

Sample translation from

*Blood and Honey* by Irene van der Linde and Nicole Segers

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## Bosnia-Herzegovina

### Mostar

-- From a restaurant in Mostar, where she and her husband sat eating trout and cheese soufflé, Rebecca West observed 'Moslem, Catholic and Orthodox' passers-by. The men looked 'exotic' in their fezzes, as did the women in traditional costumes, of which the 'Mostar dress' was the most striking. It consisted of a man's coat of black cloth, 'immensely too large', with a stiff military collar embroidered inside with gold thread. They were of an 'austere yet lubricious beauty', she thought.

Bosnia has always been a frontier region. This is where the border lay between the Roman and Byzantine empires, between Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. For centuries, Pashaluk Bosnia, as the Turks called the most Western province of the Ottoman Empire, bordered on the Habsburg Empire. During the Cold War, Yugoslavia formed the border between Communism and capitalism. And now it is the border between EU and non-EU countries. But since the war in the 1990s, the hardest borders are to be found in the country itself, running straight through regions, towns, villages and streets.

West opens her description of Mostar with a reference to the bridge built by the Turks. She thought the Stari Most – 'Old Bridge' – to which the little town owes its name, one of the most beautiful in the world. A sublime specimen of Turkish craftsmanship, constructed in the sixteenth century by order of the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. The arched bridge, thirty yards long, spanned the wide, grey-green Neretva river sixty feet above the water. Mostar lay strategically and was an important trade centre in Herzegovina. After the bridge was built, the town flourished.

Mostar is hemmed in by mountains. Only the Neretva, flowing right through the town, offers an escape route.

– Seventeen-year-old Jasmin Đozlić, Jasko to his friends, strolls through the city, twirling a big black furled umbrella. It's about four in the afternoon. The sky is dark, the streets are wet. He points nonchalantly with the tip of his umbrella at damaged house fronts, the craters left by grenades fanning over

the walls. Like scars, they're a reminder of the war and the destruction it brought, now over quarter of a century ago.

He doesn't know any better. Here and there, residents have done up a flat in an otherwise abandoned apartment complex. Looking up at a blackened façade, where torn curtains flap in rows of broken windows, it's strange to spot shiny new window frames, snow-white net curtains, geraniums blooming in a window box. Like a sparkling new tooth in an otherwise rotten set.

'Imagine having to grow up here!' Jasmin calls back to us. He doesn't say it jokingly. He means it. For him, he says, it always felt threatening.

I look at Jasmin: just a schoolboy still, an adolescent with delicate features. A lock of smooth dark hair hangs over his face; he sports glasses with big, trendy black frames. Jeans, a t-shirt, with a shirt worn loosely over the top. A fluorescent bracelet on his arm.

He points again at the charred house fronts, the empty stories. Every now and again a derelict house is demolished and a new one built, but most of these buildings have been in a ruinous state for as long as he can remember. He leads us to his old primary school, in whose basement his parents sheltered back when the bombs were falling.

'It's only now I'm older that I realise how angry I am,' he says, as we pause in front of the building. 'Angry at the grown-ups who destroyed this country, angry at the same grown-ups because they can't manage to rebuild it. How come Germany was flourishing again twenty years after the war, and Bosnia- Herzegovina isn't? Why has everything ground to a halt here? Why don't politicians do anything? I blame all the adults. Centuries of history, centuries of culture, all those generations that built something beautiful here. In the space of just a few years they destroyed everything. Everything! And it was just my luck to be born exactly then.'

Jasmin slams the tip of his umbrella crossly into a paving stone. His father is Muslim, his mother Croatian. That used to be quite common in Mostar. Part of the town was Muslim, part Croatian, a small minority Serbian. There were a lot of mixed marriages, just like his parents. Mostar was one of the most mixed communities of Yugoslavia. Since the war, that's no longer the case.

On 5 April 1992 in Sarajevo, the federal state of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia, following a referendum in which the majority of Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (as Bosnian Muslims call

themselves) had voted in favour of independence. The Bosnian Serbs, however, opposed it. Two days later, they proclaimed their own republic: Republika Srpska, headed by the nationalist president Radovan Karadžić, subsequently laying claim to large parts of the country.

This marked the beginning of the Bosnian War, which would last until 14 December 1995. The Bosnian Serbs were supported by the Yugoslav People's Army, led from Belgrade by President Slobodan Milošević. The Bosnian Croats were backed by Croat forces led from Zagreb by President Franjo Tuđman. In the first instance, they fought side by side with Bosnia, jointly expelling the Serbian troops that were shelling Mostar from the surrounding hills.

But in 1993 Milošević and Tuđman struck a malign deal: they divided Bosnia-Herzegovina between Serbia and Croatia, infamously drawing the border 'on a napkin'. On that napkin, Mostar – which lay in the predominantly Croatian province of Herzegovina – was given to the Croats. From that moment on, the Croats suddenly turned against their former allies, the Bosniaks.

For the people of Mostar, life became a hell. Serbian troops occupied a mountain on one side of the town, while the Croat forces massed on the other. The Bosniaks were sandwiched in the middle. The town's historic neighbourhood, where most of the Bosniak community lived, was largely destroyed. Over 2,000 people were killed; many tried to flee the town.

Jasmin's parents managed to escape with their small daughter Sara. They ended up in Switzerland, where they were granted refugee status. It was there, in Lucerne, in the summer of 1997, that Jasmin was born. And he still wonders every day why they didn't stay there. If they had, he'd have grown up in Switzerland, with nice houses, nice streets, good schools and opportunities. Now he's stuck in a town that's still divided, he needs a visa to travel to Europe, and he can only hope that one day he'll find a way to escape. Because if there's one thing he's sure of, it's that he wants to leave.

He was eleven, almost twelve, when he realised how bad the situation were. 'I was walking to school like I did every day,' he says, as he leans against a house front. 'I had my rucksack on, with a few exercise books and pencils in it. A gang of boys came up to me, there were about five of them. They surrounded me and asked my name. "Jasmin," I stuttered – I'd no idea what this was about. They wanted to know my surname, too. The boys were all a few years older than me, and much bigger. I had to look up to see them

properly. “Đozlić,” I said. One of them immediately punched me in the stomach. Then another one hit me in the face. The others soon joined in. Then they walked off, leaving me lying on the pavement. “Dirty Muslim,” they shouted as they left.’

He didn’t tell his family what had happened. He realised that the boys who’d beat him up must have been Croats, and that they could tell from his surname he was Muslim. ‘Only then did I realise how divided the town was, how fierce the hate. Suddenly I understood the world I was living in. At that moment I made up my mind to leave as soon as I was old enough.’

When we get to a major road that cuts straight through the town, Jasmin halts. This is the border. He rarely crosses the road or goes to the part of town that’s on the other side. And when he does, he never goes alone.

As a Bosniak, Jasmin belongs to the old neighbourhood, with the historic Ottoman bridges, rebuilt and renovated after the war; the narrow, cobbled streets; the mosques with slender white minarets. That’s the part tourists go to, where the kebab houses are, where Turkish coffee is poured slowly from copper pots into tiny porcelain cups, and where they eat *ćevapci*: sausages made from minced lamb, served in a pita pocket with lettuce and onions.

The Croats live on the other side of the road. That’s the modern part of the town, where the imposing, pastel-coloured buildings from the Austro-Hungarian era are, the grey Yugoslav flats, the modern shopping malls, the trendy clubs. It’s where the McDonald’s is that opened two years ago, and the municipal swimming pool. When Jasmin and his Muslim friends want to go there, they need protection. The Croats have the modern grand cafés, they have the little retro bars.

He leans on his umbrella, watching the busy road. On the other side, boys are playing football in the grounds of the Croat grammar school. During the war, this road was the front line. The Bosniaks stood on this side, the Croat militias on the other. On the corner, between both lines, is the United World College, an international school where Jasmin will go at the end of summer. The school’s mission is to bring together pupils from the whole of former Yugoslavia. He hopes that there he will be freer of the stifling segregation.

A wedding procession drives past, hooting loudly, with Croatian flags hanging out of the car windows. Another bridal couple is having themselves photographed on the little square, the girl dressed in white: short skirt, high heels and a veil. I saw exactly the same scene on the Muslim side, only there

the girl had a long wedding dress of green silk, edged with lace, and was wearing a shiny green silk headscarf.

‘It’s just like Berlin 2.0 here,’ Jasmin says, turning on his heel. The wall is invisible, yet yards thick. Everyone here knows where it is, everyone feels its presence. Croats and Bosniaks, who each make up half the population, live in their own separate bubbles. ‘If I was in power here,’ Jasmin says, ‘I’d start by merging schools. Croat and Bosniak children never meet anymore, they’re both taught a different history, a different perspective. There’s an invisible war here now. When I was younger, I’d often discuss with friends what we’d do if a real war broke out. Lots of them said, “I’d stay and fight.” I really couldn’t get my head round that – I’d get out of here straight away.’

Jasmin wants to become part of the West; that’s where he feels at home. What’s more, he sees the EU as the only solution for Mostar and the entire region. ‘I think rationally, like the Croats,’ he says, as we stand outside his parental home. He calls himself agnostic and Muslim – but the latter only says something about his origin. ‘I like that self-control. Serbs are different. To me they seem too emotional, too laid back.’ He searches for words. ‘They’re Easterners: they’re more free-spirited, stay up till, like, three in the morning and their tv shows are all about tragedy and misfortune: lots of weepy soaps.’ He shakes his head. ‘More rational is better, I think.’

– The first thing that hits me when we enter her flat is the spicy aroma of fried mince, mixed with the musty odour of cigarette smoke. Jasna, Jasmin’s grandmother, is standing in the kitchen. She makes coffee, occasionally stirring a pan on the stove. Nicole and I sit down at a small, square kitchen table that’s already set for lunch.

Jasna is in her early seventies: short, plumpish, with thick, dark grey hair cut short. Everything about her exudes an old-fashioned stylishness, including her smart checked skirt and white blouse. She is a real ‘Mostarska’, as she puts it. Her family’s lived in Mostar for four hundred years and she too was born, raised, married and had her two sons here. She bends over the pan on the stove. ‘I’ve made a traditional Bosnian dish,’ she says proudly. ‘Dolmas – peppers and courgettes stuffed with rice and mince.’

Jasna lives on the other side of the invisible wall, in the Croatian part of town, though she too is of Muslim origin. Her grandson Jasmin can’t visit her, but she says she never experiences any problems. Many of the residents in the apartment building she lives in are elderly and of mixed origin: Croat,

Serb, Bosniak. ‘Old people still interact normally,’ Jasna says. ‘Like in the old days, when we used to go to the Croatian coast for our annual holiday. I was friends with Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Macedonians. We were all Yugoslavs. On Saturday evenings we would dance together in Mostar’s big hotel.’

Pictures of the Ottoman bridge – ‘the most beautiful bridge in the world’ – hang on every wall in her small, cluttered flat. Drawn in pastels, gouache and even embroidered in cross stitch. The bridge is a ‘symbol of unity’ that reminds her of her youth. ‘I learnt to swim under the bridge in the Neretva,’ she tells us, as she sits down opposite us. ‘I would sit there for hours chatting with my girlfriends, and every summer the boys from my class would jump off the bridge into the river. It’s been rebuilt now, but it doesn’t feel the same.’

When the war broke out, Jasna was forty-five. She and her husband first fled to Croatia in their car, taking only a small suitcase with some clothes, the deeds to their home and their birth certificates. One of their sons went to Switzerland with his wife and child, the other to Texas. Soon however, as Muslims, Jasmin’s grandparents couldn’t stay in Croatia. Muslims and Serbs were sent to prison camps. Jasna’s parents died in one such camp, as did her brother. So in 1994 she and her husband fled to the Netherlands. By then, the war had literally made her ill.

Jasna silently lights a cigarette. ‘Wait,’ she says, in Dutch, and gets up, putting her burning cigarette on the ashtray. She goes into the sitting room, where I can hear her opening one drawer after another. A few minutes later she comes back with a well-thumbed Serbo-Croat – Dutch pocket dictionary and an old shoebox full of photos and maps. When they were taken in by the Netherlands, she and her husband were first housed in an asylum centre in Kollumerzwaag, then in Geldermalsen, then in Zaltbommel. Until they got a house in Oosterwolde, where they lived until 2001.

She picks up a photo showing them standing in front of a terraced house with their neighbours. ‘I have such happy memories of the Netherlands,’ she says, studying the photo intently. ‘I even wrote a letter to King Willem-Alexander to congratulate him on his coronation. Now where did I put it?’

She disappears back into the sitting room. The stuffed peppers are simmering in a pan on the stove. She started making them yesterday evening, she told us. I look at the photos of the neighbours and the

postcards. They show tulip fields and a windmill in a meadow by the river ('Greetings from the Netherlands').

Jasna comes back into the kitchen, excitedly waving a crumpled, blue UNICEF exercise book that had been given to her fourteen-year-old niece in the refugee camp. She points at a drawing of Mostar, and the big round arc drawn by the girl in red crayon. 'Stari Most' it says underneath it, in uneven childish handwriting.

'The bridge means everything to me,' Jasna sighs once again, as she puts the plates on the table. Then she is silent. It's hard for her to face the fact that it's all over. That her town has changed forever. She puts the pan on the table, along with a basket of bread and puts half a pepper and half a courgette on every plate. Then she gives us all second helpings. 'Eat,' she urges.

After lunch we go with Jasna to visit her grandchildren Jasmin and Sara on the other side of town. Armed with her black leather handbag, she sets off down the narrow hallway with dozens of little pictures of the Old Bridge.

When, half an hour later, we get to the house where Jasmin and his parents live, she walks perkily up to the olive-green wooden patio door that still bears traces of shell damage. In the courtyard there's a little cart from which Jasmin's father sells *palačinka* – pancakes – in summer. Once inside, she sits down in a big armchair in the living room, her handbag on her lap. Jasmin greets his grandmother enthusiastically and jumps up on to the arm of the sofa opposite. His sister Sara, who's a few years older, makes coffee in the open kitchen.

Jasmin and Sara look alike. She, too, has delicate features, brown eyes and a sprinkling of freckles. They get on well together, but there's one thing Jasmin doesn't understand about his sister: she's happy in Mostar.

'Our generation is going to do things differently,' says Sara, a student of medicine at Mostar University, as she leans against the kitchen door. 'Just like we're getting rid of corruption. People my age have broken with the custom of slipping hospital doctors cash under the table. For my granny, it's different. She's of the old school, feels she must always give money.'

'You get better treatment if you pay,' Jasna retorts, as she feels around in her handbag for her cigarettes. 'I'm sure of that.'

'But we don't do that anymore,' says Sara, whose ambition is to be a doctor in Mostar. 'I'm already refusing to accept presents from neighbours and acquaintances, because I'm scared that later, as a doctor, I'd be expected



to return the favour. At the university I study together with Croats, but I know that when I'm a doctor, I'll only be able to work in the Muslim hospital. I wouldn't be welcome in the Croatian hospital. But I don't care,' she says. 'That's just the way things are.'

'But isn't that a dreadful thought?' asks Jasmin indignantly. He drapes himself rebelliously over the arm of the sofa.

In Mostar there's two of everything: two hospitals, two national theatres, two universities, two postal services, two puppet theatres, two bus stations, two educational systems (each with their own curriculum), two grammar schools, two banks, two football clubs, two electricity companies. 'Not so long ago, during a really harsh winter, the electricity cut out in our part of town,' Jasmin says. It was snowing. The Muslims were stuck in the cold and the dark. The Croat network was just working normally. But we couldn't hook up to it, because both networks are completely separate.'

'But we're a new generation,' Sara says again. 'I'm the kind of person who wants to change things gradually. That's my style, I'm not a revolutionary. I believe in steady progress.'

'I don't think things will change,' Jasmin says sombrely. 'I think it's human nature to live divided like this.'

He picks at his fluorescent bracelet. Annoyed, Sara shrugs and falls silent for a moment. 'The hate is persistent,' she goes on to admit. 'Parents influence their children, but because our mother is Catholic and our father Muslim, we're different. Social media's part of it too. It's used to whip up hatred of Muslims and Croats,' she says quietly.

Their grandmother lights her umpteenth cigarette and grips the black handbag on her lap firmly in her wrinkled left hand.

## Plates







