

***I'm dreaming of a white Christmas in Sarajevo***

A combat veteran facing his own demons comes face to face in war torn Bosnia with the victims of genocide. If he can figure out how they cope then possibly he can find peace within himself

# I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas in Sarajevo

by John L. Cirafici

## 1

I know I'm at home, in my bed, and asleep; but the dreams when they come are so compelling, so real and disturbingly gripping that I can't pull away from them. I'm back in a war and it doesn't make a bit of difference which one. I want very badly to get away from "there" but I can't summons the willpower to force myself awake, if in fact I'm dreaming. There's no rhyme or reason to the dreams and I don't have a clue why I'm back or how. Now I'm running in different directions trying to locate my "battle rattle"—my personal combat gear—and my weapon, and wondering what's happening around me. Where did I set them down? Why, damn it, did I leave them unattended? If I don't get it together right now, I'm going to get myself killed. Sometimes I see someone I know but before I can talk to him and get some answers the scene abruptly changes and I'm somewhere else. Or, I see something happening that I should be preventing, but I can't get there to stop it. I'm getting confused about my situation; the flow of time is irrational, and the course of events makes absolutely no sense. I'm asking myself; where am I; why am I here and I'm wondering who's in charge. Doesn't anyone know what's going on? Who are those people; what are they doing? Then, absolutely certain that this has got to be a nightmare, I struggle hard to awaken. Finally, I sit upright in my bed, trying to see in the darkness. When my mind finally focuses I try hard to make sense of it all, but I never can. I sit on the edge of my bed urgently trying to collect fragments of the dream before I lose them, as reality rushes back in and washes the pieces away.

The dreams are always unsettling and "real" enough for me to believe that I am truly "there." From what I am able to retain the dreams without exception are always confusing, disorienting, irrational and irritating. The "why," however, evades me. The answer to the puzzle has got to be buried in the dream, if only I can sort it out. I wish I could figure out what triggers these episodes and perhaps be done with them.

## 2

In 1993, in the midst of one of those conflicts, our team was sent into the war zone of what had once been a part of Yugoslavia. We were to identify possible operational sites in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina for NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) peacemaking forces in anticipation of an end to hostilities. Both countries had been internally torn asunder during bloody ethnic fighting between people who were once neighbors and by units of the Yugoslav Army. By the time we entered the devastated countryside the victims were reeling from nearly two years of brutal sectarian violence. Even before heading into the “darkness” I knew how important it was for the peace initiative to work. The conflict’s hapless victims were living in an endless nightmare; they never knew when the seemingly insatiable madmen would come calling on them. The local Croat and Muslim communities alike especially dreaded the arrival of the brutal and calculatingly cruel Serb militias. They always appeared out of nowhere, their confidence fortified with slivovitz—Bosnian plum brandy—and answering only to themselves. Riding into villages on a genocidal rampage they would leave a trail of horror in their wake. It was now up to us—NATO—to put a stop to the carnage.

The images sadly are not new to my eyes. I had seen this before in one scene of horror or another. If I closed my eyes I could see again Vietnam and the village of Montagnard tribespeople brutally exterminated by a Viet Cong execution squad using flame-throwers. I thought back to when we liberated Kuwait in Desert Storm, two years before. I saw firsthand the handiwork of Iraqis who committed their final acts of brutality in the hours before they withdrew from Kuwait. Only a few months before this assignment that has brought me to the Balkans I had returned home from the stench of death in Somalia. The images clung to me and would not let go. The unpleasant memories were turning me inward and confused. By my just being “there” did I have some sort of role to play in the slaughter of innocents?

It was on this assignment that I really began to wonder as I traveled through this dystopian landscape if I would ever find answers to my own bewildering dreams. When I looked around at dazed refugees from burned out villages who were victims of ethnic cleansing, I wanted to stop them and ask; what dreams do you have? Do you feel like you’re endlessly trapped in some sort of insane purgatory? Do you think you are somehow paying for sins you never committed? Are you at least a little bit responsible for this hell?

Our team’s mission was simply to make contact with local militias and inspect potential sites for peace enforcing NATO forces. This was, of course, in anticipation of an end to the conflict. The Serbs, however, did not allow us to confuse our mission for peace with their view of the process. Occasional bursts of tank and machinegun fire reminded us that they were still kings of the dung hill.

Cyrus Vance and Lord Owens, two distinguished statesmen, thought they could convince all warring factions to cease fighting. Then, according to the plan, NATO forces would peacefully come in to replace the ineffectual United Nations forces and put an end to the genocide. Their peace plan, however, never had a chance, and sadly it was just not to be. It would take another two years for the horror to subside into a sort of peace.

I became deeply disappointed when the peace initiative failed. We packed up our gear and departed without having done a single thing to stop the bloodletting. Cyrus Vance and Lord Owen, as sincere as their efforts were, never had the slightest possibility of success, not while the Serbs held a winning hand. There was nothing that we could do for all those people who, without us, did not have a shred of hope. As we headed back to Italy and then home I promised myself that I would return one day and do a little bit of good on my own.

### 3

Helge Meyer and I became acquaintances of a sort, all because of a chance meeting I had with him in mid-1996, in Germany. Eric, a mutual friend living in Frankfurt/Main's Sachsenhausen district, introduced us at a nearby Irish owned pub. Eric wanted me to meet Helge, if for no other reasons, because we both had already lived somewhat similar and very interesting lives. I could see Eric's point. We were ex-special operators, Helge in the Danish Special Forces and me with American special operations forces, and we both were adventurous and not adverse to a little bit of risk taking. I was, however, at that very moment simply on holiday in a corner of the world where the truest and best of Riesling wines are produced, in the Rhein and Moselle valleys of central Germany. I was happily roaming the vineyards from which their grapes are harvested and enjoying German hospitality.

The Cold War had ended five years before and with it an end to all those tense years of standing close to the edge of the unthinkable. Both Helge and I had both stood very close to that precipice; we trained hard with teams prepared to conduct guerilla warfare against the Soviet Army. If they ever rolled across West Germany we would get behind the Russians and begin the process of undoing the Soviet empire. Now, that nightmare was behind us and it was time to enjoy the peace dividend.

Helge wanted to test some ideas on me. Before he could begin I said,

"Look; I am running a cross country marathon Saturday morning up in the hills of the Hunsruck region. The 42 kilometer event I plan on doing is interesting; it traverses cultivated valleys, crosses forests and passes through vineyards now laden with grapes. I like the Zen effect of nature, so why don't we do it together and then we can talk later during lunch?"

Helge thought about it for a moment.

"Yeah, why not?"

And so, that was the beginning of our plan to return to Sarajevo, a city that, until less than a year before, was savagely blasted by Serb cannons and mortars and exposed to sniper fire while under siege. Its inhabitants had been indiscriminately and cold bloodedly slaughtered like sheep.

But first, the marathon.

I was long acquainted with German weather, and this past week was just not typical. We had to be experiencing a miracle of sorts since it had not rained in over eight days. That was a blessing for the run because the forest and valley trails would be mud free and the ground firm.

When Helge and I arrived early on the Saturday morning of the marathon the temperature was very mild, the air pleasantly dry, and we had clear blue skies above. We quickly checked in at the start point in front of the modest sports complex, paid the participant's fee, and began jogging at 08:00. The course was marked by colored ribbons and temporary signs. We jogged a kilometer or two along well kept paths before we entered the forest and headed uphill. After several more kilometers we exited the trees and ran up and down slopes through well maintained vineyards, occasionally cresting a hill or jogging down to a narrow wooden bridge crossing over a stream. When we passed by a village or farmer's barn there might be a refreshment table by the trail side set with water filled cups and fruit. There would also be a cardboard sign indicating the distance to go. Aside from the several times that we were on tortuous trails filled with tree roots and loose rocks, the run was exhilarating and refreshing. Helge was roughly the same age as me; so we did great to finish in three hours and forty five minutes. That run said a lot about each other and made it obvious, without saying a word, that we were fit, focused and disciplined.

Upon returning to the sports center we were each rewarded with a cloth marathon patch, suitable for wear on a jacket, if one was so inclined, and an attractive "urkunde"—a certificate of completion. With both in hand we walked back to the parking area and carefully eased stiff legs into Helge's car. Then we headed into Rheinböllen's center for lunch. Over plates of jägerschnitzel and pommes frites, with mineral water for me and an imported Czech Pilsner on the side for Helge we talked up his proposal.

"Do you know Sarajevo at all?"

I told him I did.

"There's this district on the west side of the airport runway called Dobrinja. Do you know it? During the siege Dobrinja protected the only connection the people of Sarajevo had with the outside world. Food, weapons, and escaping people passed through a tunnel under the nearby airport runway. From there refugees made their way up Mount Igman and to safety. If Dobrinja fell, so would the supply route and then the city. Those courageous people held against terrible odds, with fighting raging from house to house. Anyone captured by the Serbs was taken to a nearby school by the park, interrogated, and then shot against the wall. They paid a horrific price for their heroism. Families were killed and children left with dead parents. Do you understand what I'm talking about? Dobrinja is where we must go and bring to them a token of good will with gifts for the children and supplies for the emergency clinic. Can we do this together?"

"We can do this, Helge. Let's get some local churches to act as collection points. I can take two weeks of military leave at Christmastime and return to Germany. It somehow seemed apropos to me that we should travel during a very joyful time in the Christian calendar to bring gifts to a Muslim community in need. Let's do it."

# 4

I arrived in Frankfurt/Main just ten days before Christmas. After Helge picked me up we made our way to his apartment in nearby Harheim. I looked at him as he drove back and it was obvious that he was itching to get started. I noticed a bruise under his left eye.

“Helge. What’s that all about?”

“There are Serb guest workers—gastarbeitern—at the assembly plant where I work. They’re taken exception because I use my holidays to make runs into Croatia and Bosnia. They said that I’m helping the wrong side. Sometimes we get into a shoving match, that’s all.”

“Tell me Helge, did you have to deal with tight moments in the war zone?”

“Are you asking me that because you’re going to bail out on me, if we get into some difficulties?”

“No. I’m just curious how you accommodated the challenges.”

“Well, during the actual conflict the portable land mines were a problem. The Serbs would set them out on road surfaces to either stop or blow up vehicles bringing in supplies. I was in eastern Croatia, making my way toward Vukovar when it was under siege by the Serbs. I anticipated this problem. I fabricated a fiberglass scoop that fit on the front of my car. The scoop would slide under any mines and then they would safely slide off to the left or right side. I was lucky.”

We spent the next two days packing up a large station wagon and Helge’s car with gifts and medical supplies. When we got finished there was just enough space in the wagon for me and a small overnight bag. The same was true for Helge’s car. Then he had an idea. It was both dangerous and difficult at this time, even with the recently implemented Dayton Peace Agreement, to be driving through the war zone. He proposed that we have bogus IFOR placards made up for the cars. Pretending to be a part of IFOR—NATO’s Implementation Force in Bosnia, would give us some sort of legitimacy in an otherwise unpredictable environment. I had to think about that one for a moment. I was certain that doing that had to be in violation of some rule or other, but what the hell. If that’s what it takes to get through, then so be it. I looked at Helge and said,

“We are sure to have a lot of other game stoppers to deal with on this trip, so let’s do whatever it takes.”

What we were doing was insane. We were going to skirt around national borders while lacking proper documentation, traverse unfriendly territory, and likely violate any number of IFOR rules. Beyond all that, I would discover even more immediate challenges on this journey.

It was oh dark thirty when we finally completed preparations and got a new fuel filter for Helge’s car installed. I was a little concerned; we already had been up for 15 hours before beginning our odyssey; just the same we got on the autobahn—the excellent German highway system—and headed south and east. The going was at first misleadingly easy. We made good time in light rain conditions as we passed Nurnberg, and headed towards Salzburg. We were in Bavaria bound for Austria and everything was clicking.

Then, frozen precipitation began to fall. Ice pelted the road surface and pinged off the windshield. When cars began sliding around us we slowed down to a prudent speed but kept going. We stopped at the last petrol station in Germany, topped off, and headed south toward the newly opened Karawanken Tunnel in southern Austria. The precipitation now became snow and quickly layered the autobahn surface. Looking up at the snowfall I began thinking about the time I had spent up in Tiksi, Siberia and contrasted the current situation with conditions I experienced then. There, everything was frozen solid including the Lena, a huge river emptying into the Arctic Ocean. That was, at 50 degrees below zero, a real winter to contend with. I reassured myself, thinking I had nothing to complain about on this journey; this, in contrast, is nothing to be too concerned about.

I needed some music to pass the time so I reached over to the dash radio and played with the knobs. No luck, it was kaput. No lively polka music for me to pass the night. It wasn't the only thing broken; the defroster, I soon discovered, was fried. This drive was getting more interesting with each discovery. I had driven this particular road several years before with my wife and it was no big deal, so why should I be worrying? In fact, the old Loib Pass we took back then over the Julian Alps was much more of a challenge than the long, level Karawanken Tunnel, so what more could I ask for?

This was getting to be one long drive, and the snow was really coming down. Drifts were forming and visibility diminishing. What's next? When we finally entered the tunnel and then exited close to Slovenia it was already day time. In those days before the war when my wife and I used to travel through the Balkans on holiday there were several bridges from which to choose that crossed the Sava River into Bosnia. But there is this odd thing about war. The infrastructure of civilization; cities, bridges, and whatever are turned into ruins by people who are much better at destruction than construction. That's what happened to the bridges; they got in the way of the war and now they're all gone. That was going to complicate things a bit, but I wasn't going to concern myself now with issues literally further down the road.

We soon pulled into the border crossing point for customs clearance. The Slovenian border guard discovered that both Helge and I lacked the requisite visa in our passports and began questioning us. This was one of those show stoppers that we had to expect, but the solution came easily. I showed my military documents and said we were on a mission for IFOR. He gave an acknowledgement and with a wave sent us on our way again.

Slovenia had not been war damaged. Consequently, the highway—the autoput—did not hinder our progress. Sometimes a surprise is actually a blessing; the weather on the south side of the Julian Alps was warm enough for rain and not snow. We were able to pick up the pace except when backed up behind double trailer trucks heading east. We made a road stop to fuel up again, use the toilets and grab some snacks for the road. I knew people in Slovenia. I remember how relieved they were that the Yugoslav army did not crush them when they declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Jozef, an acquaintance living in Ljubljana and an officer in the Slovenian army, said that it was because almost no Serbs lived in Slovenia. When we got to Croatia with its fairly large Serb minority it was a different story.

It took us until the early afternoon to enter Croatia where the indications of war were everywhere. Bullet holes in signs, destroyed structures, and some cratering in the road surface. The Serbs had been determined to either hang onto much of Croatia or destroy it on the way out. Where any road signs continued to stand the references to

Bosnian destinations were all painted out. This didn't seem to be a positive portent. As we continued east, getting close to where the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian borders all came together, traffic fell off until we were practically the only ones on the road. The short winter day had ended too quickly, and it was very dark as we were turning south toward Zupanja and the Sava River. The temperature dropped quickly and, as we approached the river, we were enveloped in an incredibly dense fog. With some difficulty we made our way to where a Croatian Army pontoon bridge should have been anchored. The final two kilometers to the anchorage was packed with a solid line of trucks that appeared to have been there some time. In this case, our ignorance of the local situation worked against us. The Sava had flooded and overflowed its banks. The Croatian Army, in order to protect its vital crossing point, had dismantled the bridge until the waters receded. What were we to do? We asked locals what they were doing to cross over. An elderly man who spoke German told us that there was a small ferry service for cars and people only ten or so kilometers back west along the Sava. Those ten kilometers, however, in fog as thick as soup and in total darkness was one of the longest journeys on this road trip. There would be more hurdles ahead but we had to first negotiate this one. The locals may know these gravel covered roads through wetlands like the backs of their hands, but we didn't have a clue. After a number of false starts we lucked out and came upon a small number of cars waiting for a ferry. This was truly the River Styx and the hell of Bosnia was on the other side. We stood there taking all of this in when out of the fog we could see "Charon" the mythological ferryman for the dead emerging with his ferry.

We were about to sneak late at night into Bosnia and nobody was asking us why. There were far too many people damaged by this god forsaken war who were now looking for some degree of normality; the survivors were keeping to themselves. People giving side glances probably wondered which militia we belonged to. Our cars with windows painted flat black (to keep intrusive eyes away) did not inspire confidence in whatever our mission might be. Were we Ustashe or HVO—the Croatian extremists and militias who had been easily as brutal as any of the Serb units? Better not to ask.

The ferry master beckoned us onboard along with some other cars. At first I wondered if anyone collected payment, and then, suddenly, Charon was standing in front of me. When he simply asked for six German deutschmarks payment and not my soul, I was so thankful.

The Sava, at this point opposite the community of Orašje—a Croatian enclave on the south or Bosnian side—wasn't all that wide, even with the flooding. The ferry was firmly connected to a steel cable strung across the river and anchored in the trees. Within minutes we crossed, disembarked, and drove ahead while negotiating the flooded river bank. Fortunately my station wagon did not sink into any soft spots and I emerged with car unscathed. It was midnight, in dense fog and darkness, and there ahead, incongruously, a female Croatian customs official in full powder blue uniform emerged to meet us as we entered the pavement. She momentarily glanced at us and without saying a word kept going. What non-verbal message were we sending? Did she sense that we were heading into the heart of darkness where genocide was a habit, ethnic cleansing the rule, and despair a common currency?

Croatians, who are Catholic, had decked out Orašje in festive Christmas lighting. We were astounded, but did not linger for an ongoing holiday celebration in the main square. They had good reason to celebrate. During the war the people of this community

had repeatedly come under attack by well armed Serb units, however repulsing them. They would have been treated very badly had the Serbs broken through. Fifteen kilometers ahead we exited the enclave and entered a darkness that was more than just the nighttime. Three autos waiting to enter Serbian held territory prudently stayed back until we went ahead of them. Better first to see what happened to us. There were no lights shining on the Serb side of the ZOS (the Dayton Peace Agreement Zone of Separation). We were traversing the bitterly contested Serbian Posavina corridor, some twenty kilometers wide at this point. This narrow passage was their only secure connection between sizeable Serb held territories and their capital of Banja Luka to the west with equally substantial Serb holdings to the east, abutting Serbia. We figuratively hunkered down and made our way through what might be described, without exaggeration, as hostile territory. If the Serbs discovered our subterfuge, things could really go badly. We saw some Bosnian Serb troops pass off to our right at a road crossing; they were, however, engaged in conversation with several locals. After another ten kilometers ahead, I saw a US Army M-1 “Abrams” main battle tank—a part of the NATO force—standing watch on a ZOS checkpoint. I had a mixed reaction. I was very relieved that we were exiting Serb territory but fearful that the soldier might discover that I was a US military person on my own in Bosnia, and worse, in Serbian territory. Fortunately, the soldier did a cursorily check on what appeared to be our documents and waved us on. With a sigh of relief we were now in friendlier Muslim territory.

## 5

We stopped at the first and only petrol station we would see until Sarajevo, and topped off again. Helge said we should make our way to Tuzla, some 80 kilometers further on. There were Norwegian soldiers stationed at the airfield who could put us up until morning. I was totally onboard with the plan; I slept very little since leaving the States, and both of us had been up for nearly 40 hours. I could definitely do with some shut eye.

As we approached Tuzla the fog returned with a vengeance. The valley we entered, with a large lake to the west, was a perfect setting for fog to form and envelop everything in a heavy white blanket. Fortunately, with more than a little luck, we were able to find the airfield entrance. Helge, expecting to exchange greetings with the soldiers in his native Danish, was totally caught off guard by American troops. They were with IFOR and had taken over security at the airfield; and, no, they were not going to allow us to enter. There is nothing like being flexible when a plan falls apart. We quickly moved on to plan B; continue driving to Sarajevo.

The route we took to Sarajevo followed a snow and ice coated mountain road that crisscrossed the ZOS. There was absolutely no one else on that road. The road rose and descended in a series of icy “S” turns; it was no place for a sane person to be driving, especially after not sleeping for nearly two days. But, without a choice, that is exactly what we did. We knew we were back in Bosnian Muslim territory again when, at five o’clock in

the morning and seemingly in the middle of nowhere, several local policemen stopped us, hoping that we were smugglers with a load of whiskey. They were sorely disappointed. The good news was that they lived in Sarajevo, which was just a little bit further ahead.

We could not actually see the city when we arrived from the northeast. It too, was completely enveloped in a dense fog with a layer of snow on all the surfaces. Despite the poor visibility I realized we were now on the same street that my wife and I had driven seven years before, along the Miljacka River. I may have been exhausted but I did know when we passed the famous bridge near where, on Saint Vitus Day in June 1914, the ill fated Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie had stopped just moments before they were assassinated; that wrong turn ignited World War One. I figured that we were also good for a wrong turn or two in the whiteout conditions, hopefully without restarting this war. Eventually, God knows how, we found our way to Dobrinja. Once there, it wasn't difficult to recognize the district, even in low visibility. Every structure was bullet riddled and blasted. There was nothing we could do until first light two hours away so we each had a fitful sleep in the cold, over packed cars.

## 6

Someone was banging on the driver's side window of my station wagon. I scraped away the frost and saw the face of a boy. He spoke some German and school taught English. I got out to rouse Helge but he was already up. The boy, it turned out, was the son of Senadin Topic, our local point of contact. When Helge had been here before he stayed at the Topic apartment. Likewise, for the two days we would be in Sarajevo we used Topic's apartment as our operations center. Of course, he and his neighbors were the first to benefit from our visit. We each acted as a sort of Santa Claus, presenting the children with something to brighten their lives just a little bit. Then, it was off to the "hospital."

When we entered the hospital and met the staff I stood in awe. This was where so many lives were saved during the brutal fighting. In the middle of hell on earth the hospital medical team had struggled, under appalling conditions and often by lantern light, to save wounded men, women, and children. Senadin had been brought here after his abdomen and chest were torn open by shrapnel from an exploding Serb mortar round. With only basic instruments they repaired him, closed his chest and abdomen wounds and prepared him for evacuation. The following night he was taken up Mount Igman and across to safety. So many people in Dobrinja were alive today only because of the incredibly heroic efforts by the staff members standing around me. Had the Serbs broken through everyone in the hospital would have been executed. I counted myself fortunate to meet them. Azra, a very pleasant, courageous, and well informed woman in her thirties with henna colored hair, was one of the volunteers. Her husband also had been wounded by a Serbian artillery round impacting on their street in Sarajevo. He was stitched up and evacuated to safety over Mount Igman. Undaunted, she raised her two sons during the siege while going out on the streets as a volunteer to aid others. She shared tidbits of her life with me as we walked around the clinic. Before the war Azra had enjoyed the time she spent with a Yugoslav engineering company working on projects in Libya and Iraq. She

could not have foreseen the day when her Serb co-workers would turn against Muslims and become genocidal madmen. I also met Ajla, a refugee from Breko, a city situated well to the north on the Sava River and a major target of Serb enforced ethnic cleansing. Before the war it was a very diverse city with Serbs, Muslims, Croats and Gypsies. Ajla was a very attractive woman with hazel eyes and dark hair, born of a Bosnian father and an Iraqi mother. When Serb militiamen “cleansed” the city, she was kept as one of their prisoners. Eventually the Serbs grew tired of their women prisoners, whom they led, shoeless, to the roadside and told to start walking south. Ajla told me how Serbian women and children would line their village streets as the Muslim women passed through, and stone them. Another woman I met had been forced to walk south from Hamulici, just west of Prijedor, some hundred kilometers to the north of Sarajevo. As I listened, she told me about the day her Serb neighbors, without forewarning, assembled on the street with guns in hand. She did not understand what they were doing until they grabbed a teenage boy, sliced him wide open on the hood of a car and disemboweled him. Fear ran through the Muslim families as they were gathered outside their homes. All men and boys were soon taken to a nearby mine where they were executed and their bodies run through rock crushing machines before being dumped down a mine shaft. The women were forced to begin walking south toward Sarajevo. They too, were stoned.

This was a land I had known from before the war, when Muslim, Croat, and Serb neighbors worked and partied together, played sports, and went to each other’s homes. Many of them married across ethnic and religious lines. What happened? All these people I was meeting had experienced hell on earth. What was it that they did to so anger the Serbs?

Helge and I could not do enough for these survivors. We humbly delivered medical supplies and instruments that the hospital sorely needed to continue treating Dobrinja’s sick and injured. We knew it wasn’t much and hoped they would understand.

We ended our visit at noon and took a much needed break. I headed into Sarajevo for lunch in the old Turkish quarter of the city. I was treating the Topic’s, so they accompanied me to Restaurant Ćevapdzinica, a quaint establishment that had been in the marketplace since 1905. Although I infrequently eat meat it was either that or nothing because this eatery specialized in serving different kinds of steak dishes. I ordered ćevapcici, which was traditional bread stuffed with grilled steak and onions. The Topic’s each ordered *dulbastija*, a grilled veal steak. When the dishes were brought to the table they smiled with anticipation. I sensed that they did not often enjoy a visit to a restaurant.

As we were eating they mentioned that the European community, deeply moved by what their district had endured, committed funds for the restoration of Dobrinja’s apartments and infrastructure. The Topic’s hoped it would begin soon because it was difficult to live in the shattered buildings. They reminded me that Dobrinja was especially targeted during the siege by the Serbs who bombarded the district more than any other part of Sarajevo, hoping to break its spirit and shatter its resistance. I could see exactly what they meant. I remembered it from before the war when Dobrinja was a neat collection of apartments originally built for participants in the 1984 Winter Olympics. Senadin also talked about the building of the tunnel—Sarajevo’s wartime lifeline with the rest of the world. With only shovels, picks, and wheelbarrows they worked in shifts twenty-four hours a day digging in the direction of the airport runway. They dug a trench 350 meters—1,000 feet—in length, starting from an apartment garage. They lined its sides

with wooden planks and braces and then covered it over with planks and soil. When they reached the airport environment they tunneled 350 meters beneath the runway and joined the tunnel constructed on the other side, coming from the city proper. Senadin spoke with pride that he had played a role in saving Sarajevo and consequently his country. Now that the conflict was behind them I wondered if their lives had returned to a semblance of normal.

“Tell me Senadin Topic, now that the war is over, is the future promising for your son.”

He looked at me with incredulous eyes. They told me to look around and see for myself. Nothing had changed.

“I am getting my son out of this mad house, before I lose him, too.”

Without him actually saying it I knew he was referring to the loss of his wife. Helge had told me that she was killed by a rocket grenade fired into their apartment building.

“We have relatives living in Germany. They said he is welcome as soon as their son travels to his new job. He’ll be able to sleep in their house, hopefully without reacting to every sound outside.”

I had asked Azra similar questions. She said she would never abandon Sarajevo to Serbs with guns. Without me prompting her Azra added her opinion of the Muslim leaders.

“They are no better than the Serbs. Instead of guns they use other methods to enrich themselves while we suffer. If the war is renewed they will take all their deutschmarks to Germany and live in luxury.”

Deutschmarks—the German currency before the later use of Euros—was the only trusted form of money throughout Bosnia.

The following day Helge and I visited with the young school children. It broke my heart to think about what they had been through and it moved me to realize how resilient they were. I don’t think it was just the gifts we brought there. The children did not rush us with impatient little hands. They actually interacted with Helge and me as if they understood why we were there. When we distributed gifts of clothing and toys they responded with song and heartfelt appreciation. I considered myself the lucky one just to be sharing this moment with them, and they give me reason to believe in their future.

Helge and I distributed the remainder of our gifts until we exhausted our supply. We returned to the Topic apartment for one final night of rest because in the morning we had a very long drive ahead and Helge needed to get back to work.

Our cars were now empty and relatively spacious. That should make for a more relaxing drive back, or so I thought. We decided to return via a different, but much longer route. This time we would head west and descend through the beautiful Neretva River valley to the coast. I had been there during the fighting and remembered the mindless destruction of war. In this insane corner of the conflict there actually had been three way fighting between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. I saw many former homes standing with just one or two walls remaining after the fighting. The symbol of Herzegovina—the old 16<sup>th</sup> century Turkish bridge of Mostar—was blasted and destroyed by mortar fire during the fighting.

Before we could depart, the school teachers asked us to visit one more time with the children. They again expressed their appreciation, and shared with us a Bosnian chocolate cake. One small Muslim child pressed a Christmas card into my hands; she had made it

just for me. Other children presented me with a handmade poster that had all their handprints in different colors around the edge and their names encircling a thank you note.

The drive back, although longer, followed the Adriatic coast where it was much safer from the possibility of attack. The hairpin turns and crazy drivers, however, spoke to a different kind of danger. There was an accident ahead in the pouring rain and that cost us additional hours. For a number of reasons we did not enter Germany until the next day. We drove through another ice storm and because of that experience, and the many other scary ones during this incredible journey, I was grateful to be alive by the time we reached Harheim.

After getting some rest at Helge's apartment I headed to the airport. Because flights were delayed by icy conditions I nearly had to remain at the terminal through Christmas Day. Luck, one more time, was on my side and I did finally get out on a flight bound for the United States.

It was on the flight home that I finally began the process of digesting everything. When I closed my eyes I saw all those people inside my head. Azra, Ajla, the children, the hospital staff, the ferry man, the mysterious Croatian customs woman, and the Topic's; the Serb soldiers, the ferry passengers, the police officers, and the people afraid to enter into Serb territory. I heard their voices, I saw them moving in the shadows, and I tried to picture their experiences, but there was too much going on. I wanted to truly understand how they were able to exist, without going insane, after the world they had once known was brutally changed forever.

I wondered; what do they dream about when they sleep? Do those little children have dreams like we do? Do the Serb militiamen dream about their terrible deeds? Does the slivovitz help them forget? Now that the walking dead are inside my head can I ever get them out? Do I want to?