

I wrote the first version of this short story as an English assignment, but the darkly fascinating siege of Sarajevo kept nagging in my mind until I rewrote it as an entry to the Wicked Young Writers competition in 2011.

Bašcaršija Burns

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Note: In Serbo-Croatian words and names, a J is pronounced with a Y sound while consonants with a Caron (ˇ) are pronounced with an H. For example, Š is pronounced like the S in sugar, while Č is pronounced like the C in cello. Also, Rs are slightly rolled. On with the story!

It was 1992. I was living in Sarajevo with my parents and my younger sister, Anja.

It felt like an ordinary spring morning. Anja and I were walking to school, teasing and gossiping as usual. The tension that had been building since the declaration of independence, the trouble on the streets, had slipped from our minds. This was Sarajevo, this was home. We felt completely safe.

"What lessons do you have today?" Anja asked me.

"History, English..."

"Ah, your *favourite* subject!" Anja spoke in English. She was top of her English class. I was bottom of mine.

"Yes," I replied sarcastically, not quite certain of the meaning of 'favourite' at that moment. She did not burst out laughing, which was a good sign. She started to pronounce a long and complicated sentence which I would soon shrug my shoulders at.

Then I noticed the side road. And the car.

I stopped inches from the kerb. Anja, concentrating on her English, carried on.

I reached out to grab her by the collar. She dodged, smiling, stepped out into the road.

As the car charged towards us at thirty kilometres per hour, time seemed to slow down.

As Anja's head slammed into its windscreen, time almost stopped.

"Anja!" I cried, too late, as the sound of squealing brakes hit me, delayed like the thunder from a lightning strike. Anja's limp body slid down the bonnet of the car until she fell onto the road in a heap. I rushed to her and felt for my sister's pulse. No comforting throb of blood met my fingers through her skin.

The door opened, and quite a young woman got out, pale. "Oh, oh..." She obviously didn't know what to say or do.

"Worry about it later. Call an ambulance." I spoke firmly, and gestured to a phone box. The woman nodded dumbly, and hurried away.

"Anja!" I groaned as soon as she was out of earshot, trying not to panic and to remember the first aid they had taught us at school. The routine ran through my head: thirty compressions... I flinched as I felt a rib crack under my first compression, and then felt a strange calm come over me. Cold, I entered a half-trance and carried on. Clear airway, two breaths, thirty compressions; clear airway, two breaths, thirty compressions; clear, two, thirty; clear, two, thirty...

My shallow breathing kept time with my compressions, until I had to breathe deeply for the two breaths.

Clear, two, thirty...

Dulled sounds of sirens reached into my trance as if through cotton wool.

Clear, two, thirty...

I was pulled away from Anja and clear of the defibrillator's electric shocks. Awoken from my trance, I found I didn't want to watch as she convulsed. Instead I looked away, waiting, hoping, for two words.

"She's alive!"

It felt like I had been stuffed into a sack, and just been pulled out, my limbs free to move and stretch again. Tears, once held back by my hot eyes, flowed free.

I fumbled as I put our schoolbags into the ambulance. Then we were on our way to the State Hospital. I sat on a chair in the back, thinking of all the things I had done wrong. Why had I reached for her collar? The image of her stepping out into the road, smiling at what she probably thought was a joke, played over and over in my head.

The Old Town, Bašćaršija, was quiet as we passed through. The silence was unnerving. Until the bombs came.

I learned, later, that they were Chetnik bombs. Then, I didn't care. I cowered. Destruction fell from the sky. Bašćaršija burned.

I think I closed my eyes while the ambulance fled to the hospital. Anja was quickly put in a bed in Accident & Emergency, while I found a phone. Dead. The next was dead, too. I gave up.

Slowly, Anja came round.

"Where am I?" she asked through the oxygen mask. I strained to hear over the shooting.

"In hospital," I replied, flinching. Above me, I heard an explosion, brickwork collapsing, screams. The hospital shook.

"What's happening?"

"War." I couldn't keep the tears from my voice. All I could do was hold her hand and pray.