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Innocent Child, Who Showed Them No Fear

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Sometimes it's hard remembering just how perfect our life was in Kozarac before the war; we were not rich but we had more than enough. We lived in a Communist country so there was not that much to want anyway. There was nothing missing in our lives. Most of the time our parents were busy working on the farm, and we took care of ourselves and each other, and the whole village looked out for us.

Looking back now, I would describe our childhood as like a fairy tale. We had everything that perhaps this generation's children cannot even dream about. Nowadays, our kids are surrounded by mobile phones and sophisticated technology that is taking their youth away. We never dreamed of leaving home or leaving our people and our village.

In this part of the country, there were Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks. We all looked the same, spoke the same language, and lived in the same area. But, in the months leading up to the war in 1992, I sensed a change. I began to hear people grumble that the Serbs ran pretty much everything, and that Yugoslavia was not fair and equal anymore.

At this time, my dad didn't seem too concerned; so, as kids, we didn't worry much either, and we carried on with our lives, going to school and playing sport.

I was a good pupil at school. The schools in Bosnia are well disciplined. Education is hard, and the teachers are strict. Every morning when the teachers entered the classroom you had to stand to attention. One literature teacher, Mr. Srećo, was really strict, and you wouldn't step out of line when he walked in. He was a good teacher, but I didn't enjoy his lessons; we always had to study the Serbian writers and poets. I hated the literature, and nobody wanted to know about the dead poets.

Mr. Srećo used to pick on me, because of my lack of knowledge in literature. We had oral examinations, where the teacher would ask you questions in front of the whole class, and it always made me feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. I thought it was just teachers' bullying tactics. I used to say, 'Sir, I find literature really boring.' All the teachers liked my honesty, and somehow I got away with being a bit cheeky and always got good marks.

My favorite subject at school was physical education, and I was best at basketball.

Basketball was massive in Yugoslavia, much like football is in the UK. One of the coaches was my hero, and I looked up to him as a father figure; because my dad was so busy working, I felt he was never really around. After training he would invite me to have a coffee and a chat with him. He gave me the best advice about everything, but particularly how to be a good sportsman. He used to tell me great stories about when he was young, and I listened to every word as he made everything sound so exciting. He told me about his military service, and I remember around this time going home from school and telling my mum that I wanted to join the army. My mum said that I was crazy, and that I didn't need to go to the army, as the army would come to us soon enough. The fighting had started in Croatia, which was not far away from our home town, and our parents were obviously more worried than we realized.

At this time, we went to school as normal. I carried on with my basketball coaching and I always did my best; I was very competitive, trying to impress my coach. At school, we joked around as all kids do, teasing and winding each other up, and playing pretend fighting using sticks and all sorts, but I began to notice a bit of tension in the air; everywhere you went, people were talking about the war. Then, one day, my basketball coach started coming to school wearing a uniform and fully armed with a Kalashnikov. One morning in the changing room, as I was getting dressed, I said to the coach, 'Sir, the gun is pointing at me, could you put it away?'

He was smoking in his office; back then it was normal to smoke, but probably not in his office while he was teaching, which probably tells you what kind of person he was. He looked at me and said, 'Who are you scared of?'

'The gun,' I said.

'Are you scared of us Serbs?'

I didn't reply; I just kept quiet, but I was thinking, why would he say that? I knew he wasn't joking as he had a really angry face; I had never seen him like that before.

All the other kids in the changing room froze and pretended like nothing had happened, but they all got changed in seconds, as the atmosphere was very tense and uncomfortable.

Gradually, we were starting to feel that pressure from occupation and the Territorial Army guarding our little towns and villages from invaders. Our parents used to take turns patrolling the town twenty-four hours a day, together with Serbs and Croats, who were the minorities in our Bosnian village. It was May 1992, and the wise people in the village knew the war was getting closer to us.

Our uncle Hašim Solaković warned my dad, 'The war is almost on our doorstep and it will be a nasty bloody war.'

My dad always thought we would be safe. He used to get angry with his uncle, and tried to explain to him that he had lots of friends and was well respected. He said that we would not be harmed, and it would be the same with the whole village. Their arguments would last for a couple of hours each day, but still my dad would not believe him.

On the TV there was some coverage of the war in Croatia. It was clear that Yugoslavia was breaking apart, but it all seemed a million miles away from our sleepy little town. TV news was about as interesting to me as those literature classes with Mr. Srećo. Yet, looking back, I sensed something was changing, just little things. Mum and Dad seemed anxious; you know when your parents are trying to appear normal so as not to worry you? My dad would give us all lingering looks before he left the house to go to work. Normally he left with a spring in his step. These days it was like he half-expected not to come back.

‘My son,’ he said, ‘if the dogs of war turn up at our door, you must say nothing, even if your life depends on it. Your silence might distract them, and you might have a better chance of surviving by not showing them fear.’

I listened very carefully, absorbing his every word, my eyes alert with fear. I didn’t say a word in reply to my father, but a clear tear rolled down my soft cheek. But I was too embarrassed to wipe it, too scared to cry, to show fear to my dad. It was clear he was no longer so confident the war would not touch our family.

‘Do not lose your honor. Do not embarrass your family,’ he said, raising his deep voice. ‘My life might be in your hands. I do have a few enemies who could use this opportunity to target me during the war.’

At school our teachers started to say that we might finish this academic year in May instead of July, just for safety reasons. It didn’t make much sense to us, but we were only kids and of course we would be happy if the summer holidays began early, not knowing what was around the corner.

Something strange happened during the last couple of days of school before the war broke out. A lot of kids started acting out war scenes – it was like a game but we obviously sensed something bad was about to happen. I remember my school friends Siniša and Saša Baltić looking out the window at the minaret of a mosque and saying, ‘Do you think if we had a bazooka we could take that minaret down?’

We all crouched on our knees, pretended that we had a bazooka on our shoulders and fired. Then we made the noise of an explosion. Siniša and Saša’s granddad had helped to build that mosque, and then at the end the Serbs destroyed it. It almost felt that the Serbs knew more about the war than us and what was about to happen.

I remember my last day in school, the teachers had to give us our final grade for the year and my overall pass was A. It was the top grade level five. I ran home so excited to tell my mum and dad, as my dad had promised me a new motorbike if I got the level-five pass. As I reached home, I found my mum working in the garden, and I just managed to say, ‘Mum, I’ve got the level-five passes for this year!’ when the siren went off to signify the war had started. My mum grabbed me and ran into the house to get her belongings. People started panicking and running up and down the street, not knowing what to do or where to go. I had never seen my parents more worried and concerned.

What will happen now? Who will go against whom and why?

What we had once seen as a TV report of war in Croatia was now happening for real in Bosnia: we were in the Serbian-dominated part of Bosnia, not a good place to be. We started to hear about villages being attacked and non-Serbs being kicked out. People were dying. At one point, we ran to our Serbian neighbor, Dušanka, to hide, and she said she would save us all. We stayed in her garage briefly, but people had become paranoid about who they could trust now and soon started panicking, saying that we should not have stayed with her, that she would get us all killed. Eventually, we all went back to our homes hoping for the best.

My dad stopped going to work; he was too well known and it was too dangerous to go out. One day, some men burst into our house and took all our money and everything they could carry, even the TV. We had watched the war unfold on it, now it even claimed the TV itself. Anything they couldn't carry, they smashed. They weren't soldiers. They were just thugs in uniforms.

But it wasn't enough for them to rob us, because then it happened, the event that would change my life forever.

Suddenly, all the looting and destruction stopped as their officer arrived - it was my basketball coach, but even now I can't mention his name for my own safety. They dragged my dad outside in front of the huge hedge, and I could hear them talking to him: 'Hey, Mr. Big Shot, not so big now, are you, eh? Look at you now, you filthy Turk, you are nothing! All your money, your business and your house are now ours. I bet with all that money you ripped off from the honest Serbs you've been supplying guns to the Muslim guys, eh? You filthy Turk!'

My dad just kept quiet.

I thought I knew fear - how stupid I was! Fear up until that point had been about whether I would lose some stupid basketball match. This was a different ballgame. They took me outside to where my dad was. He was on his knees, his head hung low, surrounded by these drunken thugs, pointing their guns at him and laughing.

'Don't say anything, son,' he whispered to me. He was scared, of course, but somehow he was still strong; there was no panic in him. He knew not to provoke them.

My coach said to me, 'My Ustaše little Turk friend, your dad will be watching when I kill you - he will be our audience.' (The Ustaše - pronounced oostahshay - were a fascist terrorist organization founded on Croatian nationalism in 1929.)

He turned to my dad. 'I bet you want to call out to your boy, eh? I bet you supplied weapons to the rebels. If you tell us everything, we'll let your boy go... or would you like to see him scattered over your fields? You'll be ploughing him for months.'

And so I stood in what I thought was to be my execution spot with my family's life in my hands, while they were hitting my dad and questioning him, trying to make him look at me. He just kept his head down - he knew that if he looked at me his heart would have broken. I wanted to call out to him, to make it stop; but I somehow knew that would just make it harder for him and for me. So there we were with each other's life in our hands. Oh yes, I knew fear that day and it seemed to go on forever. That

was the longest day of my life.

All of a sudden, I saw my cousin Sandra Solaković; she was only fifteen at the time but she was brave. She said to the soldiers, 'He's only a little boy - what has he done wrong? Let him go!'

I was concerned about her, as we'd heard that some of the soldiers had raped girls. I motioned to her with my head to go away, then her mother, my aunt, came out and brought her back inside the house.

Nobody could help me. I'd wet myself by now, but still stood like a soldier in front of the officer in complete silence, scared, embarrassed, all sorts of things going through my head: fear, death, honor, will my dad disown me, will I die, will they kill me?

They stripped me naked behind the bushes and started hitting me. My dad was in front of me with his head still down and my mum could hear the noises as they beat me, screams that I tried to hide. She was crying out, 'Take my life instead! He has done nothing wrong - he is just a little boy.'

Next, they forced me through the hedge in my bare feet to look for weapons, and I stumbled on to my cousin's army belt. When I didn't find anything, they got even angrier and said, 'There must be munitions and guns here for the soldiers - we know your dad supplied them.'

As I went further down that hedge, I found an army knife, which one of the soldiers quickly grabbed off me. I thought he was going to stab me to death. Instead, he cut a cross deep into the skin on my forearm, just missing my vein, and then he drew another cross on my chest in blood. Strangely, I didn't feel any pain at the time as my brain was just focusing and concentrating on survival. I kept quiet; even my tears were drying up. My mum was so distraught she had an epileptic fit, and she has suffered with epilepsy ever since, even now, twenty-five years later. My dad was under huge pressure and fear was inevitable, but he still pretended that he was fearless.

It is very hard to explain that day. For them it was like a game and we were at their mercy. Angry men wearing Serb Militia police uniforms told my dad to give them a plum drink called Šljivovica, a very strong spirit, and, as they got drunk, they couldn't stop laughing. They were hitting me with their truncheons, and the more they drank, the harder they beat me. By now, I was just hoping for a quick death. All sorts of things went through my head: when will this stop? Is my mum OK? Why is my dad not helping me - what kind of chicken is he? All of this started because of him. He is the toughest man in the town - maybe he'll jump out at the soldiers, grab their weapons and kill them to free his son, like they do in films. Where are those fearless Northerners who used to run the town? It felt like everybody went underground and I was alone, left in the hands of evil invaders.

I had never seen my dad more quiet, his head hung down, hoping they would not kill his little boy. All sorts of things must have been going through his head too: the powerful man he was, what he used to do and the people he used to know.

Then one of the soldiers put two grenades into my trembling hands. I didn't even know

what they were or how you activated them. In my mind, the whole world stopped – the life of my family and village was literally in my hands. I remembered my dad’s words: ‘Do not show them fear.’ But how does a young boy not show fear when he is holding two bombs? I had only ever played with toy guns, now I had real grenades in my little skinny hands, my palms sweating. My whole body began to shake – it was like a tornado deep inside me.

My old sports teacher addressed us again. He said to my dad, ‘Call out to your boy.’

My dad said nothing.

‘Call to him.’

My dad said nothing.

‘Ask your son if his arms are aching.’

My dad said nothing...

Then he turned to me: ‘What kind of father is this who lets his son die?’

I said nothing.

‘Go on, call your father for help!’

I said nothing.

‘Like this... “Oh, Dad, please help me.”’

I said nothing...

It seemed to go on and on, the pointless question followed by our silence. The muscles in my arms were burning now; it was agony. Then just when I thought I couldn’t hold out any longer, he came over and put the pins back in the grenades. ‘Get him out of my sight.’

Then he said to me: ‘I bet you want to hit me now.’

‘No, sir.’

‘Didn’t I train you to be a fighter? Let me tell you something: I know you hate me now, but if you do nothing, in years to come you will hate yourself.’

He was staring at me. I was so scared, too scared to hit him.

As he was leaving, he said chillingly, ‘One day, we’ll meet again.’

The following day, once the shock and adrenalin had worn off, I felt the pain of the beating, my skinny body covered in bruises, but this was only the start of our ordeal.

Over the next few months, fighting for survival became an everyday thing. It was like a game of death: if you got through the day without a bullet in your head, you would be a winner.

We would lose many family members over the next few years, and sadly, our uncle Hašim was one of the first victims, as he was involved in politics. A few days after the soldiers came to our house, he disappeared. Then somebody from the village came and told us that they had found him in the bushes. My dad and uncles drove the tractor to get him and brought him to our house on a trailer. That was the first time in my life that I had seen a dead body. I thought he was alive when I climbed on the trailer and I saw his legs and head, but his stomach was completely blown away. My dad shouted at me to get down. I jumped off and ran in the house, shaken and confused, not knowing what was going on. Our dear relative and childhood bodybuilder hero Fikret Hodžić was also murdered in the early days of the war, but we would not hear the full story of what had happened to him until much later.

Our own lives were also in danger. A few days later, another Serbian unit came to our village and the surrounding villages, rounded up all the non-Serbs and took us to a concentration camp. You wouldn't believe where they imprisoned us. Yes, in my school: Osnovna Škola BratstvoTrnopolje.

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