times* and sent a copy to where I was teaching in Nepal. I remember staring at the black-and-white photo of my smiling mother sandwiched between her shaken parents on the sofa in our living room back home. Underneath, a smaller photo showed men in leather jackets with turned-up collars, shivering around a sawn-down tree in a snow-covered city park. They were bartering over firewood. The caption read: 'Fire drill: everywhere in Sarajevo trees are being cut down for fuel. Logs sell for £32 a sack.'<sup>12</sup> The article grew limp in the Nepalese heat. I could not connect the pictures, and what I was reading, with my family – or with my idealised memories of Sarajevo.

What was happening to the multicultural city I loved and thought I knew? What would happen to my mother's Muslim relatives who stayed behind in the siege?

When I got back to England, our house had become a refuge for cousins, aunts and uncles who had fled the war in Bosnia and the heavy sanctions in Serbia. They were underweight and nervous, chain-smoking furiously in every corner of the house, it seemed to me. My mother, increasingly angry with how the war was being reported, had started to call herself a Serb, for the first time, instead of a Yugoslav. I spent very little time at home before going to university, although enough to have several arguments with her over her newly nationalist views. Of course, like most people, I understood next to nothing of what was going on in Bosnia. Was it a civil war or a one-sided aggression? Were

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<sup>12</sup> Morris, Tim, 'How Zlata and Vojin escaped Sarajevo', *The Times*, 19 February 1993, p. 12.



concentration and ethnic rape camps really appearing in a country whose slogan had, until very recently, been 'Brotherhood and Unity'?

My childhood memories and my father's rescue of my grandparents – which Stephen's rescue of Zora is closely modelled on – have both found their way into the novel, but it is my great-uncle's story, which I first heard at my grandfather's funeral a few years after his arrival in England, that has been the main source of inspiration for *The Painter of Bridges*. Its narrative of loss and reconnection – I hesitate to use my great-uncle's term 'rebirth' – is powerful; and it has provided me with a framework through which to explore some of my nineteen-year-old self's confusion about the war, and to try to alleviate some of the painful emotions that attach to that time.

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My great-uncle Dobrivoje Beljkašić – or Dobri, for short – was a respected landscape painter in the former Yugoslavia. In Sarajevo he was known as 'the painter of bridges' as his most well-known paintings were of the beautiful Ottoman bridges that span Bosnia's many rivers. He taught at the Sarajevo Academy of Arts and had a studio on the top floor of the old Town Hall, which housed the National and University Library on its lower floors.

He was sixty-eight when the war began. On 26 August 1992, five months into the siege, the old Town Hall was bombarded with incendiary shells. The fire, which destroyed over a million books in a night, devoured his studio: his life's work went up in flames. When he visited the smouldering building three days later, he announced to his wife, Gordana: 'That's it. Dobrivoje Beljkašić is dead.'

Both of them were convinced he would never paint again.

‘I was certainly under shock, you know,’ Dobri says, in a short HTV documentary about his loss. ‘And this shock provoked in my soul some reaction to do nothing, only to survive, if possible. It was shelling, gunfire, snipers, day and night. You could never be sure you won’t be shot or killed. It was tragedy.’<sup>13</sup>

Dobri, his wife and his critically ill mother managed to leave Sarajevo on the last Red Cross Convoy out of the city in November of that year. Their plan was to go to England, where their only child, Dragana, lived with her English husband, but during the forty-eight-hour coach journey to Belgrade, their temporary UK visas were revoked. Dobri’s mother died shortly after the long trip and Dobri and Gordana had to spend the next six weeks without money – their Bosnian bank accounts having been frozen – in the sanctioned Serb capital. In England, Dragana pleaded daily with the Home Office to reissue her parents with visas. She was eventually successful and Dobri and Gordana arrived at Heathrow on New Year’s Eve, 1992.

Initially, they stayed with some friends in Wiltshire. Later they moved to Bristol where Dragana and her husband lived. They were gaunt and exhausted. Used to the constant sound of shells exploding, they jumped every time the door slammed. Dobri, in particular, was depressed, as they both waited anxiously to see if their asylum application would be accepted.<sup>14</sup>

It was only when they were granted refugee status the following year that Dobri started to paint again. He talks of a reconnection with nature – of finding inspiration in the Avebury Stone Circle in Wiltshire and in Cheddar Gorge in Somerset. His first painting was ‘Wiltshire on a Windy Day’ and the next was of a lady with flowing, red hair, who symbolised hope, floating over

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<sup>13</sup> Leaving Sarajevo, *Frieze Frame*, HTV, 20 February 1997.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 1 for an abridged version of their asylum application.

the sea near Dubrovnik. At the age of nearly seventy, my great-uncle, having thought he would never pick up a brush again, began to paint with prolific urgency. He painted both English and Bosnian landscapes, re-painting from memory many of the artworks he had lost in the fire.

‘When I started to recover, I was like a newborn baby,’ he says. ‘I saw the world all round me like something new.’<sup>15</sup>

Since then, he has done very well, exhibiting his work in Bath and Bristol. He is the oldest member of a prestigious West of England arts club and continues to paint and exhibit at the age of ninety.

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Leaving Sarajevo’.

**CRITICAL PAPER**

The Figure of the Siege and the Refugee  
in a Selection of Twentieth-Century Siege-Exile  
Literature

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### The Siege and the Refugee

In Nenad Veličković's excellent Sarajevo novel, *Lodgers*, Maja, the teenage protagonist, has an epiphany about the nature of life under siege while waiting in line for water:

After that I listened to the people in the queue for a bit. Some were silent and looked straight ahead; they had not yet begun to believe that all this had happened to them and that here they were, at the end of the twentieth century, in the middle of a city in the middle of Europe, standing, waiting to pour a little water from a rubber tube into plastic containers.

[...] As though I had suddenly woken up, I stood and saw that I, too, was a refugee. This is how, sooner or later, everyone will finally wake up.<sup>16</sup>

This realisation comes during one of Maja's rare ventures out from the museum that her family has moved into, since their flat was shelled at the beginning of the siege. The smouldering, 'red-hot walls' of the recently bombarded old Town Hall are only a few streets away from the water point, and, glancing around at the people waiting next to her, Maja understands that they have become refugees in their own city. Not only must they queue for water and bread as if

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<sup>16</sup> Nenad Veličković, *The Lodgers*, trans. by Celia Hawkesworth (London: Brandon, 2006) pp. 162-63.

living in a refugee camp, but they have also, in a sense, been expelled from Sarajevo: their city – the shelled, fire-damaged buildings and the dangerous streets where they are targets for snipers – is no longer their home. They have become lodgers or, as Maja expresses it here, refugees. Evicted and marginalised, they remain, nonetheless, trapped inside their hometown by the circle of tanks and artillery that keeps them pinned in place. Stripped of their rights, their lives have become precarious and transitory, characterised by endless daily, waiting: both for water and bread – and for the siege to end and normal life to resume. The link between life under siege and being a refugee, though perhaps not immediately apparent, is thus made clear by this pivotal moment in *Lodgers*.

This critical project takes the ‘figures’ of the siege and the refugee as organising topics through which to offer close readings of three war-related, literary texts – two novels and one play – as well as making frequent use of a thinker, Giorgio Agamben, whose understanding of modernity centres around the state of siege and the marginalised figure of the refugee. Albert Camus’s allegorical siege novel, *The Plague* (1947), which, on one level, is about the Nazi occupation of France, frequently posits a connection between living under siege and living in exile.<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag’s 1993 production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1949) in Sarajevo under siege invites a reading of the play which emphasises the abandoned, refugee-like status of Vladimir and Estragon by aligning them with the besieged citizens of Sarajevo.<sup>18</sup> Slavenka Drakulić’s novel about Bosnia, *As If I Am Not There* (1999), charts how war turns a young woman from Sarajevo into a refugee, from the moment she is taken by a soldier

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<sup>17</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Robin Buss (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 53, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘*Waiting for Godot*: revised text’, in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, ed. by Dougal McMillan and James Knowlson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); Susan Sontag, ‘Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 16.2 (May 1994), 87-106.

to a rape camp, to her transfer to a refugee camp, to her final relocation to Sweden.<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of Western political life, meanwhile, takes the legal state of siege or exception as its starting point and has, as its 'protagonist', the liminal figure of *homo sacer*, which is his umbrella term for all excluded persons from refugees to concentration camp internees to those living in a state of emergency. His use of the term *homo sacer* thus encompasses the figures of the besieged citizen and the refugee, echoing the connection made by fifteen-year-old Maja in *Lodgers*, and underscoring the link between siege and exile intimated in the three literary texts I look at.

Before turning to the primary literary and theoretical texts in the following chapters, the rest of this introduction considers the theme of the siege in recent literature. It asks: what are some of the defining characteristics of the post-war siege novel? And, how does siege writing distinguish itself from other forms of war writing? I explore these questions with particular reference to four siege novels in order to introduce and contextualise the main areas of discussion that inform this critical project.

### The Siege in Post-War Literature

'SIEGE, a sitting down, with an army, before a fortified place, in order to take it.'<sup>20</sup>

The word 'siege' comes, via the Old French *sege*, or *siege*, meaning a seat or throne, from the Latin *sedere* meaning to sit.<sup>21</sup> To besiege a people is an act of war which entails trapping a population within the walls of its own town,

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<sup>19</sup> Slavenka Drakulić, *As If I Am Not There: A Novel about the Balkans*, trans. by Marko Ivić (London: Abacus, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Walter W. Skeat, *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, (London: Oxford University Press, impression of 1961), p. 561.

<sup>21</sup> Skeat, p. 561.

cutting off vital supplies such as food, water, medicine and fuel, and the use of low-intensity attacks. The aim is to break down resistance as much through starvation, thirst, disease and the extremes of temperature as through assault and bombardment. It is a slow, largely passive form of aggression which involves the assailants 'sitting down' in front of the city and waiting for the attacked to surrender, while the besieged are able to do little but sit and wait for external help, or death, to arrive.

Since Homer consecrated the siege of Troy in the verses of the *Iliad* at the beginning of Western literature, through to the flourishing of historical, religious and allegorical siege writing during the middle ages, the siege has long been a powerful literary muse. We could think of Chaucer's tragic love story *Troilus and Criseyde* (mid 1380s), also set during the siege of Troy; the anonymous epic poem, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, written during the latter half of the fourteenth century about the siege in 70 AD; Nevill's allegory of the body and soul being set upon by sins in *The Castle of Pleasure* (1518); or the siege of the castle of Alma in Book II, Canto ix of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96).<sup>22</sup> The siege was the predominant form of medieval warfare, accounting for ninety-nine percent of all battles in the middle ages, and so its prevalence in the literature of that age is not surprising.<sup>23</sup> Yet even with its decline linked to the development of mobile warfare in the modern era, writers have continued to be drawn to the blockaded town. In the nineteenth century, Gustave Flaubert set his historical novel *Salammbô* (1862) in Carthage in the third century BC.<sup>24</sup> In more recent times, authors as diverse as Albert Camus (1947), Ismail Kadare

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<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Malcolm Hebron's *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) for this very brief selection of medieval siege literature.

<sup>23</sup> Jim Bradbury, *The Medieval Siege* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1992), p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Salammbô*, trans. by A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1977).



(1970), J.G. Farrell (1973), José Saramago (1989), Juan Goytisolo (1995) and Helen Dunmore (2001) have all written siege novels.<sup>25</sup>

We will consider the novels by Camus, Kadare, Farrell and Dunmore, which differ widely in genre and tone, but which all converge in being structured around the duration of a siege, to attempt to identify the defining characteristics of the post-war siege novel. We will consider what sets the siege novel apart from the war novel, of which it may be considered a distinct subtype. My suggestion is that the post-war literary siege novel has been as much, if not more, interested in portraying the conditions of life under siege as the military aspects of defence and assault. The isolated, beleaguered community and the state of siege seems to have become one of the main focuses of interest for literary siege novels with the decline of the military siege.

Camus's *The Plague* (1947) describes what happens when an anachronistic outburst of the bubonic plague quarantines the town of Oran in French Algeria in the 1940s. Called *State of Siege* for its stage adaptation, and most often read as an allegory of France under the Vichy regime, the plague may be taken, on one level, to represent a fascist occupation. Its effects on the townspeople of Oran – their isolation, the halting of normal life, the restrictions on their movements, and the multiplying death toll – parallel those of a siege so closely, that *The Plague* can convincingly be read as a siege novel. It is narrated from the perspective of the colonial French trapped in Oran. Kadare's *The Siege* (1970) charts the progress of a fifteenth-century Ottoman siege of an Albanian fortress. It is narrated primarily from the point of view of the Turkish aggressors, though the voices of the trapped Albanians are heard fleetingly in the unnumbered, italicised interchapters. Although it is based on the

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<sup>25</sup> *The Plague*; Ismail Kadare, *The Siege*, trans. by David Bellos from trans. by Jusuf Vrioni (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008); J.G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (London: Phoenix, 1973); José Saramago, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, trans. by Giovanni Pontiero (London: Random House, 2011); Juan Goytisolo, *State of Siege*, trans. by Helen Lane (London: Serpent's Tail, 2003); Helen Dunmore, *The Siege* (London: Penguin, 2001).

unsuccessful siege of Shkodër in 1474 – a last moment of Albanian resistance before the region fell to the Ottomans for the next five centuries – there are enough references to twentieth-century bureaucracy and career-building in the novel for Kadare’s translator to suggest that the work functions as a veiled critique of the isolated, siege-like state of communist Albania in the 1970s.<sup>26</sup> Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) is a fictionalised account of the siege of Lucknow during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, told from the point of view of the starving British colonials who are trapped in their Residency for three and a half months by Indian Muslims. The historical novel has a distinctive, blackly comic, ironic tone which exposes and ridicules the Victorian values of the besieged. Binns, arguably Farrell’s most perceptive critic, has described *The Siege of Krishnapur* as ‘a kind of pastiche Victorian novel’, and notes that it examines a key moment of loss of self-confidence in the British Empire.<sup>27</sup> Dunmore’s *The Siege* (2001) depicts the first year of the Nazi Siege of Leningrad, where a conservative estimate of over six hundred thousand civilians and soldiers lost their lives through starvation and bombardment.<sup>28</sup> We see the siege mainly through the eyes of a young Russian artist, mother and trench digger, Anna. It is the most straightforwardly historical of the siege novels I look at and perhaps the most relentlessly harrowing. In contrast with the other siege novels, it presents a predominantly female, civilian viewpoint of the siege, rather than

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<sup>26</sup> David Bellos, ‘On Translating Ismail Kadare’, *Translation Review*, 76:1 (2008), 17-22 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2008.10523977>> p. 19; David Bellos, ‘Afterword’, in Kadare, pp. 324-28. For comment on the political, allegorical nature of Kadare’s oeuvre, in general, see Rebecca Gould, ‘Allegory and the Critique of Sovereignty: Ismail Kadare’s Political Theologies’, *Studies in the Novel*, 44, 2 (Summer 2012), 208-230; Robert Elsie, ‘Albanian Literature in the English-Speaking World’, *Translation Review*, 76:1 (2008), 1-10, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2008.10523975>>, p.4. On the extremely repressed, siege-like state of Albania during Enver Hoxha’s communist regime, see Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1995), p. viii.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Binns, *J.G.Farrell* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 65, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> David Glantz, *The Siege of Leningrad 1941–44: 900 Days of Terror* (Osceola: Zenith Press, 2001), p. 179.

that of a siege commander or an organiser of the resistance, and focuses more on the family unit than the collective besieged community.

The four post-war siege novels I have selected to analyse all follow a straightforward, linear narrative: their structure is dictated by the chronological events of the siege. Despite their broad differences in style and genre, ranging from political allegory of the present day, to a mixture of pastiche and historical fiction, to pure historical fiction, we will see that the theme of the siege imposes a remarkable degree of featural and structural unity on the novels.

### **i) Characteristics of Siege Novels**

The opening pages of siege novels often give a visual approach to the city about to be attacked, describing the surrounding landscape in exotic, poetic detail. Krishnapur is found in a vast, mesmerising, heat-distorted Indian plain; Kadare's citadel rises from a Balkan plain fringed by hostile mountains; a network of ice-floes surround Leningrad. Camus's Oran, a 'town without pigeons, without trees or gardens', is described primarily from within the city walls, although we are told that it is set in the 'midst of a bare plain surrounded by luminous hills' with its 'back' to the sea.<sup>29</sup> The reader thus gains a geographical sense of the surrounding region, from which the town's citizens will soon be annexed, and is, for a moment, aligned with the approaching army: the city is established as the object that is to be possessed during the siege and also the reading of the novel. The emptiness of the surrounding landscape focuses attention inwards on the town and anticipates the state of exile its inhabitants are about to endure.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Farrell, p. 9; Dunmore, p. 1; Kadare, p. 4. *The Plague*, p. 5, p. 7

<sup>30</sup> Binns, p. 68.

The sweep of the seasons is also given in the opening pages of the four siege novels looked at here, which establishes a sense of the passing of time and prepares the reader for the lengthy duration of the imminent siege. The extremity of the local weather is often emphasised (the monsoon rains in Krishnapur, the unbearable heat in Oran, the below-freezing winters in Leningrad), foreshadowing the exposure to the elements that the siege will bring.<sup>31</sup>

Strikingly, dust is mentioned in the first few pages of all four novels: a sign of the coming disturbance in the 'yellowish cloud' kicked up by the hooves of the horses of the approaching army (Kadare) and a harbinger of the death and the rendering to rubble of the bricks and stones of the city that is to come (all the novels). Dust lies ominously on the Ottomans as they set up camp around the Albanian citadel, a 'dusty wind' blows through the streets of Leningrad, while 'grey powder' coats the sun-baked walls of Oran and 'whirlwinds of dust' dance in Krishnapur.<sup>32</sup> The reader enters the novel through a thick veil of dust, which marks a separation between 'normal' life and its impending, theatrical overthrow.

A brief exposition of 'normal' life may be given, as in Camus's and Dunmore's novels, which is soon disturbed by the first signs of trouble: the stacks of chapatis that are left in odd places in the Residency in Krishnapur, and the dead rats that pile up in the streets of Oran. A sense of threat begins to accumulate, which is intensified by a collective refusal to believe in, and often name, the coming danger. Frequently, the first warnings of things being amiss are brushed aside: both chapatis and rats are dismissed as a 'practical joke'.<sup>33</sup> In Dunmore's novel, the possibility of war, referred to only as 'the situation', is

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<sup>31</sup> Farrell, p. 10.; *The Plague*, p. 5; Dunmore, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Kadare, p. 4, p. 5; Dunmore, p. 1; *The Plague*, p. 5; Farrell, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Farrell, p. 11; *The Plague*, p. 10.

rejected, while in Camus's allegory the plague is denied several times, the name of the illness being carefully avoided. One of Rieux's doctor colleagues bursts out: "It's impossible, everyone knows it has vanished from the West."<sup>34</sup>

Eventually, however, the terror is acknowledged and the town is blockaded or quarantined. In Camus's novel, Part One ends with Rieux reading the words of an official telegram:

'DECLARE A STATE OF PLAGUE STOP  
CLOSE THE TOWN.'<sup>35</sup>

The townspeople are now trapped within the walls of their town and everyday commerce and freedom of movement is stopped, or severely restricted. One of the primary effects of a siege is to halt 'normal' life and, from this point on, the besieged community enters a protracted and steadily worsening 'limit situation'.

Siege novels tend to be inherently dramatic in form – *The Plague* follows the five-part structure of classic Greek tragedy – and the tension increases with the worsening stages of the assault.<sup>36</sup> Discomfort is created by the emphasis on the town's isolation and imprisonment which sometimes increases throughout the novel – the sense of intense separation from the rest of the world during the 'long period of exile' is frequently commented on in *The Plague*, while in *The Siege of Krishnapur* the British are forced into an ever smaller space in the Residency by the advancing Indian 'natives'.<sup>37</sup> Details of the military strategies of attack and defence, such as mining tunnels underneath the ramparts (Kadare and Farrell), catapulting disease-ridden rats into the city (Kadare) and the use

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<sup>34</sup> Dunmore, p. 34; *The Plague*, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> *The Plague*, p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret E., Gray, 'Layers of meaning in *La Peste*', in Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, pp. 165-77, (p. 171).

<sup>37</sup> *The Plague*, p. 53; Farrell, p. 298.

of a thirst-crazed horse to locate the underground aqueduct in order to cut off the water supply (Kadare), grow increasingly ingenious and far-fetched as the siege progresses, while the fighting scenes (Kadare and Farrell) grow ever more theatrical.<sup>38</sup>

The tension continues to escalate with the dwindling of vital supplies, which leads to starvation (Dunmore), extreme thirst (Kadare), and the spread of disease (Camus, Farrell).<sup>39</sup> Exponentially multiplying death tolls and scenes of increasingly harrowing horror – ‘dismembered body parts’ raining down on the assailants (Kadare), frozen corpses piled up outside cemetery gates (Dunmore), the dead thrown, without order, into mass graves (Camus) and starving skeletal survivors (Farrell) – lead the reader to a very dark, bloody place by the climax of all four siege novels.<sup>40</sup>

Dramatic tension and suffering thus increase until the moment of the final assault, which, sometimes together with a personal confrontation with death (Anna’s father’s death in Dunmore’s novel and Tarrou’s death in *The Plague*), forms the climax of all four siege novels. The reader knows the novel can have one of only two possible outcomes: the success or failure of the siege – the city either surrenders and is taken, or relief arrives and the aggressors retreat. The simplicity of this basic plot, which drives all narratives which take the unfolding of the events of a siege from beginning to end as their organising principle, gives the siege novel both its strong narrative line and its typically linear structure.

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<sup>38</sup> Military strategies: Kadare, p. 110, p. 280, p. 217; Farrell, p. 170. For theatrical fighting scenes, see, in particular, Chapters 4 and 14 of Kadare’s novel, where the fighting is accompanied by the steady beating of the war drums, and Chapters 28-30 of Farrell’s novel, in which the final battle of the siege is presented as a performance. The Indian ‘spectators’ picnic on the plain outside the siege, watching, through ‘telescopes and opera-glasses’ as the English ‘skeletons’ defend themselves (p. 277).

<sup>39</sup> Dunmore, chapters 21 and 25, in particular; Kadare, p. 267; *The Plague*, throughout; Farrell, chapter 25.

<sup>40</sup> Kadare, p. 78; Dunmore, p. 221; *The Plague*, p. 135; Farrell, p. 308.

The four novels looked at here end in tempered victory for the besieged. A British relief force arrives in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, while the construction of the Ice Road allows food and fuel to come into the starving, frozen city of Leningrad.<sup>41</sup> More fortuitous, natural relief aids the other two towns: the pestilence seems simply to have run its course and spent itself, dropping back into the ground that it sprang from in Oran; and the arrival of the autumn rains alleviates and strengthens the water-deprived Albanians enough to repel the Ottomans' final attack.<sup>42</sup> Yet, the victory is blighted, or temporary, and the prevalent tone of all the novels, in their swift, closing pages, tends to be one of stunned, broken despair as the protagonists blink uncertainly at the changed world on the other side of side of their ordeal and great suffering. The blackly comic, ironic tone of *The Siege of Krishnapur* is abandoned in the final chapter and the siege commander of Krishnapur, the Collector, never regains his Victorian belief in progress and civilisation.<sup>43</sup> The siege will continue, albeit with less ferocity, for another year and a half in Leningrad. The reader knows that the retreating Ottomans will return and conquer the Albanian fortress the following sieging season – both from indications in the novel and from historical fact: Albania was colonised by the Ottoman empire for the next five hundred years.<sup>44</sup> The plague bacillus, we are told in the concluding words of Camus's novel, 'never dies or vanishes entirely', but will one day again 'rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city'.<sup>45</sup>

The literary siege novels studied here thus mix the classical styles of comedy and tragedy, ending both in victory and often collective celebration, as

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<sup>41</sup> Farrell, p. 307; Dunmore, p. 281.

<sup>42</sup> *The Plague*, Part V; Kadare, p. 315.

<sup>43</sup> Binns, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> Kadare, p. 287; Vickers, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> *The Plague*, pp. 237-38.

normal life is, at least, outwardly resumed, yet also in acute personal loss and the sense that full recovery and a return to pre-siege life is not possible. Furthermore, as the siege is suggested to have a cyclical nature through its charted rise, fall, and implied future rise again, siege novels, even those which are straightforwardly historical such as is Dunmore's *The Siege*, often acquire existential overtones.

## ii) Differences from Other Forms of War Writing

Siege writing distinguishes itself from other forms of war writing in four main respects: its urban setting, its focus on the isolated civilian community, the lengthy nature of the suffering inflicted and its potential for symbolism. While Kate McLoughlin emphasises the link between war and countryside, which she refers to as 'the ancient nexus between military expedition and open countryside', in her recent study of war literature, siege novels, by definition, are set in a town or city.<sup>46</sup> The *polis* is the focal point of the siege novel. It is violently disrupted by the siege and becomes its inverse, a sort of non-place which is no longer regulated by law or connected to the world.

Moreover, whereas soldiers (most frequently men) are often the main characters in other war novels, the line between civilian and defender is blurred in siege novels, where those trapped inside the battle zone include not only male soldiers, but also women, children and the elderly. Female civilians find themselves digging trenches in Dunmore's *The Siege*, while doctors and philosophers organise the resistance in *The Plague*. Siege novels can thus afford the novelist the opportunity to examine a specific civilian community in isolation as if under a microscope. The Victorian mindsets and values of the

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<sup>46</sup> Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 87.



colonial British are exposed and critiqued, as the siege advances, in *The Siege of Krishnapur*.<sup>47</sup> The soulless, commercial life of the 'entirely modern town' of Oran is held up for scrutiny, in *The Plague*, in a similar manner.<sup>48</sup>

The lengthy duration of the siege and the low-level intensity of the aggression in comparison with open battles are, as we have seen, among the main defining features of a siege. The suffering inflicted by a siege tends to be drawn-out – death by starvation, disease and thirst – rather than sudden and violent, as in other forms of war writing. Post-war siege novels that are narrated from the point of view of the besieged are often interested in examining life at the boundaries of human existence, where people are progressively deprived of basic necessities over a long period of time and must confront life-threatening circumstances on a daily basis. Siege novels are thus well-suited to the examination of extreme situations or 'limit situations' – situations which are beyond an individual's normal experience of life, and which are difficult, sometimes impossible, to comprehend and communicate to others.<sup>49</sup> *The Siege of Krishnapur*, *The Plague* and Dunmore's *The Siege* all depict what happens when a group of people experience such a limit situation for an extended period of time, and examine the related existential questions and ethical dilemmas, such as whether to stay and defend or save oneself and flee, that arise.<sup>50</sup>

Farrell once commented in an interview that the siege is: 'a microcosm of real life and [the] human condition – hostility all around you with the

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<sup>47</sup> Binns, pp. 65-66.

<sup>48</sup> *The Plague*, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> The concept of the 'limit situation' (sometimes 'boundary situation') was first expressed by Primo Levi in *If This Is a Man* and has been employed extensively in Holocaust studies. Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 225.

<sup>50</sup> This is Rambert's dilemma in *The Plague*, p. 82. He eventually decides to stay.

individual in a rather temporary shelter.<sup>51</sup> The analogy between the siege and life, in the sense that the fragile individual must defend him or herself from life's constant assaults until the inevitable victory of death, is one that is echoed in *The Plague* when the old asthmatic dryly comments of the plague – in other words, of the state of siege – that: 'It's life, that's all'.<sup>52</sup> Both novels have metaphysical overtones which arise from the symbolic potential of the besieged town, where the walled town comes to represent the individual self set upon by aggressive, external forces.

In *The Medieval Siege: Theme and Image in Middle English Romance*, which, to my knowledge, is the only existing study of the siege in literature, Malcolm Hebron observes that the siege's 'central element of a definite, enclosed space which is assailed and defended' has far greater symbolic potential than other images of war, such as open battle.<sup>53</sup> He points out that in crusade writing, the besieged town commonly represents an embattled nation or religious faith, while, in the religious allegories of the Middle Ages, such as William Nevill's *The Castle of Pleasure* (1518), the siege frequently stands for the soul or self set upon by sin or temptation. Hebron interestingly suggests that the Western concept of the private self developed in tandem with siege writing. In medieval romantic allegories, finally, such as Guillaume de Lorris and Jeun de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* (1230-1275), the castle often comes to signify the beloved whose defences a suitor must break down.<sup>54</sup>

Traces of the three strands of symbolism are present in the twentieth-century siege novels looked at here. In an inversion of the conquered, feminised castle of romantic siege writing, the citadel in *Kadare's The Siege* comes to the

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<sup>51</sup> Malcolm Dean, 'An Insight Job', *Guardian*, 1 September 1973, cited in Binns, p. 18 (Binns' italics removed).

<sup>52</sup> *The Plague*, p. 236.

<sup>53</sup> Hebron, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Hebron, p. 2, p. 149, p. 164, p. 1.

Ottoman siege commander as ‘a difficult woman’ during the failed, final assault: ‘her walls, towers, gates, limbs and eyes obsessed him, but they slipped through his fingers and got him in their grip in the end, so as to strangle him.’<sup>55</sup> The quarantined, walled town of Oran can be read to take on similar metaphysical overtones to medieval siege allegories, where it represents the self beleaguered by the trials of life – although now the focus shifts from a depiction of the soul, in religious terms, to that of the human condition, from an existential standpoint.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the isolated community frequently stands for the larger political whole: a nation (the isolated state of contemporary communist Albania in Kadare’s novel; occupied France in Camus’s novel), an Empire (the British at the peak of their colonial confidence in *The Siege of Krishnapur*), or an entire economic order (Western liberal capitalism, which is suggested by the soulless, commercial nature of Oran in *The Plague*, as LeBlanc and Jones contend.)<sup>57</sup>

The siege is therefore a powerful literary trope that enables and performs certain types of thinking about how national, religious and political identities, as well as concepts of the self, are forged. The resonance and power of the figurative siege stems, I suggest, from the structural relation between inner and outer that it sets up, which is both easy to grasp on a visual level, yet complex to express. The striking image of the enclosed, walled town that is attacked from without posits an inside that is contained within and yet is excluded from an outside, which threatens to subsume and destroy it. Both warring parts, inner and outer, may come together to form an interrelated whole. The figure of the siege is thus easily grasped on one level but can give rise to complex levels

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<sup>55</sup> Kadare, p. 306.

<sup>56</sup> See Robert C. Solomon, ‘Facing Death Together: Camus’s *The Plague*’, in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. by Garry L. Hagberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) for such an existential reading.

<sup>57</sup> Randolph LeBlanc and Carolyn M. Jones, ‘Space/Place and Home: Prefiguring Contemporary Political and Religious Discourse in Albert Camus’s *The Plague*’, in *Albert Camus*, ed. by Steven G. Kellman (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2012), pp. 210-30 (p. 208, p. 221).

of allegory, where, for instance, the whole siege symbolises a divided country laying siege to itself, as is the case when there is collaboration with an occupying regime or during an anticolonial uprising. Bellos has pointed out that Kadare's novel is 'a complex symbol of a divided and suffering nation besieged by itself', which depicts the siege-like state of Hoxha's repressive regime in the 1970s.<sup>58</sup> In Chapter 3, 'The Double Figure of the Siege in *The Plague*', I argue that Camus's novel can be read to contain *both* political allegories of occupation and uprising – that of the fascist occupation of France during the second world war *and* of a feared native insurrection against the French *colons* in Algeria. This complex double allegory, which I suggest can be taken to express how life is politically constituted in a twentieth-century European nation-state, is made possible by the symbolic potential of the besieged town.

Hebron concludes that 'the siege [in medieval romance] is above all an image of suffering'.<sup>59</sup> That this image of suffering still holds currency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, despite the decline of the siege as a form of warfare, testifies to its continuing symbolic aptitude for exploring notions of the human condition, the nation and the political organisation of life, and, in common with much war writing, its role in the examination and diagnosis of key turning points in history. Furthermore, the increased focus on the collectively suffered limit situation in post-war siege novels is interesting. Although it is difficult to do much more than tentatively generalise from my brief analysis of such a limited selection of post-war siege novels, it would seem it is the besieged community, or family unit, and the nature of life under siege that constitute one of the dominant themes of the literary, post-war siege novel. As Binns comments of *The Siege of Krishnapur*: 'Farrell's interest lies less in the

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<sup>58</sup> 'Afterword', in Kadare, p. 328.

<sup>59</sup> Hebron, p. 165.

causes of the Mutiny or its historical developments than in the condition of an isolated community caught up in the dramatic experience of being besieged.’<sup>60</sup>

Recent siege novels which are from the point of view of the besieged are often concerned with charting a group of civilians’ response to living under progressively worsening circumstances over a lengthy period of time. The group is trapped in an extreme situation of drawn out suffering, and is increasingly stripped of material necessities, agency and choice. This focus on the limit situation through the representation of life under siege in post-war siege writing, coupled with the continued writerly and readerly interest in the siege, invite the question of whether there is perhaps something particularly pertinent about the state of siege for a depiction of twentieth and twenty-first century life and suffering, in general.

This is certainly the contention of the theorist Giorgio Agamben, whose theory of modern Western life centres around the state of siege.

### **Giorgio Agamben, *The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot***

This critical project consists of close readings of three war-related literary texts, which I refer to as ‘texts of exception’ as they are representations of limit situations: extreme situations which are exceptions to ‘normal’ life. As we have seen above, siege novels, such as *The Plague*, which is the first text of exception I turn to in Chapter 3, lend themselves particularly well to the examination of collective limit situations. They offer a depiction of a state of siege where normal law has been suspended, violence happens with increased frequency and the boundary between life and death grows blurred. Sontag’s wartime production of *Waiting for Godot* and Slavenka Drakulić’s war novel, *As If I Am*

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<sup>60</sup> Binns, p. 64

*Not There*, the second and third texts of exception I look at, also provide representations of limit situations. They offer, I argue below, an insight into the threshold, lawless zones where citizens are stripped of their rights and may be killed with immunity, and as such, they may also be said to depict states of siege, or exception, in the extended sense that Giorgio Agamben employs.

Agamben, whose theory of modernity I explore in Chapter 2 in preparation for my readings of *The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot*, is perhaps the most influential recent thinker regarding siege states and the figure of the refugee. In fact, his theory of Western nation-states revolves precisely around the state of exception, or the state of siege, and the marginalised figure of *homo sacer*, or the refugee. He is a theoriser of the limit or extreme situation, which he holds as parallel in function to the state of exception, and which he argues determines the normal legal constitution of modern Western life:

Just as the state of exception allows for the foundation and definition of the normal legal order, so in the light of the extreme situation – which is, at bottom, a kind of exception – it is possible to judge and decide on the normal situation.<sup>61</sup>

The use of his theory in connection with texts of exception that offer representations of limit situations thus becomes apparent. It invites interesting questions about the relation of the exception, or limit situation, to the normal order of life, which I pursue in my Agamben-oriented readings of *The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot*.

That *The Plague* is a text of exception is abundantly clear. Whichever way the plague is interpreted – as siege, totalitarian state, sickness, death, natural or manmade disaster – its effect is to disrupt and stop the normal flow of life in Oran, abandoning its inhabitants to extreme, life-threatening circumstances.

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<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Brooklyn, New York: MIT Press, 1999), p. 48.

When the pestilence takes hold and the town is quarantined, all commerce and thus 'normal' life is halted and the citizens must suffer what is variously described as 'an extreme situation', an 'ordeal', a 'trial', an 'unbearable holiday' and a 'general abandonment'.<sup>62</sup> The plague functions as an 'assault on the ordinary' and what is important is not so much what it represents, as its effects, and how the town responds to the crisis.<sup>63</sup> The novel offers a depiction of a city whose inhabitants collectively undergo a state of siege. In my first reading of *The Plague*, in Chapter 3, I look at how the state of exception and the concentration camp (also central to Agamben's theory) have been represented and ask to what extent Agamben's thesis that the exception is becoming the norm is borne out by Camus's novel.

Reading Beckett's seminal play as depicting a state of siege may meet with initial resistance. *Waiting for Godot* has no plot, no climax, no real action and is circular and repetitive rather than linear. In many ways, it could not be further removed from the siege novels we have looked at above. Yet, I suggest that Beckett's play succeeds precisely where most siege novels fail in conveying the substance of life under siege, which, to go back to its Latin roots of sitting, is not to do with action, tension and the forward march of a plot, but with stasis and waiting. Furthermore, although the prevalent interpretation of Beckett's play is that it is a representation of Everyman, taken at face value, the play is about two excluded, abandoned tramp-like figures who wait in a wasteland setting with no work or other signifiers of 'normal' life to occupy their time. They suffer from hunger, pain, boredom, depression and homelessness and one of the pair is physically beaten every night. We could easily apply the situation descriptors from *The Plague* – 'an extreme situation', an 'ordeal', a 'trial', an 'unbearable holiday' and 'general abandonment' – to Beckett's play.

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<sup>62</sup> *The Plague*, pp. 55-58, p. 185.

<sup>63</sup> LeBlanc and Jones, p. 208.

If *Waiting for Godot* is a representation of the human condition, then the play would seem to indicate that the human condition, at least recent times, has much in common with a siege-like state of abandonment, exclusion, loss of rights and agency. Certainly Susan Sontag seems to have read the play this way when she chose *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's 'supremely realistic play' about 'abandonment' as 'the one obvious play' to direct in Sarajevo under siege.<sup>64</sup> In this sense, *Waiting for Godot*, I contend, can convincingly be treated as a text of exception – as a representation of a limit situation, or a disruption of 'normal' life – even as, at the same time, it comments on the so-called norm of the human condition. Read this way, Beckett's representation of twentieth-century life as an exceptional, limit situation where Everyman is a homeless tramp, rather than a rights-bearing citizen, may be seen to corroborate Agamben's understanding that the norm is structured by the exception.

In Chapter 4, I construct a reading of *Waiting for Godot* which figures Vladimir and Estragon as *homines sacri* in relation to a sovereign Godot. Lucky is seen as a clear example of Agamben's 'bare life' in this reading. This chapter forms a bridge between the figure of the siege in the previous chapter and that of the refugee in the following, by embracing both the states of siege and exile in the interminable waiting of the *homines sacri*.

*As If I Am Not There*, the third text of exception I look at, offers a representation of an even more extreme form of limit situation: a rape camp during the war in Bosnia. Here, we are in a completely lawless zone, which is at an even greater remove from 'normal' life than the siege states portrayed in *The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot*. In the camp, all forms of community have broken down and there is no possibility of resistance. While the concentration camp is central to Agamben's theory of modernity, as it is the most extreme space of exception, I do not give an Agamben-oriented reading of *As If I Am Not There*

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<sup>64</sup> Sontag, Susan, 'Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo', *Performing Arts Journal*, 16.2 (May 1994), 87-106.



precisely because there is no ambiguity about its subject matter, unlike in the previous two texts of exception. *As If I Am Not There* presents a realist depiction of a camp and therefore does not benefit from further decoding. Instead, in Chapter 5, I turn to questions about the ethics of representing the other.

### Representing the Other

Twentieth-century siege writing frequently invites postcolonial questions about the representation of others as sieges are an integral part of the processes of colonisation and de-colonisation. The aim of a siege is for an external force to take over and colonise a city as, for instance, the Ottomans did in Albania, or in the case of a colonised country, such as British India or French Algeria, for a native force to attempt to wrest back a taken city. The siege writing looked at here has often been criticised for the erasure of the other. *The Plague* has been roundly criticised for its erasure of native Algerians by Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said, while *The Siege of Krishnapur* has been condemned, by Margaret Drabble, for its scant understanding of the motives of the besieging Indian Muslims and, by V.G Kiernan, for its failure to mention the bloody reprisals dealt out by the British to the Indians directly after the historical siege of Lucknow.<sup>65</sup>

This critical project considers postcolonial questions about the representation of others in *The Plague* and *As If I Am Not There*. The second siege allegory I find to be at work in Camus's novel is, as mentioned above, that of an anti-colonial uprising in French Algeria. In the second part of Chapter 3, I follow Conor Cruise O'Brien's seminal postcolonial criticism of *The Plague*

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<sup>65</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1970), pp. 207-23; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 212. Binns, p. 80.

closely to arrive at different conclusions, which suggest that the colonial setting of Oran is not arbitrary, as O'Brien holds, and that a moderate critique of colonialism is, in fact, at work in the novel.

In close reading Drakulić's novel in Chapter 5, I refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's distinction between representing (speaking for) and representing (speaking about) the other and question whether it is ethically desirable to speak for the oppressed other as Drakulić has attempted.<sup>66</sup> I look closely at the narration of the novel to interrogate whether Drakulić best represents the victims of Bosnian rape camps through the fictional character of the protagonist S., which I find to have an aesthetically and ethically problematic double consciousness. This final chapter, then, differs from the preceding two in that it does *not* offer an Agamben-oriented reading of the novel, but instead makes use of postcolonial theory to problematise Drakulić's representation of the refugee.

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<sup>66</sup> *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. by Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 28.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Giorgio Agamben's State of Exception, *Homo Sacer* and the Camp**

Zora, in *The Painter of Bridges*, is stripped of her civil rights when a state of siege – or a ‘state of exception’ – is declared in Sarajevo and does not regain them until her refugee status is granted five years later in the United Kingdom. As a civilian living in a besieged city and then as an asylum seeker, the protagonist of my novel is what Giorgio Agamben terms a *homo sacer*. The shadowy, marginalised figure of *homo sacer* is any person who has been stripped of their political rights, such as a refugee or a concentration camp internee. *Homines sacri* are characterised by voicelessness and invisibility within the ‘normal’ order of life. When a state of exception (the suspension of normal law) is declared, a ‘zone of indistinction’ opens up in which *homines sacri* are produced. The two novels I look at depict the ‘zones of indistinction’ that open up when a ‘state of exception’ is put in place: the town of Oran becomes a ‘zone of indistinction’ in *The Plague* and the rape camp in *As If I Am Not There* is an extreme example of a ‘zone of indistinction’. The reading I give of *Waiting for Godot*, inspired by its wartime staging in Sarajevo under siege, construes the play as taking place in such a lawless zone.

The concentration camp is the ‘zone of indistinction’ which, according to Agamben, constitutes the ‘hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity’.<sup>67</sup> Agamben evokes the camp as a metaphor for liberal Western nation-states, whose citizens, he contends, are being increasingly stripped of

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<sup>67</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 123.

their rights and their agency. The camp may be seen to be present in, haunt or inform all three works that I look at. I argue that the figure of the concentration camp haunts the pages of *The Plague* from the outset and that the isolation camp, which strongly resembles a concentration camp and is glimpsed when the plague is at its peak, does indeed secretly structure modern life as it is presented in the novel. Sontag's wartime production of *Waiting for Godot*, which posits Vladimir and Estragon as abandoned people living in a siege-like state of exclusion and isolation, leads me to give a reading of the play which sees Lucky as an extreme exemplification of *homo sacer*, the refugee or camp detainee. The camp is most visible in the final text I look at. *As If I Am Not There* is predominantly set in a rape camp, and here the biopolitical exercise of power over the individual subject and the production of *homines sacri* is most clearly depicted.

While I give Agamben-oriented readings of Camus's allegory and Beckett's anti-realist play to reveal the presence of the camp and *homini sacres* in these texts, the representation of the camp and the violation of the individual is so explicit in *As If I Am Not There* that it requires no further decoding. While my reading *As If I Am Not There* predominantly engages with postcolonial questions about the representation of others, I do refer, in passing, to Agamben's discussion in *Remnants of Auschwitz* about the problems of attempting to bear witness to and represent the camp and *homo sacer*. It is thus worth spending some time getting to grips with Agamben's theory of modernity in this chapter, which, with its account of times of exception and political crisis, helps us to think through aspects of the siege state and the aporetic, marginalised figure of the refugee.

### Giorgio Agamben's Theory of Modernity

Agamben's theory, as set out in detail in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *The State of Exception*, is a critique of modern Western democracy.<sup>68</sup> It holds, as noted above, that the concentration camp is the invisible structuring paradigm of modernity. Agamben connects the Nazi concentration camps to the twenty-first century detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, and so posits a link between fascism and Western liberalism, which, he claims, has increasingly elided with totalitarianism since the first and second world wars. We increasingly live in a 'state of exception' (similar to a state of siege or emergency), where a real or perceived threat to national security leads to the suspension of normal law – ostensibly to protect us from the threat (such as terrorism), yet at the same time stripping away our civil rights, such as the right to a fair trial and legal representation, and so subjecting us to increased governmental control. The 'state of exception', originally declared only during wartime, is becoming the rule.

Following Foucault in asserting that power is exercised biopolitically, in other words, through our bodies, Agamben argues how, when the state of exception becomes the rule, governments extend their exercise of biopolitical control over all of their citizens in an increasingly sovereign manner. He points to the liminal figure of *homo sacer* – the person, stripped of political rights, who resides in the camp (the refugee, the concentration camp prisoner, the detained terrorist suspect, and so on) – as the originary source and limit point of Western politics, rather than the rights-bearing citizen, as might be expected.

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<sup>68</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

## Bare Life

[T]he inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.*<sup>69</sup>

Agamben's concept of 'bare life' (*la nuda vita*) is crucial to grasp as it underpins his political theory. Drawing on Aristotle, Agamben holds that the ancient Greeks had two terms for referring to life, *zoē* and *bios*, which remain pertinent today, thus tracing a paradigm of Western politics from the birthplace of Western democracy to the current day.<sup>70</sup> *Zoē* is mere existence: unqualified, biological life that is pre-linguistic and common to both humans and animals. *Bios* emerges from *zoē*, and is unique to humans. It is political life: the proper way of living in a community which is predicated on language. *Bios* is thus entwined with – and, in fact, emerged at the same moment as – the *polis*, or city, the more usual paradigm for political life than the camp. Normally, citizens have both *zoē* and *bios*, but when a state of exception is declared, a citizen may be stripped of *bios* – their political existence and right to legal representation. The citizen, now a *homo sacer*, is left not with *zoē*, but 'bare life'. The difference is, firstly, that 'bare life', unlike *zoē*, is qualified: it is deemed pejoratively and often seen as a threat to national security. Secondly, through its exclusion from political life in the form of a ban (such as forced internment without trial), it is still within the jurisdiction of the political: it is subject to the nation state that has excluded it.

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<sup>69</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 6. Italics in original.

<sup>70</sup> This is one of the areas in which Agamben has been criticised. Finlayson considers 'the very idea of a single underlying paradigm of Western politics since the Greeks...ridiculous', and asserts that no distinction between *zoē* and *bios* can be found in Aristotle's *Politics*. For Finlayson, Agamben's misreading of Aristotle undermines his entire theory. James Gordon Finlayson, "'Bare Life' and Politics in Agamben's Reading of Aristotle", *The Review of Politics*, 72 (2010), 97–126 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0034670509990982>> (p. 99).

For Agamben, it is precisely this apparent paradox of an exclusion within an inclusion that structures Western politics, allowing, as it does, for the sovereign exercise of power over the excluded few: 'Western politics constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life.'<sup>71</sup> We need to look to the almost invisible marginalised figures of society to understand how power is constituted and exercised, as *homines sacri* provide the most perfect examples of biopolitical bodies which carry 'bare life'. We should look to the exceptions to understand the rule.

As mentioned, Agamben follows Foucault in asserting that power is exercised biopolitically, but he points to the liminal figure of *homo sacer*, the refugee or concentration camp internee, rather than the prisoner, as the site where biopolitical power is most clearly exercised. Instead of Foucault's prison as paradigm of modernity, which leads to the production of 'docile bodies', Agamben contends that the camp is the structuring site where 'bare life' is forged and contained. He sees his work as completing and 'correcting' Foucault's theory of biopolitics. Whereas Foucault saw biopolitics emerging with the modern era, Agamben holds that the exclusion of 'bare life' has been integral to Western politics since its conception. However, it is only with the appearance of the first concentration camps in the 1890s that excluded 'bare life' began to be incorporated into the political sphere, blurring the boundaries between citizen and outlaw, and creating a 'zone of indistinction':

[T]he decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion,

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<sup>71</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 7.

outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.<sup>72</sup>

I consider the two novels and play examined in this thesis as literary representations of such 'zones of indistinction', where there is a merging between the categories of outlaw and citizen, inside and outside, exclusion and inclusion, and the production of 'bare life' occurs. We will return to this in a moment, after first looking at the 'state of exception' which needs to be in place for such lawless zones of indistinction to open up.

### State of Exception

Agamben's theorisation of the state of exception draws on the works of the German jurist and Nazi apologist Carl Schmitt's definition of the sovereign as 'he who decides on the state of exception',<sup>73</sup> and Walter Benjamin's assertion that 'the state of exception...has become the rule'.<sup>74</sup> A state of exception occurs when normal law is suspended, for instance, during a time of political crisis, when the nation in question is threatened by extreme internal disorder. When a state of exception is declared, a 'threshold space' or 'zone of indistinction' or 'indifference' opens up, which is both inside and outside the law:

In truth, the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a

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<sup>72</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 9.

<sup>73</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* (Munich-Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1922) cited in *State of Exception*, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' in *Gesammlet Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, 1 (1942), p. 697, p. 257 cited in *State of Exception*, p. 6.



threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other.<sup>75</sup>

The judiciary may be overruled during such times, and the one who declared the state of exception – the president, for instance – is revealed to be sovereign. The state of exception, which is declared to protect the stability of a nation and its citizens, thus also makes citizens more vulnerable, by overriding laws that have been put in place to ensure their basic civil rights. It creates a lawless zone, where all citizens may, at any moment, have their rights curtailed and, potentially, erased, becoming *homines sacri*. In a state of exception, the killing of not only political enemies but also ‘of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system’ is permitted.<sup>76</sup>

France during the Revolution, the First World War, the twelve years of the Third Reich and, according to Agamben, the contemporary political period are all examples of states of exception. Although the state of exception – the German legal term for what, in French and Italian law, is called a ‘state of siege’ and, in Anglo-Saxon theory, ‘martial law’ – used to be tied explicitly to civil war, it has increasingly been freed from its wartime context:

The [...] history of the state of siege is the history of its gradual emancipation from the wartime situation to which it was originally bound in order to be used as an extraordinary police measure to cope with internal sedition and disorder, thus changing from a real, or military state of siege to a fictitious, or political one.<sup>77</sup>

In relation to *The Plague*, we will see that a state of siege is declared to restore order to the chaos that erupts in the quarantined town. Oran becomes a threshold zone of indistinction where citizens are stripped of most of their

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<sup>75</sup> *State of Exception*, p. 23.

<sup>76</sup> *State of Exception*, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> *State of Exception*, p. 5.

political life, or *bios*. If they try to leave the town, they are shot and if they contract the plague, they are interred in an isolation camp. Significantly, the one named character who is quarantined in such a camp is a judge, suggesting the overruling of the judiciary. Oran has become a lawless zone, where the authorities are sovereign and 'entire categories of citizens' – those infected by the plague – may be eliminated. A totalitarian state of siege is thus depicted in *The Plague*, much as Agamben describes.<sup>78</sup> As the internal threat that necessitates the suspension of law is a plague, rather than a human enemy, we see in *The Plague* how the state of exception has been liberated from its wartime context, how it may be applied at other times, and how it is perhaps increasingly becoming the rule.

That the provisional state of exception is, imperceptibly, becoming the permanent norm is central to Agamben's thesis, which concurs with Benjamin's thought at this point: 'the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm in contemporary politics.'<sup>79</sup> It is only during states of exception, and not during normal law, that the figures of the camp and *homo sacer* emerge.

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<sup>78</sup> See Isaac for a discussion of Camus's literary depiction of the totalitarian state of siege in *The Plague*. Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 49-50.

<sup>79</sup> *State of Exception*, p. 2.

### *Homo Sacer*

The liminal, excluded yet included, figure of *homo sacer*, the bearer of 'bare life', is the one who may be killed with impunity and has no recourse to legal representation. Stripped of his or her *bios*, he or she is almost invisible and voiceless within the normal order of life. Biopolitical control – through confinement, torture, rape – is most visibly exercised through *homines sacri*. Modern-day incarnations of *homo sacer* include asylum seekers, concentration camp internees and those imprisoned in terrorist detention camps.

*Homo sacer* resides in a zone of indistinction, on the threshold between the inside and the outside of the law. A government, in suspending the law, and creating a state of exception in order to open up such a zone, reveals itself to be sovereign: outside the law and yet held in relation to it, in a similar position to *homo sacer*, but at the other end of the political order. In fact, *homo sacer* and the sovereign are the only two figures to share the threshold realm inside and outside the law: they are both included exceptions. Agamben states that: 'the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men may act as sovereign.'<sup>80</sup> The implication of this statement is that all citizens have the potential to become *homines sacri*.<sup>81</sup> In fact, Agamben suggests that, in our contemporary political climate, the line between a rights-bearing citizen and a *homo sacer* is increasingly blurred: '*homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen.'<sup>82</sup>

Agamben traces the genealogy of *homo sacer* from Roman times to the present day. The 'bare life' of *homines sacri* has always been the site of biopolitical control, but it only became visible as such with the event of

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<sup>80</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 84.

<sup>81</sup> This, according to Murray, has been the most contested of Agamben's claims. Alex Murray, *Giorgio Agamben* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 65.

<sup>82</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 171.

modernity and the emergence of nation-states. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789 tied, for the first time, 'bare life' – the mere fact of being born – to a political territory, bringing 'bare life' into the political realm from birth. Everyone born into a nation was now protected by inalienable rights, but at the same time, the possibility also opened up that these rights might be stripped away. Agamben, acknowledging the influence of Hannah Arendt, points to the massive swell in the number of refugees during the twentieth century, caused in part by the denationalisation of citizens for 'anti-country' activities at the start of the century and the subsequent upheaval of the world wars. This increase, caused by a wish to enclose and protect the nation, ends up destabilising the link between birth and nationality inherent in the concept of the nation:

Bringing to light the difference between birth and nation, the refugee causes the secret presupposition of the political domain – bare life – to appear for an instant in that domain.<sup>83</sup>

The concentration camp internee, also denationalised and imprisoned for anti-country activities, exhibits the complete reduction of a person to nothing but 'bare life'.

*Homo sacer* is a term in ancient Roman law. Agamben cites Pompeius Festus:

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that 'if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.' This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 131.

<sup>84</sup> Pompeius Festus, *On the Significance of Words*, cited in *Homo Sacer*, p. 71.

The main point Agamben wants us to take from this definition is that *homo sacer* may be killed without the executioner being punished, which both excludes and includes *homo sacer* from the law. '(T)he death of *homo sacer* is neither sacrifice nor homicide, leaving him simultaneously included and excluded from both the religious and legal spheres,' Murray comments.<sup>85</sup> Agamben explains that calling a man sacred was 'a kind of legal loophole' which allowed the killing of a man without breaking a religious or a legal code. He notes the contradiction of the law which calls a man sacred and yet authorises his killing.

Downey clarifies the use of the word 'sacred' in *homo sacer*. He maintains it is not connected with being holy and worthy of veneration, but more to do with being 'set apart' and abandoned:

It should also be noted that Agamben's term *homo sacer*, the sacred man, is deployed not so much to indicate the religious experience implicit in the term of *sacer* as it is to highlight the other more subdued meaning of the term 'sacred': that which is 'set apart'. In this structure of exceptionalism the 'sacred' does not reveal a religious element as such, rather, it further defines the moment of being set apart and thereafter takes on the hue of accursedness and abandonment.<sup>86</sup>

I suggest that Agamben's employment of the word 'sacer' does indeed embrace these tones of separation, 'accursedness and abandonment', but at the same time works with and triggers the more modern meanings of both 'sacred' and 'sacrificed' (common to all Latinate languages). *Homo sacer*, we might understand through these lexical associations, is a good man who is sacrificed, a type of scapegoat. The suggestive term *homo sacer* thus seems to be aptly chosen

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<sup>85</sup> Murray, p. 64.

<sup>86</sup> Anthony Downey, 'Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's "Bare Life" and the Politics of Aesthetics, *Third Text*, 23:2 (2009), 109–125 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820902840581>> (p. 111)

to correct the pejorative associations that often accompany such marginalised, excluded figures.

In the following chapter, silenced *homines sacri* are glimpsed in the isolation camp in *The Plague*. In *Waiting for Godot*, my reading sees Lucky as an extreme example of 'bare life'. Susan Sontag understands *Waiting for Godot* as a play about 'abandoned people', and her staging of it holds up a mirror to the people of Sarajevo under siege, who are thus figured as excluded *homines sacri*, who may be killed with impunity. The rape victims in *As If I Am Not There* are *homines sacri*, and their loss of name (they are represented only by their initials) in part suggests their loss of civil rights, or *bios*, and their reduction to 'bare life'.

### The Camp

Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation. This is why the camp is the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen.<sup>87</sup>

Agamben sees the concentration camp as the invisible paradigm that structures modern nation states rather than the usual paradigm of the city. The 'camp' is a 'space of exception' – a place outside moral codes and the law, where people, detained without necessarily having committed a crime, may be killed with impunity. This hidden space for the exclusion, suppression and elimination of the marginalised *homo sacer* is, for Agamben, what structures and engenders modernity.

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<sup>87</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 171.

Agamben argues that 'the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that decisively signals the space of modernity itself', pointing out that concentration or detention camps, in which an unwanted category of people are held, are a modern phenomenon, which emerged soon after the birth of nation-states.<sup>88</sup> As noted, the newly-founded nation enshrined the liberty and equality of its citizens in its declaration of rights, promising to protect the rights of all those born on its land, and so, for the first time in history, privileging 'bare life': the mere fact of being born. At the same time, however, 'spaces of exception' opened up in the form of detention camps, where undesirable people were herded (for instance, the Boers by the English in colonial Africa and the Cubans by the Spanish in Cuba, both in the mid 1890s) and stripped of their rights.

Agamben extends the meaning of the word 'camp' to include all 'spaces of exception' or 'zones of indistinction' where the civil rights of an individual have been suspended or dispensed with. Thus the *zone d'attente* in a French international airport, a football stadium in Bari, Italy, where illegal Albanian immigrants were herded before deportation, and refugee camps are all 'camps'. He argues that the system of modernity is dependent on, and cannot function without, such lawless spaces of exclusion – without the 'lethal machine' of the camp.

By broadening the definition of the camp and tracing its evolution from the threshold of the modern era to the present day, Agamben is able to argue that the camp should be viewed 'not as historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past [...] but in some way as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living'.<sup>89</sup> He can thus link the Nazi concentration camp to the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay and, by proposing the refugee and concentration camp prisoner as examples of modern

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<sup>88</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 174.

<sup>89</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 166.

day *homines sacri*, he 'has neatly tied the political principles of Western civilisation and the inalienable freedoms of modern mankind to the most horrific events of the 20th century'.<sup>90</sup>

Although Sarajevo under siege was often likened to a concentration camp, due to the extreme living conditions, the constant presence of death, the prohibition on leaving and the endless queues for water and food, it could not really be described as a camp, in Agamben's terms.<sup>91</sup> Although a political and military state of exception operated, a 'camp never truly materialised', as Jestrović points out, as Sarajevans still had some agency and voice, which was evident in the artistic life of the city.<sup>92</sup> Here, I would like to add that the siege of Sarajevo was not completely watertight: people did manage to escape (and enter) the city. This porosity also sets it apart from a 'camp.'

Before turning to the figures of the siege and the camp in *The Plague*, it is worth drawing out the differences between the two as both are connected to the state of exception and both are zones of indistinction. In the camp in *As If I Am Not There* no resistance is possible, and the women, through the exercise of complete biopolitical control over their bodies, are reduced to 'bare life', mere existence without agency or voice. Resistance, on the other hand, is possible in a siege – in *The Plague* this is seen in the building of communities outside the juridico-political order: the health teams which Tarrou, the philosophical traveller who is trapped in Oran, organises. Thus we might think of different levels of zones of indistinction. When a state of exception is declared, camps start to open up and proliferate – this is seen in *The Plague* as isolation camps

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<sup>90</sup> Murray, p. 67.

<sup>91</sup> For references to Sarajevo as a concentration camp, see: Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 53; Toole, David. *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p.1.

<sup>92</sup> Silvija Jestrović, *Performance, Space, Utopia: Cities of War, Cities of Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 160.



open everywhere once a state of siege is called – but this does not mean that everywhere is a camp, though it may be on its way to becoming so.

Siege literature, as we saw in the introduction, revolves around the city as the essential structure of civilised life. At times the besieged city may metaphorically shrink to represent the citizen or the self, at others it may expand to represent the nation. Agamben's theory unsettles this notion of the city as the structuring unit of Western civilisation, which dates back to Aristotle, and argues instead that modern life is structured by the camp: 'Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.'<sup>93</sup>In the following chapter, we see that both paradigms are represented in *The Plague*. The besieged city (which is attacked from within and not without, suggesting the blurring of the inside and outside that occurs when a modern state of exception is declared) contains the camp within it. The camp has moved from outside the city gate into the town, bringing 'bare life' into the *polis*.

In the next chapter, I construct two political readings of the Camus's novel, the first drawing on Agamben's theory of modernity, the second turning to postcolonial criticism, to find that a complex picture of the political reality of the Western nation-state in the mid-twentieth century is presented.

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<sup>93</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 181.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Double Figure of the Siege in *The Plague*

On eût dit que la terre même où étaient plantées nos maisons se purgeait de son chargement d'humeurs, qu'elle laissait monter à la surface des furoncles et des sanies qui, jusqu'ici, la travaillaient intérieurement. Qu'on envisage seulement la stupéfaction de notre petite ville, si tranquille jusque-là, et bouleversée en quelques jours, comme un homme bien portant dont le sang épais se mettrait tout d'un coup en révolution!<sup>94</sup>

It was as though the very soil on which our houses were built was purging itself on an excess of bile, that it was letting boils and abscesses rise to the surface, which up to then had been devouring it inside. Just imagine the amazement of our little town which had been so quiet until then, ravaged in a few days, like a healthy man whose thick blood had suddenly rebelled against him!<sup>95</sup>

Albert Camus's *The Plague* narrates what happens when Oran, a colonial town in the French prefecture of Algeria, is quarantined due to an anachronistic outbreak of the bubonic plague in the 1940s. Although it is a plague that takes hold of Oran, the epidemic is likened to a siege so frequently that a double metaphor can be seen to be at work in the novel. The effects of the plague correspond almost exactly to those of a siege: the townspeople are imprisoned within the walls of their town and cut off from the outside world as no letters or

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<sup>94</sup> Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 26.

<sup>95</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Robin Buss (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p.15.

intercity phone calls are permitted; food supplies are limited, petrol and electricity are rationed; and mounting daily death tolls are recorded.<sup>96</sup> Resistance is organised in the form of health teams. The plague is directly compared to a siege at points: 'the pestilence was gathering all its strength for an assault on the town, so that it could take it for good', and 'a state of siege' is finally called.<sup>97</sup> Where it differs from a medieval siege is that the plague or enemy rises from within the town walls, rather than attacking from without. This blurring of inside and outside might remind us of one of Agamben's zones of indistinction, which open up when a state of exception is called, and where the line between citizen and outlaw, *zōē* and *bios*, is increasingly confused. Given the '194-' date of the events of this novel, we can read the figure of the besieged town in *The Plague* as a modern, twentieth-century image of the *polis*, where such blurring occurs.<sup>98</sup> In this chapter, I argue that two siege allegories operate in *The Plague*, both of which centre around the image of a divided town laying siege to itself. The first is the widely-known allegory of the Fascist regime in France, when many French citizens collaborated with the Nazis, a reading which Camus himself supported.<sup>99</sup> The second is an allegory of a feared anticolonial uprising in French Algeria, strongly suggested by the use of the word 'révolution' in the above passage. Taken together, they give a complex, two-sided image of the political state of France in the middle of the twentieth century.

Divided into five sections, the novel follows the rise and fall of the plague through the five-part structure of Greek tragedy: exposition, rising

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<sup>96</sup> *The Plague*, p. 54, p. 62, p. 91.

<sup>97</sup> *The Plague*, pp. 100-02, p. 106, p. 131.

<sup>98</sup> The opening sentence establishes the date (and the place): 'The peculiar events that are the subject of this history occurred in 194-, in Oran.' *The Plague*, p. 1.

<sup>99</sup> *Albert Camus: Selected Essays and Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Philip Thody (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 220-222 (p. 220).

action, climax, falling action and denouement. Beginning with a brief exposition of 'normal' life in the 'entirely modern town' of Oran, the worsening stages of the plague are depicted as the death toll mounts. A state of siege is declared in the climactic Part Three of the novel, when the plague has reached its peak and 'taken' the town, which allows the French authorities to respond with extreme repressive measures to contain and combat the epidemic. The number of plague victims starts to fall and the novel ends on a note of apparent victory with the vanquishing of the plague and the resumption of 'normal' life.

On one level, *The Plague* is the simple story of the fight between an epidemic and a town. It may be pared down to two main characters, both of which are personified at various points during the narrative: the plague most often being compared to a besieging army or repressive regime, while the town is frequently likened to a sick person.<sup>100</sup> However, this seeming simplicity is troubled on a number of levels: the complexity of the polyphonic narration, the blurring of the brutality of the plague and the French authorities' response, and the doubleness of the siege allegory. *The Plague* is a far from simple novel, which may be seen to critique, to a greater or lesser extent, all three European mid-twentieth century political paradigms – liberal capitalism, totalitarianism and colonialism – that it engages with.<sup>101</sup>

*The Plague* is an examination of what happens when 'normal' life is turned inside out by extreme circumstances, opening a 'space of exception' or 'zone of indistinction'. The word 'bouleversée' in the above-cited passage is telling: it is translated more accurately as *turned upside down, disrupted or*

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<sup>100</sup> *The Plague*: plague as army: p.106, as regime: p. 182; town as sick person: p. 15, p. 26.

<sup>101</sup> For discussion on how *The Plague* engages with the three political paradigms, see: John Randolph LeBlanc and Carolyn M. Jones, 'Space/Place and Home: Prefiguring Contemporary Political and Religious Discourse in Albert Camus's *The Plague*', in *Albert Camus*, ed. by Steven G. Kellman (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2012), pp. 210-30 (p. 208, p. 221).

*shattered* than as ‘ravaged’.<sup>102</sup> In other words, the normal life of the town has been turned upside down by the pestilence. The plague has shifting significance, depending on how the novel is read, but it is most usefully seen as an ‘assault on the ordinary’<sup>103</sup> which disrupts and halts the normal life of the town, leading to the declaration of first a state of plague and then a state of siege. If we follow Agamben’s thinking, it is precisely in such exceptional states that the underlying political structure of modern life is most visible, so meriting our close analytical attention. In this chapter, I turn to Agamben’s theory of modern life to help reflect on the state of exception and draw out the significance of the camp in the totalitarian allegory of *The Plague*. I then think through O’Brien’s influential postcolonial criticism of Camus in relation to the anticolonial allegory to arrive at different conclusions.<sup>104</sup> I argue that the figure of the concentration camp haunts the novel and that the visit to the isolation camp is central to the totalitarian reading of the novel, and has implications for the second Algerian reading, where a link between totalitarianism and colonialism is, perhaps unknowingly, posited.

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<sup>102</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press (2014) <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/translate/french-english/bouleverser>> [accessed 10 January 2014].

<sup>103</sup> LeBlanc and Jones, p. 208.

<sup>104</sup> Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Camus* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1970).

**i) *The Plague* as Totalitarian Allegory**

*The Plague* is well-known as an allegory of the wartime occupation of France by the Nazis, a reading that, as mentioned, Camus supported in his correspondence with Roland Barthes.<sup>105</sup> Simone de Beauvoir famously criticised this allegory of fascism because, given that the plague rises and then falls seemingly back into the ground and buildings of Oran, there is no sense of agency or political responsibility.<sup>106</sup> At the same time, the enduring appeal of *The Plague* – it transcends the specific years of World War Two during which it was written and remains pertinent today – has been attributed to how it comments on the universal human condition of suffering. The figure of the siege, as noted in the introduction, lends itself well to both political and existential allegory. Gray's recent reading, embraces the fascist allegory, but leans towards a humanist interpretation, finding that *The Plague* 'dramatises the victory of the human spirit and solidarity over that which threaten and dismember it: a plague, an enemy occupation, existence itself'.<sup>107</sup> Soloman dismisses the pointed fascist allegory altogether, asserting that *The Plague* is 'properly treated as an "existentialist" novel'.<sup>108</sup> This reading is in part encouraged by the novel itself, when the old asthmatic says of the plague: 'It's life, that's all'.<sup>109</sup> However, ignoring the many parallels with the Nazi regime seems almost wilfully blind and leads to an insensitive reading. *The Plague* is

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<sup>105</sup> *Albert Camus: Selected Essays and Notebooks*, pp. 220-222. See also Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 49; and O'Brien, p. 34, on reading *The Plague* as fascist allegory.

<sup>106</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

<sup>107</sup> Margaret E. Gray, 'Layers of meaning in *La Peste*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. by Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 165-77 (p. 165).

<sup>108</sup> Robert C. Soloman, 'Facing Death Together: Camus's *The Plague*', in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. by Garry L. Hagberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 165.

<sup>109</sup> *The Plague*, p. 236.

not about politics, Soloman maintains, but about life. However, the exposition of the commerce-driven organisation, habits and substance of pre-plague life in the 'entirely modern town' of Oran in the opening pages of the novel, the detailing of the collective response to the epidemic and the 'new order' that is installed during the plague, and the suggestion that a 'reorganisation' of life might be needed after the plague has died down strongly invite a political reading.<sup>110</sup> *The Plague* is certainly about life and suffering, but specifically as it pertains to the twentieth-century *polis*. Agamben's theory of modernity will therefore help us with reading the political nature of modern life as it is presented in Camus's novel.

### State of Exception

*The Plague* may be considered as a clear-sighted look at the 'zone of indistinction' that is opened up when a state of exception is declared. Agamben's 'state of exception', as we have seen, refers to the suspension of normal law during times of crisis, when the stability (or health) of the nation in question is perceived to be threatened by extreme internal unrest. He who decides on the state of exception is sovereign. During the period of exception, citizens' rights are severely curtailed and, in some cases, may be stripped away all together: they may be killed with impunity.

We first begin to see the erosion of the townspeople's rights when a 'state of plague' is declared, at the end of Part One, and the citizens are imprisoned within the walls of their quarantined town.<sup>111</sup> Their rights are curtailed by the preventative health measures – the more draconian laws which are activated

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<sup>110</sup> *The Plague*, p. 6, p. 138, p. 216.

<sup>111</sup> *The Plague*, p. 50.

when a 'state of plague' is declared: they are forbidden to write letters to the outside world, may be forcibly removed by the police from their homes if they contract the plague, and cannot leave the town, escape being punishable by prison.<sup>112</sup> However, despite the advance of governmental powers into the townspeople's private lives, this is not a pure state of exception because these measures are provided for in the law. On the other hand, there is growing ambiguity. The suggestion that Oran is slipping into the lawless 'zone of indistinction' comes towards the end of Part Two when two shots are heard. "'A dog, or an escape,'" Tarrou comments, revealing that the authorities may be starting to kill people for breaking the law by attempting to escape.<sup>113</sup> In the association, through juxtaposition, of a dog and a human, the stripping away of civil rights and the emergence of the 'bare life' which is forged under states of exception is foreshadowed.

A full state of exception opens up in Part Three when a state of siege is declared. Unlike the state of plague, which was declared to stop the spread of the epidemic, the state of siege is put in place in response to the unrest and mutinying of the town's citizens. The town gates have been 'repeatedly attacked at night', houses have been pillaged, there has been 'revolt' and 'scenes of violence'.

Ce furent ces incidents qui forcèrent les autorités à assimiler l'état de peste à l'état de siège et à appliquer les lois qui en découlent. On fusilla deux voleurs, mais il est douteux que cela fit impression sur les autres, car au milieu de tant de morts, ces deux exécutions passèrent inaperçues: c'était une goutte d'eau dans la mer.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *The Plague*, p. 54, p. 70, p. 86.

<sup>113</sup> *The Plague*, p. 123.

<sup>114</sup> *La Peste*, p. 189.



It was these incidents that forced the authorities to compare the plague to a state of siege and to apply the appropriate laws. Two thieves were shot, but it is doubtful whether this made much impression on the rest, since, in the midst of so much death, these two executions passed unnoticed – they were a drop in the ocean.<sup>115</sup>

Oran enters the ambiguous zone of indistinction, where the ‘appropriate laws’ authorise the killing of thieves and of escapees. The laws that uphold a citizen’s civil rights, ensuring his or her legal representation, have been suspended: he or she may be killed without trial. The so-called ‘appropriate laws’ of the state of siege are a set of prohibitions that further erode the townspeople’s rights: a curfew is imposed, sea bathing is forbidden, and the families of plague victims are not allowed to attend their burials. The Prefect and French authorities, having declared the state of exception in order to quell unrest and protect Oran’s citizens from pillaging and theft, now have sovereign power over all of the town’s citizens, who are increasingly left without legal protection and so are being stripped of their citizenship. They are becoming *homines sacri*.

In recording the two executions in the passage cited above, there is a syntactical opaqueness which tends towards the erasure of agency (who shot the two thieves has to be inferred; the use of the indefinite pronoun ‘on’ in the original has the same effect as the passive construction in English) and an obfuscation of causal connections (do the executions happen because all insurgency and petty crime is now punishable by death or simply because normal law has been suspended and Oran is now, in reality, without law?) This ambiguity at the level of language corresponds to the confusion inherent in a zone of indistinction, where, with the suspension of normal law, there is a lack

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<sup>115</sup> *La Peste*, p. 132.

of clarity about what or who the perpetrator of death is, between the cause and the response.

In Oran, the effects of the plague and those of the extended powers of government are increasingly conflated and confused. The voices of the townspeople are silenced and they slip into a 'state of immobility' – but whether this is due to the imposition of the curfew, which means that, at night, the town is 'like a monument', or the deaths caused by the plague is uncertain. Both, it would seem. A further elision between the plague and the actions of the authorities occurs in the language used to describe the dehumanised mass burials – where 'everything was sacrificed to efficiency' and organised by card index to the 'satisfaction' of the Prefect – is echoed in that used to describe the plague: 'a shrewdly designed and flawless system, which operated with great efficiency'. The citizens of Oran are 'living under a new order', they have 'adapted' and 'come to heel' – again, there is uncertainty surrounding whether this 'new order', which controls and silences the formerly mutinying citizens, has been imposed by the epidemic or the state of siege.<sup>116</sup>

What is clear, in any case, is that a state of exception is in place. What is interesting is that a state of siege has been declared when there is not, in fact, a war. We begin to see how the state of siege has been freed from its roots in war and may be applied to any situation that causes terror and unrest, as Agamben has noted.<sup>117</sup>

Once a state of exception is in place, the distinction between citizen and outlaw starts to blur leading to the figure of *homo sacer* and the emergence of the camp.

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<sup>116</sup> *The Plague*, pp. 132-40.

<sup>117</sup> *State of Exception*, p. 5.

### The Camp in *The Plague*

The figure of the camp haunts the pages of *The Plague* from the outset: it is present in all parts of the novel. We first glimpse it in the name 'Camps' in an overheard conversation recorded by Tarrou. 'Camps' is the name of the second man mentioned in the novel to die of the plague, the first being the concierge.<sup>118</sup> It comes just as a name, a signifier severed from what it signifies, yet connected to the plague and death. The word 'camp' is the same in English as in French; *camp de concentration* is the translation of concentration camp. A French (and English) readership in the aftermath of the Second World War would undoubtedly have been alerted to and troubled by what cannot be an arbitrarily chosen name. At first, the figure of the camp is purely abstract, a name which momentarily summons the unthinkable inhumane sites, the existence of which were sometimes denied, to the reader's consciousness.

When a state of plague has been declared, the camp draws closer and becomes more concrete. Rieux, Rambert and Tarrou overhear a naval officer in a bar telling his companions about the establishment of camps during an outbreak of typhus in Cairo:

<< Des camps, disait-il, on avait fait des camps pour les indigènes, avec des tentes pour les malades at, tout autour, un cordon de sentinelles qui tiraient sur la famille quand elle essayait d'apporter en fraude des remedes de bonne femme. C'était dur, mais c'était juste.' >><sup>119</sup>

'Camps,' he said. 'They set up camps for the natives, with tents for the victims and a line of sentries who would open fire on the families when they tried to sneak in their old wives' remedies. It was hard, but fair.'<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *The Plague*, p. 21.

<sup>119</sup> *La Peste*, p. 171.

<sup>120</sup> *The Plague*, p. 118.

The camp, on its second mention, is explicitly associated with the military, as well as an epidemic: it is a zone of indistinction, where the killing of innocent people is authorised. Its full horror is still held at a distance, both by its geographical remove from Oran and by the colonial standpoint of the officer which lacks empathy: those interred were mere 'natives'. He approves of the segregation and harsh measures.

The word 'camps' (so far always in the plural) does not surface in Part Three, when a state of siege is declared and Oran becomes a zone of indistinction. Instead, we have an image of the most horrific form of camp, the extermination camp, in the 'old incinerating ovens' which lie outside the town gates. It is there that the bodies of the dead are cremated, when the mass graves are full. A tram line is redirected to take the corpses to the ovens, 'which now became the end of the line'. '[S]trange convoys of trams without passengers' transport their cargo in the middle of the night, 'a thick, foul-smelling vapour' hanging over the eastern quarter of the town in the morning.<sup>121</sup> The correlation to a death camp and its gas chambers is clear. The most extreme form of camp arises once a state of exception has been declared. However, the figure of the camp in Part Three, though much closer, still lies outside the city gates and the reader is held back from complete confrontation by its lack of name. Whereas in Part One, we had the signifier 'Camps' and no signified, now we have the signified and no signifier.

According to Agamben, 'the camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule', and it is only in Part Four, when the state of siege has been established for several months, that the figure of the camp enters the town walls and proliferates: every public place, apart from the

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<sup>121</sup> *The Plague*, p. 137.

Prefecture, is transformed into a hospital or isolation facility.<sup>122</sup> It fully materialises in the isolation camp which Tarrou and Rambert visit, where judge Othon is quarantined (not only 'natives' contract the plague in Oran). Metaphorically, the isolation camp lies somewhere between a death camp, as the plague victims interred there are waiting for death, and a refugee camp, which is closer to the visual image summoned by the tents set up on the grass, under the open sky of the football stadium.

Tarrou's character is closely entwined with the figure of the camp and one of his main functions within the novel is to bear witness to its existence. A stranger to Oran, he appears in the town a few weeks before the plague, to study its people 'through the large end of the telescope', recording in his notebooks 'a mass of minor details'.<sup>123</sup> His seemingly insignificant observations of the quirks and oddities of life in Oran are incorporated into Rieux's account of the epidemic, thus making *The Plague* a polyphonic narrative. The first entry of his that we read is the conversation about the death of the man called Camps, establishing Tarrou's function in charting the camp, and, of course, it is Tarrou, and not Rieux, who enters and records the life of the quarantined people in the camp. It is entirely appropriate that Tarrou, the 'historian of that which has no history', should be the one to leave a testimony of the camp.<sup>124</sup> That the camp has no history is not necessarily because it has no historical antecedent – there was a similar camp during a different epidemic in Cairo, as we have seen – but because of its character of invisibility, which Agamben draws attention to. 'If one is to believe his notes,' Rieux comments half-way through Tarrou's account of the camp, suggesting there is something intrinsically unbelievable and

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<sup>122</sup> *Homo Sacer*, pp. 168-69; *The Plague*, p. 182.

<sup>123</sup> *The Plague*, p. 21.

<sup>124</sup> *The Plague*, p. 21.

seemingly impossible about the existence of such places.<sup>125</sup> The camp is hardly a 'minor detail', but again this points to its lack of visibility and exclusion from the main narrative of history. Far from being insignificant, the image of the camp lies at the centre of *The Plague's* analysis of the fascist regime: it is where the subject is stripped of all political existence and 'bare life' is produced and contained.

Agamben holds that 'bare life' has existed since Aristotle but it has only been brought into the political realm, into the *polis*, in the modern era and with the invention of the concentration camp. It is worth quoting Agamben again on this point:

The decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē* and, right and fact enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.<sup>126</sup>

This movement of the camp and the 'bare life' that resides there from outside the *polis* to inside coincides with the movement of the camp in *The Plague* from being outside the city walls in Cairo to its incorporation within the walls of Oran, once a full state of siege is established. 'Bare life' is simultaneously excluded and included.<sup>127</sup>

The plague victims that Tarrou witnesses in the camp, isolated from society by a ban, are clear examples of Agamben's *homines sacri*. They are referred to as 'internees' three times, emphasising their lack of rights: they cannot leave. Guards are positioned at the entrances to stop their escape. They

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<sup>125</sup> *The Plague*, p. 185.

<sup>126</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 9.

<sup>127</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 11.

'are curiously silent', having lost their voices, their *bios* and the ability to live in a community.<sup>128</sup> Stripped of *bios*, they are reduced to bare life. Power is exercised biopolitically through their bodies, both through the ravages of the plague – Gray comments on the dismembering effect of the epidemic – and the scientific organisation of the distribution of food in the camp, which treats them as little more than animals.<sup>129</sup> In these marginalised figures, who do nothing but wait for death, there is blurring of the line between life and death, and also between citizen and outlaw: they have committed no crime yet 'they all look suspicious'. The insensitivity of Gonzales, the football player, who takes Rambert and Tarrou to the camp – he laughs and reminisces about the matches he used to play there – suggests that the quarantined are, indeed, seen as less than human. Tarrou notes that the worst thing is that they are 'forgotten people', forgotten by both their acquaintances and their loved ones. They have become barely visible, non-people.<sup>130</sup> Significantly, a representative of the legal system, Judge Othon, is quarantined as well, pointing to the overruling of the judiciary that occurs during a state of exception: everyone is or may become a *homo sacer*, including those who make the law.

*The Plague's homines sacri* suffer from 'a general separation from everything that makes up their lives'. They are exiled from their normal lives and yet, as the camp is contained within the town walls, they are included within normal life at the same time. This simultaneous exclusion and inclusion is emphasised: the sound of the running trams outside informs them 'that the life from which they were excluded continued a few metres away from them

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<sup>128</sup> *The Plague*, p. 185.

<sup>129</sup> Gray, p. 168; *The Plague*, p. 187.

<sup>130</sup> *The Plague*, pp. 184–86.

and that the concrete wall separated two worlds as foreign to one another as if they had been on different planet'.<sup>131</sup>

The crux of Agamben's social theory is that modern life is secretly structured around the exercise of pure power over human life that is exhibited in the camp and that the state of exception, that creates such zones of indistinction and reduces people to *homines sacri*, is becoming the norm. Does this happen in *The Plague*? At its centre, in the camp, simultaneously excluded and included bare life is made visible. However, the walls of the quarantined stadium are contained within the walls of the quarantined town, where a state of exception is also in place, where people also suffer from separation from loved ones beyond those walls and from feelings of exile, and where killing of innocent people has also been authorised. We thus have a zone of indistinction within a zone of indistinction and all the people within the town walls may be seen as on the way to becoming *homines sacri*. The Chinese box structure of walls within walls, a zone of indistinction within a zone of indistinction, sets up a pattern which invites the reader to question whether 'normal' life beyond the town walls is also, in fact, structured by the state of exception, based on the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of bare life.

We do not glimpse life anywhere but Oran, but the opening pages of *The Plague* give us an exposition of 'normal life' in this 'ordinary', 'entirely modern town' when it is not under a state of siege. Commerce structures every aspect of life from people's relations with each other (they 'consume' rather than love one another; and once not useful to the commercial life of the town due to illness or dying, they are excluded and forgotten) to their relation with nature ('spring [...] is sold in the market-place'). They are thus exiled from each other and from nature (the town is treeless) and devoid of a sense of anything transcendent

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<sup>131</sup> *The Plague*, p. 184.



(such as 'soul' or 'inklings').<sup>132</sup> Finally, there is no disorder and the town induces sleep and boredom, suggesting a dulled critical ability. Despite this, Oran is a seemingly happy, 'well-contented city': the inhabitants, in general, are unaware of the deadness of their lives.<sup>133</sup>

When Cottard asks Tarrou what he means by a 'return to normal life', Tarrou replies with a smile: "'New films in the cinema,'" emphasising the lack of distinction between plague and pre-plague life.<sup>134</sup> As Le Blanc and Jones note: '*The Plague's* "no" to Hitler's fascism and totalitarianism is not a "yes" to the liberal capitalist paradigm'.<sup>135</sup> The similarities between the state of exception and 'normal' Western life, between fascism and liberal capitalism, are frequently highlighted throughout *The Plague*: both are structured by exile and separation, suggesting that the two paradigms are not as distinct from one another as might be supposed. If we accept Agamben's theory that the camp is the secret structuring *nomos* of modernity, we might speculate that the part of the reason Rieux hurries to record the 'peculiar events' of the plague on the eve of the victory celebrations is specifically to incorporate Tarrou's testimony of the camp, momentarily made visible during the state of exception, before its existence is denied and it slips back into obscurity.

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<sup>132</sup> *The Plague*, pp. 5-7.

<sup>133</sup> *The Plague*, p. 238.

<sup>134</sup> *The Plague*, p. 215.

<sup>135</sup> LeBlanc and Jones, p. 221.

## ii) Hidden Allegory of Anticolonial Uprising: Re-reading Postcolonial Criticism

Camus, writing in response to Barthes's charge that *The Plague* was not politically engaged enough, comments:

*The Plague*, which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism. The proof is that although the enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized him. [...] *The Plague* is, in a sense, more than a chronicle of resistance. But it is certainly nothing less.<sup>136</sup>

While directing attention to the metaphor of fascist occupation, the use of the term 'a number of levels' opens up the possibility that there might be more than the two immediately apparent existential and totalitarian allegories at work in his novel. His next sentence subtly points to the connection between readership and interpretation: a European readership in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War would have recognised the enemy as the Nazi regime. However, for his smaller French Algerian readership, I suggest the 'obvious content' would have been a situation of colonial mutiny. Violence between French *colons* and Muslim Algerians was escalating during the 1940s and the Sétif massacre at the end of the Second World War, in which six thousand Muslim Algerians were killed in reprisal for the deaths of one hundred and three *colons*, would have been fresh in the minds of such readers, as well as, of course, in Camus's.<sup>137</sup> *The Plague* is more than a chronicle of fascist resistance: it is also a chronicle of imagined and feared colonial uprising.

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<sup>136</sup> Albert Camus: *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, p. 220.

<sup>137</sup> Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977) pp. 26-27.

Postcolonial criticism (O'Brien, Said) has been damning of Camus's oeuvre and, in particular, *The Plague*, for its omission of native Algerian characters.<sup>138</sup> Countering O'Brien's assertion that the setting of Oran was more or less arbitrarily chosen merely because Camus was familiar with the town, and that Muslim Algerian characters were eliminated merely to make the allegory of occupied France 'work', an attentive reading of the novel shows that it holds not one but two political allegories, the second of which concerns a state of siege in French Algeria. It is not the case *The Plague* ignores the 'native question' and that the anticolonial Algerian insurrection eight years after the publication of *The Plague* was unforeseen by Camus, giving, in O'Brien's eyes, unintended 'tragic resonance to the work'.<sup>139</sup> The second level of siege allegory at work in *The Plague* is precisely that of anticolonial uprising in the French prefecture. On this level, *The Plague* constitutes both a critique of the repressive form of colonialism that operated in French Algeria and a warning of the anticolonial uprising that is likely to ensue. The novel offers a diagnosis of the town of Oran as sick *because of* the colonial regime which has led to the poor living conditions and state of health of the Arabs, thereby positing the need for colonial reform, but in ultimately quashing the mutiny and restoring order, it stays within the paradigm of colonialism, rejecting decolonisation as a solution. *The Plague* therefore certainly addresses the 'native question', showing far greater insight into colonial issues and criticism (albeit moderate) of colonialism than most postcolonial readings allow, but while it diagnoses the causes of anticolonial violence clearly, it is nonetheless firmly locked into a French colonial position and reaches an impasse in its thinking with regard to giving Muslim Algerians full agency and personhood.

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<sup>138</sup> O'Brien, pp. 207-23.

<sup>139</sup> O'Brien, p. 50.

According to most anglophone critics, Camus was not an anticolonialist: he never declared his position either in support or condemnation of Algerian independence.<sup>140</sup> He perceived that the main problem in Algeria was to do with the lack of assimilation through the two different languages spoken, French and Arabic, which meant there could be no true communication between the two groups.<sup>141</sup> He was certainly not oblivious to the cycle of violence that had developed under French colonial rule, giving an analysis in an article in *L'Express* in 1955:

Oppression, even if benevolent, and the lie of an occupation that always talked about assimilation without ever doing anything to bring it about, have given rise to various nationalist movements, which were ideologically weak but certainly audacious. These movements have been repressed.

Every instance of repression, whether measured or demented, every act of police torture, every legal judgement has increased the despair and the violence of the militants affected by them. In the end, the police have bred terrorists, who have in turn multiplied the number of police.<sup>142</sup>

This spiral of violence is exactly what *The Plague*, written eight years earlier, lays bare. *The Plague* is a critique of a form of colonialism which does nothing to

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<sup>140</sup> That he was not an anticolonialist is a view that is in keeping with most anglophone criticism, Edward J. Hughes, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. by Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1-10 (p. 7). Said sees Camus's work as being part of the colonial project and in 'outright opposition to Algerian independence', Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 212.

Francophone critics tend to be more forgiving: Bernard-Henri Levy even sees Camus as 'one of the first opponent of colonial rule in France', Ieme Van der Poel, 'Camus: a life lived in critical times', in Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, pp. 13-25 (p. 24). Interestingly, several Algerian intellectuals have recently 'reclaimed' Camus including Assia Djebar, Abdelkader Djemai and Aziz Chouaki, Charles Forsdick, 'Camus and Sartre: the great quarrel', in Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, pp. 118-30 (p. 128).

<sup>141</sup> Van der Poel, p. 22.

<sup>142</sup> Camus cited in Van der Poel, p. 23.

assimilate its subjects. The silenced, erased Arabs points to their lack of voice and legal status, as well as their lack of assimilation.

O'Brien's highly influential postcolonial critique, which Said makes use of to arrive at his conclusions that Camus's works are 'interventions in the history of French efforts in Algeria, making and keeping it French', deserves close critical attention.<sup>143</sup> As other critics have argued in relation to O'Brien's reading of Camus's unfinished novel *Le Premier Homme*, I find issues concerning colonialism in *The Plague* are much more subtle, complex and informed than O'Brien's reductive and at times confused reading allows.<sup>144</sup>

O'Brien's argument is that the erasure of native Algerians from the semi-fictionalised setting of Oran unwittingly colludes with a programme of extreme colonial repression. *The Plague*, for O'Brien, effects an 'artistic final solution of the problem of the Arabs of Oran': they should be repressed, silenced, even eliminated.<sup>145</sup> I write *unwittingly* colludes because O'Brien takes the absence of native Algerian characters as a highly problematic oversight on Camus's part, a 'serious flaw', which it certainly would be if *The Plague* were a realist novel. However, *The Plague* makes no claims of being realist: it is an allegory that Camus 'wanted to be read on a number of levels'. Oran's unreal space is marked by its jumble of anachronistic phenomena – plague, siege, cinema and concentration camp. Camus, responding to Barthes' criticism that *The Plague* was not politically engaged enough, comments in parentheses: 'many of your remarks are clarified by the very simple fact I do not believe in realism in art', and this same comment may be used to undo much of O'Brien's reading.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup>O'Brien, p. 212.

<sup>144</sup> Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory, Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999) p. 160; Debra Kelly, 'Le Premier Homme and the literature of loss', in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. by Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 191-202 (pp. 191-92).

<sup>145</sup> O'Brien, pp. 48-49.

<sup>146</sup> *Albert Camus: Selected Essays and Notebooks*, p. 221.

O'Brien sees *The Plague* as a 'sermon' and not a novel, with Camus preaching directly to the reader. He does not find the disclosure in the last few pages of the novel that Rieux is the narrator convincing, stating: 'It is Albert Camus who is talking to us.'<sup>147</sup> Of course, this is largely a matter of aesthetics and subjective taste: I find *The Plague* works as a novel and that the withholding of the identity of the narrator is successful. In fact, the move from apparent objectivity to subjectivity is essential in understanding the novel: the narrator is revealed as fallible and it may be that the other voice that is woven into the narration –Tarrou's – sees and understands more than Rieux.

It is worth looking closely at the passage in *The Plague* when the journalist Rambert asks Rieux about the health of the Arabs, which I argue O'Brien has misread. My reading of the passage, on the other hand, finds that this is the point where the link between the native Algerians' state of health and the plague is posited, and the allegory of anticolonial uprising is suggested. The passage in question is this:

[Rambert] enquêtait pour un grand journal de Paris sur les conditions de vie des Arabes et voulait des renseignements sur leur état sanitaire. Rieux lui dit que cet état n'était pas bon. Mais il voulait savoir, avant d'aller plus loin, si le journaliste pouvait dire la vérité.

– Certes, dit l'autre.

– Je veux dire: pouvez-vous porter condamnation totale?

– Totale, non, il faut bien le dire. Mais je suppose que cette condamnation serait sans fondement.

Doucement, Rieux dit qu'en effet une pareille condamnation serait sans fondement, mais qu'en posant cette question, il cherchait seulement à savoir si le témoignage de Rambert pouvait ou non être sans réserves.

– Je n'admets que les témoignages sans réserves. Je ne soutiendrai pas le vôtre de mes renseignements.

– C'est le langage de Saint-Just, dit le journaliste en souriant.

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<sup>147</sup> O'Brien, p. 44.

Rieux dit sans élever le ton qu'il n'en savait rien, mais que c'était le langage d'un homme lassé du monde ou il vivait, ayant pourtant le goût de ses semblables et décidé à refuser, pour sa part, l'injustice et les concessions.<sup>148</sup>

[Rambert, a journalist from Paris, who 'wore sporty clothes and seemed at ease with the world'] was doing an investigation for a large Parisian newspaper about the living conditions of the Arabs and wanted information about their state of health. Rieux told them that their health was not good; but before going any further, he wanted to know if the journalist could tell the truth.

"Certainly," the other man said.

"I mean, can you make an unqualified indictment?"

"Unqualified? No, I have to say I can't. But surely there wouldn't be any grounds for unqualified criticism?"

Rieux gently answered that a total condemnation would indeed be groundless, but that he had asked the question merely because he wanted to know if Rambert's report could be made unreservedly or not.

"I can only countenance a report without reservations, so I shall not be giving you any information to contribute to yours."

"You're talking the language of Saint Just," the journalist said with a smile.

Without raising his voice Rieux said that he knew nothing about that, but that it was the language of a man weary of the world in which he lived, yet who still had some feeling for his fellow men and was determined for his part to reject any injustice and any compromise.<sup>149</sup>

O'Brien comments:

When Rieux learns that Rambert would not be in a position to 'condemn totally' the health situation among the Arabs, should he find that it deserved such condemnation – which in Rieux's own belief it did not – he refuses to give him any information on the subject. Now the curious

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<sup>148</sup> *La Peste*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>149</sup> *The Plague*, pp. 11-12.

thing is that, after having provided the occasion for this demonstration of integrity, the Arabs of Oran absolutely cease to exist. Their problems, including their health problems, had been sufficiently large and distinct to attract the visit of a reporter from 'a large Paris newspaper' but at that point they disappear.<sup>150</sup>

O'Brien views this exchange as functioning solely to demonstrate Rieux's integrity as a man and a narrator. I dispute this. What it demonstrates is that Rieux, in this particular situation, does not want to share information with someone who is not free to tell the truth, and who may use the information in a political manner. This exchange reveals to us that: 1. the native Algerians are in a poor state of health; 2. the Parisian newspapers do not report the truth about their colonies and 3, these papers have an interest in downplaying the poor state of health amongst their colonial subjects. This suggests that there is a link between the poor health of the native Algerians and the colonial regime. O'Brien states a little too assertively that Rieux does not believe that the state of the Arabs' health deserves condemnation – he says it does not deserve 'total' condemnation, suggesting that it deserves some, perhaps even quite a lot, just not 'total'. This a carefully hedged political discussion: Rieux does not want to abet the colonial intentions of the Parisian newspaper. The political nature of their conversation is underscored by the reference to Saint-Just, which is not commented on by O'Brien. This should be hyphenated as it is in the French version: Saint-Just not Saint Just. It is not a reference to a saint and to notions of justice and telling the truth, which is perhaps how O'Brien reads it, adding weight to his understanding that the function of this exchange is to underline Rieux's integrity. It is a reference to one of the central figures of the French Revolution: Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, who along with Robespierre, called for the execution of King Louis XVI. Rambert is implying that Rieux, in refusing to

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<sup>150</sup> O'Brien, p. 46.



help the Parisian newspaper in its biased reporting, is aligning himself with a revolutionary position. Rieux, as is typical of his character, shies away from being called political or overtly anticolonial (which he is not: being part of the colonial structure of Algeria, he colludes with it) but he will not let the truth of the undeniably poor state of health of the Arabs be slanted for Paris's colonial propaganda.

So what is being said here is both more complex and more subtle than O'Brien's reading allows. Not everything is being spoken: a lot has to be inferred. The importance of Rambert and Rieux's exchange is crucial – and O'Brien is right to draw attention to it – but I suggest he misreads it and then bases much of his ensuing argument on this misreading. When O'Brien comments that after this point, the Arabs and their health problems 'disappear', he fails, as does Rambert, to draw the clear connection between the native Algerians' poor state of health and the plague. The whole town, not just the Arabs, falls sick. The living conditions and health of the native Algerians that Rambert has been sent to report on are decisively diagnosed as so dire *by the novel* that a plague erupts and the whole town has to be quarantined, but Rambert – and O'Brien – fail to see the story, which is surely, in journalistic terms, a scoop.

The plague rises from within the town. The only possible cause for the outbreak of the plague that is suggested in the novel is the poor living conditions and bad health of the Arabs. Their state of health is so dire as to attract the attention of the Paris newspaper, as O'Brien notes, but – and here O'Brien fails to join the dots in what amounts to a crucial misreading of the text – it cannot be reported on unreservedly, or even discussed openly, because to do so would constitute an indictment of the colonial powers. In other words, the French colonial administration is responsible for the poor living conditions of the Arabs and so for the outbreak of plague. Rieux points to this link between

the poor living conditions of the Arabs and the plague again when he says to Rambert, once the plague has broken out: 'Well, now you have a good subject for a report'.<sup>151</sup> Significantly, they are walking through the 'oddly deserted' African quarter on their way to the town centre, when they have this second conversation.<sup>152</sup> Whereas O'Brien reads further evidence of Camus's 'disquieting' colonial erasure of Arabs from the streets, it is, of course, possible to read that the streets are empty because the Arabs who live there have contracted the plague and are dying or in quarantine.<sup>153</sup> In other words, it is the repressive form of colonialism that is making the Arabs sick is silencing and erasing them. Rieux and Rambert conclude their conversation, standing under a 'dirty and grimed' statue of the Republic, the dirt and grime on the monument to France suggesting that *The Plague* is indeed, on one level, a critique of France's repressive form of colonialism, which perhaps has to be veiled in order to be read by a French readership.<sup>154</sup>

*The Plague* may thus be seen, on the one hand, as a damning report for colonial Paris on the living conditions of the native Algerians, caused by a repressive form of colonialism which erases their voices and legal status, and which leads to civil uprising. On the other hand, it is a defensive text: the French authorities are shown to react in a swift, oppressive way, declaring a state of siege and detaining the insurgents in isolation camps. The rebellion is brutally squashed and the colonial status quo is reinstated. While *The Plague* addresses rather than ignores the 'native question', giving a diagnosis of what ails the town of Oran, it cannot think beyond the colonial paradigm to offer a solution that would give native Algerians full agency.

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<sup>151</sup> *The Plague*, p. 66.

<sup>152</sup> *The Plague*, p. 66.

<sup>153</sup> O'Brien, p. 47.

<sup>154</sup> *The Plague*, p. 67.

Returning to the figure of the camp, *The Plague*, read as an allegory of anticolonial uprising, shows the concentration camp to be as central to colonialism as it is to totalitarianism, in its role of containing and eliminating civil disorder and reinstating the status quo. In fact, both Agamben and Arendt point out that the concentration camp was first used precisely in situations of colonial oppression. The novel offers this knowledge of the link between totalitarianism and colonialism, but it seems to be something Camus himself had not fully grasped.

*The Plague* is primarily addressed to a French readership. It offers a complex double allegory of the 'sick' political condition of France in the 1940s, threatened by fascism in Europe and of anticolonial revolt in its 'southern department' of Algeria. As the plague rises from within the town of Oran, France is shown to be already infected, harbouring the germs of both plagues within its juridico-political constitution. It is implicated both in colluding with the Nazi regime and with causing the rise of nationalist Algerian violence. In erasing fascists from the first reading and native Algerians from the second, a fictional space is created in which the two allegories can co-exist in order to give a complete image of 1940s France, and critical attention is guided away from solely blaming the other for the crises. Instead, the response and the responsibility of the French are held up for examination. Ultimately though, as noted, the colonial reading defends the status quo. *The Plague's* engagement with the three political paradigms that have shaped and continue to shape much of the world, of course, extends its relevance far beyond France and perhaps accounts for its continuing transnational popularity as much as its existential overtones.

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With *The Plague*, we have seen how the powerful literary trope of the siege can be used to render complex political realities in a graspable, concrete way. In the following chapter we move from the siege in literature to literature in the siege, with a consideration of Susan Sontag's staging of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo. We leave behind the linearity of the siege narrative that helped give shape to Zora's recollection of her ten months of life under siege in my novel, and move onto *Godot's* extreme uncertainty, repetition and circularity of time that better reflects the substance of life under siege, and which has informed the moments of waiting in my novel, in particular, the overarching present-tense narrative.

*The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot* perhaps do not seem immediately comparable. The former is a novel with a familiar, linear narrative that follows the five-part structure of Greek tragedy.<sup>155</sup> The latter, sometimes described as an 'anti-play', explodes traditional form, has no plot, no climax and can be seen as endlessly circular. *The Plague*, set in the specific location of Oran, focuses on the *polis* and the collective, and presents an ethics of resistance through community-building and solidarity in the form of the health teams. *Waiting for Godot*, on the other hand, is set in unspecified wasteland 'in the midst of nothingness', has only four main characters and is concerned with the symbiotic relationships between them. It gives no apparent sense of the possibility of resistance.

Yet there are several points of convergence which are significant for this thesis. Both Camus and Beckett lived through the years of Nazi occupation in France, worked for the Resistance, and wrote the works under discussion in the immediate postwar years. *The Plague* was written in 1947 and *En attendant Godot* from October 1948 to January 1949.<sup>156</sup> Camus, as we have seen, endorsed reading his novel as an allegory of fascism. While Beckett rejected such a

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<sup>155</sup> Gray, p. 171.

<sup>156</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London, Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 378.

reading of *Godot*,<sup>157</sup> his experience of the war years, in occupied Paris and then in hiding in Rousillon, certainly inform the play's themes of hunger, physical pain, lack of shelter, radical uncertainty, exile and the situation of interminable waiting for 'real life' to resume.<sup>158</sup> In *The Plague*, when the pestilence is at its peak and a state of siege is declared, we are told 'the whole town seemed like a waiting-room'; Oran grinds to a halt and is transformed into a 'huge necropolis'. Thus, motifs of exile, separation, waiting and stasis are common to both works.

Sontag's 1993 wartime production mirrored its besieged audience's situation of waiting and abandonment. While *Waiting for Godot* is endlessly open to interpretation – a signifier which never finds its signified – her context-specific staging draws out its many parallels with the excluded nature of life under siege, and so I again turn to Agamben to construct a reading of Beckett's play in the following chapter.

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<sup>157</sup> Elin Diamond, 'Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett, and the Politics of Seeming', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 44.4 (2000), 31-43 (p. 39).

<sup>158</sup> Knowlson p. 351 and p. 380. Stanley E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) p. 35.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*

Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!<sup>159</sup>

In *The Plague*, Tarrou and Cottard go to see a performance of the Greek tragedy *Orpheus and Eurydice* in the Municipal Opera House. 'Evening dress drove away the plague,' the narrator dryly informs us.<sup>160</sup> In the end, however, it is the plague that drives away evening dress: the actor playing Orpheus dies of the plague in the middle of a duo with Eurydice, resulting in the panicked emptying of the theatre. Tarrou and Cottard remain, a reflection of their plague-ridden life presenting itself in the dead actor on the stage. They stood before:

an image of what their life was at that time: the plague on the stage in the person of a performer like a limp puppet; and, in the auditorium, luxury that had become useless in the form of fans and lace stoles left behind on the red plush of the seats.<sup>161</sup>

The plague has reduced them to lifeless marionettes: imprisoned performers with nothing to perform, no free will and no agency.

When Susan Sontag chose to direct *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo under siege, she did not do so because it might 'drive away' the siege for a few hours,

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<sup>159</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Waiting for Godot: revised text', in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, ed. by Dougal McMillan and James Knowlson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 38.

<sup>160</sup> *The Plague*, p. 155.

<sup>161</sup> *The Plague*, p. 156.

providing relief in the form of escapism and distraction. She did it primarily as an act of 'solidarity' with the trapped citizens of Sarajevo and because, by holding up a mirror to Sarajevans of what 'their life was at that time', she hoped *Waiting for Godot* would fortify and console them by transfiguring their suffering through art.<sup>162</sup> The life that is represented in Beckett's play is not dissimilar to the 'limp puppet' in *The Plague*: Sarajevans had been reduced to being not much more than lifeless puppets with little agency and 'nothing to be done' but wait, much as *Godot's* Estragon and Vladimir have been reduced, imprisoned by their endless waiting on the stage with each new performance. In the non-play or anti-play that is *Waiting for Godot*, which has no traditional plot or climax and where 'nothing', as Vivian Mercier famously put it, 'happens twice', it seems that Estragon and Vladimir exist in an excluded time-space outside the 'normal' time-space of a traditional play or opera, such as *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Susan Sontag, in staging *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo, was not only reflecting the zone of exclusion Sarajevo had become to the Sarajevan audience, she was also calling the West's attention to this zone of indistinction that had opened up in Europe. Her wartime production, restricted by a lack of material resources and the physical and mental exhaustion of its cast, was a way of bearing witness to life under siege in Sarajevo. Far from 'fiddling while Rome burns' as one journalist suggested, Sontag presents her action as serious and engaged.<sup>163</sup>

The plague-caused death of the actor playing Orpheus which leads to the hasty emptying of the auditorium by an audience fearful of contagion depicts a bleeding of the 'real' world into art and of art into the 'real' world. It is a literary representation of a breaking of the fourth wall so that text and world interact. By staging *Waiting for Godot* in a war zone, the potential for interaction between

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<sup>162</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo', *Performing Arts Journal*, 16.2 (May 1994), 87-106, p. 103 and p. 89.

<sup>163</sup> Sontag, p. 91.

text and world was dramatically increased. On the one hand, there was the risk that the theatre might be shelled mid-performance or one of the actors or Sontag might be killed by sniper fire on their way to the theatre. Of course, these risks were run by everyone every day in Sarajevo but the resonance of such an event would have been enormous. On the other hand, the UN or the American president Bill Clinton could have decided to intervene so ending the siege, and thus, happily, ending the need for Sontag's context-specific version of *Godot*. Although Sontag denies that her action was political, she certainly made her position in favour of intervention very clear in both her interviews about the production and by having the boy in *Waiting for Godot* wear a blue UN hat, so aligning Godot with the UN and Clinton: "'waiting for Clinton" [...] was very much what we were doing', she points out.<sup>164</sup> Further, Sontag's version of the play encouraged interaction with the world in the form of provoking political response. Due to wartimes circumstances, Sontag abandoned the second act of *Waiting for Godot*. Even though unintended, her truncated version invites the West to rewrite the ending of the play: it invites Godot to arrive in the form of Western intervention to end the interminable waiting of Sarajevans.

Sontag, criticised by Beckett scholars for radically altering the play and by journalists and other intellectuals for the impracticality of her action, was nonetheless, as one of the only Western intellectuals to go to Sarajevo, welcomed by Sarajevans themselves, who realised that her presence there could only be 'good for Sarajevo' by drawing international attention to their suffering.<sup>165</sup> She was made an honorary citizen of Sarajevo and the square outside the National Theatre has been renamed after her. An article in the

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<sup>164</sup> Sontag, p. 100.

<sup>165</sup> For criticism: Lois Oppenheim, 'Playing with Beckett's Plays: On Sontag in Sarajevo and Other Directorial Infidelities', in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, ed. by SE Gontarski, 4.2 (1995), 35-46.; Jean Baudrillard, 'No Reprieve for Sarajevo', in *CTheory.net* <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.asp?id=60>> [accessed 17 May 2011]; Sontag notes she was told 'the story of production would be "good for Sarajevo"', p. 102.



*Observer* goes as far as claiming that her production 'drew so much attention to the city's plight that many believe it helped end the war'.<sup>166</sup> While this risks distastefully exaggerating the influence of her production, it does point to the extraordinary symbolic power and resonance of staging *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo under siege. The choice of play was excellent as *Waiting for Godot*, a play 'capable of drifting across continents and contexts',<sup>167</sup> absorbing its context and taking on situation-specific meaning wherever it is performed, acted like a magnifying glass, focalising international attention on the trapped, abandoned citizens of Sarajevo and saying: 'this is happening here'. In what follows, I give the background of Sontag's singular production of *Godot* and discuss the main changes she made, before giving an Agamben-oriented reading of the play, invited by its wartime context and Sontag's understanding that it is a play about the 'abandoned', figuring *Godot* as a space of exclusion in which Vladimir and Estragon reside as *homines sacri*. They are excluded from the normal order of society, yet bound to it through their waiting for Godot, who, in determining their fate, behaves in a sovereign manner towards them. In Vladimir and Estragon, besieged Sarajevans recognised themselves, while Western audiences might glimpse what, according to Agamben, we may easily become or are already in the process of becoming – *homines sacri* – as the exception becomes the rule.

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<sup>166</sup> Imogen Carter, 'Desperately thanking Susan', *Observer*, 5 April 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/apr/05/susan-sontag-godot-sarajevo-bosnia>> [accessed 5 January 2014]

<sup>167</sup> Elin Diamond, 'Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett, and the Politics of Seeming', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 44.4 (2000), 31-43, p. 38.

### Sontag's Production

Susan Sontag first visited Sarajevo in April 1993, a year into the siege. There she met Haris Pašović, a prominent Sarajevo theatre producer and director who had mainly worked in Serbia before the war, but who had returned to his hometown at the end of 1992, breaking into rather than out of the siege, in order to put on plays and thus show solidarity with his trapped fellow citizens. After an initial hiatus at the start of the siege, theatrical production resumed, as did artistic life in all areas, becoming a point of pride and a means of expressing defiance of the siege: 'every performance was a victory of civilian life over the war'.<sup>168</sup> Jestrović notes that the fact artistic production was possible during wartime meant Sarajevo was not a 'camp' in Agamben's sense, where such resistance and expressions of agency would not have been possible:

In the 'underground life' of the city which could never be fully contained by the state of exception, the inhabitants alone reclaimed their safety, freedom and agency, asserting their status and role as citizens.<sup>169</sup>

Productions often had an anti-war message, ranging from the very popular anti-Vietnam musical *Hair* to weightier plays such as Euripides' *Alcestis* and Sophocles' *Ajax*.<sup>170</sup> Sontag, therefore, was not unique in directing a play in Sarajevo under siege, but she was the only Westerner to do so. When she asked Pašović if she could put on a play, he immediately said yes and asked what play she would direct. Sontag knew at once that it would have to be *Waiting for Godot*: 'There was one obvious play for me to direct. Beckett's play, written over

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<sup>168</sup> Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) p. 55.

<sup>169</sup> Silvija Jestrović, *Performance, Space, Utopia: Cities of War, Cities of Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 160.

<sup>170</sup> Maček, p. 56; Sontag, p. 88.

forty years ago, seems written for, and about, Sarajevo.<sup>171</sup> By this she was, in part, referring to the play's central situation of waiting to be saved which paralleled that of the Sarajevans. The tramps provided an 'apt illustration of the feeling of Sarajevans': 'bereft, hungry, dejected, waiting for an arbitrary, alien power to save them or take them under its protection'.<sup>172</sup>

She returned in July 1993 for rehearsals. The script was in Serbo-Croatian (or 'the mother tongue' or Bosnian as people were starting to call their language), and she learnt it in ten days. Working conditions were difficult: there was no electricity and very few candles which meant the actors could barely see each other or their scripts in the dark. They were exhausted and malnourished from seventeen months of war, and this affected their ability to memorise their lines. Several of them had two-hour round trips on foot to the theatre and would lie down on the stage in between saying their lines to regain their strength. It was performed in the small Youth Theatre near the city centre. The stage consisted of two levels: a four-foot-high platform, with the tree on the left, which Pozzo and Lucky acted on, and the stage floor where the six actors who played Didi and Gogo usually stayed, (Sontag had tripled the duo for this production). There was room for an audience of about a hundred who sat on United Nations flour sacks as seats.<sup>173</sup> The tickets were free and neither Sontag nor the actors were paid a salary. It ran for around a week, all productions being matinées due to the nighttime curfew and the lack of electric lighting.<sup>174</sup>

Sontag's production, which was just Act One of the two act original, ran at ninety minutes. It was 'gender-blind', having a female Pozzo, and three pairs

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<sup>171</sup> Sontag, p. 88.

<sup>172</sup> Sontag, p. 97.

<sup>173</sup> John F Burns, 'To Sarajevo, Writer Brings Good Will and 'Godot'', *New York Times*, 19 August 1993 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/19/world/to-sarajevo-writer-brings-good-will-and-godot.html>> [accessed 16 December 2012].

<sup>174</sup> Sontag, pp. 92-97.

of Estragons and Vladimirs: a female-female pair and a male-female pair in addition to Beckett's male-male coupling. This led to a 'Greek chorus' effect when they chanted some of the lines in unison, and was responsible in part for the longer than usual timing of Act One. The nine actors were of all three ethno-nationalities – not a 'politically correct' move as has been suggested critically by some commentators, but reflective of the mixed nationalities of Sarajevo's actors, as Sontag points out.<sup>175</sup> It was performed sombrely, with all comic tones removed, and Sontag notes how Lucky's 'nonsense' speech about divine apathy and abandonment made perfect sense in wartime Sarajevo. The 'boy' in Sontag's production was a strapping man wearing a blue UN hat, who was attacked in fury by all six Vladimirs and Estragons when he announced: 'Mr Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow.'<sup>176</sup>

### Sontag's Adaptation

While *Waiting for Godot* has been previously staged in situations of political oppression, such as in South Africa under apartheid in 1980, and in Palestine under Israeli occupation in 1984 – showing its affinity with siege-like situations which aim to suppress, contain and silence certain categories of people – and women have acted in some or all of the roles before, what makes Sontag's production unique is the amputation of Act Two and the multiplication of Vladimir and Estragons.<sup>177</sup> These alterations to the play are explained by Sontag

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<sup>175</sup> Sontag, pp. 92-93

<sup>176</sup> Sontag, p. 98.

<sup>177</sup> For political *Godots*, see David Bradby, *Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, Plays in Production (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2001), p. 162. A female cast played in Avignon, France, in 1991: 'Judge Authorizes All-female "Godot"', *New York Times*, 6 July 1991 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/06/theater/judge-authorizes-all-female-godot.html>> [accessed 5 January 2014].

in terms of circumstance and necessity. There were too many good actors to choose from, so rather than decide she multiplied the number of roles. Consequentially, Act One ran longer than usual, which, combined with the fact that it was too much to ask of the physically weak audience to sit through another hour with no bathroom or water, led to her lopping off Act Two.<sup>178</sup> Her emphasis on the changes being caused by war circumstance rather than being intentional staging decisions, directs attention away from the fact that she, in effect, produced a play that radically differed from Beckett's original. It was not just a production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo, it was pointedly Susan Sontag's *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo.

Sontag writes that *Waiting for Godot* 'may be the only work in dramatic literature in which Act I is itself is a complete play', pointing out that the repetition of the sequence of events in Act II – Didi and Gogo wait, Pozzo and Lucky arrive and depart, the boy informs them that Godot will not be coming that day – means that in some senses Act I can stand for the whole.<sup>179</sup> Of course, what is lost by the omission of Act II is not only the realisation that their waiting, the spectacle of Pozzo and Lucky's master-slave relationship, and Godot's non arrival, is endlessly repeated, but also the worsening that occurs: Pozzo turns blind and Lucky dumb. The repeated structure, the worsening of the situation, as well as the confusion of time that occurs between the acts, are essential to an understanding of Beckett's play. Its meaning, which is not conferred with Godot's arrival, springs instead from its repeated structure and doubleness of form.<sup>180</sup> Act I alone cannot 'represent the whole of *Waiting for Godot*' as Sontag claims.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Sontag, p. 92, p. 97.

<sup>179</sup> Sontag, p. 97.

<sup>180</sup> James L. Calderwood, 'Ways of Waiting in *Waiting for Godot*', *Modern Drama*, 129 (1986), 365-75.

<sup>181</sup> Sontag, p. 97.

However, in the specific context of Sarajevo under siege, given that the Sarajevan audience after seventeen months of siege would have immediately recognised their situation of futile waiting interspersed with and surrounded by violence in Act I, knowing themselves that this unbearable, extreme situation of exclusion was repeated daily – there was, arguably, less need for Act II to bring out the repetition of non-action that structures *Waiting for Godot*. Sontag notes:

Perhaps I felt the despair of Act I was enough for the Sarajevo audience, and that I wanted to spare them a second time when Godot does not arrive. Maybe I wanted to propose, subliminally, that Act II might be different.<sup>182</sup>

Truncating the play served not only to spare the gloom of her audience, but also might be seen, tentatively, to invite the world to respond in the form of intervention.

Sontag's crowded, truncated play, then, functions as a political statement (underscored by the fact that the boy wears a blue UN hat) and a provocation. Having three Didis and three Gogos not only allows for the possibility of a multiethnic cast, but also focuses attention on the sheer number of abandoned people, of *homines sacri*, on the stage and shifts Lucky's nonsense speech to a more central, climactic position.

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<sup>182</sup> Sontag, p. 97.

### *Waiting for Godot* as Space of Exception

Beckett once clarified that the minimalist country road setting of *Waiting for Godot* was not strictly a road, which was why no traffic ever passed, but a 'track on wasteland'.<sup>183</sup> It may thus be seen as an excluded, threshold space, outside the more normal urban sphere of daily life. It is a space beyond civic protection where Estragon is beaten every night without his assailants being punished: one of Agamben's lawless zones of indistinction.

Estragon and Vladimir inhabit this liminal space, but they are not native to it ('we're not from these parts', Estragon points out) and do not in any way 'own' it.<sup>184</sup> They are often depicted as tramps or prisoners and certainly seem to be marginalised figures, uncannily akin to *homines sacri*. Significantly, it is made clear in their first discussion about their relation to Godot and what he might offer them, that they no longer have any rights:

ESTRAGON: We've lost our rights?

VLADIMIR: [*Distinctly.*] We got rid of them.<sup>185</sup>

These are men who no longer have *bios*, or political existence: they are *homines sacri*. Pozzo, though recognising them as human beings on first meeting them: 'You are human beings none the less', qualifies this with a less certain: 'As far as one can see', and '*bursts into an enormous laugh*' at the thought that they are of 'the same species' as himself, further underlining their marginalisation and reduction of status.<sup>186</sup> He fails to recognise them each time he sees them, as does the boy, as indeed does everybody: 'nobody ever recognises us', Vladimir says,

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<sup>183</sup> Samuel Beckett cited by director Donald Howarth in Bradby, p. 170.

<sup>184</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 22.

<sup>185</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 18.

<sup>186</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 22.

perhaps suggesting that he and Estragon are so marginalised as to have become more or less invisible.<sup>187</sup> They are reminiscent of the liminal, antisocial protagonists of Beckett's short fiction 'The Expelled' and 'The End' written around the same time as *Godot*.<sup>188</sup> In fact, 'expelled' would be a good word to describe the pair: they seem to have been expelled from normal life, condemned to living a rough non-existence, which is surrounded by violence, permeated with hunger and pain, and structured around the non-activity of waiting.

Although Vladimir and Estragon are excluded from normal life, they are not free to wander where they want, held in place by their appointment with Godot. Vladimir's denial that they are 'tied' to Godot, starts rigorously and ends uncertainly:

VLADIMIR: To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it.  
[Pause.] For the moment.<sup>189</sup>

However, the fact that neither character moves from the stage at the end of either act belies the actuality that they are indeed bound to Godot. They are thus excluded, yet kept in place, much as Agamben understands the 'bare life' of *homines sacri* to be simultaneously excluded from and included in political life: 'Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life.'<sup>190</sup> Godot may, in Agamben's terms, be seen as the person who acts as sovereign to them. Indeed, as Pozzo points out, Godot has their 'future in his hands' and, to all extent and purposes, their lives

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<sup>187</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 45. Both the repeated sequence of events of Acts I and II and Vladimir's comments (p. 44) suggest Pozzo and Lucky have passed by the waiting pair before.

<sup>188</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Expelled, The Calmative, The End & First Love*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 2009). *The Expelled* was written between December 1946 and January 1947 and *The End* was written in July 1946.

<sup>189</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 20.

<sup>190</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 7.



as well.<sup>191</sup> If we follow Agamben's thinking, the implication would be that it is Godot who both excludes Vladimir and Estragon from normal life in the form of a ban that strips them of their rights, and that he may treat them as he wants, even killing them with impunity. Of course, this appears to run counter to what Godot seems to offer, which might be salvation, meaning, work, readmittance into 'normal' life,<sup>192</sup> or no more than a night of shelter in a hay loft,<sup>193</sup> but is, in any case, left uncertain and open. We might assume, along with Vladimir and Estragon, that they are waiting for something positive that will alleviate or end their unbearable situation of waiting. However, the opposite is delivered: each night Godot renews their tie to him, and his sovereignty over them, by sending a messenger boy to tell them he will surely come the next day. He thus prolongs their situation of waiting, keeping them as *homines sacri* in relation to him, unable to break free from the liminal space of exclusion. Seen this way, Godot very closely resembles Agamben's sovereign, the one who decides when to call a state of exception which opens up the zones of indistinction where *homines*

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<sup>191</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 28.

<sup>192</sup> Koshal, in her insightful Agamben-oriented reading of *Waiting for Godot*, argues that Mr Godot is a 'a placeholder for that elusive inside of bourgeois civil society' from which Estragon and Vladimir have been excluded. She notes that the reason prisoners have responded so enthusiastically to the play, while the first middle class audiences walked out of the auditorium in disgust, was that prisoners, as *homines sacri*, saw their situation of abandonment and confinement reflected back at them while bourgeois, theatre-going audiences did not. She challenges a universalist Everyman reading of *Godot*, asserting the play is specifically about the excluded of society. Erin Koshal, "Some Exceptions" and the "Normal Thing"; Reconsidering *Waiting for Godot's* Theatrical Form through its Prison Performances', *Modern Drama*, 53.2 (Summer 2010), 187-207, p. 192 and p. 188.

However, Koshal's reading seems to ignore Agamben's claim that Everyman and *homo sacer* are becoming increasingly conflated and indistinguishable. My reading focuses on Godot as sovereign rather than as rights-bearing citizen, which, in fact, structurally positions him in the same threshold space as *homo sacer*, rather than on the 'inside': both sovereign and *homo sacer* are simultaneously inside and outside the law.

<sup>193</sup> See Knowlson's discussion about Beckett's decision to reinstate a missing section of text to the English translation about sleeping 'snug and dry' in the hay loft, which gives 'a degree of plausibility to the image of physical comfort [being] all that the tramps can imagine receiving from Mr godot by way of respite from their continual waiting state.' *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, ed. by Dougal McMillan and James Knowlson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. xv-xvi.

*sacri* reside. The main difference is that Agamben's sovereign is real, whereas Godot never arrives and therefore may be construed as non-existent.

In fact, who Godot is and what he offers is so open to interpretation as to become irrelevant in a reading of *Godot*. It is not what he represents but his relation to Estragon and Vladimir that is crucial. In the relation of sovereign, he creates and maintains the state of exception in which they live. He might kill them with impunity, but he might equally behave charitably towards them by 'seeing' them (through the boy recognising them at last), and giving them shelter in his hay loft, so inviting them back into 'normal' life. I see both of these options as illusory within the terms of existence set up by the play: the repetition of the two acts, which re-performs and recreates the unbearable situation only with a worsening of conditions, points, as noted, to a repetition of waiting and the non-arrival of Godot *ad infinitum*. In this sense, Didi and Gogo are imprisoned, the only way out being, not through Godot, but through natural death or hanging themselves.

There are immediate parallels between this reading and Sontag's politicised version of *Godot*. The West (or Clinton or the United Nations) as Godot may be seen to be acting in a sovereign manner towards the trapped citizens of Sarajevo. This is in keeping with Sontag's thinking: she writes of the 'UN occupation of Sarajevo' and holds that the West's non-action was paramount to murder.<sup>194</sup> The boy, who wears a United Nations hat, fails to recognise the suffering of the Sarajavens and to fulfil the promise of help offered in the form of intervention. Sontag had the six tramps throw themselves on the boy (played by a sturdily built man) in fury, the long silence that followed – the longest in the Sarajevo production – underscoring this stark criticism of international policy.

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<sup>194</sup> Sontag, p.105.

With the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, we are presented with a play within a play. Vladimir and Estragon watch the spectacle of the 'master-slave' relationship enacted by the new pair. Pozzo, who discusses killing Lucky as if he were an animal, holds Lucky's life in his hands and is sovereign over him. Agamben points to the relational nature of sovereignty by stipulating that: 'the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereign.'<sup>195</sup> When Pozzo, after some uncertainty, recognises Vladimir and Estragon as 'human beings' and his 'likes' – 'Yes, gentlemen, I cannot go for long without the society of my likes' – they also become sovereign over Lucky.<sup>196</sup> Although the tramps resist this shift of relations at first, by pitying Lucky, they end up by helping with his oppression by beating him and silencing his speech.<sup>197</sup>

Lucky may be taken as an extreme example of Agamben's 'bare life'. Power is exercised biopolitically through his body: he is tied to Pozzo by a rope and physically exhausted from carrying Pozzo's belongings. He has been stripped of all political life, his agency and his voice: he only acts in response to Pozzo's commands and only talks when ordered to. He has been reduced to the status of Camus's 'limp puppet', more dead than alive. His monologue, when he is ordered to 'think' to entertain the other three, is merely the jumbled vestiges of the intellect he once had. The fact that he had the ability to 'think very prettily once', as Pozzo wistfully points out, and now no longer can, implies that he has been stripped of his *bios* through his subjugation to Pozzo.<sup>198</sup> In Act Two, the process of the production of 'bare life' is shown as complete.

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<sup>195</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 84.

<sup>196</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 23.

<sup>197</sup> Diamond makes this point about the tramps' collusion in the oppression of Lucky but for a different end. She sees that through their identification with Pozzo 'comes the tramp's only moment of political self-consciousness.' p. 40.

<sup>198</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 37.

Lucky, now dumb, has been entirely stripped of his voice and thus his *bios*. Pozzo, correspondingly, goes blind. No longer able to see or hear Lucky (because Lucky is dumb), Lucky, although still tied to Pozzo, is almost completely erased. Pozzo depends on Lucky completely now, but cannot see or hear him.

In Sontag's production, the effect of the omission of Act II was to shift emphasis onto Lucky's speech, giving it a near-climactic position, along with Godot's non-arrival and the attack of the boy. Thus the play's most extreme example of 'bare life' is caught at the stage before his voice is completely erased and moved firmly into a central position – the main speech of the play within the play – by presenting Act I as a complete play. Sontag, who instructed Lucky to deliver his monologue much more slowly than is usual, writes:

I wanted Atko [who played Lucky] to deliver Beckett's aria about divine apathy and indifference, about a heartless, petrifying world, as if it made sense. Which it does, especially in Sarajevo.<sup>199</sup>

In what ways does Lucky's unpunctuated, nonsense speech make sense? Lucky's 'think' can be seen as an attempt to reflect on his excluded, abandoned, liminal position as *homo sacer*:

LUCKY: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine athasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown [...]

The subject of his speech is not whether 'a personal God' exists but the 'exceptions' whom are unloved by this God 'for reasons unknown': in other words, the subject is excluded, unprotected *homines sacri*, such as himself.

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<sup>199</sup> Sontag, p. 98.

Lucky's frequent repetition of the phrase 'for reasons unknown' suggests both the innocence of such set apart people and that he is struggling to make sense of an exclusion that has no reason and makes no sense. This lack of logic is reflected in the apparent nonsense of the speech, which in its jumbled lack of punctuation might bear traces of shell shock or brain damage, and shows the breakdown of the subject and agency in the extreme biopolitical conditions that produce *homines sacri*. In his last words before dumbness, he struggles to understand why 'some exceptions' are abandoned to suffering and death despite the advances of civilisation.

Of course, Lucky's speech may be taken to refer to the abandoned condition of all humanity, and not just the 'exceptions'. In fact, precisely this is suggested by his opening words, for having characterised the 'personal God' as being entirely indifferent to human suffering, imperturbably oblivious and incommunicative ('from the heights of divine apathia' and so on), he contradicts this with the cliché 'who loves us dearly', which is thus emptied of any meaning. It does not seem that the personal God (for which may be substituted any 'Godot' or any sovereign to whom we are tied) he has just described loves anyone. In other words, we are all in the position of the 'exception', which corresponds to Agamben's understanding that we are all 'virtually' *homines sacri*. Sontag also, in saying '*especially in Sarajevo*' (my italics), suggests that the abandoned, broken down condition of Sarajevans is representative of the modern human condition as a whole.

If we take Godot as sovereign, in Agamben's sense, in relation to Vladimir and Estragon, and Pozzo as sovereign in relation to Lucky, then we can infer that Godot is to Vladimir and Estragon what Pozzo is to Lucky. What Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly witness each time they see Pozzo and Lucky (and the suggestion is that this spectacle has been repeated nightly for the perhaps fifty years they have been waiting for Godot) is a re-enactment of their

own gradual reduction to 'bare life'. While Vladimir and Estragon are not tied by a rope to Godot, and Godot is never physically present as Pozzo is, they are still tied by his nightly-renewed promise of coming. Godot, like Pozzo, is blind to Vladimir and Estragon, repeatedly failing to 'see' them through his messenger boy: 'You did see us, didn't you?' Vladimir anxiously asks.<sup>200</sup>

Thus, Beckett's play may be seen to hold the invisible space of exclusion or exception, where bare life is produced, up to the light. If Agamben is right, and such hidden spaces of exclusion are what structure Western liberal politics, if the totalitarian exception is becoming the rule, then this would account for part of the appeal of *Waiting for Godot*, which has been upheld by many as the quintessential twentieth-century play. It exposes how our lives are politically structured through a space of exclusion. It also invites us to question, as we watch a performance of Vladimir and Estragon watching the spectacle of Pozzo and Lucky, if we are also unknowing *homines sacri* bound to a Godot, to whom we are invisible, voiceless and expendable; if the line between citizen and *homo sacer* is becoming increasingly blurred, and if the democratic society we live in is structured by the totalitarian, or sovereign, exception.

Having considered the double siege allegory at work in *The Plague* and the mirroring of the non-life of those under siege in Sontag's Sarajevan production of *Waiting for Godot*, we now leave the figure of the siege behind, and turn to Drakulić's novel *As If I Am Not There* in the following chapter. Written some fifty years later than the first two works of exception, *As If I Am Not There* explicitly has its roots in war: the war of the break-up of Yugoslavia. The camp, glimpsed in *The Plague* and, according to Adorno, pervading Beckett's representation of reality, becomes the subject of our final text of exception, which is the most realist of the three works under consideration. We find ourselves in the most

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<sup>200</sup> *Waiting for Godot*: revised text, p. 48.

extreme zone of indistinction, where bare life and the exercise of biopolitical power is graphically depicted in the violated bodies of the women in an ethnic rape camp in Bosnia. Agamben comments on such camps, which were part of the programmes of 'ethnic cleansing', in *Homo Sacer*:

At issue in the former Yugoslavia is [...] an incurable rupture of the old *nomos* and a dislocation of populations and human lives along entirely new lines of flight. Hence the decisive importance of ethnic rape camps. If the Nazis never thought of effecting the Final Solution by making Jewish women pregnant, it is because the principle of birth that assured the inscription of life in the order of the nation-state was still – if in a profoundly transformed sense – in operation. This principle has now entered into a process of decay and dislocation.<sup>201</sup>

The repetition of the word 'dislocation' is important here, as these camps functioned precisely to dislocate ethnic groups. Although *As If I Am Not There* provides a clear literary representation of Agamben's camp, it is more concerned with portraying the breakdown of the individual subject than with political existence. In the following chapter, I do not examine the camp through Agamben's theory, but instead consider *As If I Am Not There* as an exile narrative and work of transnational literature, looking closely at its representation of the fragmented, diasporic subject: the refugee. *As If I Am Not There* is a text about the dislocation of the self and the former Yugoslavia. If *The Plague* gives a sense of the *polis* and community, and *Waiting for Godot* is concerned with symbiotic relationships, *As If I Am Not There* is about the fractured, dislocated self in isolation: the protagonist S. forms no significant relationships. Forcibly uprooted and expelled from her home, S. no longer belongs anywhere and is presented throughout the novel as existing between places. She is in constant transit and has no country. In the following chapter I

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<sup>201</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 176.

examine closely the unsettling double consciousness of our most up-to-date incarnation of *homo sacer*.

I turn in this final text to matters of representation to do with speaking for and about others, as well as representing an experience one has not had, issues that have concerned me when writing *The Painter of Bridges*. We have already touched on postcolonial matters when looking at O'Brien's criticism of *The Plague*. Having argued against his reading on the grounds that *The Plague* is not a realist novel and that it does, in fact, address the 'native question', in the following chapter I level almost O'Brien's exact charge against Camus at Drakulić. Through paying close attention to the narration and the character of S., I question whether *As If I Am Not There* is a novel or a sermon, and argue that at points it is not the protagonist S. but Drakulčić who is speaking directly to us. I feel the accusation holds currency in this case because, unlike *The Plague*, *As If I Am Not There* is not an allegory and presents itself as a realist text which draws on the testimony of raped women.



## CHAPTER 5

### The Strange Doubled Consciousness of *As If I Am Not There*

*As If I Am Not There*, a novel about a woman's experience of being imprisoned in a 'rape camp' during the Bosnian war and her forced migration via a Croatian refugee camp to Sweden, invites analysis as a piece of transnational writing on several levels.<sup>202</sup> It was written by a transnational writer, is aimed primarily at a transnational readership, has a displaced protagonist and is structured around a series of migrations from Bosnia to Sweden. Thomsen in *Mapping World Literature* points to three major constellations among transnational literatures: writing by migrant authors; works by instantly translated authors; and literature that deals with genocide, war and the stripping away of human rights.<sup>203</sup> *As If I Am Not There* is, then, in many ways quintessential transnational writing.

Thomsen suggests that the term 'transnational' is broader than that of postnational as it does not suppose the death of the nation, or a movement towards a nationless era, but rather 'merely reflects the idea of literatures that are rooted outside of a single nation'.<sup>204</sup> Bahun refers to *As If I Am Not There* as a diasporic text which centres around an impossible chronotope: that of a

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<sup>202</sup> A different version of this chapter has been published as an article. Priscilla Morris, 'The Strange Doubled Consciousness of Slavenka Drakulić's *As If I Am Not There*: Ethics of Representation in a Transnational Novel', in *Between History and Personal Narrative: East European Women's Stories of Migration in the New Millennium* ed. by Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru, Madalina Nicolaescu, Helena Smith (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014), pp. 161-176.

<sup>203</sup> Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 23.

<sup>204</sup> Thomsen, p. 148.

disappeared country, the non-entity of Yugoslavia.<sup>205</sup> The novel is not only rooted outside of a single nation; the nation in which its refugee protagonist S. was once rooted, has now fragmented and no longer exists: 'S. is from Bosnia and that is like having no country.'<sup>206</sup> The novel, which does not mention Yugoslavia by name once, revolves around its loss. This experience of 'razed home' is suffered by all former Yugoslavs in much of Drakulić's post-war writing.<sup>207</sup> Though the bulk of the text depicts S.'s terrible experience of gang rape and living on a level of 'brute existence' surrounded by torture and death, it is encased within a frame of migration: the novel opens and closes in Sweden, and the last third is concerned with conveying what it means to be a refugee.

The use of initials instead of full names is interesting here. As well as functioning to universalise the women's plight for a transnational readership and avoiding the vilification of any one ethno-nationality,<sup>208</sup> it is significant that *all* former Yugoslavs have truncated names, not only the imprisoned women: R. is a man and G. is a woman who voluntarily left Yugoslavia before the war.<sup>209</sup> The only two characters granted full names are those with Swedish citizenship: Maj and her baby Britt. Thus the reduction and violation of self implied by the loss of name is directly linked to loss of citizenship and security, in other words, to the condition of being without country, in transit, a refugee:

A refugee is someone who has been expelled from somewhere but does not go anywhere because they have nowhere to go. S. feels that she is

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<sup>205</sup> Sanja Bahun, 'There Was Once a Country. An Impossible Chronotope in the Writings of Slavenka Drakulić and Dubravka Ugrešić', in *European Journal of English Studies*. 14.1 (2010), 63-74 (p. 63).

<sup>206</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 2.

<sup>207</sup> Magdalena Zolkos, 'The time that was broken, the home that was razed: Deconstructing Slavenka Drakulić's Storytelling About Yugoslav War Crimes', *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2.2 (2008), 214-226 (p. 218).

<sup>208</sup> Bahun, p. 70.

<sup>209</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 163 and p. 185.

now actually existing between two places, in a state of anticipation, in transit between the one and the other.<sup>210</sup>

The clipped nomenclature suggests that all former Yugoslav citizens are scarred and fragmented by the war; with the disappearance of their country, all have been made into refugees who exist between two places. Thus the novel is as much concerned with conveying the trauma of being forcibly uprooted and expelled—of no longer belonging to a single nation—as with depicting the horror of being interred in a camp.

Croatian journalist-turned-novelist Slavenka Drakulić's personal story of migration is well known. She left her home country in the early 1990s, when she was branded, along with four other feminists, an anti-nationalist 'witch' who 'raped' Croatia. She had reported on wartime rape but had portrayed it through a gendered rather than a nationalist lens, refusing to demonise a particular ethno-nationality, but instead finding fault with a deeply patriarchal, misogynistic culture.<sup>211</sup> Losing her readership in her home country, silenced and marginalised by a nationalist, war-oriented press,<sup>212</sup> she migrated to Sweden where she started seeking a transnational readership. Unsurprisingly, *As If I Am Not There*, the result of five years of research, including interviews with rape victims and the reading of hundreds of testimonies,<sup>213</sup> was *not* published first in Croatian, but in German and English in 1999, and only a year later in her mother tongue.<sup>214</sup> It has been translated into ten other European languages, as well as being published in the United States under the title *S. A Novel About the*

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>211</sup> Bahun, p. 68.

<sup>212</sup> Noemi Marin, 'Slavenka Drakulić: Dissidence and Rhetorical Voice', *East European Politics and Societies*, 15.3 (2001), 678–697 (p. 687).

<sup>213</sup> Slavenka Drakulić, *S. A Novel about the Balkans*, trans. by Marko Ivić (New York: Penguin, 1999), Introduction, p. 3.

<sup>214</sup> Bahun, p. 64.

*Balkans*. Through her novel she both lent her voice to the silenced, raped women and made her own voice heard again. Only through leaving her home country was she able to find a readership, underscoring the inherently transnational dimension of her writing.

Reception of the novel has been mainly positive from British and American readerships, where it is praised for its courageousness and moral engagement in unflinchingly bringing to light the lot of Bosnian women during wartime, doubly silenced and made invisible by the shame of having been raped.<sup>215</sup> It is applauded both as specific historical testament and as a work of universal 'humanity', pointing to the transnational appeal of the denial-of-the-right-to-life literature. Some questions are raised about its aesthetics: namely, its overly summarial, journalistic style,<sup>216</sup> and its ethics: its overly ideological stance<sup>217</sup> and the manner in which reducing all the raped women's names to initials may paradoxically further efface them.<sup>218</sup> The ending, in which S. decides to keep her baby, strikes a dissonant note for some.<sup>219</sup> Meanwhile, it was met with mainly hostile reactions from Bosnia itself. Drakulić summarises

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<sup>215</sup> See, for instance, Maggie O'Kane, 'A Disturbingly Moving Insight into the Horrors of Bosnia's Rape Camps', Review of *As If I Am Not There*, Slavenka Drakulić, *The Sunday Herald*, 28 November 1999 <<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-18990871.html>> [accessed January 25, 2013]; Rita Giordano, 'In a Novel, Some Brutal Truths about Conflict in the Balkans', Review of *S.: A Novel about the Balkans*, Slavenka Drakulić, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 4 September 2000 <<http://slavenkadrakulic.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/H04.pdf>> [accessed 15 November 2012]; Steve Kettmann, 'In Bosnia, a Survivor's Lament', Review of *S.: A novel about the Balkans*, Slavenka Drakulić, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 February 2000 <<http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/In-Bosnia-a-Survivor-s-Lament-Novel-charts-2805593.php>> [accessed 25 January 25 2013].

<sup>216</sup> Rand Richards Cooper, 'The Prisoner', Review of *S.: A novel about the Balkans*, Slavenka Drakulić, *New York Times*, 2 April 2000 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/02/reviews/000402.002cooper.html>> [accessed 6 November 2012].

<sup>217</sup> Radmila J. Gorup, Review of *As If I Am Not There*, Slavenka Drakulić, *World Literature Today*, 74.3 (summer 2000), 669-70.

<sup>218</sup> Cooper.

<sup>219</sup> Sharon L. Jansen, *Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing: A guide to six centuries of Women Writers Imagining Rooms of their Own* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 197; Zolkos, p. 224.

the criticism she received for fictionalising the war and mass rape as threefold. First, as it was published so soon after the war, there was the expected denial that such camps existed. Second, there was distrust that an 'outsider' could write about another's highly emotionally and politically sensitive war narrative: that only people who have lived through such an experience 'have the moral right to recount what happened'; that, in short, 'if you are not a woman who has suffered mass rape in a camp, then you have no right to talk about it'. Third, there was the accusation that the victims' suffering was being exploited for Drakulić's artistic gain and profit. Drakulić responds that those who have lived through such a shattering experience may not have the ability or the talent to best represent it, pointing out that the women themselves were happy with the outcome. She glosses over the sense of 'distaste' that the victims are being violated further through their suffering being made into art, as mere 'envy' of the success of her work, thus giving short shrift to the whole ethical debate surrounding the aestheticisation of extreme suffering which Adorno discusses at length (for instance, in his essay 'Commitment' in *Notes to Literature II*).<sup>220</sup>

Originally Drakulić intended to write a non-fiction account of the camps, but then decided that the best way to represent the 'women's collective experience' was by writing a novel.<sup>221</sup> Her primary aim seems to have been politico-historical: to produce a record of the existence of such camps, and also explicitly feminist: she is interested in the female experience of war, rape and forced migration. She marks her serious intent by the novel's three epigraphs, quotes from survivor memoirs (Primo Levi, Eva Grlić and Varlam Shalamov), and so we are invited to read the text in a similar vein: as a type of survivor

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<sup>220</sup> Slavenka Drakulić, 'Can Hollywood tell the truth about the war in Bosnia?', *Guardian*, 17 February 2012 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/17/bosnia-in-the-land-of-blood-and-honey>> [accessed November 6, 2012]; Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature. Volume Two*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>221</sup> Giordano.

testimony. Yet, the fact, as is made clear by the subtitle of the UK edition: *A Novel About the Balkans*, which is incorporated into the title of the US edition, is that this *is* fiction. This is a text that both wants to draw on the validation of trauma memoir and, at the same time, to say no, it is just a novel. *As If I Am Not There's* migrations between fact and fiction can be seen to root it outside of a single genre, as much as outside of a single nation. Like its refugee protagonist, the text also appears to be 'existing between two places'.

In finally calling itself a novel, however, it avoids the possibility of historical falsification while opening itself up to aesthetic criticism. In what follows, I pay close attention to how the novel is narrated to suggest that several 'doubled consciousnesses' are at work in *As If I Am Not There*. With reference to Cohn's understanding of the distinction of fiction and Gilmore's insights into trauma writing, I look at why Drakulić might have decided fiction was the best way to represent the collective experience of the women and, in particular, I focus on S., examining how and to what extent she represents the rape victims. Following a discussion on the ethics of representation, in which I refer to Spivak's postcolonial warning about speaking for other people, I argue that S. has an ethically—and narratively—problematic doubled consciousness, which reveals itself as untenable at the close of the novel.

### Strange Doubled Consciousness

*As If I Am Not There* opens and closes in a hospital in Sweden in 1993 where the protagonist S. has just given birth to an unwanted child, the product of rape. She wants to give the child away and forget her past: 'For her, war is this child she had to give birth to'.<sup>222</sup> She enters a recollection, that takes up most of the

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<sup>222</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 6.

novel, of the ten months leading up to the birth, and of her transit through a succession of camps from Bosnia to Croatia to Sweden. The reader accompanies S., by means of a claustrophobically close third person, present tense narrative, with occasional italicised dips into the first person, past tense, as she is rounded up by soldiers in a village outside Sarajevo and taken to an exchange camp. There she is selected to live in the 'women's room' where women are at the constant sexual disposal of men. The dehumanisation she and the other women undergo is hard to bear. She is gang-raped, urinated on and wakes up one morning enveloped in the stench of burning flesh: corpses from the adjacent men's camp are being burnt like 'human garbage' in wheelie bins in the yard.<sup>223</sup> After seven months' imprisonment, she is transferred (in exchange for the release of Serbian prisoners) to a refugee camp in Croatia, and then onto Sweden, where a former schoolmate G. looks after her, before she is given a small flat. The novel closes, back in the Stockholm hospital, with a change of mind. She decides to keep her child and to remember her individual war story rather than forget.

Every so often an italicised sentence or two, narrated in the first person, past or present tense, is woven into the otherwise third person present tense narrative of *As If I Am Not There*. Jansen is confused by these shifts in point of view and speaks of the 'strange doubled consciousness' of the novel.<sup>224</sup> I would suggest that these italicised inserts operate in three ways that are bound up with different aspects of what the novel is attempting to represent and re-

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<sup>223</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 99.

<sup>224</sup> Jansen, p. 196.

present, all of which do indeed point to different doubled consciousnesses in the novel.<sup>225</sup>

One of the first times we encounter the italicised words, they are clearly flagged as S.'s thoughts as she remembers her ordeal in the camp after having given birth in Sweden:

Suddenly the door is kicked open. It was not locked, anyway. She had not even locked the door, that is how naive she is. *That wouldn't have helped me anyway*, S. thinks to herself, lying in the hospital bed in Stockholm. *I go back to the moment for the nth time, and I'm still not sure that I understand how it all happened.*<sup>226</sup>

On another occasion, in the camp:

Two guards pass by [...] There is mention of torture by electricity in the other camp [...] They utter the words: electric cable, saw. She feels she will lose her mind at the very mention of the words.

*How can I ever explain to anybody the isolation we were kept in? Everything got around, but the news was unreliable, unconfirmed. Even though it is happening right next to you, you don't believe it.*<sup>227</sup>

In the second quotation above, and on all subsequent occurrences, the italicised inserts arrive without attributions (such as 'S. thinks to herself'), yet in most (but not all) of the cases, they can still be conceived as S.'s reflections as she lies recalling her past in her Swedish hospital bed, thus reminding us of the novel's transnational frame. Taking them as such, the split between first and third

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<sup>225</sup> In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* it is noted, with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, that two senses of representation are often "run together: representation as "speaking for", as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation' as in art and philosophy." I will endeavor to hyphenate "re-presentation" when I mean the latter in this chapter. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. by Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 28.

<sup>226</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 14.

<sup>227</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 48.



person is significant. It functions as an artistic re-presentation of S.'s trauma-fragmented self. S. cannot recall herself in the first person, but only in the third, as if the rape and internment have happened to someone else. Dissociation, or absenting oneself from one's body and surroundings, as S. does when she is first gang-raped: 'As if I am not here, she thinks', is thus signalled by the use of the third person.<sup>228</sup> Such an experience strips one of agency. It is only in Sweden that S. tentatively starts to think of herself in the first person again as she recollects her past (though the Swedish narrative is also third person). Through the first-person/third-person split, Drakulić re-presents the doubled consciousness of S.'s trauma-shattered self and suggests that S. is striving to regain agency by the use of the reflective first person inserts. This, in turn, sets up the narrative expectation of healing through remembering and articulation.

The italicised comments work in a second way. As there are no further attributions to tie the reflections to S., they become unmoored and begin to read like the collective voice of the women who have been through such a trauma. This reading is encouraged by the switch in person and the lack of speech marks—so that the reader may well assume that the first and third person narratives stem from different narrators. They sound like they are traces from the interviews Drakulić carried out during her research, transposed and

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<sup>228</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 67.

That the sufferer only belatedly experiences the traumatic event, and is not fully present to witness it at the time, is a central claim of postmodernist, poststructuralist trauma theory (Caruth, Felman). The event is so extreme that it is only afterwards that the individual experiences it. At the time there is a lack of registration, as if the person involved were not there. This leads to what psychoanalyst Dori Laub has called a 'collapse of witnessing' – the impossibility of fully witnessing a traumatic event as it occurs and the subsequent gaps present in survivor testimony. Agamben discusses the problems inherent in witnessing and thus representing a limit situation such as Auschwitz in his third book in the *homo sacer* series, *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Drakulić seems to point to this collapse and absence of the witness in the first/third person spilt of her protagonist and the title of her novel.

On the question of bearing witness to extreme trauma, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Brooklyn, New York: MIT Press, 1999).

interwoven directly into the novel. They serve to add the weight and authority of first person memoir. This is particularly striking when the first person plural is used. For instance, when S. gets her papers to go to Sweden in the refugee camp in Croatia:

Then R. says that they must toast the good news, the journey, a new life, and who knows what else. [...] She remembers the raised bottle, the long sip and the male face illuminated by the light bulb. And his excitement rather than her own. [...]

*All of us would have preferred to return to the past if only we could.*<sup>229</sup>

Thus our attention is directed to the real stories and interviews from which S.'s narrative is constructed. They are a reminder of the doubled consciousness of the text as a whole, which as pseudo-memoir oscillates between fact and fiction.

Finally, there is a third type of italicised statement that has a moralistic tone and which does not seem to come from either S. or the interviewed women:

She finds that it is easier for them to view their lives as a fairy tale, to remember only the best of times. [...]

*Except that then we do not see our own responsibility for what happened, for the war.*<sup>230</sup>

We are hearing Drakulić's voice here: these are surely the author's thoughts on the dangers of idealising the past, as it seems improbable that a camp survivor would reflect in such balanced, dispassionate terms just a few months after her ordeal. This brings me to the third doubled consciousness that permeates the novel, which I will explore in detail below: the disquieting merger of the consciousness of Drakulić, the transnational writer with her own

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<sup>229</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, pp. 165-67.

<sup>230</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 172.

ideological agenda, and the collective consciousness of the women she sets out to represent.

### **Representing the Women's Collective Experience through S.**

Drakulić spent five years researching her novel, during which time, according to Ignatieff's introduction to the American edition, 'what started out as pure reportage transformed [...] into a fictionalised account of one woman who represents the thousands interred in Bosnian death camps'.<sup>231</sup> There are several reasons why Drakulić may have decided to use fiction to represent the collective experience of the women. Novels tend to be more accessible than survivor memoirs, so reaching a wider audience and potentially increasing their pedagogical value.<sup>232</sup> Well-drawn characters, skilfully-shaped structures, the original use of language, and themes that resonate on universal levels can make novels more memorable and durable than non-fiction narratives: the best do not date, but will continue to be read decades and centuries from now. Survivor memoirs which last and are widely read, such as *If this is a Man* and *The Truce* by Primo Levi, are exceptions because they are both non-fictional *and* artistically written and structured: Levi was a writer.<sup>233</sup> If 'best representing' is equated with making the women's stories heard and remembered, taking them to the widest possible audience — breaking the silence and telling the most possible people that these camps existed — then certainly I think Drakulić achieves this better through a novel, which allows for a certain universalisation of the women's trauma and for an artistic shaping of their perhaps otherwise

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<sup>231</sup> S., p. 3 in 'Readers Guide'.

<sup>232</sup> Anna Richardson, 'The Ethical Limitations of Holocaust Literary Representation', *eSharp* 5, Summer 2005 <[http://www.gla.ac.uk/media\\_41171\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media_41171_en.pdf)> [accessed Nov 30, 2012] (p. 7).

<sup>233</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man and The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1971).

fragmented and incoherent individual narratives. She, or rather her character S., is a loudspeaker for their ordeal, shouting it to the world.

Cohn posits in *The Distinction of Fiction* that one of the main distinguishing features of fiction is its ability to introduce invented characters into the world of the text: 'it is by its unique potential for presenting characters that fiction most consistently and most radically severs itself from the real world outside the text'.<sup>234</sup> With a novel, Drakulić is able to select and conflate the women's narratives into the coherent experience of one character, the protagonist S., who then becomes a representative for the collective experience of the camp survivors. In this way, she turns to fiction to realise the paradoxical demand of autobiography: that it must be 'both unique and representative' at the same time.<sup>235</sup> The expectation when reading a memoir is that although it is the story of an individual, it also stands for the experience of similar others. S.'s sawn-off name advertises her fungibility – she could be Samira, Sanja or Selma – and hence her representativity. Furthermore, the author of fiction is able to portray the inner consciousness of her characters in ways that a non-fiction writer rarely (plausibly) can when depicting real-life people.<sup>236</sup> Drakulić, in her conversation in the US edition of the novel, flags up this aspect as what drew her to fiction:

But these women were only able to recount the facts – the names of the men who raped them or the names of their husbands' murderers – they could not speak about their own feelings. I wanted to fill this void with my imagination. Therefore, the only 'invented,' or rather imagined, part

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<sup>234</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>235</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 8. Gilmore discusses the 'memoir boom' in trauma life writing at the turn of the millennium.

<sup>236</sup> Cohn, p. 16.

of the novel is the description of S.'s feelings, emotions, reactions, her inner life...<sup>237</sup>

Thus with a novel, she is free to delve into S.'s innermost thoughts and feelings, which she does using free indirect style. Fiction is the best—perhaps only—vehicle for Drakulić to imagine and convey the women's feelings, as the traumatic experience has prevented the women from accessing and articulating their own feelings themselves (which Gilmore refers to as the other double bind of trauma writing: the impossibility of expressing the trauma, but the necessity to do so in order to heal).<sup>238</sup> Hence Drakulić uses fiction to surmount two of the main paradoxes of trauma memoir with the aim, one assumes, of best representing the overall 'truth' of the women's experience of internment and forced migration through S.

On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that Drakulić does more than simply use S. as a loudspeaker for the women's ordeal and this is where things grow morally murkier. If 'representing' means being a typical example of the group, in other words belonging to the group and not just speaking for the group, then Drakulić scarcely represents the women through S. at all. Beyond being a victim of rape and internment, S. is not representative of the women Drakulić would have interviewed. The majority of women who were held in such camps, as the novel itself makes clear, were uneducated Muslim peasants. S. is an anomaly. She is an educated, middle-class school teacher of mixed Muslim/Serbian ethnicity from Bosnia's capital city, Sarajevo.

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<sup>237</sup> S., p. 6 in 'Readers Guide'.

<sup>238</sup> The paradox of the unspeakability and unrepresentability of extreme trauma (the impossibility of putting it into words or representing it in any form and yet the need to do so) is a central claim of much recent trauma theory. See Holocaust-centred trauma theory (Felman and Laub, pp. 78-79, 224-25; *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 154) as well as theorisation of this century's demand for trauma memoirs (Gilmore, p. 6; *Trauma Texts*, ed. by Gillian Whitlock and Kate Douglas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 1). Note that Leys questions the 'modish' claim about the unspeakability and unrepresentability of extreme trauma and is unconvinced by Caruth's arguments and reading of Freud. (Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 2000), pp. 266-67, pp. 304-05.)

Her difference is spelled out: the soldier who rounds her up initially addresses her with the formal 'Vi' instead of 'ti' and later asks her to assume a superior position, despite her young age, by keeping an eye on the village women 'since she is a teacher'.<sup>239</sup> Her exceptional status is made even clearer when the Captain singles her out to be his mistress because of their shared cosmopolitan, educated background:<sup>240</sup> they talk about 'childhood, school, movies, cities and travels – about that other, previous life'.<sup>241</sup> She has more in common with him, her Serbian captor, than with the other imprisoned women. Further, the fact that she decides to keep her child is extremely rare, as Drakulić herself acknowledges: she knows of only two cases where a rape camp victim did not reject her baby.<sup>242</sup> So S. neither comes from the specific group of people whose experiences she is representing, nor does her story conclude in a representative way.

By making S. an educated teacher from Sarajevo, Drakulić is able to bring a middle-class, cosmopolitan, intellectual, anti-nationalist (signalled by the shorthand of being of mixed ethnicity) consciousness into the camp. She thus pulls S. much closer to her own subject position. Such a decision allows S.'s thoughts about the camp to be more intellectual and reflective, and so potentially more accessible for the educated, cosmopolitan reader, who will also be able to put herself more easily in S.'s shoes. S. thus helps to universalise the women's experience of rape and internment so that a transnational readership may relate to it. Yet, I would suggest that there was another reason for Drakulić to introduce the anomalous character of S. into the camp. The thoughts and reactions that S. has in the face of unspeakable atrocities are certainly not typical

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<sup>239</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 16 and p. 22.

<sup>240</sup> Jansen, p. 208.

<sup>241</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p.114.

<sup>242</sup> S., p. 8 in 'Readers Guide'.

of a village woman, but nor are they very credible of *any* woman in such an extreme situation. For instance, in response to realising the stench that has filled her nostrils all morning is that of burning human flesh and that corpses from the men's camp are being burnt in wheelie bins in the yard, S. reflects: 'Their action is terrible not only for the people burning in the pile of garbage, but also for those who lit the match.' Later, when she sleeps with the Captain, the man ultimately responsible for the rape, torture and killing carried out in the camp, she looks at him as she leaves at daybreak and 'senses what the sleeping man does not yet know, that he is, after all, a condemned man'. I would argue that these measured, forgiving responses are hardly plausible as the reactions of someone who has been consistently violated and is living at a level of 'brute existence', surrounded by death. Instead, like the third type of italicised inserts looked at above, they are Drakulić's ideological views which are interwoven seamlessly into the free indirect style of S.'s thoughts.<sup>243</sup>

Zolkos argues that Drakulić's writing is informed by the understanding that all former-Yugoslavs share an experience of 'razed home' and 'broken time' (the sense that time was broken in half by the war, which Drakulić conveys by the almost total erasure of history and personal memory from *As If I Am Not There*). The collective temporal schism of 'broken time':

makes them all, perpetrators and sufferers alike, victims of war. Within such a narrative, the war is endowed with performative capacities – it fractures people's lives and thus detaches them from one and another and from themselves.<sup>244</sup>

It is not hard to see that this particular view, with its tendency towards forgiveness and the levelling of the difference between perpetrator and victim, has been woven into S.'s thoughts in the two examples I selected above. As well

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<sup>243</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 98, p. 119 and p. 28.

<sup>244</sup> Zolkos, p. 220.

as being a representative of the women's collective experience, it can be seen, then, that S. is also a mouthpiece for Drakulić herself. It is, of course, no coincidence that S. is Slavenka's initial.

This is where the main problems to do with representation in this novel lie, rather than with the criticism Drakulić received over representing an experience she had not had. She is doing more than she claims with S.: she is not just representing the women's collective story but also her own ideology. I would go further and suggest that in wanting to push forth her own views she has actively excised certain details from the women's lives. The two most obvious omissions are the lack of reference to Islam and the almost complete lack of anti-Serb hatred. While S. may well be an urban atheist, the women around her would probably have prayed to Allah. While S. fights to resist hatred,<sup>245</sup> most of the women would have succumbed. *As If I Am There* is thus sanitised of religion and almost free of references to nationalism and ethnicity. (Though it is not entirely free: the cross and four Cyrillic "S"s—a national symbol of Serbia—that are fatally carved into A.'s back by a friend of her brother's are a horrifically explicit condemnation of Serbian nationalism.<sup>246</sup> However, there is no outpouring of anti-Serbian sentiment after this incident.) It is not, of course, that I disagree with Drakulić's anti-nationalist, anti-war views, but I do find that there is something ethically problematic in claiming S. best represents the women's experience, when at the same time the character represents Drakulić's cosmopolitan, transnational viewpoint.

Drakulić thus fills the void left by the women's unarticulated feelings with her own views, reflections and feelings; with her subject position not theirs. She has not experienced rape or internment, nor is she of the same socio-political or ethno-religious background as the women she lends her voice to —

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<sup>245</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 99.

<sup>246</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 90.



or even from the same country after the war: she is from Croatia; they are from Bosnia. Much postcolonial debate has focused on issues of speaking about and for others, arguing that while a dominant group should engage with speaking *about* the silenced, marginalised subaltern other, they cannot and should not speak *for* the other.<sup>247</sup> Coming from different subject positions, the dominant group will not be able to do the other's thoughts and views justice. Worse, they may insert their own views and assumptions into those they seek to represent, thereby, intentionally or unintentionally, confirming and perpetuating the very hierarchical power structures they wish to expose and write against. On the one hand, one can readily see why Drakulić strips away the signifiers of ethnic and religious difference from the women in the camp. First, she does not want to incite further ethno-national hatred by labelling and pointing fingers (as already noted, S. could be Samira, Sanja or Selma). As with the reportage for which she was criticised, she continues to examine wartime rape through a gendered rather than a nationalist lens. Second, as noted, she wants to universalise (S. could equally be Shanthi, Suzette or Sarah-Jane) so that the transnational reader may put herself in S.'s place, and not shrug off rape, war and forced migration as something that only happens to others.<sup>248</sup> On the other hand, it could be argued that a terrible double injustice is done to the victims precisely by erasing their specificity. They were taken to the camps because of their ethnicity, and raped as part of a program of 'ethnic cleansing', and now in representing them,

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<sup>247</sup> 'The problems of speaking *about* people who are 'other' cannot, however, be a reason for not doing so. The argument that it's just too difficult can easily become a new form of silencing by default. [...] But whites can never speak *for* Blacks.' Spivak and Gunew, p. 137, cited in Gina Wisker, *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Literature*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 204.

<sup>248</sup> Drakulić, S., p. 7 in 'Readers Guide'. I find this argument puzzling. In our increasingly multicultural world, not many novel readers are blocked from identification with a character by a foreign-sounding name. S. is called Samira in the 2010 film adaptation of the novel, revealing her (part) Muslim roots. The effect is humanising and increases rather than decreases empathy. I suspect the real reason for the use of initials is the first, as well as to show loss of personhood through loss of country as discussed at the start of the chapter.

their ethnicity and singularity is similarly effaced. Disturbingly, by emptying the women of their ethno-religious identity, the novel could be seen to continue to do what the camp set out to do, albeit with different motivations: eradicate differences.<sup>249</sup> Here we come back to the postcolonial concern that speaking *for* marginalised others can lead to compliance with the very structures that enabled the violation and silencing of those others in the first place.

The character of S. then serves not only to conflate the experiences of the women into one character, but also to conflate the consciousnesses of the women and that of Drakulić, and to cloak this double consciousness at the same time. Cohn posits that the main distinction of fiction is a simple one: it does not *have to* refer to the real world, and when it does, it is not bound by the judgements of accuracy and, therefore, cannot be falsified.<sup>250</sup> Non-fiction, on the other hand, *must* refer to the real world and *can* be falsified. With a non-fiction account, Drakulić would not have been able to interweave her reflections and thoughts into the thoughts of the women, as she does here with S., without being challenged and discredited. There would have been a level of separation between her standpoint and theirs. Thus, I am skeptical of the claim that the reason for her move to fiction was solely to ‘tell the women’s truth through fiction’.<sup>251</sup> I would say it was equally to voice her own message as well.

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<sup>249</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 35.

<sup>250</sup> Cohn, p. 15.

<sup>251</sup> Cooper.

### Strange Doubleness of Ending

As suggested earlier, the narrative expectation is set up in *As If I Am Not There*, through the use of the italicised first person reflections, and also through the lengthy embedded narrative itself which is configured as an act of remembering, that once S.'s ten months of trauma have been recalled and articulated, she may begin to heal, move on and integrate into her new country. This is a fairly standard way of structuring a novel which centres around trauma and, the reader's expectation is that once the painful past has been remembered, the protagonist will undergo a liberating transformation. Sure enough, after struggling with her reactions of fear and revulsion: 'She still recoils from him', S. eventually decides to keep the child. The baby symbolises the war for her and so by accepting him, she confronts and accepts what has happened. Accepting the child (somehow) means: 'victory over the horror of war' because '[o]nly his mother could show him that the hate from which his life emerged can be transformed into love'. S.'s final reflection in the novel is: 'Their murderers need to forget, but their victims must not let them'.<sup>252</sup> Thus the reader is delivered the expected ending of reconciliation with the past and hope for the future which entails a new baby and a new life in Sweden. S. has done the hard work of remembering and now, presumably, will heal. As Zolkos puts it: '[t]he message of Drakulić's storytelling is that contrary actions (i.e. the confrontation and admittance of the reality and irreversibility of wartime) have a healing effect'.<sup>253</sup>

However, this hopeful reading of the ending does not hold water on close scrutiny. S.'s reasons for her change of mind fail to convince, not least because the baby would almost certainly be better off with a Swedish adoptive

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<sup>252</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 211, p. 214 and p. 216.

<sup>253</sup> Zolkos, p. 221.

mother, never knowing 'the hate from which his life emerged' in the first place, and therefore not needing his real mother to 'transform' it into love (which also assumes that she, the real mother, would be capable of love at all after such a dehumanising ordeal). What is more, I would suggest that S. is not freed by her decision to remember the past, but remains imprisoned within it. The novel closes on the image of S. breastfeeding the child for the first time:

The baby keeps crying. S. unbuttons her nightgown. The milk is running. She places her nipple in the baby's mouth. He sucks on it hungrily. S. feels his little body utterly relax. She draws him closer. Tears stream down her face, her neck, her breasts.<sup>254</sup>

While this could be read as a celebratory, tender act of mother-son bonding, it could equally suggest that S. is still imprisoned by her body, as she has been throughout the novel. For a novel that is about rape to have the most prominent signifier of a woman's gender, her breasts, as its final word, is, I would argue, far from being unambiguously hopeful and tender. Earlier in the novel, when S. discovered she was pregnant in the refugee camp near Zagreb, she had the realisation that: 'a woman's body never really belongs to the woman. It belongs to others — to the man, the children, the family. And in wartime to soldiers'.<sup>255</sup> While just before her decision to keep the child, she reflected: 'There is so much she could tell [Maj] about a body that lives independently of a person's will, about the way a body can be enslaved which is known only to women.'<sup>256</sup> In fact, the whole embedded flashback of the novel was initially triggered by her body: first by the birth of her child: '[h]er entire past has spilled out of her body with this child', and then by the pressure of

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<sup>254</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p.216.

<sup>255</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 156.

<sup>256</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 210.

milk in her breasts.<sup>257</sup> When she finally draws the child to her breast as the novel closes, rather than being an act of free will, it could be seen that she is giving into her body's need to express milk and to stop the baby crying: she continues to be enslaved and defined by her body. Note that in the final paragraph of the novel, it is the baby's body that relaxes, not hers, and that the tears that stream down her face could signify many emotions: joy, relief, pain, hopelessness, grief. The italicised 'I' that has been struggling to break through S.s' third person narrative is markedly absent from the final pages of the novel: she does not regain her agency. Instead, we close on dislocated images of parts of her body: her face, her neck and her breasts, suggesting her sense of self is still very much in pieces. There is no real sense of freedom here, as it seems her body and life will continue to be controlled by others: first, by the men in the camp, and now, by her — and their — son.

There is equally no sense given of a positive future unfolding, or indeed of any real future at all. Just as entering the camp severed S. from her past, turning her into a refugee: '[e]ven her memories are becoming remote and inaccessible',<sup>258</sup> the experience also seems to have denied her the possibility of a real future. By keeping the baby, she will be constantly reminded of her past. Time is oddly flattened out and deadened by the use of the present tense in both the frame and the main story, so making it appear that both times simultaneously coexist (and thus do not exist), one inside the other. The camp is imprisoned within S.'s present moment in Sweden, which in turn is held hostage by the camp, as S. is continuously compelled by her body and her baby to remember, so rendering any future unimaginable.

Thus the novel can be seen to have a double ending: one hopeful and pointing the way to reconciliation and the other intensely bleak and

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<sup>257</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 1 and p. 10.

<sup>258</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 49.

imprisoning. The tension this doubleness creates has been commented on as a 'troubling dissonance' by Zolkos, who sees S's story as primarily one of redemption and hope for the future, yet acknowledges: 'that her decision to keep the child [...] is not convincing as an expression of regained autonomy'.<sup>259</sup> Jansen, meanwhile, finds S's decision to keep the child 'utterly perplexing', and underscores how she has doomed herself to live in the past: '[s]he may no longer be confined in the women's room, but she will remain a prisoner of what happened to her there.'<sup>260</sup>

I would suggest that the close of the novel is precisely where the untenable doubled consciousness of S. as a character is unmasked and the novel is forced into having two separate endings: one for the women and one for Drakulić. The hopeful, message-laden ending of redemption, which points out that the way to healing and reconciliation is through love not hate, through remembering rather than denial and silence, is Drakulić speaking directly to the reader. The words hardly make sense in S.'s thoughts: 'Their murderers need to forget, but their victims must not let them.'<sup>261</sup> Why would she use the word 'murderers' rather than 'rapists'? How can this final dictum be given the positive charge that its forebear trumpeted — that through accepting her child she would have 'victory over the horror of war' and 'over herself' — when it still configures her as a 'victim'? Drakulić's hijacking of S. to speak her own words is made abundantly clear here. As if holding a gun to her head, she forces her character to shout her redemptive message, which is aimed at those outside the novel: at a transnational, Western readership trying to make sense of the war; or, at other displaced, former Yugoslavs whose 'hope [...] for a collective future [is to be] achieved through confrontation and reconciliation

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<sup>259</sup>Zolkos, p. 224.

<sup>260</sup>Jansen, p. 197 and p. 212.

<sup>261</sup>*As If I Am Not There*, p. 216.

with the past'.<sup>262</sup> Then, once, she has spoken, or rather reflected, S. is allowed to rest for a moment: 'she sleeps peacefully for a while longer', before she is abandoned to the grim truth of her particular situation.<sup>263</sup> For the character of S. herself, there is no hope. As a representative of the women Drakulić interviewed, the truth is made clear in the closing paragraph: they will not regain their agency, or free themselves from the prison of the past. There is no joy and little hope of healing for them.

### Migrant Text

The doubled consciousnesses and genre slippages of the novel mirror what Drakulić is trying to convey: the female migrant's state of in-betweenness, of not fully existing as one thing or the other. Just as S. feels split and doubts her existence, *As If I Am Not There* migrates between fact and fiction. It oscillates between appealing to a Western readership and the disseminated, fragmented former-Yugoslav peoples; between representing the collective testimonies of the raped women and Drakulić's personal experience of migration. There is something fundamentally aporetic and even impossible about representing the non-sovereign, violated transnational subject: the *homo sacer* who has disappeared into the interstices between nations. One way of conveying this impossibility and in-betweenness is through the trampling of textual boundaries between fact and fiction. The text itself seems to be a refugee, a migrant, seeking a home (readership) and attempting to straddle two opposing genres at once. It is almost successful, but not quite. When examined through the ethical lens of whether Drakulić best represents the women, I have argued that stripping them

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<sup>262</sup> Zolkos p. 224.

<sup>263</sup> *As If I Am Not There*, p. 216.

of their specificity and including a redemptive, anti-nationalistic message risks, paradoxically, violating them further. When examined through an aesthetic lens, the novel's over-expository, moralistic tone and the troubling doubled consciousness of S., which comes apart at the close of the novel, point to a work that is artistically flawed. Both as survivor testimony and as novel, *As If I Am Not There* can be found wanting. As an example of transnational writing, *As If I Am Not There* clearly highlights the complex aesthetic and ethical difficulties faced by a migrant writer who seeks to represent highly sensitive, specific war and migration narratives in a transnational context.



## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

We have traced the literary representation of the figure of *homo sacer* through three works of exception which have taken us from the fascist occupation of France during the Second World War, and anticolonial uprisings in Algeria, in the mid-twentieth century to the siege of Sarajevo and ethnic rape camps in Bosnia at the end of the century. Following my novel's shift from siege to exile, we have correspondingly refocused the lens through which we view *homo sacer*, moving from the figure of a citizen stripped of their rights, during a state of siege, in *The Plague*, to the fragmented, diasporic subject of *As If I Am Not There*. The lawless zones of indistinction that each text holds up to the light have become increasingly more extreme, moving from Oran under a state of siege, where resistance was possible, to the trapped, abandoned figures of Vladimir and Estragon endlessly waiting for Godot to arrive, to the violation and murder of the women imprisoned in the camp. The *homines sacri* of each text have been depicted with progressively less agency and, as if uncannily exemplifying Agamben's theory that the camp has replaced the city as the paradigm of modernity, the order of the texts looked at has moved from a focus on the *polis* and the collective, through the no man's land of Beckett's seminal play, to the most extreme zone of indistinction: the camp.

Examining what I have termed works of exception through the prism of Agamben's political account of modern Western life has proved illuminating in the case of *The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot*. In particular, I think the tracing of

the shadowy figure of the camp in Camus's work to reveal its hidden yet central position has been fruitful in pointing to the institution of violence that structures totalitarian regimes, and perhaps, if we follow Agamben's thinking, 'normal' life as well. Viewing the space of *Waiting for Godot* as an excluded zone of indistinction and seeing Lucky as a bearer of 'bare life' also strikes me as an insightful way of reading *Godot*. Given that Agamben argues that the exception is becoming the rule and that the line between citizen and *homo sacer* is being increasingly blurred, construing *Godot* as a space of exception does not preclude an existential reading. In fact, it posits a link between Everyman and *homo sacer* in accordance with Agamben's account of life.

There is something aporetic about representing the camp and the liminal *homines sacri* that reside there due to their exceptional nature and character of invisibility within the normal order of life. *As If I Am Not There* struggles in its attempt to give a realist depiction of the camp and its prisoners. The grammatically incorrect title (a faithful rendering of the Croatian) partly acknowledges this, pointing to the seeming unreality of the most extreme space of exclusion and the severing of self that occurs there.

My reading of *As If I Am Not There* turned away from Agamben and back to postcolonial concerns of representation, first raised in relation to *The Plague*. I found that S. has a dissonant doubled consciousness which problematically conflates the viewpoint of the rape victims and Drakulić's anti-nationalist message. Ethically, the women may not be best represented as they are excised of many of their markers of ethno-religious difference, and so arguably violated further. Artistically, the stitching together of two markedly different consciousnesses unravels at the conclusion of the novel, when S. is forced into having two separate endings: one redemptive and hopeful, the other bleak and imprisoning. *As If I Am Not There* is flawed by the inclusion of its redemptive,

anti-nationalist message which paradoxically does not do full justice to the women it sets out to represent.

Extrapolating beyond the three texts looked at here, it strikes me that the analysis of the marginalised figure of *homo sacer*, the state of exception and the camp in recent works of literature will be most fruitful in texts which are concerned with representing the underlying structure of modern life, such as *The Plague* and *Waiting for Godot*.

It seems appropriate to draw this thesis to a close by returning to the candlelit stage of the Youth Theatre in Sarajevo in 1993. Sarajevo under siege was in many ways a stage, images of the daily bloodshed occupying second or third place on the news worldwide for almost four years: it was the first televised siege. The world watched while a small pocket of civilised Europe was reduced to medieval conditions – no light, no heat, little water or food – and did nothing. Meanwhile, from within the siege, the gaze was not returned, as trapped Sarajevans could not see out, could not watch television and could not communicate with the external world by letter or phone, just as actors on a brightly lit stage struggle to see their audience. There was something incredibly resonant about staging a production of *Waiting for Godot* in a place that had already become a worldwide stage, throwing a spotlight on the invisible space of exclusion that, according to Agamben, structures modernity. That it was crowded with three Didis and three Gogos, half male, half female, some Muslim, some Christian, on the one hand, constitutes a protest on the behalf of pluralism and diversity, which was and still is under assault, and, on the other hand, can be seen to represent the proliferation and normalisation of *homines sacri* throughout the twentieth century.

## CRITICAL AFTERWORD

### **The Influence of the Literary Texts on The Novel**

*The Painter of Bridges* tells the story of Zora Buka, a fifty-five-year-old landscape painter from Sarajevo, who loses her life's work and suffers the death of someone close to her during the siege before she manages to flee to England. Part One, 'Waiting', depicts her life during the first ten months of the siege, while Part Two is set four years later in England, around the time she receives news from those she left behind in Sarajevo, her refugee status is granted and she starts to paint again. *The Painter of Bridges* can be described as a hybrid siege-exile novel as it seeks to convey the experience of life under siege in Sarajevo and that of being an asylum seeker and refugee in England. Being under siege or in exile means being outside the 'normal' order of life – one's civil rights are stripped or curtailed and chaos threatens to dominate. Both states are characterised by the anxious uncertainty of waiting for normal life to resume: for the siege to end and relief to arrive, or for asylum to be granted and citizenship in the new country to be conferred.

The state of siege – of being exiled from the outside world, from normal life and from loved ones – which is so strongly evoked in *The Plague* has influenced my portrayal of Zora's experience of the siege. The linear narrative of the worsening stages of the siege helped shape the structure of Zora's recollection of the first ten months of the war. My decision to separate Zora from her husband and mother at the start of the siege in order to emphasise her isolation, was directly inspired by Dr Rieux's separation from his wife at the start of *The Plague*. The narrative thread that runs through Part One of *The*

*Painter of Bridges* revolves around the theme of staying or leaving, the climax of 'Waiting' being the arrival of help and Zora's exit from the siege (as well as the death of Samir), thus lending it the structure of a typical siege narrative.

However, *The Painter of Bridges* diverges from the typical linearity of siege narratives through the inclusion of the present-tense narrative. Having interviewed a dozen Sarajevans about their experiences of living through the almost four-year blockade, I found that it was their stories of depression and of the chronic trauma of waiting, as well as their sense of the collapse of time, that emerged as the main fabric of their narratives, together with pride in how they struggled to resist the siege through resourcefulness, humour and creativity.<sup>264</sup> Life reduced to waiting, days which rolled into one another other, the unbearable uncertainty of not knowing when it would end, the dwindling of resources and physical abilities, the chaos and the lawlessness, and the constant presence of death and violence – in brief, the turning inside out of 'normal' life – this was what the people I spoke to articulated about their experience of wartime Sarajevo. While most siege novels emphasise action over waiting, and are structured climactically around battle scenes, *Waiting for Godot*, to my mind, far more accurately conveys the circularity and stasis of life in wartime Sarajevo. The radical uncertainty and collapse of time presented in *Godot's* central situation of waiting have informed the present-tense narrative in Part One of *The Painter of Bridges*, where I have attempted to evoke the paralysis and nothingness of life under siege. Beckett's anti-realist play can be seen to represent more realistically the non-action of life under siege than conventionally structured, action-oriented siege literature.

The overarching structure of my novel is an exile narrative. Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić describes the exile narrative as a quest that ends in the

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<sup>264</sup> For creativity, humour and resourcefulness in Sarajevo under siege, see Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 34-61.

attainment of a passport and a new nationality, much as a love narrative ends in marriage.<sup>265</sup> This definition focuses attention on the liminal state of being in-between countries and passports that war often forces on individuals, the protagonist of such narratives being a refugee, or *homo sacer*, who has been deprived of his or her civil rights. My engagement with Slavenka Drakulić's war-exile narrative, *As If I Am Not There*, which charts a forced migration from Bosnia to Sweden, helped me to confront many of my anxieties when depicting Zora, the refugee protagonist of *The Painter of Bridges*. My concerns, which halted the writing of *The Painter of Bridges* for quite some time after my research trips to Sarajevo, were to do with representing an extreme situation I had not experienced (war) as well as speaking for specific, oppressed others (Bosnian war refugees). By critically engaging with a novel which depicts one of the most extreme aspects of the Bosnian war, the rape camp, and through interrogating its representation of the refugee along interconnected ethical and artistic lines, I found I could identify and think through many of my own difficulties to do with representation, which enabled me to break through my block and write on.

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<sup>265</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, 'The Writer in Exile' in *Thank You for Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p. 129.

## APPENDIX 1

### **Dobrivoje and Gordana Beljkašić's Asylum Application (Abridged)**

*I was born in Vlasenica, Eastern Bosnia, on 10 October 1923. Staying with my parents in Sarajevo since 1926, I completed in this town my primary and secondary school. I studied painting in Paris for two years, 1945-1947, and in Belgrade for five years, 1947-1952. I graduated painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade in 1952.*

*I worked as a curator in the Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo in 1953. From 1954 to 1970 I worked as a professor of painting and drawing at the Department of Fine Arts in Sarajevo. From 1970 to 1980, I worked as an advisor for Art and Visual Culture at the Department of Education and Culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since 1980 retired.*

*As a painter I was a member of several professional artistic associations in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia. I participated in many collective exhibitions of painting in the country and abroad and I had many one-man shows in Yugoslavia. My name and short biography entered in the encyclopaedia of Art Yugoslavia.*

*[...]*

*We used to live in a nice residential area of Sarajevo, full of greenery. We had a very comfortable three-bedroom flat with central heating. Our earnings were ample to enable us comfortable and pleasant living. Our professional engagements and achievements ensured us a very well established place in our society. We were respected as individuals, professionals and experts.*

*We found it extremely hard to accept what has been happening since April 1992 and is still happening in our country. Everything that was valuable in our lives and our lives themselves were endangered. We were shocked by brutality, ferocity and hatred that was surrounding us. We could not support a regime who ordered and committed such abominable crimes as: massive and individual killings, rapes, robberies, burnings, terrorising of innocent people, devastation of cultural and natural heritage, suspension of power and water for civilians and industry, and destroying of works of culture and art.*

*[...] Living on the lowest level of human existence I and my wife were physically and emotionally completely exhausted.*

*Also, my mother-in-law, who was eighty-nine, lived with us. We had to nurse and look after her. That was extremely difficult because there was no medicine. With some predictions that forty thousand people will die from cold and hunger this winter, the only way was to leave Sarajevo.*

*So, we were evacuated by the last Red Cross Convoy on 15 November 1992 and arrived in Belgrade on 17 November 1992 where we had to stay longer than planned.*

*My mother-in-law sadly died from exhaustion.*

*We couldn't stay in Belgrade because we didn't have accommodation or income. Our assets and bank accounts were frozen. Our one hope was to go to England and join our only daughter and her husband and we are very grateful it was possible.*

*Our stay in the UK is however limited.*

*We would like to go back to Sarajevo where we left all our valuables and everything we gained in our lifetime. We are sorry to have left Sarajevo where we had many good friends of various professions, nationalities and religions. With all these people we have lived in harmony and we would really like it should be so in the future.*

*Our motives and reasons for coming to England were and are:*

*1. Our lives were endangered because of all above circumstances, chaos and anarchy were everywhere. We were not members of any political party and didn't take*



*sides and therefore we were classified as 'against' all three warring sides. We lived in the area which was in the first front line, which was under constant shelling. It was uncertain whether we'd stay alive if we had to go to queue for water or bread or go in the street or stay at home.*

*2. Any communication with the outside world, especially with our only child, as well as within the city was impossible.*

*3. We felt we had to come out of darkness into broad light and so return to our creative work to which we have dedicated our lives.*

*4. England was the only place we felt we'd belong, because our dear daughter lives here. We longed to see her and her husband after more than two years.*

*5. We saw Great Britain as a broad democratic country where civil rights and freedom are guaranteed and respected. We thought that a peaceful and harmonious life there would be possible.*

*6. The last but not least, is the fact that my studio burnt down completely and all my paintings, material and documentation destroyed. It was situated in the old Town Hall which has been used for the National and University Library for the past forty years. Almost the whole national literary heritage was destroyed in that catastrophic fire. In that fire I have lost my life's work with all my major works of art.*

1993.

## APPENDIX 2

### *The Painter of Bridges Sources*

*The Painter of Bridges* draws on several sources: the above asylum application and numerous telephone and face-to-face interviews with Dobrivoje, Gordana and their daughter Dragana; my father's diary of the three weeks he spent in Sarajevo in January 1993, arranging to evacuate my mother's parents; lengthy face-to-face interviews with twelve Sarajevans who had lived through the siege during two research trips I undertook to Sarajevo in 2010; and the historical, ethnographical, and literary texts which are referenced in this thesis. Among the most useful of these texts in terms of detailing what life was like under siege in Sarajevo have been: Nenad Veličković's nuanced, blackly comic novel, *Lodgers*; Ivana Maček's ethnography, *Sarajevo under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime*; *Besieged: Life under Fire on a Sarajevo Street*, an eyewitness account by journalist Barbara Demick; and journalist Miroslav Prstojević's chronicle of the first year of the siege, from which I drew up a detailed timeline, *Sarajevo: The Wounded City*.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Nenad, Veličković, *The Lodgers*, trans. by Celia Hawkesworth (London: Brandon, 2006); Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Barbara Demick, *Besieged: Life under Fire on a Sarajevo Street* (London: Granta, 2012); Miroslav Prstojević, *Sarajevo: The Wounded City* (Ljubljana, DAG Grafika, 1994).

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