

## BOSNIA BY BUS, 2004

*America always means more than you want it to*

- Jenn Mason

“It’s Hollywood,” an old Brit to my right is saying to a couple of college girls as I sit down across the table in the common room of this London hostel. “Of course it’s Americanized, darling.”

On a television at the far end of the room, Owen Wilson is scrambling through snowy woods—an American soldier one step ahead of the Serbs in the white mountains of the Bosnian War. He’s just uncovered a mass-grave, stumbling into the gruesome, muddy ditch of bodies after watching his injured partner executed in cold blood. The Serbs make up ground with every step, as the United Nations deride a make-believe Clinton for sending in backup, not giving up on just one soldier.

There is some truth in the story, yes, but the man is mostly right—it *is* Hollywood.

A Bosnian boy in an oversize hoody hides Wilson, and in the back of a pick-up truck, tells the soldier he loves Ice Cube, and imitates the rapper through a thick Slavic accent. The girls giggle again. “I know some boys from there... just like that... the baggy clothes, all that aggressive rap and metal...all that American stuff.” The soft, rounded *r*’s of their English accents drift across the table, (I haven’t opened my mouth, and decide to listen rather than reveal my Ohio drawl).

The old Brit turns to them again. “Ever been to America?” he asks. They shake their heads and he smiles. “Don’t go.”

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A month later, I’m on a night-bus out of Munich, south to the Balkan hills, the only English on this coach coming from me and my seat mate, a Sarjevan named Damir, who lives in Germany. He is a little drunk, and knows the route well (he tells me later) traveling this course every month to see his wife in Sarajevo.

When I first sit, he looks at my face and asks (in English) if I am from Spain. “No,” I say, “American,” and feel very conspicuous.

I offer my name as *Charles*—formal, but it feels somehow more international than *Chuck*. He grins.

“Prince Charles from America,” he says, pleased and without irony. “And you come to Sarajevo, Charles. Why? Why would you go into Bosnia?”

This is a question I am not prepared for. In my six months of living in Italy and poking around Europe—every cathedral, pub or piazza, and every bus, train or taxi I’ve taken to get there—no one has asked me what I’m looking for, why I’ve come.

“I’m curious,” I say. And it’s true. It has been ten years since the fighting in these hills registered in the suburbs and cornfields back home. I’d been in high school then, the cold war so recently laid to rest. And now, at 26, I *am* curious.

“No,” he says in amazement. “All the way from America for curious? No no no.” I nod. “You come from America, which is so big—like *this*,” he holds his hands far apart in a wide bracket before us, “to Bosnia, like *this*,” he brings them together as though he were holding an invisible softball between them. I smile.

“I like the smaller towns,” I say. “And I’m curious.”

He still doesn’t believe me and grins in half-drunk skepticism. “What is here that you don’t have in America?” he asks, giving me the visual aids again.

I tell him I’ve been living in Sicily, that I like these Mediterranean towns. “The people are much more open and friendly than back home.” This, apparently, is the right answer.

“Ah, Charles, they are. You are right. The people of Bosnia, you will see, will offer you their homes. The most generous people you will ever meet.” He is gushing and we both know it (though he inadvertently backs himself up with the genuinely kind act of buying me unsolicited coffee at every smoke-stop with a bar all night). At this point though, as he pours on the compliments to his native people, he can tell I’m humoring him a little, and turns his attention toward his home in Munich, and how much friendlier Sarajevo is. He tells me he’s lived in Munich a dozen years, moved there as the war began, met his wife there (a fellow refugee), and she returned to raise their kids Bosnian—“when it was safe.”

“Sure,” I say. “That makes sense.”

“It’s very different now,” he says. “In Sarajevo, Muslims, Serbs, Jews, everyone is Sarjevan. Everyone wants to live quiet. Everyone together.”

“That’s great,” I say, feeling increasingly like I cannot add more.

“You know much about the war, yes?” I nod. “Is very different now.” A pause. “In the country, the hills, there are still villages—not good—where they want to know who you are, you understand? But in the cities, in Sarajevo, no one asks ‘are you Muslim? Are you Serb?’ We are all Sarjevan.”

I am not sure how to ask the questions I want to ask (*what was it like then? was it really as bad as we all thought? what did you, yourself, see?*) without sounding like a blood-hungry storm-chaser, and even start to wonder what I really meant by *curious*. I stay quiet, keep nodding, keep my responses short. But he hesitates, so I ask, “this is the best it’s been in Bosnia in a while then?”

“The best in Bosnia,” he says, “was when Tito was here.” Marshall Tito, the sometimes brutal but largely beloved Yugoslav dictator who died before I was old enough to know different. What I know of him paints him a villain—oppression of speech, imprisoning dissidents, the familiar stuff. My eyes betray a surprise at his affection, and he notices. “Yes. No one had anything then. Tito had it all, and everyone else was equal. It was hard, but hard for everyone.” I smile. “I’m serious, Charles,” he says, sincerely.

“I believe it,” I say.

“It is hard to remember in Germany. There is so much money, it is so important to everyone. I have been there a long time—I am this way too sometimes.”

“America too,” I say. He smiles a little at this. “Have you ever been to America?” I ask him.

“No,” he says. “In America, everyone has a chance, no? That is what everyone says here. People in Bosnia, everyone wants to go to America. Everyone wants to start a restaurant in America and get rich. That’s how they say it works.” He is grinning and I can’t tell if he believes in the dream or not. He reminds me suddenly of Owen Wilson’s Ice Cube fan. “I would like to go to America some day, but we would have to come back to Bosnia to grow old.”

I tell him there are some who make it work, but America is shaky too—the Euro worth so much more now, the States not as confident as they used to be. He grins again. “America can fix itself,” he says. “The whole world is better when America is better, no matter what the Euro is worth. I understand though—the Euro is good, it helps some countries. Not Bosnia—they are not in the Union.” He smiles a little to himself. “Don’t spend too much in Sarajevo, Charles,” he says. “They take Euro, but change in Bosnian Marks that aren’t real money—no one wants it outside the country.” He shows me a ten Mark note, an older man in a suit and thick-rimmed glasses on the front. It’s smaller than a dollar bill, but looks like real money to me. “Is just paper,” he says. “No one will change it. Worth nothing.”

The darkness is thick and cold outside the window. When Damir has returned the bill to his pocket, he flips off the overhead light and nods off, leaving me to my thoughts. Everywhere I’ve gone on this continent, they know something real about America. They ask me what I think of John Kerry; they ask me if I supported the war in Iraq. They smile and nod to me with hope when I tell them, *yes, I like him* or *no, I didn’t*.

But more than facts and events, the people here in the east (the old Soviet Block nations) understand something about my country—that sense of possibility, of intangible forward motion; the chance for a tomorrow without yesterday creeping in. This is what is powerful about America here, not our military or our money or any of the rhetoric we throw around in election years like this, but that endlessly defiant *today*. It’s not a choice here, yesterday is everywhere; the cultural memory is too long. The power changes hands, but the same people live in these hills, and they remember. They look to America and see what is beneath the freedom of Huck Finn or Kerouac. They see Ice Cube—poor gang kid who became a Hollywood star. They see how easily we turn our backs on *then* and blindly march into *what’s next*, for better or worse. I feel more American here than I have in years, and I’m not sure what to make of it.

And for the first time, here in the dark, I admit to myself that I came here to forget a lover, to find something so tragic and bloodwarm that I can cauterize myself with it and start again from scratch. That I didn’t come here to learn anything at all. I’ve avoided the usual traps on this trip—the drunk spring breakers and rich tourists that define the ugly American—

but I feel like a vacationer now, in this man's struggling country, even as he sells it to me unapologetically like the friendliest place on earth. How very American.

In six months, I'll be 9000 miles away, in Santa Cruz, CA, teaching cultural studies to college kids who won't even be able to find Ohio on a map. It's there that I'll be when my country will re-elect its own terrifying, irresponsible leader, and the 49% will wonder how to get up the next morning, what an endless clean slate leaves you with at a time like this.

Here, on this bus, it is too much—just a jumble of confused fears and premonitions, wordless gut-thoughts. Damir shifts in his seat and I ask him if we have passed into Bosnia yet. He shakes his head.

"You'll know you're in Bosnia because the roads will get, uh, like this." He holds his hand out, palm down, and starts shaking it, making rumbling sounds in his throat.

"Oh, I understand," I chuckle, thinking of the highways back home. He smiles, but gently, and I realize I don't understand after all.

"There are buildings too," he says, "left over from the war. Bosnia is a wonderful country, but, as I said, there is no money—some things don't get fixed."

I nod and he turns back toward the window to sleep.

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A few hours later, in white morning, the bus shaking like a wagon on gravel, I wake from half-sleep to peak out the window. The villages remind me of the shotgun-tarpaper towns of the deep south: small houses on overgrown lots, a car here or there on blocks, waist-high rusty fences calling out property lines. But then, one at a time, things come into view for which I have no simple comparison: here a brick building with no glass in window-frames, one wall crumbled to gravel below; a few lots down, a house with no roof, only one support left standing inside; across the street, three cinder-block walls in a U-shape, open to the road, the rest of the structure just rubble of brick, dust, and metal inside.

I want to say it's as though a tornado cut into these mountain passes, randomly picking off and gutting houses at will. But of course this is not the case at all, and it takes just one more pass to know: a large 2-story cube with no roof or occupants, (a grocery? an apartment

building? impossible to tell). The outer walls of plaster and stucco are pockmarked with bullet holes. These are the leftovers of the war.

At first I am held fast, staring at each to memorize the sight—the 45 degree angle at which that wall falls, jagged but definite, from the small house; the three gray-cinder pillars rising, defiant, in a pile of orange brick-dust across the street—but soon I begin to watch the ways that people move around them; how they sit on front porches and smoke cigarettes; how they get into cars for morning commutes to work or market, and never even look at the heaps of shaky skeleton-brick, as if they are not there, as if they are not important, or cannot hurt anyone now. This is what it means to move on, to live with the nightmares that don't go away, to learn to close your eyes and then open them again.

I try my hardest to imagine what this place would've looked like in the worst of it. But I can't, and never will.

A few miles on, we pull into a hotel's parking lot for a smoke. The place is open—wood-paneled and quaint, with a mountain view, a cafe-bar, even a patio for warmer weather. And just beyond it, a whole wing of rooms leveled to ash and rock-gravel. An old woman climbs a staircase behind us with an armload of fresh linens, rattles keys from her apron pocket.

And I know that there are some things we do because we can, others because we can't help. So even though I lean on the wall, watch her disappear into the stairwell, trying again to write this living ruin into my memory while Damir burns his cigarette down to the filter – I can't stop thinking about my friend Noga, a widow at 28: how she flew from her SoCal home, out to the cliffs and beachheads of Spain soon after her husband's death, looking for something healing or real. She drank red wine in Salamanca, she'd told me, wept helplessly to a waiter who'd confessed himself a widower. Older man, she thought he'd know something to help, so she asked him what to do. *Don't try to forget any of it, was all he could offer. You never will.*

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