

I told him that I thought I was under arrest, explained to him what had happened, right up to the road crossing, and said that I would need at least a letter from the police, some document I could produce in case of a similar incident. He waved a hand dismissively and shook his head. But what about the fat man, I said, who was he anyway? 'The commander,' I was told, as though that explained everything. As I got up, shook his hand and turned to leave, I asked who was in fact responsible for the parliament building area. He just looked at me, smiling like I was a dumb child too young to understand, and shrugged. 'Listen,' he told me with slow deliberation, 'these are difficult times here. Some of today's heroes are yesterday's criminals.' Then came the words I was to hear a thousand times during the conflict, the short-circuit dismissal of any attempt to analyse the confusion, the air of resignation accompanied by hunched shoulders and raised hands: 'What can you do?' he said. 'It's war.'

## 2

Marko was doing his best to kill somebody for my benefit. Twenty-four years old, trilingual, well educated, he was a sniper for the HOS, the extremist Croat militia which was still managing to maintain a loose affiliation with the government army in Sarajevo. We had met in the city's one remaining nightclub, the BB, a sweltering basement venue that afforded an outlet for easy pick-ups among Sarajevo's youth as the war stoked desire with one hand while unbuttoning restraint with the other. Curfew meant that once inside you were there until dawn unless prepared to risk a night in jail, a delight I had discovered once already in the continuing saga of my relationship with Bosnian 'law'. The black-market beer served at the bar was so foul it produced a hangover whose chemical legacy left its taste on your brain, and the fumes from the generator seemed to threaten mass asphyxiation, but for sheer atmosphere the BB was unsurpassed. The fashion accessories included Scorpion machine-pistols strapped

to the ankle for the men, thigh-high black suede boots for the vampire-like women. On a good night there was even shellfire to pick up where the bass left off.

Despite such easy kicks the war was beginning to impress its cruelty upon me as I witnessed my first casualties prefiguring a darker incident that was to cause me finally to leave Sarajevo. There was a slow build-up to my initiation in the physical suffering of others. At a party given by some friends of Momčilo I had noticed the crutches stacked by the door where there should have been coats. There cannot have been more than twenty people in the room, but there were at least four pairs of crutches there, left by the wounded as they hobbled in to sit down. Casualty figures in Bosnia have become a bitter topic since the war ended. The claim of 250,000 dead is frequently contested, usually by quasi-academics who were never there but whose revisionist figures are glibly bandied about by politicians to justify and exonerate their policies of non-intervention. But if you stuck around long enough at the time, the dead and wounded piled up so quickly they squeezed one another off the narrow platforms of your memory.

Some children showed me my first body. I had bumped into them outside our house, a tough little street gang of ten-year-olds led by a kid with a revolver. We smoked for a while before one asked if I wanted to see a dead Četnik. They took me through a small labyrinth of looted flats on the front line, clambering over the toppled masonry and crunching glass before beckoning me towards a room. Torn blue curtains flapped idly in the breeze, gates to a frameless window that overlooked the Vrbanja Bridge and the Serb-held bank a mere stone's throw beyond. 'You must be quick,' they warned, 'or the snipers will get you,' and directed my gaze to a body lying in the roadway on the other side. It felt like I was sharing an odd childhood experience with them. At that

distance the corpse was a shapeless lump in a military overcoat, though one swollen white hand was visible poking out of a sleeve. Later I asked Momčilo why the Serbs had not removed it under the cover of darkness. 'It's a very bad place,' he said, 'you send some men there at night to get one body, maybe in the morning there are three bodies.'

I saw my next casualties while talking to a doctor I had met in the state hospital. An elderly couple were rushed in on stretchers. They had been walking together in the old town and shot with an anti-aircraft gun. Great lumps had been blasted out of them leaving ghastly injuries, gaping wounds of bone sliver, blood and tattered flesh. The old man – he must have been over seventy – was moaning and trying to reach out to his wife who made a gurgling sound, like water going down a plughole. One of her legs seemed to be the wrong way round; the stretcher began to drip with blood as I watched. She was not going to live. It was the first mutilation of the body that I had ever seen, and struck in my mind for a long time afterwards, an unwelcome memory that would spring up unannounced like a hideous blood-soaked jack-in-the-box. I felt as upset by their age as by their injuries. I imagined all the hurdles they must have navigated successfully to be able to stay together all their lives, then blam blam blam, someone blows them away with a gun designed to bring down a jet aircraft.

Even the dead were not beyond the gracelessness of the war. A few days after the shooting of the old couple I wandered into a funeral service. It was taking place on a football pitch that had been converted into a cemetery to cope with the excess of dead in the capital. I had never seen a Muslim funeral and I was curious so I attached myself, at a distance I thought respectful, to the cortège of twelve people. The body had not even been lowered into the ground when someone opened up on us with a machine-gun from a distant hillside. My memory recalls it as a frozen

moment of absolute stillness: a gravedigger on his belly before me staring upwards, shovel still in his hand; the imam and others sprawled wide-eyed among the cover of the graves; the crude wooden coffin abandoned askew on the newly turned earth. Only the sound moves, a soundtrack of zings and putts as the bullets hit the earth around us.

There was a crucial element missing in all this: 'they', 'them', 'those people', as Jasmin had called them. I had never seen a Serb fighter. Nor had I any understanding of what it really was to see a human being in a sight and pull the trigger. I had been in close proximity to fighting, it happened around our house almost every night, but it was an unmoving, faceless sound and presence. I wanted to know what it was like to shoot people. I felt it was the key to understanding so much more. I had to find out.

Then I met Marko in the BB. He was drunk, had bumped into me as he swayed to the bar and apologized. We struck up a conversation, drank some more and it transpired he was a sniper. Then he asked if I would like to go up to the front with him. A couple of days later I met him at his unit's base, an old school-house near the bakery. His comrades were a strange collection, a mixture of hard-faced elder veterans, many of whom had fought the Serbs at Vukovar in Croatia two years before, and teenage recruits already experienced in the fighting around Sarajevo. There were two women with them. One was ugly, large and wounded. She said she had killed five men and her commander told me she was the best shot in his unit. The other was the most beautiful woman combat fighter I have ever seen. She was in her early twenties, blonde and pale-skinned with a figure that could have graced a models' catwalk in Rome. The HOS had a fanatical ideology which, if fully realized, would have made all of Bosnia, right up to the Drina, part of Croatia, at the expense of every Serb living there. I could not believe someone as beautiful as this girl

could be party to such sectarianism, especially after I discovered that she had lived with Serbs until the start of the war. Hoping to find at least a trace of humanist compassion within her, I asked if she really hated each and every Serb. 'I hope that the only ones I see again are those I am about to kill,' she replied.

As the sun began to drop Marko and I, together with two other marksmen, left the base and walked out of the city's confines up the green slopes to the north, heading for the lines that overlooked the Serb-held suburb of Vogošća. En route, as the darkness collected, we dropped into a field headquarters located in an abandoned house. There we were briefed on the latest situation by a government army commander. It had become increasingly obvious to me that the war was an unequal contest. The outgoing fire was only ever a fraction of the incoming, something apparent even before Andre had made his cynical quip about its educating values. The government soldiers I met on the lines near our house always complained about how little ammunition they had and most were lucky if they even had uniforms, let alone boots. The commander in this headquarters looked totally exhausted, his eyes sunken so far back into his head as to be almost invisible. As with so many Bosnians, he was keen to talk to a foreigner and hear another opinion on the war, almost desperate that the words coming from the world beyond would make sense of things, perhaps offer a glimmer of hope where there was none. I fear they were always disappointed by what I had to say. In turn I asked this man what most angered him as a commander. 'I am sick', he replied in a tone so sorrowful I wished for a moment that I had not asked, 'of sending my boys into the line with barely a magazine a man, and having to ask them to conserve their fire.'

The three snipers went separate ways after the briefing. I stuck with Marko. After another twenty minutes or so we crawled into



a damp fold of earth overlooking the Serb positions some 200 metres beyond. A vague misgiving flittered through my mind as I wondered how much Marko's attention to his task was intensified by my presence. From our position on the hillside, among trees whose spring blossom appeared to glow in the bright starlight, we had a panoramic view of the battlelines and sporadic firefights that erupted in the valley below us. Periods of silence were punctuated by clattering bursts of fire; purple-red tracers drifted and bounced between the slopes with curves of inimitable grace; choreographed flashes of light followed by resonant thumps marked the impact of mortars; from the Serb-held ground an anti-aircraft gun spat single repetitive streaks of fire upon a perfect, unchanging axis into a position to our left. It was truly beautiful.

Marko appeared unimpressed. After about an hour he grunted and turned to me. 'Hey, English, you want a look?' he murmured, handing me the wooden stock of his rifle, a Kalashnikov sniper variant. Through the starlight scope I was witness to a speckled green world of surprising clarity, in which the tracers left time-delayed imprints like the tails of comets. Scanning along the Serb positions before us, the trenchlines stood out as vivid scars in the landscape, interrupted by the shadowy bunkers and broken, doll-like houses. Then a small black blob stirred from the ground beside one of the bunkers, stood up, and took the shape of a man.

I stopped breathing and pulled the sight closer to my eye. I wanted to pull the trigger, to erase the faceless shape in the sight. It would be no different from shooting sparrows as I had done in the garden as a child. It was not a question of killing; there seemed nothing human in the exchange, only the need to achieve a conclusion to the trigger-bullet-body equation. It would be so easy.

I did nothing. My detachment faded with the coldness of the

trigger. A nameless Serb fighter scrambled back into position, for ever unaware of his predicament. But Marko had noticed a change in my posture and wanted to know its cause. 'Can you see something? Here, give it to me...' He snatched at the rifle.

Momčilo laughed for a long time when I told him what had happened, rocking around in the armchair repeating 'You saved one Četnik' over and over again. Thinking of how close I came to pulling the trigger, how absolutely meaningless that little black blob had been to me, my return grin was a little lopsided. But I had not fired the shot. It was not my war and I had no excuse or reason to kill anyone.

At that time I still had such values.

For a while longer my life in Sarajevo went on in much the same way and I adapted easily into the rhythm of each day. Sometimes we were afraid, sometimes depressed. We laughed a lot, and were often bored. We drank enormous amounts of coffee and smoked thousands of bitter-tasting Drina cigarettes. The sound of gunfire lost some of its novelty for me. Once you have been shot at a few times even the first thrill of that begins to pall, leaving you with a realization of how pointless it could be to be gunned down for nothing on the streets of a strange city.

Then something happened which broke the comfortable ease. I was leaning out of the window one afternoon having a smoke, looking at the destruction and daydreaming vacantly. A mortar round exploded by the side of the house nearest the parliament building, then another, then a whole clutch of them. The sound of a woman's keening bit the air, its low wail making my skin crawl. I ran outside. A young woman was dead, slain by the first explosion as she stepped out of the building onto the grass below. The mortar had landed close by, killing her immediately. Her mother was holding her. It was she who cried.

'Get your cameras,' a neighbour called out. His voice was neutral as if he was just making a statement. But I could not take a picture of this. I knew the dead girl. I knew the people around her body. I was part of this, yet detached. A feeling of great confusion came over me. There was nothing I could do. She was dead and that was it. Often I had talked with her in the apron of tatty garden on the far side of the parliament building. There was nothing between us; she was just a friendly face who was always ready with a smoke and a story, a blonde-haired girl in her twenties. It was not even that I felt especially affected by her death in the immediacy of those moments. It was the issue of the cameras that really got to me.

I walked away. I walked through the city for hours, full of self-hatred, the security and ease of my life in Sarajevo falling away from me like a shed skin, my mind a turmoil of questions. Why was I here? There had to be a reason. I was not a Bosnian stuck in Sarajevo, I was a foreigner who could leave. So why did I stay? Was I a sluttish dilettante day-tripping into someone else's nightmare? Maybe. And if I wanted to be a journalist, what then? I could not even pick up a camera when it really came down to it. My time in the flat had cosseted and lulled me. I must have been mad to think that such days could go on for ever. No past history, no impression from the words of others had preceded me to the house so I had arrived as an open book to those who lived there. As a stranger in the war only the present mattered as to how you were judged. Your past was irrelevant. In my desire to learn of war I sought only the cloak of anonymity in the community in which I lived. I had ended up not wanting even to carry cameras, let alone use them. Like the bullet-proof vest, the camera was a barrier. Yet it was impossible to integrate totally, unbelievably stupid to think that I could have managed it. The words 'get your cameras' re-identified me as the outsider I was. And if I could not

accept that status, if I could not use my cameras, then I should not be there. I could not stay on and feed off the misery of people who had become my friends just to 'see a war'. I had used the warmth shown to me in that house to shackle and deceive myself. I had to break away. I had to be alone without support.

I despised myself that day; everything I had ever proved to myself was suddenly nullified. I could not even talk about it, with Momčilo. It was too difficult to explain and I would have felt too ashamed to do so anyway. So I left Sarajevo. It was a hard moment for me, full of guilt at leaving the three of them. I did not really say goodbye as I resolved to return when I could. There was a new war breaking out in central Bosnia, this time between Muslims and Croats. I did not know the details but decided to go there.

time to gather his wits and corrupt his account of reality with what he thinks he should have felt, or thinks he should have done, rather than telling what he actually did feel, or did do. This is what the soldier told me:

It was at the beginning of the conflict between Muslims and Croats in Hercegovina, where Croatian nationalism found such strong roots in the sun-blasted rock and the corresponding infertile set of the minds of the men who lived there. The fighter was part of a small unit of troops from west Mostar, old childhood friends. Their commander was a young athlete, renowned for his strength and prowess on the track. He was a good man, the soldier said, brave and strong. One morning, cleaning the ground of Muslims, as he put it, the men scabbled down a slope northwest of the city through stunted bushes and sharp-edged grass, the only vegetation that seemed to grow on the hills there. They approached a small Muslim village and were met by rifle fire. The man said that all the civilians had already left the area.

The athlete broke cover first, leaving a shallow ravine to bound across some open ground towards the houses. There was a small explosion and he fell down. The front of his foot had been blown off by a mine and he lay in view of his comrades moaning and writhing with pain. His men were in a dilemma. To rescue their commander they would need first to clear a route to him free of mines, itself made impossible by the fire coming against them. They called out to reassure him and he replied. They then laid down a lot of return fire but were unable to locate the exact position of the sniper, nor could they tell exactly how many Muslim troops were in the village. All the time the athlete lay on the open ground, crying out and cursing. After a while one of the men, a particular friend of the athlete, began to crawl towards him, feeling for mines in the tufts of grass with a knife. It was only when this man had not moved for a while that the

### Hercegovina, Summer 1993

I met an HVO fighter in a bar one night who told me a story. It was as if he had handed me a blank canvas that each subsequent day filled in, brushstroke by brushstroke. It was not until nearly a year later when the last shots of the Muslim-Croat fighting finally added a signature that I could see it all and understand what he meant. The soldier was drunk and morose, sweat-stained fatigues clinging to his body with the familiarity of an aged lizard's last skin. His eyes had the transient blank stare you often notice in men who have just come out of combat, a one-dimensional emptiness normally seen only in baby animals or very old men. It never lasts long with fighters though, and is always replaced by something harder and meaner. But if ever you wish to hear a story as close to the truth as you can find, then speak to a man with these eyes, for you will find it in the stream of consciousness that pours forth with his words, before he has

others realized he was dead, killed by a single bullet. The soldiers went mad with rage, and wasted a lot of ammunition firing on empty houses. Yet still they were unable to reach either man, and the fire against them seemed only to increase with the heat of the day. The athlete was aware that his friend was dead. Several times he called out to the remaining troops to abandon him. He must have been making his own appreciation of the situation lying out there, for suddenly he drew his pistol and blew out his brains.

'There are two ways to die here,' the fighter concluded. 'You can die doing the right thing for the wrong reason, or die doing the wrong thing for the right reason.'

I never asked if they recovered the bodies.

The Muslim-Croat war: it could really stretch your concepts of courage and cowardice to the point where your mind just jammed with trying to feel out values like right and wrong. Analysts now say that it was just a bloody side-show to the main event, the conflict between the Serbs and Muslims. They miss the point. As the war shed its cloth like a cheap strip artist, few could deny the contours of its flesh. The conflict had been started by the Serbs, who aimed to create a Greater Serbia out of the mulch left by the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Arranged against them was an alliance between the Croats and Muslims who still at that time wanted to live in a multi-denominational secular Bosnia independent of Serbia. For those who wished for co-existence - including many Serbs - the alliance was the hook upon which they hung their ideals. But it began to fall apart at the end of 1992, the decay spreading in the spring of 1993 and leading to all-out war. Even the most liberal, tolerant minds were faced with the choice of leaving Bosnia, though this was usually impossible for the Muslims who were cut off, or drawing on long-forgotten religious heritages to find whatever

label would ensure survival. It was this second conflict which killed the liberal ideal in Bosnia.

There was no balance of guilt in the causes of the Muslim-Croat war. It began when opportunistic Croat leaders in Hercegovina saw in the inaction of the international community their chance to seize large swathes of Muslim territory. Fighting the Serbs had helped the Croats to perfect the methods they now employed in Bosnia - viriolic propaganda, pogroms and massacres. Yet once the war was under way, trying to apportion blame often became as relevant as trying to find a copycat arsonist while the first firestarter is still at large, and all the while a city disappears into a firestorm.

If the war as a whole was some epic tragedy, then in ignoring the Muslim-Croat conflict you were leaving the theatre before the hero died. And that was some time before the final act even started.

I walked on just after the beginning, and soon got sent to jail. Again.

The Hercules from Sarajevo dropped down in Split beneath the skirts of a storm. There was only one other civilian passenger on board, a Bosnian in his late thirties with the cultured, aquiline nose of an academic. As an interpreter for a foreign newspaper in the city he had managed to get hold of one of the UN's precious press cards, his ticket out of the Bosnian capital. I doubt he ever returned. We walked out of customs together and for a while stood on the pavement outside the airport terminal in quiet vexation as taxi drivers and UN personnel hustled past us. When an aircraft suddenly plucks you from a war situation and deposits you into the confusing slipstream of peace it leaves you very alone.

Suddenly the air around us was rent by a terrific crashing as if



an enormous artillery barrage had opened up. For seconds we stood staring at each other like the dumbstruck victims of a cruel joke, whom the war had somehow reached though it had no right to do so. Lightning broke our gaze, flashing out from the dark cumulus rolling in from the Adriatic. A storm. Only a storm. Laughter ripped out of our bellies, bending us nearly double, threatening to crush our ribs as we rocked off the pavement, slapping each other's shoulders in recognition of our shared fear and relief. I finally recovered but as I said goodbye and shook the Bosnian's hand I saw the skin beneath his eyes twitch and jerk, and mirthless tears break out from the palisade of his lashes and trickle down his face.

After Sarajevo, Split seemed like a lotus fruit to the senses, a blast of waterfront restaurants, light, space, wine and beautiful, unobtainable Dalmatian women. Yet I found it hard to relax during the two days I spent there. I had neither a car nor contacts, and in the absence of any alternative, my plan to reach central Bosnia involved first taking a bus to Mostar, itself now wracked by Muslim-Croat fighting, then hitch-hiking north-westwards across the battlelines that were growing in number and intensity by the day. Deep in Bosnia a town named Vitez had become the centre of media attention after HVO troops had massacred the Muslim inhabitants in the nearby village of Ahmići a month earlier. Its name meant 'knight' but when I eventually arrived there I found little chivalry in the ugly town. War had lifted Vitez from its dull anonymity, and it was now becoming a hub to the fighting in central Bosnia; action began to revolve around it like the spokes of a slow-turning wheel, scarcely braked by the presence of a battalion of British troops. It seemed a natural choice of destination, a place where I could see a war that moved, and maybe even use the cameras that seemed to have become the muted voice of my conscience.

Aware that the longer I stayed in Split brooding over my plan, the more intimidating it would become, I moved quickly, using the time to make decisions over what belongings I must leave in the small room I rented from a Croat family, and what I could carry on my back in an old rucksack for the indeterminate journey ahead. Once again the flak jacket proved an annoying encumbrance. It weighed a ton and took up space. For a while I thought about leaving it behind or else ditching its two ceramic plates. Finally it went into the rucksack too, plates and all. Then I rang home.

Home: I was only two hours from London. It seemed so far away. It was more my mindset than geographical position that accounted for my feeling of isolation. It was not necessarily a bad sensation, indeed at times I relished the liberty of my solitude. Memories of London, my family and life in England were almost abstract; the odd face and emotion whirling out of a vague and distant cloud. It was as if my recall stretched only as far as the moment three months earlier when I started the journey eastwards. Everything before that day was like a half-remembered dream. My emotions had lost their definition. It was not that I no longer missed those close to me, merely that I felt so detached as to be suddenly unaware of what I wanted or cared about outside the immediate realm of Bosnia, a kind of ongoing metamorphosis from which I had no way of knowing what would emerge.

I had left a girl behind in London. We had been together for a year before I departed for Bosnia. I loved her. I had tried writing to her from Sarajevo but after a time had not really known what to say any more, and my letters had stopped. Now I felt unsettled and guilty. The conversations in the PTT phone booth were more like exercises in what not to say than what to say. The task of communicating what I had experienced or felt to her, and to



others at home, was completely beyond me. The 'Hi-how-are-you-I'm-fine' bit went all right, but it was followed by a ghastly *mêlée* of wooden dialogue and empty silences, all overshadowed by the certainty that I would leave the listener either worried and unenlightened, or else very worried and wiser. How can you condense war into an acceptable telephone recipe and leave the person on the other end of the line happy?

More distressing still, I found it difficult to grasp anything of what was going on in the lives of those in England. I was trying to equate listening to news from home with thoughts of crutches, killing and firefights; the inevitable domestics of peace versus the insular details of war. Irreconcilable worlds: try linking them up and it feels as if your head will blow off.

Brooding on the phone calls, running misunderstandings over in my mind, I hardly noticed the bus ride until the coach stopped at Metković on the Bosnian border. Croat customs officials there became unnecessarily suspicious of my British passport and called over the 'Special Police' to check it out. Either solitary foreign travellers were rare on this route or else the officials were so bored that the chance of a little power demonstration was too irresistible to miss. My protests were weakened by a looming sense of *déjà vu*. I was taken off the bus with one other passenger and escorted to an empty container shed. The vehicle pulled away leaving us sitting alone in the baking heat. I pulled out the ritual packet of cigarettes with a resigned grunt and offered one to my new companion of circumstance, a tough-looking young man in his twenties with a crew cut. He had quite a story, though the first instalment he gave me was brief and to the point.

Eric was a deserter from the French Foreign Legion's parachute regiment. A Canadian of Italian descent, he had become bored with the tedium and heat of his regiment's distant posting,

and so had come to fight in Bosnia. He had already seen action with Croat troops fighting the Serbs along the Posavina corridor, way to the north, but found the stagnation of the lines dull after a while. Now he was en route to central Bosnia to get involved in the fighting there.

At this stage in our conversation he gave away little more than that. We smoked and let the subject drift into wondering what would happen to us next. We did not have to wait long to find out. Two cars appeared, each with HVO military police inside, and with scarcely a word we were driven separately to a barracks in Čaplina, in Bosnian territory. It is amazing how quickly you get accustomed to saying nothing when dealing with Bosnian authority. Very soon you realize that it is a waste of time trying to explain anything and that it is better just to shut up and see what happens.

Much of the barracks was damaged, the result of fighting with the Serbs the previous year, but the separate cells we were given in the guardroom were untouched, save for the predictable scrawl of jailbird graffiti on the walls: a pastiche of naked women, obscenities, dates, names and a Croat flag, all carved crudely into the stone. I was neither particularly surprised nor disturbed by the turn of events. Only weeks before the HVO had turned on their Muslim allies in the region; we were close to the fighting, and the atmosphere was tense and ugly. The appearance of a couple of strangers, both of military age, was bound to have caused some reaction. I peered out of the tiny window at the back of the cell into the yard beyond. There were two small units of regular Croat troops, identifiable by the flashes on their arms, who waited quietly at the edge of the yard being briefed by officers. More boisterous were the forty or so Bosnian-Croat HVO soldiers. They were all heavily armed and appeared to have just completed an operation. A few of them

threw themselves down on the ground and began to doze in the sun while others shouted and jostled each other, gulping brandy from bottles. Their leering faces and swaggering shoulders were the first examples of the porcine brutishness I was to see so much of in the months ahead.

After about an hour I was taken out of the cell and led to a small room where I was questioned by an HVO officer. He had one of those intransigent spade-shaped faces common to ex-communist officials, the kind that lets you know immediately that nothing you say or do will influence the outcome of a decision which has been made in advance anyway. So I went through a minimal preamble explaining I was on my way to Mostar, before letting him drone on about a betrayal of the Croatian people by fundamentalist Muslim hordes, a speech he rounded off by telling me that my documents were not in order and that I would be taken under escort back to Croatia.

To my surprise Eric and I were put in the same car for the journey back to the border. The fact that he had served alongside a Croatian unit that still remained loyal to the Bosnian government army was enough to provoke the HVO's suspicion, so he was due to be deported too. There was only one policeman in the car, though, and scarcely had we pulled out of the barrack gates when Eric launched into tales of his days fighting the Serbs and proclaimed his desire to serve again with the glorious HVO. Within a mile the driver accepted cigarettes from us; minutes later we had him laughing; a few miles further and he simply pulled the car over, let us out, indicated the road to Mostar, then left us standing at the verge.

The sun was low in the sky so we lay down our bedrolls in a clearing among the scrub, shared some bread and wine that was stashed in our baggage, and exchanged our stories. Eric's plan was a little more complex than he had at first let on. It turned out

that after his experience in the Posavina corridor, he had spent time in Zagreb where he had stayed with a group of Arab aid workers and learned of the plight of the Muslims in Bosnia. Rather than joining up with the HVO, Eric was in fact trying to reach central Bosnia to link up with the government forces, the BiH armija.

His world was divided into two categories: 'good' mercs and 'bad' mercs. Good mercenaries knew their profession and got on with it, bad mercenaries just bullshitted each other about it in bars. Eric said he knew that 'good mercs' had a short life-expectancy, so he planned to fight in a few wars before quitting the profession to write a book on his experiences. He did not rate the competence of the local fighters very highly and described the ease with which he had carried out night raids upon the Serb positions around the Posavina.

'Both sides hardly ever went out into no man's land,' he explained matter-of-factly. 'They became so confident that the only threat was from shelling, after a while they never even bothered posting sentries at night, and in the winter just used to pack into their bunkers and drink. One evening I got so fucking bored that I crawled out of the trench with an RPG and one other guy. We made it up to the Serb lines, heard voices from a bunker, and hit it with the RPG. We heard the wounded screaming and shouting and ran back to our own positions, which the Serbs then shelled in retaliation. After that I began to wait in no man's land after hitting a bunker. It was better to hang out there, maybe even have a cigarette, while the Serbs shelled our lines. But it got stupid after a while. The officers would encourage me to go out on raids but a lot of the guys I was with got pissed off because they knew every time I went out with an RPG they would get shelled. I mean, do they want to fight a war or what?'

I laughed. I could well imagine the attitude of many of the men in the trench, farmers and townsfolk who had ended up in uniform through no choice of their own, content to have a quiet time of things until some gung-ho legionnaire turned up and began spoiling it all. Eric spoke with the kind of naive assurance and frankness, devoid of bravado, that carried with it the ring of truth. I had no reason to doubt him; he was not trying to impress me, merely tell it as it happened.

I had a dreamless sleep beneath the open sky, and with dawn no more than a pastel glow on the horizon, we hit the road again. After several miles we came to another town, Čitluk. The light was still the peaceful blue-grey of early morning, and the streets were deserted except for a few stretching dogs and a pair of HVO soldiers who passed us hunched and silent, bleary-eyed with sleep. Lights shone from the ground floor of a small hotel on our right, so we stopped there for some coffee, pulling up a couple of chairs to a table still damp with the night's dew. The moment remains so clear in my mind: the stillness of the town in its waking moments, the distant cry of a cockerel, the sense of easy introspection in our mood, the feeling of unfolding and limitless adventure, the flippant shrug of shoulders with which we agreed on the venue to drink coffee. It was all in such total contrast to the significance that moment would have on my companion's life.

We had scarcely been there five minutes when three uniformed men walked out of the foyer, sat at a nearby table and laid their assault rifles across their knees. Two of them were barely out of their teens; one tall and blond, the other stocky and brown-haired. The presence of the third man so dominated the small patio I barely noticed their features. He was tall and slender with a whipcord leanness that dispelled any suggestion of weakness. He wore the Legion's green beret pulled down low over his

forehead so that for a time only his mouth was visible out of the shadow. Yet when he looked towards us a pair of burning ice-blue eyes stared out of the darkness, seeming to look straight through us to some point in the far distance. Here was a killer of men. The winged dagger of the Deuxième Régiment Étranger Parachutiste, Eric's regiment, glinted dully above one eye beside the small red and white chequered shield of the HVO. On noticing it Eric took a breath and walked over to the man's table.

They spoke for a couple of minutes, the man at the table firing short questions at Eric in a flat voice then staring keenly at him while he answered. Finally he gave out a bloodless white smile and shook Eric's hand. It was quite a handshake. With it went Eric's intention to join the government army. He had just thrown in his lot with the HVO. I joined them at the table where my presence was met with neither hostility nor undue interest. They asked me what unit I was with. I said nobody's. They asked me if I wanted to join. I said no thank you. They asked me what I did and where I was going. I said I was a photographer and was going to central Bosnia, but I would be interested to see Mostar first. They asked if I would like a ride in. I said yes.

The legionnaire was French, his tall companion Dutch, the shorter man Irish. I gathered they were going to a briefing at an HVO headquarters in the city. Their transport was a Red Cross lorry. They explained that the emblem provided useful protection against Muslim fire on a particularly vulnerable corner of the road as it began to descend to the city. I jumped in the back with Eric and we sped off, baby food and spare ammunition bouncing around our feet as the vehicle lurched over the rough tarmac. It was a strange way to go to war, but I could not help grinning at the childlike sense of pleasure I got from violating the Red Cross taboo.

'Hey, I hope you don't feel bad that I won't be going to central



Bosnia with you,' Eric shouted above the noise. He did not look embarrassed at his sudden change of allegiance, nor had he particular reason to be, but he wanted to explain things to me anyway. 'It's just this guy was in the Legion, we know some of the same people and . . .' I brushed aside his apology. He didn't have to justify himself to me. He had come to Bosnia to fight, and whatever concept of cause he had subsequently discovered took second place to that. He had just met up with someone from his old četa, his martial tribe, the Legion. Unless his views of justice, right and wrong had been iron-cast by his encounter with the Arabs in Zagreb, then his new choice of loyalty was inevitable.

The lorry took a winding route alongside steep, barren hills and plunging ravines, before dropping sharply into the Neretva Valley, the arid linear crucible in which Mostar lay. With the exception of a few narrow government-held salients on the Croat bank, the river marked the front line: the Croats to the west in the larger sector of the city which we now entered; the Muslims jammed up in a shell-blasted ghetto on the east bank.

The mercenaries parked the lorry outside a tall building whose otherwise featureless grey face was fanned by an enormous Croatian flag. They waved vaguely eastwards to indicate the front line and suggested I join them for a drink later, then trooped into the doorway of the headquarters. Eric and I shook hands and he followed them inside. A passing soldier, with no more than a trace of irony in his smile, suggested I try the Hotel Ero as a place to stay and directed me to the edge of a long avenue. 'Just keep walking down there, you'll know when you get there,' he added, only then grinning wolfishly.

The same brooding electricity I had met in Sarajevo hung over the avenue, and intensified as I walked eastwards. Fewer people became visible, and those I saw were moving in a shuffling jog.

The sound of explosions and heavy gunfire came closer. It would have been easy to turn around, and I felt vulnerable and exposed, lumbering conspicuously down a now-deserted road with an enormous rucksack on my back. But if I allowed fear to take over it could carry me back to England on a plane, unfulfilled in any way, so I tried to control it, telling myself without much conviction that it was all to do with state of mind.

Turning a corner I saw a body, in civilian clothes but barefoot, lying headfirst in a ditch beside me. Ahead a burned-out lorry blocked the road. As I crouched and prepared to run back, the whooshing of an RPG sounded above me, exploding a short distance away, followed immediately by another, closer. A burst of machine-gunfire answered from a building behind me.

I was inside the ditch with the body, which was buzzing with flies and smelled terrible, when an HVO soldier leapt in beside me, a red flash of cloth all that distinguished him from the Muslim troops ahead. 'What the fuck are you doing?' he asked in English. I told him, rather sheepishly, that I was trying to find the hotel. He paused, catching his breath, grabbed me by the arm, and together we ran across some waste ground to a building beyond.

The sign outside read 'Hotel Ero' and I walked in, attempting to look sanguine and unconcerned. The scene was chaotic. The floor was a skidpan of congealing blood, broken glass and spent bullet casings, while through a haze of smoke and dust HVO troops fired Kalashnikovs in random bursts from the edge of windows on the other side of the foyer to unseen targets beyond. Every few seconds a round would smack back through the windows into one of the walls around us, sending everybody ducking in unison. It was obviously the place to be.

I no longer felt afraid, as the inside of the building felt a lot safer than the street I had just come from, besides which, bullets are



seldom as unnerving as shellfire. It was logical that as long as you stayed away from the windows you would be unlucky to get hit, though the odd ricochet pinballed between the walls in an unpleasant series of whines and thwacks. So I lit a cigarette, dumped the rucksack, and installed myself in a suitable corner and watched what happened. The first thing I noticed was the way the fighters' faces seemed contorted: eyes wide, jaws clenched, mouths grimacing, skins oily with sweat. Nobody was still for more than a few seconds. It was as if small dust devils of energy would ripple one group or another into action, something close to a hysteria of juddering gun barrels, feverish concentration and tensed muscle, followed by an almost post-coital backwash when a firer would slide behind the cover of a wall, head lolling slightly, sometimes uttering an unnatural peal of relieved laughter, near to a giggle, to anyone who made glittering eye contact. Then the vibe would rip into another part of the room, and that would suddenly convulse into activity and noise. There were the occasional shouts, grunts and hoarse directives, all but lost to the overwhelming Kalashnikov-crackling tempo and the jingle of falling brass.

Accompanied by the soldier who had brought me in from the street, an officer was gesturing to me from the side of the room nearest the door. I walked over quickly. He was young, looked good-humoured, and asked what I was doing. Playing to his humour, I asked him as coolly as I could if I could have a room on the west side. All Bosnians regard the English as ridiculously indifferent. They even have a phrase for it, '*nemoj da se praviti Englez*', meaning 'don't be as the English', which they use if urging someone to get real. Coldness is alien to Bosnians, and often bemuses rather than angers them. The officer laughed encouragingly, spoke for a second with the soldier, and told me he would see what he could do. Minutes later he reappeared, now

looking serious, with a more senior commander who could have been the pasty-faced twin of the officer in the jailhouse at Čaplina. The familiar refrain concerning absence of documents snapped from his lips and, as the younger man shrugged apologetically, I was led away, crestfallen. Two other soldiers escorted me through a succession of alleys to an HVO BMW with a complement of gun-toting fighters, who drove me to the outskirts of the city. Consoling myself with the thought that I had at least seen a proper gunbattle, I decided to continue my journey northwards.

The mercenaries were fairly drunk when I met them that night back in Čitluk, and talked freely of their experiences. The legionnaire, Luc, was a veteran of fighting in South America and Africa before joining the Croats for combat against the Serbs during the Croatian war of 1991. He was a sniper by specialization; with eyes like that he could not have been much else. He had met his two younger companions in Croatia, and when that war ended they had come to Bosnia together, again to fight the Serbs. The tide of the conflict now meant that his foes were Muslim, but he seemed comfortable with the change of circumstance.

'OK, so I have many Muslim friends, I don't have a problem with Muslims,' he told me. 'We all make our choices. Mine is to stay with the HVO. As it happens they fight the Muslims. It's that simple.'

In contrast the Irishman, Shane, the youngest at twenty-two, had had no military experience before arriving in the Balkans. The others said that didn't matter, that he had now survived two years of fighting, and that was knowledge enough. He was affable and amusing, the inevitable mascot of the team. After a while we retired to a room above the bar, shotgunned hash down a Kalashnikov barrel and drank a lot of whisky. They reminisced about the Croatian war, and speculated on Mostar's fate. 'Listen,'

said Peter, the Dutchman, 'we don't fight for the money, and we're not in it for the killing. It's about camaraderie and, sure, it's about excitement. Some are bullshitters, some are psychotics. We are neither. We are here because we want to be, and if there is a price to pay, then we are ready for that too.'

There was little real difference between them and anyone else who goes to war voluntarily. In their case they had taken a side and were ultimately prepared to kill. Though my reasoning for being there was still in flux, at its simplest I was there to watch, and that gave neither of us the higher moral ground. Men and women who venture to someone else's war through choice do so in a variety of guises. UN general, BBC correspondent, aid worker, mercenary: in the final analysis they all want the same thing, a hit off the action, a walk on the dark side. It's just a question of how slick a cover you give yourself, and how far you want to go. If you find a cause later then hold on to it, but never blind yourself with your own disguise. I spent a couple of days with Luc, Shane and Peter, pumping them for information about the roads northwards and the state of the fighting on my route. Then I said goodbye and left.

Many months later I returned to the hotel in search of them. Their rooms were empty. As I walked out through the foyer I noticed a figure sitting alone in the deserted bar. He was in civilian clothes, had his back to me, and a kit bag by his feet. It was Peter. He gave me a dry smile as he reached out over his coffee to shake my hand. We talked for a long time. I was lucky to have caught him, for he was leaving Bosnia for good the next day. 'There was an ideal once,' he said and paused, eyes vacant and shiftless with fatigue, squinting slightly through clouds of chain-smoked Marlboro, 'but not any more.' He told me that Shane had been fighting near Gornji Vakuf when he trod on one mine and was

blown onto a second. With both his legs gone above the knee, he had returned to Ireland for life in a wheelchair. Luc's girlfriend, a Croat nurse, had been eviscerated by an RPG on the front in Mostar. He had gone too. I hear that he is now serving a long stretch in Marseilles for armed robbery. Eric? Well, I had somehow known what would happen when I said goodbye. He was killed in action five days later. War bills.