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Letter to the First Man I Saw Die

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I didn't know your name, but you became a part of my soul at the instant of your death. I was sixteen, and the war in Bosnia had just begun. Simply walking on the street became a game of Russian roulette. Each step could be the last. Indeed, death seemed inevitable. Still, we took our chances in daily searches for food and water.

That morning began just like any other. At dawn, my sister and I went on a water run. Early morning shelling and sniper fire made it particularly challenging. We kept close to buildings, and only once were forced to run across sniper alley, chased by a volley of fire. None of the morning events betrayed the fateful meeting later that day.

I can't remember if it was the early spring or late winter. War memories are non-linear and somewhat chaotic. Sounds, smells and emotions define events, rather than chronologically factual sheets. There were patches of dirty snow on the ground and the biting smell of burning rubber filled the air. I was accompanying my friend on a trip to the other side of the town where Caritas was giving out flour rations. A downhill sniper run was a dreaded obstacle. Snipers continuously guarded a narrow street connecting two parts of the city. Hiding in empty windows on the hillside, they often played games with those who had to pass the street.

On the count of three, my friend and I sprinted down the street and over a fence to a bombed-out train station. I felt the heat of bullets and the whiny, hissing sound they made as they passed my head. I ran so fast that I thought I was going to pass out as fear thundered in my chest.

We made it to the other side safely. As I was trying to catch my breath and conquer sudden nausea, I looked through the fence and spotted a man, sprinting towards us. The gunfire intensified and he was hit several times. His legs failed him and he tumbled to the ground, bleeding, unable to drag himself out of the line of fire. We screamed for him to get up until our voices gave out.

It was then that I saw you, coming from that shabby house at the edge of sniper alley. You were watched by a woman, another man and several children cowering behind the house. Were they your family? Despite the protests from crying women and children, you ran out and got hold of the man to drag him to safety. At that moment, the sniper fire seemed to come from a million different directions, with bullets zipping all around you two, going over our heads, some slapping into the surrounding houses.

I watched you fall, your body riddled with bullets. It was as if you were a paper target. Your skull was turned into a mush, your leg turned at an impossible angle, the heat and friction of bullets tearing your clothes into shreds. You were clearly dead, but that did not stop the fire. It was as if in you they found the embodiment of their hatred and they had to torture your body to save themselves.

Shielded from direct sniper fire, the man on the ground dragged himself to the safety of the house where your family huddled together in disbelieving shock and grief. They were screaming and crying, knowing that you were far beyond help any longer, and that they would not be able to retrieve your body.

My friend held my arm tight, refusing to let go. We stared at each other for a time, not speaking. And then, we picked up our backpacks and left, continuing our journey without a word of acknowledgment for your tragic death.

I never learned your name or who you were, but you became a significant part of my war self. You became the war to me. You became the sudden cruelty, the tragedy and pointlessness of the war. You were not a soldier, but a hero, martyr and victim all at once. We never met but we shared something so intimate. The moment of your death is a part of my soul and a memory I cannot or will not ever erase.

(March 8, 2009)

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