We were different then, so we are different now: it is we who have the war. We didn't build a political underground of people with liberal, democratic values ready to take over the government; not because it was impossible, but on the contrary, because the repression was not hard enough to produce the need for it. If there is any excuse it is in the fact that we were deprived of the sense of future. This was the worst thing that communism did to people. What is our future now? Your future? No one asks that question and I don't like it. I am afraid this war will last and while there is a war going on even in one part of the country, there is no future. And because I am a typically selfish mother, I don't want you to be deprived of the future too. Once was enough.

Forgive me for this long, confused and maybe pathetic letter, but I had to write it. Stay well, all my love is with you.

Your Mother

Drakulić, Slavenka, 1993

18

HIGH-HEELED SHOES

'Have you seen this before?' Dražena asked me, holding a yellow piece of paper in her hand, the certificate that she was a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

'It took me two weeks to get it. Not because of the red tape – the procedure at the Office for Refugees is very simple even if it takes you half a day waiting in what seems to be an endless queue. But I wasn't able to pull myself together and go and collect it because I couldn't accept that I am a refugee, that this time it is happening to me and not to someone else. You see, even now I hesitate to show this certificate to a bus driver when I go into town. In fact, I befriended him just to avoid that, to avoid having to admit that this is my status in the world.'

Dražena is a journalist from Sarajevo who came to Zagreb in mid-April, on the last day when it was possible to leave the city by normal means of transport before the Serbian army surrounded it, the night before they destroyed the bridge over the River Sava to the Croatian side. 'I didn't mean to leave the city, I had this crazy idea that nothing could happen to me. To the others, yes, but not to me. But then something happened to make me change my mind,' she continued.

'I'd just picked up my daughter Ivana from her kindergarten and as I walked across the street near my house, on the opposite side I noticed this woman. She was ordinary looking, blonde, middle-aged and overweight. She was carrying two plastic bags with some food. It was a late afternoon and I imagined she was heading home from her job in the city. When she was about to cross the street a grenade hit her directly from somewhere above. First she was lifted in the air – for a moment it looked as if she was flying – then she landed at my feet. She lay there motionless with blood coming from what seemed to me like a thousand little holes all over her body. I looked at my daughter. She stood there, with her eyes wide open with horror. She didn't look at me, she didn't move or say anything and when I took her in my arms, she was rigid, as if frozen. The next day we left.'

For more than a month Dražena has been staying with mutual friends of ours. In their small two-bedroom apartment they've given her and Ivana their child's room. But she will have to leave soon – perhaps to go to another friend's apartment. They told me that when Dražena came she expected to go back to Sarajevo within a couple of days, after leaving Ivana with her grandfather on the island of Pag. But two or three days into her stay in Zagreb she heard in a radio broadcast that the building where she lived had been heavily hit by a bomb. For the whole of the week following she just cried and took tranquillizers and nothing could get her out of this terrible state of despair.

I remembered her apartment: it was on the sixth floor of a skyscraper where she lived with her father (her mother died of cancer several years ago) because she couldn't afford to live on her own. When I visited her in the spring of 1991 she took me

to Baščarsija, the oldest part of the city where they make the best čevapčići. 'Where in the world could you get such fresh-made čevapčići in the middle of the night?' she laughed. Now Baščarsija was almost entirely destroyed, Sarajevo burned down and Dražena is sitting out in my garden. Behind the wall Zagreb is buzzing, the air is sweet with the smell of a nearby linden tree and an orange climbing rose bush has just begun blooming. It is hard to grasp her words as facts, I think as I look at her: the fact that she has lost her apartment, her job and God knows how many friends. She is telling me how she went to Pag where her father has a summer house to leave Ivana. She is wearing jeans and sneakers, her black curly hair tied in a pony-tail. With her dark tan and black eyes she looks like a mulatto beauty. Looking at her I am trying to detect a trace of recent change on her face and it strikes me as odd that I am unable to see any, as if it were only once I could see pain painted all over her face that I could actually believe her story.

On Pag there is no electricity and the water supply is restricted. Her father doesn't get a pension. Living in a house that he built years ago to benefit from tourism, without any chance now of renting it for a third season in a row, he depends entirely on her ability to make money as a reporter. Because they literally live on fish he catches during the day, she went to Caritas, the Catholic humanitarian organization, for help. They gave her some pasta, flour, rice, sugar and a bar of soap.

'But I foolishly didn't bring anything in which to carry things, so I just took all the supplies in my hands and, of course, I dropped them. Right there, in the middle of the room I dropped all the food – pasta, rice, flour, all mixed up. Other women waiting in line started to scream at me, but I was totally unprepared, no one warned me I should bring a shopping bag

or a box or something. And you know what, instead of crying, I burst into laughter.'

She is laughing again, but her words are not registering. I am still looking for something in her face, some traces of war. Finally I realize: she is wearing make-up. This is what is confusing about her, making her situation even more surreal, I think. She has the same face as when I saw her last time but it's as if her make-up is bridging the time, the war, her tragedy itself. This is what fails to fit into the picture of a refugee. However I say nothing.

A few days later she came back, this time to pick up some clothes that I'd prepared for her because she'd left Sarajevo with only one suitcase stuffed with Ivana's clothes. This time my daughter was about too, so she took her to her room to give her a few things. When she came out Dražena was wearing a pair of black patent high-heeled shoes, the kind you'd wear to a party. In fact, she looked exactly as if she were going to leave for a party at any moment. 'Why did you give her those shoes?' I asked Rujana, surprise rising from my voice like hot steam. She looked at me in bewilderment. 'Mother, how could you be so insensitive? What do you mean, how could you say such a thing about your friend?' she said. 'What is so terrible, what did I do?' I replied, trying to defend myself, already sensing that there was more to it than I realized. 'I just thought that because she'll be moving a lot from one apartment to another she would need practical things, not fancy stuff like that,' I said, in a matter-of fact tone of voice. 'Oh, but you are wrong,' she jumped. 'She needs precisely that fancy stuff, as you call it. Because even if she has lost everything, she needs to feel like a normal person, even more so now. Why do you expect her to wear sneakers all the time?'

Indeed, why did I think that a pair of high-heeled shoes were no longer appropriate for Dražena, why did I react in that way, I asked myself while my daughter left the kitchen in a fury. Perhaps because to me Dražena doesn't fit into the refugee category at all. The truth is that every time the word refugee is pronounced, in my mind it recalls pictures of women covered with black scarves and poorly dressed, their faces wrinkled, their ankles swollen, dirt under their nails. One can see them wandering through the city in groups with that particular look of lost persons. Some of them beg in restaurants or at street corners or just sit in the main square. Who are these people, I asked myself, realizing at the same time what a strange question it was, a question poised between the cliché established for us by the media and the fact that they are no different from us, only less lucky. *These are people who escaped slaughter by the Serbians*, I could hear my tiny inner voice answering. But I could also hear the other voice, the voice of suspicion, of fear, even anger: *They are just sitting smoking, doing nothing. Waiting. Waiting for what? For us to feed them. They could work, there are plenty of jobs around, houses to be repaired or working the land.* But no, it's easy to say that our city wasn't shelled and our homes burned down, as if the war were only that, as if we didn't have enough suffering of our own. Just the other day in a tram I heard a woman saying, 'This city stinks of refugees.' She said it in a loud voice, while two people, obviously refugees, were standing right beside her. The papers report that in hotels down on the Adriatic coast refugees have torn apart rooms, furniture, wallpaper, taps, lamps, everything, shouting: 'If we don't have anything, you won't either!'

Since Dražena fails to fit this picture I have become aware that something deeper is happening to me, that I am witnessing

a more serious process: the creation of a prejudice within me towards these people, something that should be called 'a yellow certificate syndrome'. What I am starting to do is to reduce a real, physical individual to an abstract 'they' – that is, to a common denominator of refugees, owners of the yellow certificate. From there to second-class citizen – or rather, non-citizen – who owns nothing and has no rights, is only a thin blue line. I can also see how easy it is to slip into this prejudice as into a familiar pair of warm slippers, ready and waiting for me at home. And even if I don't like to recognize it in myself, I obviously do believe that there is a line dividing us, a real difference – never mind if it is not me who is defining that line, setting the rules, excluding them. Or is it? Once excluded, they become aliens. Not-me. Not-us. You still feel responsible, but in a different way, as towards beggars. You can pity, but you don't have to give. With this exclusion the feeling of human solidarity turns into an issue of my personal ethics. That is, once people are reduced to the category of the 'other' – or 'otherness' – you are no longer obliged to do something for their sake, but for yourself only, for the benefit of your own soul.

Perhaps what I am also witnessing is a mechanism of self-defence as if there were a limit to how much brutality, pain or suffering one is able to take on board and feel responsible for. Over and above this, we are often confronted with more or less abstract entities, numbers, groups, categories of people, facts – but not names, not faces. To deal with pain on such a scale is in a way much easier than to deal with individuals. With a person you know you have to do something, act, give food, shelter, money, take care. On the other hand, one person could certainly not be expected to take care of a whole mass of

people. For them, there has to be someone else: the state, a church, the Red Cross, Caritas, an institution. The moment one delegates personal responsibility to the institution, the war becomes more normal, orderly, and therefore more bearable. The person not only relieves himself or herself of responsibility, but also of a feeling of guilt too: the problem is still there, but it is no longer mine. Yes, of course I'll pay the extra war-tax, I'll gladly give away clothing or food to Caritas or any responsible organization, instead of to the suspicious-looking individuals ringing the doorbell claiming that they are refugees. Because what if they are not real refugees – your help might get into the 'wrong' hands and you'll never earn that place in heaven that you'd promised yourself at the outset. The moment I thought Dražena ought not wear make-up or patent high-heeled shoes was the very moment when I myself pushed her into the group 'refugee', because it was easier for me. But the fact that she didn't fit the cliché, that she disappointed me by trying to keep her face together with her make-up and her life together with a pair of shoes, made me aware of my own collaboration with this war.

Now I think I understand what I couldn't understand before: how it happened that people who lived near German concentration camps didn't do anything, didn't help. In Claude Lanzmann's long documentary on the Holocaust, *Shoah*, there is a scene of dialogue with one of the survivors from Chelmno, the place in Poland where Jews were first exterminated by gas, 400,000 of them.

'It was always this peaceful here. Always. Even when they were burning 2000 people – Jews – every day, it was just as peaceful. No one protested. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now,' he said.

And the survivor from Treblinka said: 'We were in the wagon; the wagon was rolling eastwards. A funny thing happened, maybe it's not nice to say it. Most of the people, not just the majority, but ninety-nine per cent of the Polish people when they saw the train going through . . . they were laughing, they were joyful because the Jewish people were being taken away.'

The third voice I remember is of a woman who lived through the war in hiding: 'I remember the day when they made Berlin *Judenrein*. People hurried along the streets; no one wanted to be in the streets; you could see the streets were absolutely empty. They didn't want to look, you know. They hastened to buy what they had to buy – they had to buy something for the Sunday, you see. So they went shopping, then hurried back to their houses. And I remember this day very vividly because we saw police cars rushing through the streets of Berlin taking people out of the houses.'

But maybe the best explanation as to why people didn't stop the massacre is given by a Polish villager from present-day Treblinka who, in answer to the question whether they were afraid for the Jews, answered that if he cut his finger it hurt him, not the other person. Yes, they knew about the Jews, the convoys, the fact that they were taken into the camp and vanished. Poles worked their land right next to the barbed wire and heard awful screams. 'At first it was unbearable. Then you got used to it,' said yet another villager, a Pole. They were Jews, others, not-us. What had a Pole to do with the fact that Germans were killing Jews?

So we all get used to it. I understand now that nothing but this 'otherness' killed Jews, and it began with naming them, by reducing them to the other. Then everything became possible,

even the worst atrocities like concentration camps or the slaughtering of civilians in Croatia or Bosnia. For Serbians, as for Germans, they are all others, not-us. For me, those others are refugees. For Europe, the 'other' is the lawless 'Balkans' they pretend not to understand. For the USA it's more or less a 'European problem': why should they bother with the screams of thousands of people being bombed or simply dying of hunger, when those screams can hardly be heard? Let Europe do something, aren't they working the land next to the barbed wire?

I don't think our responsibility is the same – and I am not trying to equate the victims with those who murdered them in cold blood – all I'm saying is that it exists, this complicity: that out of opportunism and fear we all are becoming collaborators or accomplices in the perpetuation of war. For by closing our eyes, by continuing our shopping, by working our land, by pretending that nothing is happening, by thinking it is not our problem, we are betraying those 'others' – and I don't know if there is a way out of it. What we fail to realize is that by such divisions we deceive ourselves too, exposing ourselves to the same possibility of becoming the 'others' in a different situation.

The last time I saw Dražena she told me she was okay. She is staying in a friend's apartment until the autumn and free-lancing for a local newspaper. Afterwards she will manage to find something else. She also told me that she is writing a war diary since that is the only way she can attempt to understand what is happening to her. 'And what I find most difficult to comprehend is the fact that there is a war going on,' she said. 'I still don't understand it. It's not that I expect a miracle to end this nightmare immediately. No, no. I mean, it is just hard for

me to grasp that what is going on is the war. Do you know what a war is?' she asked, but I could tell from her look that she didn't really expect an answer.

I don't know what the war is, I meant to tell her, but I can see that it is everywhere. It is in a street flooded with blood after twenty people have died in a bread queue in Sarajevo. But it is also in your not understanding it, in my unconscious cruelty towards you, in the fact that you have that yellow certificate and I don't, in the way it is growing within us and changing our emotions, our relations, our values. We are the war; we carry in us the possibility of the mortal illness that is slowly reducing us to what we never thought possible and I am afraid there is no one else to blame. We all make it possible, we allow it to happen. Our defence is weak, as is our consciousness of it. There are no them and us, there are no grand categories, abstract numbers, black and white truths, simple facts. There is only us – and, yes, we are responsible for each other.

And I also wanted to tell Dražena that she should go out and dance in her high-heeled shoes, if only she could.

ZAGREB
MAY 1992

19

DEATH, LIVE

They say that a little girl was killed while eating a pie. It seemed that it happened like this: it was morning, bright and chilly. You ask yourself how that woman, her mother, made the pie in Sarajevo? What flour did she use? What oil? In any case, still half-asleep, the two-and-a-half-year-old girl had been sitting at the table, eating breakfast. At that moment, she heard the sound of shelling. Maybe she was frightened by it, so she ran to her mother – but maybe not. The sound of shelling is normal around here. A shell went through the roof of their house and landed in the kitchen. The girl fell to the floor. It all happened with lightning speed and she was dead before her parents or her grandfather had time to understand what was happening. By the time her father took her in his hands and looked for help, it was all over.

Then a TV camera arrived on the scene. This happened perhaps only one or two hours after the shelling. We see the small kitchen already without the little girl, the floor is covered with brick and plaster debris, scattered shoes, her little boots. The camera zooms in on the roof, on the hole left by the shell. Sky and cold descend through the gap into the kitchen. The