Paul Theroux 1995. Pillars of Hercules, Penguin-London

II

The Ferry *Liburnija* to Zadar

My destination today was Pivka, "somewhere in Slovenia" (so I was told), reachable on the Budapest Express by my getting off very quickly at a thirty-second halt after about two hours' traveling from Trieste. It was a sunny morning, I was dozing in the midday heat. The border formalities brought me fully awake.

Until now I had hardly shown my passport anywhere, but leaving the European Community for the hastily improvised republics of former Yugoslavia meant that I was now under scrutiny. High in the Carso Mountains that formed the Italian frontier, Italian officials stamped my passport and looked through my bag. A few miles farther down the line, at Sezana on the Slovenian border, there was another search, but a stranger one. The Slovene customs man ordered me outside into the corridor, and then, kicking my bag aside, he set his sights on removing the seats from the compartment. He fossicked in the crevices where I might have hid lawyers, guns or money. He found nothing but dust. He jammed the seats back into the racks and said goodbye in English. In the matter of visas and border crossings, the smaller the country the bigger the fuss; like a tiny cop directing traffic.

It was such an empty train. Obviously no one wanted to leave Italian abundance for the relative deprivation of Ljubljana or Budapest, or any of the desperate little stations in between. For example, I was the only passenger to alight at Pivka, a railway junction.

After all that traveling and trouble I was nowhere. Yet I had to admit that it was a satisfaction being on this tiny platform, among unreadable signs, particularly after the celebrated places I had passed through. The pathetic name Pivka seemed curiously belittling and joyless, like a nickname for a dwarf. But because travel is

often a sad and partly masochistic pleasure, the arrival in obscure and picturesquely awful places is one of the delights of the traveler.

It was like one of those remote junctions you see in depressing East European movies where people in old-fashioned clothes commit meaningless murders. It was now the middle of a hot afternoon.

I walked into the station bar, feeling like a conspicuous stranger, and ordered a cup of coffee. It was dark inside, and shabby, and the air was dense and stinging with the smoke of cheap cigarettes. I had no Slovenian currency, but Italian money was good enough – probably better. Citizens of these new little nations were forced by circumstances to be accommodating, and to speak English. I handed over a small Italian bill and received a wad of Slovenian money in return, with the newness and inkiness of inflated currency. I calculated that the large cup of coffee had cost me thirty-five cents, the cheapest I had drunk in fifteen years.

Pasty-faced men with greasy hair chain-smoked and muttered. I wanted to make a telephone call from the rusty phone on the wall but no one could sell me the token I needed to make the thing work.

"No tokens," the young woman said. Her name was Marta. She spoke English.

"I am a stranger here. I want to visit Pivka. Tell me, what is the best thing to see?"

"There is nothing," she said.

She was wearily wiping wet glasses with a dirty rag. She sucked her teeth. She pushed a loose hank of hair behind her ear.

"And the winter," she said.

"What is it like?"

"Bad."

"What about the summer?"

"Too hot."

"But there's no fighting here."

"No, that's –" She waved the rag to the east, slopping water on the bar's mirror. "There."

The men in the bar, drinking beer, smoking heavily, did not acknowledge me. Through the unwashed window I watched a dirty yellow engine shunting. I thought, as I frequently do in such places, *What if I had been born here?*

Leaving my bag with the station-master I walked into Pivka proper, which was a narrow road lined with empty shops. The town was sooty, just peeling paint and impoverishment, but it was not littered, simply fatigued-looking, like the people, like Marta at the bar. Now and then a car, always a small one going too fast, side-swiped me as I walked down the narrow pavement of Koldvoska Cesta. A rusty Wartburg, a Zastova, some gasping Yugos. It was like being attacked by weed-whackers. I could hear their whirring engines and frayed fanbelts, the sputter of their leaking radiators. But even these little cars proclaimed their nationalism. One had a sticker *Slovenia*, the rest were labeled *SLO*.

Walking along I heard a child crying inside a house, and a woman scolding; then a slap, and the child crying louder, and more scolding. Scold, slap, screech; scold, slap, screech.

I looked for a place to eat, I asked people – made eating gestures – "Station," they said. That horrible little bar? So I went back to the station and saw that there was a train in an hour or so for Rijeka. I talked to Marta again. She urged me to go to Rijeka, even though it was in the foreign country of Croatia. I sat in the sunshine, reading, catching up on my notes, and listening to the dusty sparrows of Pivka until the train came.

This two-car Polish-made train of Slovenian Railways was about twenty years old, filled with rambunctious schoolchildren on their way home. They shrieked at each other for a while, then shut up. There was a sort of hysteria here, probably something to do with political uncertainty and recrimination. Soon they all got off. There were now about eight of us remaining in the train: seven old people and me. And it was interesting that the countryside looked as seedy as the town, as bedraggled, not like nature at all, but like a stage-set designed to symbolize the plight of the country: thin, rather starved trees, ragged discolored grass, wilting wild-flowers. There was a 6,000-foot mountain to the east, Veliki Sneznik, but even that looked collapsible.

"Bistrica," the conductor said, clipping my ticket and motioning me out of the door.

At Ilirska Bistrica a youth in a baggy police uniform flipped the

pages of my passport and handed it back. That was one of the irritations of nationalism – every few miles a passport check, just a ritual, at the frontier of another tinky-winky republic.

The train jogged on to a small station building with wisteria clinging to the walls. We sat there a while, the old folks muttering while I tried to engage one of them in conversation. There were no talkers.

"Just tell me where we are."

"We are leaving the Republic of Slovenia," an old man said. "We are entering the Republic of Croatia."

There was no sarcasm in his voice, yet the bald statement was sarcasm enough. We had gone – what? – about twenty miles from Pivka.

"You will require a visa," a policeman said.

This was Sapjane, the frontier of the Republika Hvratska (Croatia). It was a place much like Pivka or Bistrica. When a country is very small even these tiny, almost uninhabited villages are inflated with a meaningless importance. A breeze was ruffling the weedy tracks, and soughing in the pines; a cow mooed, its bell clinked. More sparrows. Customs! Immigration! You will require a visa! The officious but polite policeman laboriously filled in a form ("Father's name? Place of birth? Purpose of visit?") and stuck a pompous-looking Croatian visa into my passport, a scrupulous operation, taking fifteen minutes. I was the only foreigner. God help them when they had four or five foreigners on the train.

We were all ethnically approved: one American, seven Croatians. Before the break-up of Yugoslavia the train would have raced through this station at eighty miles an hour. But I did not complain about the delay. This was all experimental travel. If I had flown to Croatia from Italy I would not have been privileged to witness this sad farce.

Having done his duty, the policeman became pleasant. His name was Mario, he was from Rijeka – he commuted to this outpost – and he was a mere twenty-three. I remarked on the farcical bureaucracy – after an hour we were still at the station, waiting.

"Yes, there are delays, because we are all separate now," he said. "Slovenia. Croatia. Serbia. In Bosnia you have Mussulmans."

"They're different, are they?"

"Very much. You see, Slovenian people are much more like Germans or Austrians."

That became quite a common refrain: We are big bold Teutons, they are dark little savages. But in fact they all looked fairly similar and Slavic to my eye, untutored by Jugland's prejudices. I soon learned that a former Jug could spot an ethnic taint a mile away. Here comes a Bosnian! There goes a Slovene!

I said this in a polite form to Mario.

"That is because we married each other before," he said. "But we don't marry each other now."

"What a shame."

"Well, you see, it was Marshal Tito's idea to have one big country. But maybe it was too big." He was digging a big polished boot into the railway gravel. "Better to have our own countries, for political freedom. Maybe like America. One government in Washington and every state is separate."

"Mario, we don't need a passport and a visa to go from New York to New Jersey."

He laughed. He was intelligent; his English was good enough for him to understand that I had shown him the absurdity of what he proposed. And after all, the war was still on.

"Will I have a problem going to Montenegro?"

"I think, yes," he said. "And Serbia is a problem. Where do you come from?"

"Boston."

"Kukoc plays for the Bulls," he said. "Divac plays for the Lakers. But I am for the Bulls."

"They're not doing very well."

"They won last night," Mario said.

Here, in the farthest corner of Croatia, on the wrong side of the tracks at Sapjane, among mooing cows, the latest NBA scores.

"Michael Jordan," Mario said. "He is the greatest player in the world."

The Slovenian train had returned to Pivka, and at last a Croatian train arrived in Sapjane from Rijeka to take us on the

return trip. I got into a conversation, speaking Italian with a Croatian. I remarked on the complexity of the republics that had sprung up.

"It's all shit," he said.

Rijeka had a reputation for being ugly, but it did not seem so bad, another Adriatic port city, rather steep and scattered, with an air of having been forgotten. Many people still spoke the Italian they had learned when the city was part of Mussolini's empire, and named Fiume (meaning "river", as did the word Rijeka). "Fiume is a clean asphalted town with a very modern go-ahead air," James Joyce wrote in a letter in 1906. "It is for its size far finer than Trieste." Within minutes of arriving I changed a little money and left the money-changer's a millionaire, in dinars.

Earlier on this trip I had read Nabokov's vivid memoir, *Speak, Memory*. He had remarked on his childhood visits from St Petersburg to a resort called Abbazia, much frequented by Russians at the turn of the century. I had inquired about the place while I was in Italy (*Abbazia* means monastery), but there was no such place on the coast. But I saw the name in parentheses on a Croatian map, and I realized that just a few miles away, down the coast, the penultimate station on the line to Rijeka, was Abbazia in its Croatian form, Opatija.

"There are dimples in the rocks, full of tepid sea water," Nabokov wrote of the place, "and my magic muttering accompanies certain spells I am weaving over the tiny sapphire pools."

It was 1904, Nabokov was five, and he was with his doting father and mother. His family rented a villa with a "crenelated, cream-colored tower." He remembered traveling to Fiume for a haircut. He described hearing the Adriatic from his bedroom: "The ocean seemed to rise and grope in the darkness and then heavily fall on its face."

This was my excuse to stay in Rijeka that night, eat another pizza, sleep in another bargain-priced hotel, and go to Opatija in the morning. The seaside resort was deserted. It retained its elegance, though, and looked like a haunted version of Menton. An old man swept the broad promenade with a push-broom. The boarding-houses looked abandoned. The restaurants were closed. The day was warm and sunny, the sea lapping at an empty beach.

"People come at the weekends," a Croatian woman at the news-stand told me in Italian.

Returning to Rijeka I made inquiries about the train to Zadar, which had recently been under heavy Serbian shelling.

"Ha! No trains these days!" the woman at the hotel said. But she took charge of me.

"You want to know the best thing to do? Leave this hotel right now. Go straight to the port. You can't miss it. In two hours the ferry leaves."

It was the coastal ferry to Zadar and Split.

"You think I'll get a ticket?"

"Ha! No problem!" she said. "No one comes here any more!"

I snatched up my bag and hurried to the port. Within fifteen minutes I was in possession of a five-dollar ticket to Zadar on the ferry *Liburnija*, with a hundred or so Croatians, and soon we were sliding past the islands of Krk, Chres, Rab, Losinj and Pag in the late afternoon sunshine, and I was happy again, on the move.

There were half-a-dozen German tourists on board who were taking advantage of the bargains created by the war – desperate hotel-keepers and empty restaurants, unlimited beach umbrellas, cheap beer. The rest were Croatians. I had the only ticket to Zadar; everyone else was going to Split.

The effects of the war were evident on the *Liburnija*, too: the chain-smoking adults, looking shell-shocked, the children in their mid-teens, a great deal more manic and aggressive than any I had seen so far – and I had seen a large number, since they often took trains home from school. These Croatian children acted crazed: they swung on poles, vaulted barriers, punched each other, screeched and wept – this was later, at eleven at night off the Dalmatian coast – and well into the early hours they kept trying to push one another over the rail into the Kvarneric channel.

I assumed it was an agitated state induced by the uncertainties and violence of the war that they had all experienced in some way, even if it was only hearing the thunder of artillery shells. They were returning to parts of Croatia that had been under fire. The Serbs had made their presence felt almost to the edge of the shore, and even many coastal towns had been shelled or invaded. The children were so hysterical at times that I expected one of them

would succeed in tipping another over the rail and that we would then spend the rest of the night searching fruitlessly for the body.

The war mood was a species of battle fatigue, depression with brief periods of hyper-alertness. And it was as though, because the adults said nothing but only murmured and smoked, the children were expressing their parents' fears or belligerence.

I went into the cafeteria of the ship to escape them, but even there teenagers were running about and bumping into tables and overturning chairs. No one told them to shut up or stop.

"Those kids bother me," I said to a young man at my table.

He shrugged; he did not understand. He said, "Do you speak Italian?"

He was Croatian, he said, but lived in Switzerland, where he was a student and a part-time bartender in a club in Locarno, just over the Swiss border at the top end of Lake Maggiore. "I hate the French and the Germans. They don't talk to me anyway." Girls hung around the club – from Brazil, from Santo Domingo and the Philippines. "You could call them prostitutes. They will go with a man if the money is right. I am not interested in them."

He was on his way home to the island of Brac across the channel from Split for a long-delayed holiday.

"I didn't come last year because Serbs and Croats were fighting in the mountains, and there was trouble in Split. It is quiet now, but still no people come, because they are afraid of all this fighting they hear about."

"Are there good guys and bad guys in this war?"

"Look, we are Croats, but last year my father was robbed of almost five thousand US dollars in dinars, and the robber was a Croat!" He laughed. He was busily eating spaghetti. "Serbs are Protestants, Croats are Catholics, Bosnians are Mussulmen. Me, I can't understand Slovene or Montenegrin or Macedonian. It is like French to me. Bosnian and Serbian and Croat languages are almost the same. But we don't speak to each other any more!"

Having finished his meal he went to the cafeteria line and bought another meal, more spaghetti, salad, french fries and a slab of greasy meat.

"I'm hungry," he explained as he put this second tray down. "I'm a swimmer. I'm on the water-polo team at my school." He

resumed eating and after a while said, "This food is seven dollars. Okay, maybe this isn't such a wonderful place, but it's cheap."

I went back on deck, where the youths were still running and shouting, and many people were bedded down in the open air, sleeping: stacks of bodies in the shadows. But even at nine o'clock there was some dusk left, a pearly light in the sky that made the water seem soapy and placid, and far-off to the west floating fragments of the sunken sun.

There were tiny lights on the coast, and fewer lights showing on the off-shore islands. Soon I saw the timed flashes of what could only have been lighthouses and we drew into a harbor that was empty and poorly lit; just a few men awaiting the ship's lines to be thrown to them.

This was Zadar, and it was midnight, and I alone left the *Liburnija* and went down the gangway. I saw a light burning at the shipping office, where there was a woman and man shuffling papers and smoking.

"I just got off the ship," I said. "I am looking for a hotel."

The man shook his head. The woman said, "There are just a few hotels and they are full with refugees."

"You mean there is nowhere to stay?"

"It is so late," the woman said. "Maybe the Kolovare Hotel. They have refugees, but they might have a place for you."

"Where is it?"

She pointed into the darkness at the end of the quay. "That way. Two kilometers – maybe three."

In fact it was more than a mile. The distance and even the late hour did not deter me from walking there; it was the thought of walking alone in a strange town that was twelve miles from the Bosnian Serb lines. Only someone looking for trouble would walk down these dark streets at that late hour.

"It is possible to call a taxi?"

"No taxis," the man said.

"Thanks."

But as I turned to leave, he said, "When the ship leaves, I will give you a lift."

So I waited on the dark quay at Zadar. It was like a quayside scene in a DiChirico painting, just as bare, just as bewildering.

There were no cars, no people, nothing stirring: it was the abnormal silence full of implication that is more typical in a war zone than noise, for war is nothing happening for weeks and then everything happening horribly in seconds.

The *Liburnija* did not leave until almost one-thirty. I thought: Is it any wonder I travel alone? I had no idea what I was doing. I seldom knew from hour to hour what my plans were. That trip to Opatija was a sudden decision, like the decision to plunge into Pivka and abruptly leave; ditto Rijeka. And now it seemed I had drawn a blank at Zadar. It was unfair to subject another person to this impulsiveness and uncertainty. I had started the day in Rijeka, had lunch in Opatija, had bought the ticket back to Rijeka, and had been sailing since late afternoon. Now, well past midnight, I had no place to stay, and my bag felt like a boulder. I would have been apologizing like mad to a traveling companion. Actually I was pleased. You're in Zadar, buddy, and that was something, still in the Mediterranean after all this time!

"See the holes in the buildings," the man from the agency said, greeting me and yawning after the ship departed. He spoke English mixed with German. His name was Ivo, one of many Ivos I was to meet in the next week or so.

Lumps of stucco had been blown off the walls, some of the walls had crater holes, and many windows were broken.

"From grenades," he explained. "The Serbs were in ships, right there, shelling us. This" – where his old car was parked – "was a crater. They filled it up. But the rest we still haven't fixed. The town is worse than this."

We got in and he drove, very slowly, like an elderly man uncertain of his route.

"All was dark. The whole of Zadar," he said. "And I was so afraid, and even now –"

He laughed in an urgent, mirthless way.

"I am very nervous now," he said. "My nervousness is serious. Look – holes, holes, holes."

We were passing blasted buildings and low ruined walls and pot-holes in the street.

"Do you think I should be nervous?"

"Maybe. I don't know," he said. "For me it was terrible. No water, no electricity. All dark. And it is still not over."

Not more than 125 miles across the Adriatic at Ancona, Italians, their bellies full of pasta and good wine, were sleeping blissfully; and all this Croat spoke of was bombing and war.

"Many people used to come here," Ivo said. "Now there is no one. They are afraid."

We were still traveling through the dark city, and I was grateful for this ride. It was hard to imagine my being able to find my way through these dark streets to the hotel.

"Now – only you," Ivo said.

"The last stranger in Zadar, that's me," I said.

"I hope they have a space for you," Ivo said, as he swung into the driveway of the Kolovare.

All I saw were sandbags. They were stacked in front of the entrance, two bags deep, eight feet high. They were stacked in front of the ground-floor windows. There was a wall of sandbags along the driveway. Some dim lights burned behind them. There were definitely refugees here; the unmistakable sign was laundry hanging from every balcony and most windows, so that the front of the hotel looked like a Sicilian tenement. All the doors were locked.

Ivo roused an old woman, and said something to her. He bade me farewell and disappeared behind the sandbags. The woman gave me a key and showed me to a back room. I tried to talk to her.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," she said.

Zadar had been seriously shelled – there were signs of damage everywhere, and it was obvious that it had been hit from up close and vindictively: the ancient main gate of the old town, a Roman relic, had been shelled – for what reason, apart from malice? – and chunks blown out of it. The Serbs had set up machine-guns and howitzers in a nearby park, where they were dug in; and these marksmen shelled the high school that was sixty feet away. The high school was now in session, students chatting in the playground, but the front door was sandbagged, so were most of the lower windows, and many upper windows were broken. The entire front

of the school was cicatriced by shells. There was major damage around the window frames, misses from their attempts to fire into the windows.

I talked to some of the students. Yes, it was fairly quiet now, right here, they said. But there were road blocks not far away. I asked about the shelling of the buildings. What was the objective?

"They wanted to kill civilians," a young boy said.

"Students?"

"Kill anybody," he said. "If they kill ordinary people in Zadar they think they would make us afraid."

But life went on. The old town of Zadar was not large, and it was contained within a high wall – shops, cafés, restaurants, a theater, some churches. The churches and most other buildings in the town were sandbagged, up to fifteen or twenty feet; but they were also damaged. There were many gun-toting Croatian soldiers in the streets. They were unkempt, they had long hair, many wore earrings; some of the soldiers looked middle-aged, and none of them seemed particularly healthy. They were pale and harassed, like the Zadar civilians.

In the Hotel Kolovare, refugee families killed time in the lobby – there was nowhere else to go, and this was now everyone's parlor. They looked at me without curiosity. Old men dozed in the lobby chairs, children chased up and down the corridors. They were over-excited, they were crazed, ashamed. The room doors were left open, so I could see women doing their laundry in the hotel bath-tubs, and dishes in the bathroom sinks, and ironing boards and household goods stacked in the bedrooms. There were whispers, and shouts. Life went on, but the moods were strange.

There was a cluster of small shops and cafés in the residential part of town about fifteen minutes from the hotel. "Residential" gives the wrong impression, though. The houses were dilapidated, many were scrawled with graffiti, or had broken windows. Some attempts had been made to grow vegetables in the yards. The apartment houses were in the worst shape of any. I walked there to look for a newspaper, but found nothing to read, though there were girlie magazines hung from clothespins along with comic books.

At a café I ordered a cup of coffee. A rock song was playing:

Take your bombs away
So we have today
Take your bombs away
Think about the way
You –

"Is that a local group?" I asked the young woman behind the counter.

"It's English – must be American," she said, and handed me my coffee.

It was none that I recognized, and they were wartime sentiments.

"You're American?" she said.

"Yes. And you're from Zadar?"

"No. My town is Zamunike," she said.

"Is that very far away?"

"Twelve kilometers," she said, and sounded rueful. "I can't go back there. I am a refugee here in Zadar."

Twelve kilometers was only about eight miles. Still, her house was behind Serbian lines, and that was another country, with a sealed and dangerous border.

"The Serbs are there."

"In your house?"

"Maybe."

"That's awful."

It amazed me – the nearness of everything: of war, of shelling, of nastiness, of dislocation, even of comfort, for the Italian Riviera was just across the water, and the stately solemnities of Trieste just up the coast. Zadar was a town which had been besieged and then abandoned. But the enemy was only a few miles away. Refugees had fled here, and no one really knew where they were or what was coming next.

We talked a while more, then an odd thing happened. When I gave her money for the coffee she refused it. She put her own money in the cash register.

"It's a little present," she said.

She did not let me insist. And I was moved. Since beginning this trip months before in Gibraltar it was the first time that anyone

had given me anything that could be described as a present. Most of the time I was hardly noticed. I had passed through the Costa Brava and the Côte d'Azur, and Barcelona and Marseilles and Monaco. Nothing came my way. I had to travel here to find a token of generosity, from a skinny woman in a café, in a town full of shell holes, in the shadow of a war. Perhaps war was the reason. Not everyone was brutalized; war made some people better.

My map showed a railway line that went south to the coastal city of Split. It went farther than that, continuing through Montenegro to the Albanian border and beyond, deep into Albania. But a map was not much good here – maps are one of the casualties of war, the single purpose of which is to rewrite them. This was especially true here on the fuzzy border of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was in fact occupied by Serbian soldiers who were attempting to capture and so obliterate Bosnia-Herzegovina. They had tried and failed in Croatia: the shell holes in Zadar were proof of that.

There were many more shell holes in and around Sibenik, which I reached on a bus because none of the trains was running, for of course they all passed through Serbian lines. The bus left Zadar and stayed on the coast road, the choppy Adriatic on the right and pale gray boulders and cheese-white cliffs on the left. Soon we were in a landscape that resembled the Corsican *maquis*, low fragrant bushes and an intense litter of big stones, some in piles, some forming walls, the whole place weird with them.

There were not many passengers: the usual Croatian soldiers and nuns, some elderly people, a few youths. When the bus stopped, as it frequently did, the soldiers hopped off and smoked. At Biograd I attempted a conversation with a group of soldiers but was waved away. Rebuffed, I looked at the Kornat islands offshore, an archipelago of a hundred or so uninhabited and treeless lumps of stone in the sea. The whole landscape was stony, and the odd thing was that it had been demarcated into football-pitch-sized fields that served as goat pastures or great stony rectangles enclosing fruit trees.

I got off at dry, windy Sibenik for lunch – a cup of coffee and a slice of cold pizza – and to look at shell holes. It had been more

lightly bombed than Zadar, but it was obvious from the random shelling that the Serbians had no scruples about bombing civilians. Like Zadar, like many of the towns on this coast, Sibenik wore a wounded expression and seemed to wince. I looked at these places but they did not look directly back at me. That was an effect of war, too.

The bus to Split took over an hour, though the place was only thirty miles away. I decided to stay here, to get my bearings. It was an industrial port, rather horrible-looking, enclosing the tiny ancient town of old Split in a maze of streets, with a Temple of Jupiter and a cathedral and a nearby market. All over the sea front of Split, and at the ferry landings and by the bus station (near another defunct railway station), there were old women plucking people's sleeves and offering rooms and nagging in German.

I saw those old women as my opportunity, and decided on a likely one and gave her the thrill of believing she had talked me into a ten-dollar room about a fifteen-minute walk from the ferry landing.

"Good room, cheap room," she said in German, and she made a "follow me" gesture by flapping her hand.

The room was on the third floor of a large, seedy apartment house, but I did not regret it until it was obvious that this old woman and I did not have any language in common. She could say "room" and a few other words in German and Italian, and was of course fluent in Croat. She lived alone. She was the envy of some other old women in the apartment house, because she had snared me.

I would not have minded being trapped there if we had been able to talk, but there was no conversation, I was not able to poke through the other rooms in my nosy way, the pictures of the crucified Christ and suffering saints on the walls depressed me, and I never found out her name. Some of the religious paraphernalia in the dark apartment – pictures of the Madonna and shiny rosaries – were, I later realized, souvenirs of Medjugorje, not far away, which the Madonna had been visiting fairly regularly to inspire the Croatians in their own religious nationalism.

"One week, two weeks?" the woman asked me in German.

"One night," I said.

It passed quickly. I fled in the morning to the greater comfort of the Bellevue Hotel, and tried to find a ferry south to Dubrovnik. None was running. "Forget Dubrovnik – go to Hvar," a ferryman said. Hvar was a nearby island. Instead, I wandered in the market, watching people selling some of their earthly goods in the Croatian version of a flea-market – but these people were refugees. In desperation I looked at the ruins of the Temple of Jupiter, and then I decided to make more travel plans. It seemed you could go almost anywhere from Split – to Ancona, to Rijeka, even to Albania. The one place that was unreachable was Montenegro. The border was only ten or fifteen miles south of Dubrovnik but it was closed. And there was no ferry traffic out of Dubrovnik. But I could bypass Montenegro by taking a ferry to Albania.

"We go to Durrës once a week," the young woman said at the shipping agency.

Since this Albanian ferry was leaving in a few days, I could go south to Dubrovnik, then come back here and catch it.

Split seemed aptly named: it made me want to split. The Bellevue was on a noisy street. After dark the streets of Split emptied. Most of the restaurants had no diners – no one had any money to eat out. I sat eating foul mussels and overcooked pasta. Even the wine was slimy.

But one of the pleasures I experienced in Split was entering a phone booth, inserting my plastic Croatian phone card, and then dialing an access code, my calling card number, and the phone number I wanted – thirty-one numbers altogether, and hearing a sleepy voice, *Hello, darling. I knew it was you. I'm so glad you called. I was worried . . .* Three in the morning in Honolulu.

Traveling from Split to Dubrovnik on a bus the next day I was thinking: What is Croatian culture that it gathered all these people into one nation? The food was a version of the worst Italian cooking. The language was the same as Serbian. What Croatian nationalism amounted to was fanatical Catholicism as a counter to the orthodoxy of Serbian Protestantism, and both sides had terrorist groups and secret societies. Croatians had abandoned the designs they had for annexing parts of Bosnia, because they had border problems of their own – most of the places on the Croatian map were in Serbian hands.

Yet with all the talk of Republika Hvratska, and all the nationalistic graffiti, and the flags and the soldiers and the empty nights in their cities, it seemed to me that they had ceased to be individual. Driven by war and religion, they had dissolved their personal identities into the nation, and so they seemed spectral.

The ruined villages along the coast road looked like work-in-stoppage, and even the landscape had the look of a building site: whirling dust on windy bays, dry soil, broken boulders, crumbling cliffs. Half the passengers on this bus were chain-smoking soldiers who looked unfit for active duty.

We entered Bosnia. True, it was only the few miles of it that reached to the coast – Bosnia's only shore – but thirty miles inland, up the Neretva river, was Mostar, city of atrocities and continuous shelling – it was being shelled today. After 428 years of being admired by invaders and locals alike, intact through two world wars, Mostar's single-span bridge over the Neretva, a masterpiece of Ottoman architecture, had recently been blasted apart by mindless Croation artillerymen.

We soon came to a checkpoint, with Bosnian soldiers, and some policemen who entered the bus and bullied civilians, denouncing them for carrying doubtful-looking identity papers. There were Croatian checkpoints, too, at Omis, Makarska and Podgora: the same routine. Usually the victim of the policeman's wrath was a squirming, cowering woman. In this sort of situation the cop had absolute power: he could arrest the poor woman or boot her off the bus, or send her back where she came from.

We reached Slano, farther down the road. You did not need to be told that Slano had been the front line. The house walls were riddled with bullets, many of the roofs were missing, some of the houses were bombed flat. This was where the Serbians had dug in for their attack on Dubrovnik. They had shot at everything. There was not a structure on the road that did not have at least a divot of plaster missing. Some had bright patches of tile where the roof had been mended, and many windows were boarded up.

"Welcome to Dubrovnik" was repeated on a signboard in four languages, and written across it in large letters, almost obliterating the welcome, the Croatian word *HAOS!* – chaos.

*

Dubrovnik was famous for its beauty and its bomb craters; but it was another empty city, with no traffic and no tourists, and even Lapad harbor looked peculiarly bereft: no ferries running, no fishing boats, no anglers. It was a gray day, the low sky threatening rain.

I hopped off the bus in the newer part of town with the soldiers and the nuns and the others. The soldiers laughed and stayed to talk while everyone else scuttled away. That was another characteristic of the war: no one lingered anywhere – people arrived in a place and then vanished. Apart from the groups of soldiers, there were no street discussions or any public gatherings. As the only non-Croatian on the street I was wooed by taxi-drivers, but it would not be dark for a few hours and so I decided to walk around the port, from hotel to hotel, to check the prices and get my bearings.

Red Cross vehicles, UN Land-Rovers, and official cars of charitable agencies filled the parking lots of the first three hotels. The desk clerks said, "We have no rooms."

This was not happy news. I kept walking. An aid worker, probably Canadian judging from the maple leaf on his lapel pin, sat in the lobby reading a paperback book. The woman at reception told me her hotel was full.

"Wish I could help you," the Canadian said.

The book he was reading was *Pride and Prejudice.*

Afterwards on the street, in a sharp attack of what the French call "stairway wit," I realized I should have quipped to him, "Is that a history of Yugoslavia?" He might have laughed and thought: What a witty fellow!

Two more hotels were closed and looked damaged. The next hotel that was open had been entirely given over to refugees. But I eventually found one on a back street that had spare rooms. It also had refugees. It was not a very good hotel. I was beginning to comprehend another axiom of war: in a time of crisis the do-gooders get the best rooms – five-star hotels for the UN and the charities, one-star hotels for the refugees and me.

Again, as in Zadar, and on the *Liburnija,* and in Split, I was among rambunctious children and dozy parents – locals and refugees: more war nerves. The children played loud music and chased each other and yelled. They raced up and down the hotel corridors, they congregated noisily in the lobby. Given the fact that they had been severely bombed, they remained indoors and seemed to have an obvious and perhaps understandable aversion – to not say phobic reaction – to being in the open air.

I had no such aversion. But before I could walk very far the rain began, first as a series of irregular showers and then as drizzle interrupted by thunder and lightning. I sheltered inside a grocer's shop that was so small I had to excuse myself and step outside when a customer entered.

Business was terrible, the grocer said. His glum wife agreed, shaking her head.

"Dubrovnik depended on tourists," the grocer said. "Now there are none."

That was the strange thing about a tourist resort without tourists. The town had been adapted for people who were not there. The hotels looked haunted, the restaurants and shops were empty, the beaches were neglected as a result and were littered and dirty. Few of the shops sold anything that a native or a townie would be likely to need or could afford. So the place was inhabited by real people, but everything else about it seemed unreal.

Apart from the shell holes and the closed hotels and the bullet nicks on buildings, the city was in good shape. The shattered roofs had been repaired. I had not yet seen the famously lovely old town of Dubrovnik, which had been heavily bombed, but I was told it had been restored.

"We have no income," said the grocer.

The stormy sky descended and darkened the town, and a while later the streets were black, the storm having obliterated the transition from day to night.

The hotel was so hard-pressed that for simplicity there was only one menu available, the refugee meal. I sat with these hundred or so people, mainly women and children, and had my refugee meal. It was one of the hours in the day when, stuffing their faces, the children were quiet. Elsewhere – but not far away, just across the mountains that hemmed in Dubrovnik, in Bosnia – food was being dropped from American planes or tossed out of the back of UN

trucks; yet there was famine all the same. These refugees who had gotten to the shores of the Mediterranean were the lucky ones.

After dinner I began talking with a man in the lobby. First the subject of the weather – rain. Then business – no tourists. Then the war. He was aggrieved that America had not done more to help.

"Help who?" I asked.

"Help us in our struggle," he said.

I said, "Tell me why American soldiers should get killed in your civil war."

He did not like my tone.

"No one cares about us," he said.

"Everyone cares," I said. "No one knows what to do, and I don't blame them, because so far it has all looked so petty and unpredictable."

"Clinton is weak," the man said.

It irritated me very much that a tribalistic Croatian on this bombed and squabbling coast, with its recent history of political poltroonery, not to say political terror and fratricide, should criticize the American president in this way.

"Who told you that, Tudjman?"

Tudjman, the Croatian president, was noted for being a fanatical nationalist and moralizing bore, and an irritant generally.

"He's very strong, isn't he?" I said. I could not keep my eyes from dancing in anger. "You're so lucky to have him."

In sunshine, the old fortified town of Dubrovnik lived up to its reputation of being one of the loveliest in the Mediterranean: a medieval walled city, a citadel on the sea, with an ancient harbor. It was the Republic of Ragusa, so prosperous and proud that even when its buildings were destroyed in an earthquake in the mid-seventeenth century it was scrupulously restored, and has been so well preserved that the oldest paintings and etchings of it show it as it is today, unchanged. The town is listed as "a treasure" by UNESCO.

The worst damage since that natural disaster in 1667 had happened just recently, late in 1991 and well into 1992, when as many as 30,000 Serbian and Montenegrin shells hit the city – there were cannons firing from behind the city, on the heights of the mountain range, and more cannons on warships just offshore, as at Zadar. There was no reason for this. The capture of the port meant almost nothing from the military point of view. The Serbian assault was rightly termed "cultural vandalism."

Most of the bomb damage had been repaired. Dubrovnik was a prettier place by far than Rijeka or Zadar or Split, or any of the other coastal towns, but there was something spooky about a preserved old town, one of the most venerable on the Mediterranean shore, that was totally empty. It was like Venice after the plague. Just after the Black Death, in 1345, when most of its citizens lay dead, Venice was begging outsiders to settle, and this queen of cities promised citizenship to anyone who became a Venetian: it must have looked something like Dubrovnik, with its empty streets and scarred walls and its air of bereavement.

But Dubrovnik was putting on a brave back-to-normal face and that made the whole place seem odder still, because it was empty – empty and handsome. Some stores were open, some cafés, even some restaurants. Art galleries sold pretty pictures of the town, sprightly oils of the glorious stone buildings and the harbor; watercolors of church spires, pastoral scenes of sweetness and light.

None of war, none of damage, or emptiness: no despair, no soldiers.

"Some artists came after the fighting and did sketches of what the bombs had done," a gallery owner told me. "They went away."

I asked a question about the siege.

"No," the woman said, and turned away. "I don't want to think about it. I want to forget it."

It was only twenty-odd miles from Dubrovnik to the border of Montenegro, the smallest of the improvised republics, then maybe another sixty or so to Shkodër in Albania, and that was – what? – a couple of hours.

No, no – not at all. Although these distances seemed in American newspapers to be enormous, the pronouncement, "We journeyed from the Republic of Croatia to the Republic of Montenegro and

then to the Republic of Albania" described a two-hour jog in a car, a mere piddling jaunt, with plenty of time to stop and admire the view. Geographically it was nothing, politically it was something else. It was, in fact, a political distance, like the eighty miles that separated Cuba from Key West, or the few miles that divided Mexico from California. You could not get there from here without the danger of physical harm.

Montenegrins had allied themselves to Serbia and both had designs on Croatia. So the border was closed. It was impossible to tell whether the Albania–Montenegro border was open: probably not. My hope lay in a ferry from Split to Albania, but even so I looked for someone willing to take me to the checkpoint on the border.

I found a taxi-driver, Ivo Lazo, a friendly man who had worked for fifteen years in Germany and who spoke German and managed some English.

He would say, "So the Serbian *chetniks* take the – *was ist Messer*?"

"Knife."

"– take the knife and –" Mr Lazo passed a finger across his throat to indicate how the *chetniks* slit them in their fanaticism.

"Can you take me to Montenegro?"

"Ha!" Mr Lazo exclaimed, meaning "ridiculous!"

"What about to the border?"

"Ha!"

"Maybe just to look at it?"

"Ha!"

"What do you suggest, then?"

"I will show you something interesting," Mr Lazo said.

Passing a sign reading *DUBROVNIK* on which was scrawled *To HELL*, Mr Lazo drove me to the upper road, on the mountainside behind Dubrovnik, near where the Serbian artillery had shelled the city. This was quite a different perspective from the one I had had within the city itself. From this high position I had an aerial view of the bombardment's effects – about a third of the roof tiles were new, in great contrast to the old gray tiles; the repairs to the walls were still visible – the new stucco-work left large pale areas. Perhaps in time the colors would blend and the stone would

be uniformly mellow. At the moment it was a city wearing patches.

"Five hundred to seven hundred bombs hit it – you see?" Mr Lazo said.

"Where were you at the time?"

"Over there," he said, and pointed to the newer part of Dubrovnik, in the Lapad district, near the other harbor.

"Did you have any warning?"

"The first indication we had was from the Serbian families here," he said. "Four thousand of them – yes, many. The men started to go away, little by little. The old women stayed. They knew something."

"How did they know?"

"How did they know! How did they know!" Mr Lazo threw up his hands, and then began to explain the network of Serbian whispering, the foreknowledge of the attack.

He did not hate the Serbs, he said. He had lived with them almost his whole life. The *chetniks* of course were a different matter.

"They have long beards, they are dirty, they are – so to say – fundamentalists. They are like the Gestapo. They don't just kill. They torture. Women, children, all the same."

The *chetniks* were famous for their daggers and their muddy boots and their long hair, and there was something about their filthy faces that made them seem more ruthless and frightening, like the Huns and Visigoths – their distant ancestors – who had raped and pillaged their way through here at the end of the fifth century. *Chetniks* also were driven by the worst and most merciless engine for violence there is – religious crankishness.

In October 1991, the Lazo family in Lapad became very anxious, noticing that by degrees their Serbian neighbors had crept away. Soon the shelling began and lasted through November. They cowered in their house, twelve of them, Ivo and his parents and wife and children and some cousins. The shelling continued. It was now December. Many people had died, many houses had caught fire. The water was cut off. "We carried water from the sea to use in the toilet." They shared a well for drinking water. There was no electricity. It was cold, some days it snowed.

In a horrible and pitiless way it is interesting how gutless and

patient soldiers can be, even when they have their enemy pinned down. The war all over the former Yugoslavia was – and still is – the epitome of this sort of cowardly onslaught. In almost every siege, in Sarajevo and Mostar and twenty other places, there has been no forward motion. The attacking army found a convenient position on a mountain or a road or at a safe distance at sea, and then for as long as it had artillery shells it bombarded the target, pinning people in their houses.

This was why the war seemed endless: instead of infantry attacks or guerrilla fighting or even aerial bombing, it was a war of sieges, like the oldest Mediterranean warfare. Every coastal town or port by this sea had been under siege at some point in its history: Gibraltar had fourteen of them; Malta had known even more – Turks attacking crusaders in Valletta harbor; British attacking the French during the Napoleonic wars; Phoenicians, Romans, Goths, Vandals, Turks, Nazis, the US Marines and my American uncles had all made war in these Mediterranean ports. But there was a significant difference between invaders and besiegers. Siege was hardly a military art; it was a simple method of wearing down and starving and demoralizing a civilian population. It was a massive and prolonged insult, carried on by a merciless army with a tactical advantage.

The Serbian army had massed their tanks on the north side of town, on the road near Slano, where I had seen the bomb damage. That was the forward line, the little villages of Trsteno and Drasac, where there were holiday homes and time-share bungalows built by Germans and British people in happier times.

There were also tanks on the road south of Dubrovnik, around Cilipi where the airport was – half an hour by road from Montenegro; and more tanks on the eastern heights that Lazo called Jarkovitze Mountain (it was not on my map). The ships were a mile or so off-shore. So Dubrovnik was completely surrounded, and shells were falling from the four points of the compass.

"My daughter Anita was very worried," Mr Lazo said. "I said to her, 'Go to the Old Town. You will be safe there.'"

There was an almost mystical belief in the sanctity and inviolability of the Old Town. Because of the enormous walls, ten feet thick and four stories high; because of the beauty of the town; because of its historical importance – its association with Venice, its great trading history, site of the oldest apothecary in the Mediterranean; because, most of all, of the town's religious connections – St Blaise had lived and died here, St Nicholas was its patron saint; for all these good reasons, the Old Town was a refuge.

Anita Lazo fled there with a number of others, and on 6 December, the Feast of St Nicholas – the timing was deliberate – the Old Town was shelled.

"I looked up and saw the tanks on the mountain," Mr Lazo said. "They were like matches lighting – the fire and then *whouf* – the bombs."

Hundreds were killed, as many as 250 civilians in that siege alone, and the destruction was enormous. Anita Lazo survived. Mr Lazo drove me to a point overlooking Lapad harbor and showed me the burned-down freezer plant, the ruined buildings, the rubble, the boats that had been shelled and had sunk, still lying dead in the water as hulks. This was the newer part of town, not a priority; about half the roofs had been repaired.

"They didn't come closer. They bombed. But to take the city – to capture it – that is very difficult," Mr Lazo said. "We had Kalashnikovs and other guns. We could defend it, man to man. But still the bombs fell."

The siege lasted three months – tension, noise, eerie silences, rumors; no water, no lights. Not long before they'd had as many as 70,000 tourists in a season. Now they had – how many?

"We have you," Mr Lazo said. "Ha!"

We went to Slano where there was hellish damage and more sunken boats.

"It will take ten years to go back to normal," Mr Lazo said. That seemed a popular number; many Croats mentioned ten years, and I was wondering whether they were quoting someone. "Even then there will be big differences. We are of the West. Croatia had 900 years of Austro-Hungarians, Serbia had 500 years of Ottoman Turks. They have the Eastern Orthodox, like the Russians. We have Rome – we are Catholics."

That meant, for example, that on 3 February, the Feast of St Blaise, they went to the church in the Old Town and a priest placed two lighted candles against their neck and said a prayer,

because among other things St Blaise was the patron saint of neck ailments. I knew that from my childhood in Boston: the smell of beeswax, the flames warming my ears.

I avoided the theology of warfare and asked him why, after fifteen years in Germany, he had come here, to be bombed.

"I came home. Because home is home."

In a year of Mediterranean travel it was one of the most logical statements I heard.

"Tell people to come here," Mr Lazo said. "We are ready."

True, Dubrovnik was open for business, and like its women war had given it a gaunt beauty. But it was a city that had been traumatized and still looked patched up and fragile. My hotel was $18 a night, quite a bargain, even with the resident refugees and their manic war-nerves. The traffic in town was mainly the modern equivalent of camp followers – Mother Courage and her children: UN Land-Rovers, Red Cross vans, Caritas trucks, UNPROFOR and UNHCR vehicles. The beaches were foul. The casino was closed, many hotels were shut. It was not possible to count all the broken windows, nor had much of the broken glass been picked up from the ground.

The clearest sign that it was still a city of refugees was that laundry hung from every window and every porch and balcony, the sad scrubbed and faded clothes fluttering like battle flags.

I stayed a few more days in Dubrovnik, to catch up on my notes and for the pleasure of walking along the coast, the only tourist in town. One day I met an Italian taking a shipment of Red Cross medicine to Mostar. It was a day's drive from here. He had a Caritas truck.

"Mostar was very badly bombed, but there is no fighting in town now," he said. "A bit outside the town there is shelling."

"I'd like to go there, just to see."

"I can't take you, because of the insurance."

"I wanted to see the famous bridge."

"It's fallen," he said. *Caduto*.

On the way back to Split, the bus broke down at Slano. So while the driver made a mess of replacing the fan-belt – hammering the bracket with his monkey wrench, struggling with rusty nuts – I

had another chance to examine the bomb damage. Then I sat beside the road, with the grumbling soldiers, and the bus-driver swore at the limp fan-belt.

I now understood why, the moment the bus had gasped to a stop, an attractive young woman had dashed out of the door, run into the road and begun hitchhiking. A few cars went by her, but within five minutes she had a ride. She was on her way and we were sitting at the edge of the broken road with a clapped-out bus. She exemplified another axiom of war: don't wait for your vehicle to be mended – just use your initiative; flash your tits and take off. It may be your only chance.

Back in Split I went to the Albanian ferry agency. The ferry for Durrës was scheduled to leave that night.

"Sorry. It was canceled," the young woman told me. "I cannot sell you a ticket."

"How do I get there?"

She shrugged. She did not know.

But I had a suspicion that if I took a ferry back to Ancona in Italy I could get one from there, or possibly from Bari, where I had been told there were regular departures. I bought a ferry ticket to Italy on the next day's sailing, feeling that I would reach Albania eventually, even if it meant criss-crossing the Adriatic. But it seemed a waste: in Dubrovnik I had been just two hours by road from Albania, but the trip was impossible. I was now faced with a four-day journey.

The point about atrocity stories, especially here, was that everyone told them. For a week I had been listening to stories about *chetnik* fanaticism; but, killing time in Split until the day the Ancona ferry left, I met an aid worker from Canada who told me about the Croatian fanaticism.

"Didn't you see them?" he said. "Weren't you here a few days ago?"

"I was in Dubrovnik."

"There were groups of Ustasha soldiers in the bars here in Split, all singing Nazi songs – the 'Horst Wessel' and all that."

The Ustasha were Croatian commandos, much like the Serbian *chetniks*. They modeled themselves on the Nazi SS and wore black

shirts and a "U" insignia. Their ruthlessness and racism dated from the fascist Ustasha regime which had governed Croatia with Nazi help during the Second World War, and off its own bat, without Nazi control, had operated its own death camp. Serbian "ethnic cleansing" was now well enough known to be universally condemned, but this policy of Croatian "purification" was new to me.

"So what's going to happen here?"

"In ten years" – that magic figure again – "things will be quieter," he said. "And there will be a greater Serbia, a greater Croatia and a smaller Bosnia."

On the quay, having just bought tickets to Italy, was a family of refugees – a hollow-eyed man, his painfully thin wife and his child. The little boy looked robust, the parents half-starved, and so it was easy to conclude that the child had been given the parents' rations.

"We were airlifted by helicopter from Tuzla," he said, and since Tuzla was in Bosnia, the family obviously had been through the wringer.

They had escaped from Sarajevo, leaving their parents and their house and everything they possessed. All they had were two small suitcases, a pram for the child (who was too heavy for them to lift), and a bag of food. This family had been sponsored by a French organization, Solidarité, which had provided the helicopter getaway.

The family's story was not complicated, but in its simplicity it amply illustrated the despicable nature of this civil war, which was a border dispute fueled by ancient grievances (the assassination of the Croatian King Zvonimir in 1089, for example), wartime collaboration and score-settling, racism, and religious differences.

"I am a geologist," he said. His name was Dr Tomic; he was probably in his mid-thirties, but his haunted look made him seem much older. "I am from ex-Yugoslavia. My parents are Serbian, but I was born in Bosnia, so I am a Bosnian. Sarajevo is my home. My wife is a Muslim. That's the problem."

Mrs Tomic gave me a wan smile and shrugged her skinny shoulders.

"For eight years I had been at the university in Sarajevo, specializing in the geology of the area," Dr Tomic said. "Then my

colleagues began to ask me questions as though to test me. Finally they said, 'We have lost confidence in you.'"

"Did they say why?"

"No – they couldn't. My geology is very local, just the thing that is studied there," he said. "My neighborhood was next. My neighbors began to make problems. They were blaming my wife for things. They know she is a Muslim. It got very bad."

"How bad? Give me an instance," I said.

"Dangerous – threats," he said, and seemed so shaken by the memory that I did not press him.

"We considered fleeing to Slovenia," he said. "They have camps here, but we don't qualify. They have Serbs in one camp, Croats in another, Muslims in a third. We don't fit in, because we are mixed."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Go to France," he said. "Take the ferry to Italy, then the train to Paris."

They were leaving everything behind, most of all they were abandoning hope for their country. It interested me that they had only two small bags and this folding pram; I imagined it to be the little boy's clothes, and a change of clothes for themselves. The average tourist in Italy on a short holiday – they would probably be sharing the train with many such people – had ten times this weight in baggage.

After that, whenever I read about troop maneuvers or politicians grandstanding or mortar attacks on cities or the pettiness and terror of the war, I thought about this skinny man and wife, each one holding a bag, pushing their little boy down the quay at Split, their starved faces turned to the Mediterranean, waiting for the ferry to take them away from here.

The next day I saw the refugee couple on the ferry *Ivan Krajc* standing in the rain by the rail watching the Croatian shore recede from view.

The rest of the passengers divided themselves into groups – Italian truck-drivers who joked and sang and ate, Italian pilgrims who had just come from Medjugorje and were still praying (dozens of them, standing on deck in the rain and chanting the rosary out

loud), Croatians like the Tomic family, looking furtive and anxious; and aid workers down from Bosnia, with a few days to spend in Italy.

"We drove down from Zenica today," an aid worker told me. Zenica was about forty miles north-west of Sarajevo. "Last year it took us ten days to drive from Zenica to Split, because of road blocks and fighting. Today it took eight hours. Maybe things are improving!"

He was an Australian, traveling with his American wife, who was also an aid worker. She had a neighborly manner, and he was upright, mustached, and had a military bearing – he later told me he had been a soldier in South Africa. He was in his mid-forties, with the charity World Vision. His name was David Jennings. He and Theresa were making their first-ever visit to Italy, as a break from their aid project in Bosnia.

They asked me what I did for a living.

"I'm a writer."

"Journalists are a pain," David said.

"They all cover the same story – four guys in four separate cars go to the same place," Theresa said.

"They come for the big stories, when they can get their face on the camera, with shooting behind them," David said.

"I'm not a journalist," I said. "I don't work for anyone. I'm just looking around."

"I went back to Australia for about ten days last January," David said. "I looked at the paper, flipping the pages, and there was nothing about the war – nothing. I called the editor. I said, 'Hey, mate. I've just come back from Bosnia, and I've got some news for you – the war's still on!'"

"What sort of thing do you do?"

"I'm a logistician," he said. "But I do everything. I mean, we all do. We have heart specialists driving ambulances."

"Isn't logistics about making things happen?"

"Yes. I coordinate shipments of food and equipment. My military background is useful for that. It takes patience, though. I mean, like waiting for six hours at a checkpoint because some jumped-up little guy pretends there's something wrong with my papers."

The problem was that all the borders were so blurred. Serb, Croat and Bosnian lines were close and continually shifting.

"Because I'm working in Bosnia they see my work as helping the enemy," he said. "And they're fussy too. In my office I have a Bosnian Muslim, a Croat and a Serb. They get along fine. But my interpreter was dealing with a freight forwarder in Zagreb over the phone. After a few minutes my interpreter handed the phone to me. 'She doesn't want to talk to me.' The woman in Zagreb suspected – from the interpreter's Serbo-Croatian accent – that he might be a Muslim. I asked the Zagreb woman for a reason. She says, 'He is not speaking my language.'"

"I was thinking of going to Mostar," I said. "But I was warned that it was dangerous."

"You might have hit it on a bad day," he said. "Hey, I was standing talking with some UNPROFOR guys at Tuzla airport the other day. I felt a tug in my chest – a hard poke – and heard a bang and saw a slug spinning on the floor. Someone had fired at me."

"But it bounced off?"

"I was wearing a flak jacket."

"Who was the sniper?"

"Might have been anyone," he said. "Probably thought I was UNPROFOR. They all hate them. They suspect them of helping the enemy, whoever that might be."

Theresa said, "They try to demoralize people. That's how they think they'll win."

"Who is 'they'?"

"Each side," she said.

"Demoralizing" took the form of being beastly and unreasonable in uniquely horrible ways.

Later, in my cabin on the *Ivan Krajc* at midnight, twiddling my radio I found an FM station broadcasting from Split in English, for the benefit of aid workers and UN soldiers. It was a war report, and it sounded as bland as a stock market update.

"*– and three artillery shells fell just outside the city of Tuzla today. There were no casualties. Small-arms provocation was reported in Bihac lasting thirty-five minutes this afternoon. Twenty-five people are still listed as missing in Sarajevo. Two shells struck a house in Gorazde, demolishing*

it. No one was injured. Two mortar bombs exploded in Travnik. It was agreed that the left bank of the Neretva river in Mostar be officially reopened after six p.m. tomorrow. One member of UNPROFOR was critically injured by sniper fire in –"

The soporific drone of the ferry's engines mercifully eased me to sleep. I slumbered all the way across the Adriatic, and in the morning I was back in Italy, looking for a way by ship to Albania.

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The Ferry *Venezia* to Albania

It was not until I was on board the ferry *Venezia*, among dowdy women wearing long trousers under their thick skirts and grizzled cheese-paring men in cloth caps and frayed tracksuits – both men and women had the faces of fretful tortoises – that I realized that I was at last on my way to Albania. I had rehearsed it all mentally with such thoroughness that the whole business seemed inevitable. I had bought a ferry ticket from an agent in Ancona. The ferry was leaving from Bari, 200-odd miles down the coast. I went by train to Bari. Returning to a city, I always retraced my steps. In Bari this meant the same hotel, a certain laundry, a certain restaurant, a certain bookstore, a stroll down the Corso to the port. The women at the laundry remembered me, and one said, "We think you're an artist of some kind." That was nice. But they expressed amazement that I was going to Albania, which is regarded with horror by the Barese.

Another man in Bari was franker. "Albanians are the filthiest," he said. *Sporchissimi*. "And the poorest." *Poverissimi*. "Stay here!"

No argument could detain me. I was beyond being determined; I was programmed for Albania. I had my fifty-dollar ferry ticket. My clothes were washed. I had a stock of books and batteries for my radio. I even had a map of the place. I did not want to listen to any Italian's opinions about Albania – none of the ones I met had been there. But it was only on the deck of the *Venezia* as we headed east out of the harbor that I remembered that I had no visa for Albania, I hadn't the foggiest idea where I was going, or why. All I had done was offer myself as a passenger. I had merely shown up and said: *Please take me*.

But where? The importance of getting to Albania had preoccupied me to such an extent that I had forgotten why I was going.