

Five Days and Five Words in Sarajevo

Paige M. Erickson

Hana was trying to tell me something,
speaking quickly, lighting up, focusing in, rushing words together.
She saw my uncertain face and began again, again
slower,
more deliberate,
and I leaned over and in,
as though the closer I got to a 45 degree angle the closer I was to comprehension,
but I still couldn't follow, and went scrambling through my options to find
the one word I could say to her that would make any difference:

Opprostate

I'm sorry.

She covered her mouth in gratitude and nodded.

The one Bosnian word that managed to make it to my mouth,
the one perfect word that meant her story made sense
even if, technically,
I couldn't understand the slightest phrase.

My hostess was stout and beautiful, hair to match her red felt bathrobe,
pointing me into white leather house shoes with wobbly heels.
Surprised by my excessive habit of smiling
she pinched my cheeks,
said something about my green eyes,
poured my second coffee cup too full,
modeled how I should drink spoonfuls out before picking it up.
Then after I lowered the level, as I lifted it to my mouth,
she traded saucers with me--hers now gritty and mine sparkling clean.

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She wanted then to give me proper nouns for details,
and these even I could repeat:
Milošević. Karadžić. Serb. Croat. Bosniak. Boom boom. Sarajevo.
Boom boom.

Her eyes met mine over and under
and I gathered what she gave.
With me she could offer all her large and small wonders,
her uncertain statements of fact,
her story under siege.
How freeing, in practice, to say anything, everything, and be heard
for the depths, the feelings below your words.

Anything I remembered from the Bosnian phrasebook
how to order lamb or cheese, though I just pointed,
how to say my wife likes the city, though I have no wife,
how to say I am from Mostar, though I hadn't seen it yet
would have been insufficient to express what I needed, what I wanted to learn.

On this journey, when locals spoke English,
our conversations were packed with meaningless expressions:
Would you like coffee? What will you see today?
Yes, please. The churches, the mosque,
and I'd like to go to the (apologetic lowering of volume) war museum.
You must also try some cake.
I won't miss it. Looks like it might rain.
Yes. No good. More sugar?
This is plenty, thank you. I don't mind the rain. I'm so happy to be here.
Why?
I can't say.
You are here from America?
Yep.
Do you have family from –?
Nope. Sorry. I wish I could explain, but
You didn't come all this way for museums and churches.
You're right about that.
What then?
I'm just not sure. So. Have a nice day.
Yes, yes, you too.

Instead Hana and I,
with only scant common words,
were quick to embrace.

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In my pointing and sighing, she learned I adored the photos of her grandchildren.
I heard their ages and circumstances,
and the story about the image on her table of a man
who could be her son, or her husband when young,
perhaps lost in the war, perhaps just away for the week.
She told me about the city under snipers.
I told her I waited through a divorce and three years of small town beers to get here.
We kept getting tears in our eyes, comprehending, comprehending,
then fell into silence,
watched a BBC nature program with narration I understood,
and subtitles she understood,
where assorted insects were made large by the camera on their hunt for food.

Finally, she asked: *Sarajevo?*
And pointed at me and tossed up her hand.
Even in a common language
with startled co-workers or family members,
I could not find the words to say
why I needed to see these streets for myself,
why I heard the word Bosnia across a crowded room,
why I boarded the flight as though out of duty,
but for her I could make it clear.
Sarajevo. Dobro. Good.
Without a stronger term I tried quantity: *Dobro dobro dobro,*
with my hand over my heart and my shoulders hunched into a swoon,
as she clapped with glee in the echoing room.

We had become importantly fluent.
I said all that I was, she repaid in her own tale,
and we were more open in our inability
than we could ever have been in polite conversation.
I couldn't explain why I had come, but she understood:
I have not Bosnian blood but bones.

ii.

It was not possible to buy a stamp or ask which direction the bus went,
but I did enter the mosque with my head covered, clapping the scarf in place
and lifted my chin to take twelve blurry photographs of the ceiling
in my rush to be appropriately reverent.
Mere blocks away I went to Catholic Mass

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and followed the behavior of habits and nuns.
Just down the street I found a Serbian Orthodox church where,
over the door, St. Michael the Archangel posed with his bullethole tracheotomy.

I wandered the city on foot.
An old, hunched woman seemed to ask me directions and I could only shrug.
Where is my sorry, where is my *opposite*?
She laughed at my muteness and took my hands in her own.
A bit of a mystery, this American woman,
girl in many ways,
alone in Sarajevo without friends to visit,
without family connections,
an apparition perhaps, and consequentially treated
as such, as ancients might have been wary of gods dropping in.
I shared a lunchtime table in the small, busy café
with faster and more efficient diners,
then with a couple who had tea: he ate the lemon from her saucer.
Girls in spike heels tottered along the cobblestone square.
A man with a pickaxe at his side like a grocery sack passed by
a waitress watering the sidewalk.
In a grocery store, a boy clerk in a lab coat watched me
and I tried to communicate that my loitering was merely indecision,
not trending toward shoplifting.
Yet when I looked up from the assortments of instant cappuccinos
I saw his watchful and cautious smile. I returned one in kind,
and loitered a bit longer.
Why not this boy? This city? This future?
Why must I endlessly, ceaselessly seek my own?

iii.

When he came to fetch me from airport, the driver was tardy.
Mine was the last arriving flight, and the airport closed in a hurry behind me.
Three employees exited,
untucking their work shirts and gazing at this woman
standing by the door and staring past the line of awaiting taxis.
Come with us. We'll get a few drinks and can take you home after.
I'm tired, I replied, suppressing a fake yawn to demonstrate my exhaustion,
when, in fact, my blood was rushing joyously awake.
Here I was: in this city I had overdreamed.
We're all tired, that's why we're drinking, they called back in laughter.

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Though part of me thought I should go after them, the other part asked
if I would get in a car with three unknown men at home,
and I reminded myself not to misdiagnose stupidity as adventurousness.
As a counterargument formed, my ride rumbled up, a formless yellow yugo,
and all English conversations ceased for the next five days.

The driver's dark hair stayed set in a 50s style that I can't presently name,
he had deep eyes, not smiling, not unsmiling,
he wanted to show me the sights but could not give captions:
Lady, lady, small English.
I shrugged, That's fine, no problem,
two assurances, mere utterances.
Rat, he said, *rat*, making a pistol with his hand.
War, I said aloud as though correcting him.
I keep berating myself for not having learned this language,
for not having learned how to hear the city's story.
All I could remember at this point was thank you. *Hvala.*
I didn't know what to thank him for just then,
so we rode in silence until we neared the library.

Bibliotech? He asked and I nodded, feigning certainty.
Then he put his fingers together,
and rubbed them in the flint-style movement for money.
I nodded. *Da. Da*, yes, yes.
And he moved the invisible bills to his pocket,
then gestured to clear the slate,
made the money motion again, then again put these funds in his pocket,
once again, the horizontal hand chop, and finally he pointed out the window.
I looked at the building to our left, the library, I supposed,
with boarded up windows, black scars from fire.
In return for this performance I gave him a look of stoic sympathy:
I shook my head, lowered my gaze into reverie,
and he instinctively reached over to touch my arm, but stopped himself.

I wanted to ask a hundred questions that didn't have pantomime replies.
But I settled into a sadness.
Though I hoped to learn about a different life, the things I seemed to love the most
were on the other side of this impossible language.

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However, on the ride to my return flight,
I knew what I could learn without words,
and, along with that, he'd been practicing:

Lady, lady, hello.

Bill Clinton? Good. George Bush? Okay.

We drove by a soccer field of dust and patches of dead grass
where boys played and ran, serious in their sport,
and as we both smiled at the life of it, I made the movement
of putting a wedding ring on my finger, and I pointed to him:
my question simple.

I heard the hum in his voice before he attempted English,
one I'd echoed as a preface to my five Bosnian words,
and he explained:

No. Lady. No. Small money.

Small money. No lady. No baby. Much problems.

Bosnia-Herzegovina. No money. No work. Work much, no money.

To say I was sorry seemed insufficient.

To offer him *opposite* was not enough.

I said it anyway, feeling the need for words,

and he pressed his lips together, his eyes dampening, his mind hunting,

Da, Lady. Da. Yes, yes.

I did not have the tools to empathize, as the story of Sarajevo
had nothing to do with one passing through,
no matter how much I longed for it.

All I could do to reply to the kindness was to look where they pointed,
to note what they requested,

to struggle as an outsider without expecting them to come to me,

to follow the pantomime in the car,

to lean out the window to gaze over the city at night and put my hand in the
bullethole wounds of Hana's home without doubting.

In the years of saving up I'd been moved by a city I'd never seen.

And as the plane lifted me out of this long-awaited visit

I scrambled for a way to explain

what it was to put images to the expectations,

to muffle the gasps and the questions about this place,

to ease my soul and complete this portion of myself

that had no business being so interested in a far-flung region,

and ideas of elsewhere,

where a man without money had nothing to anticipate but

longer days of work, constant thoughts of money he didn't have,

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and the inaccessible accompanying life.

What he did not request was my pity,
and what I felt pulsing was not pity,
but a sensation that did not translate into my native tongue
as so many of my Bosnian breaths would did not.

So when I touched down and my home-bodied friends awaited me,
We climbed into an air-conditioned sedan,
and they asked me to say what I had learned.
I found I had only those five words,
thank you, I'm sorry, yes, good, and Sarajevo,
only sounds without meaning.
I called up my newfound fluency,
and reached out with my hands,
fingering money toward my pocket,
covering my mouth, my arms open and active,
and with worried looks and talk of a good night's rest, they ceased to understand
and turned away.
So that feeling familiar, unfamiliar,
armed with millions of likely expressions,
voiced with the whole of my language,
I would try again, again in vain, to press the unspoken into speech.



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