March 9

Fifty kilometers out of Zagreb you come off the end of the toll road and the war starts. One town has just the faintest scars; casual swishes of the war's tail swipe at the walls of buildings, mortar shrapnel fanning outwards along the side of apartment blocks, spatter of gunfire into the fronts of working restaurants, the telltale divots in roads and pavements that spoke so eloquently in Zagreb. Then you come to the place these attacks were launched from; the frontline is a physical fact. On one side are traffic lights and office hours and birthday parties; on the other side there is only destruction.

The first few buildings are a shock, like something perverse and unruly and wrong has stomped through an otherwise orderly world. But so soon this definition of humanity becomes the only definition, as civilisation palpably unwraps itself in timelapse photography. The busy town seems like a dream; this is how things are. How things are...

walls pocked-marked and blistered with random spray of bullets and expanding concentric circles of shrapnel

the soldier walks proudly into this place that was their's and is now his, and like an animal spraying new territory he takes possession with his gun

roofs gaping open, suprised, exposed, stripped to blackened rafters and gutted stone by the internal blast of dynamite

the soldier goes in the house, does what he wants to who he wants, takes what he wants, and leaves the rest to the secret hiss of his wire

houses cave in defeatedly, twisted and broken and still standing but impossibly contorted dancing to the music of a shell, with black smudged mournful eyes gazing out

the soldier leans his neck into the metal, pulls on the hard piston and heaves his awfulness and mess into someone else's back yard

everything that exists is irrevocably messed and utterly empty

maybe one single bomb could replicate this horror but each building, each stone wall has its own tragedy, is individuated by the uniqueness of its own moment of reckoning; it wasn't one bomb that did this. Soldiers did this.

One house is sliced in half; there sits in one first floor corner a cosy chair, and on the floor a cosy rug, and by the door, in a second corner, there is the tv, plugged in. The other two corners are gone.

where?

Thousands of acres of buildings - houses with comfy chairs, restaurants with menus, shops with tins of food, hotels with beds for the night - millions of acres of buildings, empty, destroyed, like unfarmable fruit where unfathomable plague has struck.

But that's only buildings. They are a testament, that's all. Because buildings are places where people live, where people work, where people entertain. What is terrible about these buildings is what they whisper to us. The question they ask...

If someone did this to the buildings; what did they do to the people inside them?

There are some people crawling through this holocaust; apart from the people in UN cars that scurry through horror for a weekend at the coast, the package tourists to hell, me. In the rubble, someone pushes a wheelbarrow full of bricks towards what yesterday was his home, and what tomorrow he intends to be his home. On a rooftop, someone hammers, stitching up the hole the rain comes through. In a window, someone carefully stretches a sheet of polythene. We stop at a roadside restaurant. In the middle of all this, we sit and drink coffee. The lady was sorry, she didn't have tea. Four men at the bar; drinking and smoking and talking. A radio plays western pop music.

I have tried to kill a nest of ants. I poured on washing-up liquid, bleach, beer, paraffin, ant powder. I marvelled at them; how they kept coming back. In the end I moved flat; it was easier.

We drive through mined fields. The fields have piles of cookers, fridges, tvs in them. You want a video player? Go grab it.

Bihac is a small town you can walk in an hour with a luminously clear river running through it; it sits in a valley surrounded by hills. A tragic geography. We drive down through hills until recently occupied by Serb militia. In the suburbs, children play on bikes. Tractors, horses, people pull carts of chopped wood. Everywhere in Bihac, there is chopped wood; piled high on the balconies of apartment blocks, in neat rows down sidestreets, in carts and cars and vans. The other distinguishing feature of this town is that every building is blasted, and yet remains intact. Walls, windows, roofs all scorched and spattered; but the big holes are repaired and the small holes don't bother anyone. Everywhere you stand or sit; look

closely and you'll find a bullet hole or mortar burn.

We are met at the tv station by Hussen and Essan, who work there. The tv building has had more than its share of batterings; it must have been infuriating to the besieging army that Bihac tv managed to broadcast to the town throughout the war. Hussen's first action on meeting is to give me a Bihac banknote for some huge sum. I say I am rich. This is the first of a thousand hospitable gestures I receive in my short time there. You get used to it very quickly; the instinct of these people is to give. If you sit down in a cafe or bar, a stranger on the other side of the room orders you a drink through the waiter; and makes nothing of it. A look in the eyes is all he needs. In people's homes they offer coffee, cognac, food. Luxuries. These people have nothing; they give you everything. There is a Bosnian saying; if you make some coffee for friends, put an extra cup on the table in case a stranger comes. There is a Bosnian joke; if you make some coffee for friends, for heaven's sake don't put an extra cup on the table, a stranger might come.

Hussen excuses himself; he has a funeral to attend. Essan takes us to a cemetry.

On the edge of town, the hills looming, the first thing you see is a grey squat concrete shell with three archways leading to a domed court. This is the temple, and it is for all faiths. In the cemetry, Moslem is buried next to Serb and Croat: the people of Bihac are buried as they lived; mixed, without discrimination. In the middle of grey hills and grey sky, a garden grows: a fantastic flowering of colour and gaeity make you realise you have never seen a cemetry like this. A cemetry where all the graves are new; all the dead still mourned.

Row after row after row; immaculately tended mounds whose headstones bear flowers and mementoes and messages and photographs. Row after row, born in 1970, 1974, 1975; row after row, died 1994, 1993, 1994, 1992, 1994.

Mourners quietly tend the graves; in groups or alone. The only sounds are distant cocks and dogs; the crowing and insane barking of a war which still hangs coldly in this air.

Essan shows us the recent grave of his friend; a Serb. Essan is the godfather of his two year-old child. In fact, Essan is the godfather of many children. I walk past a woman of maybe twenty; she smooths the dirt of her sweetheart's grave, she sprinkles water on the little bunch of flowers there, she kisses his likeness on the stone. As her head comes up her eyes make contact with mine and my head drops in abject shame for my intrusion on this private moment.

As we walk away, Essan tells us this is only one cemetry; there are other graveyards in Bihac.

We go to a destroyed village; the closest the army got to Bihac. The mosque's minaret is blasted, and twisted melted steel claws at the sky, a skeleton. You can almost hear the soldiers' boots crunching the gravel in these streets; almost smell their beery breath and the sulphur of their explosives as they kick in door after door, spray bullets through windows, and desecrate. They have sprayed graffiti on a wall; it is the name of their division: 'INDEX'. Apparently these are the univerity students of Banja Luca. Where are they now? Back with their books?

We sit with Essan and his wife and their three children in the front room of their apartment. A few windows down the apartment is charred and empty; a grenade went through the window. Coffee, brandy, cigarettes, food are offered and

received. The children watch kids singing on Bihac tv. The neighbours come up. You tell the neighbours to come up for coffee by tapping on the floor with your foot. He is a Serb, she a Croat. They have a two year old child, and its mother holds it lovingly. They had been trying for fourteen years to have this baby. It finally came in the middle of the seige. I ask the father if it was difficult to stay in Bihac when the Yugoslav army pulled out. He said it to me with gesture; we Serbs aren't fighters, we're musicians. Essan immediately puts a guitar in his hand and tells him to prove it. He does. He asks if I know Paul McCartney; I say not too well. Essan's oldest son, and Essan himself all take their turn on the guitar. On the tv, tanks on the streets of Belgrade, being driven against its own citizens. A fifth anniversay. Someone says, I bet they're not showing this in Belgrade tonight. The Serb musician says it again with gestures; 'Politico! Ppfff!' The phone rings in Essan's flat; it's Nadege, a French woman friend of the UN lot. She got dumped by UNTV thirty kilometers outside of Bihac and is now at the tv station; a succession of people have helped this woman on her own with no knowledge of the local language, in the middle of a place she doesn't know. Within minutes she's collected and sitting drinking kava surrounded by friends and children. In the middle of what til recently was one of the unsafest places on Earth, she was more safe than on London's Central line.

We go to a restaurant for food and drink and music. The music's great; I've found the band for the wedding scene at the beginning of the film. Essan tells me the guitarist took out two tanks. He's a Serb; married to a Muslem. On the other side of the room a crowd of very pretty young women. Only one of them is with a man. When the band comes back to do another set, the guitarist pops the speakers as he plugs into his amp. A moment of deathly silence, followed by

loud laughter from the crowd of women and several at our table. I look to Essan; he makes a swooping movement with his hand and says in English, "Mortar fire". The crowd of girls start dancing through the restaurant; Vanja, Nadege and I join them. They have only one dance; it's childishly simple. I haven't danced in two years.

As the band are packing away, Essan says "You go to DiscoClub?" I reply through Vanya that Bihac DiscoClub is a place I must go to. Essan has children asleep in bed, he and his wife must go; but Hussen is game and we drag my tired but understanding colleagues to Bihac DiscoClub. It's not too busy; people still have a curfew in their minds, but Hussen says it was packed last night to celebrate International Women's Day, which has always been big in Bihac.

(A few days later Vanja warns me not to romanticise the poeple in Bosnia; I'm only telling it as I found it, and I know how it reads.)

In Bihac a barman brings a tray of beers like any other barman; but you ask about him and it transpires he was on the frontline throughout the war. We get bought beers by strangers, and it's fun to take on the custom and send good cheer to others. At the adjoining table a guy in his twenties, with a pony tail and baseball cap, is sitting with too many lovely young women. He was on the front line too. He says to Hussen, "I spend four years fighting to defend Islam and here I am surrounded by Serbs." For the first time being surrounded by Serbs seems quite a pleasant experience. I make saucy eye contact with one of the Serbs; she tells all her friends, including the war hero. They look at me. I am unthreatened. I've found a place in Europe not yet sullied by scumbag Brits. There's me, I guess.

At two thirty am we drive through darkened streets to the Bihac motel; a clean, spartan place that gets used by I-FOR. At three in the morning I'm sitting on the window ledge of my room. There's no electricity at night. A dog's barking but that's the only sound. The air is fresh. Then some way off the sound of machine gun rounds being let off in spurts. I ask Hussen the next day but I already know; some guy full of beer whose head's fucked up by war, who has no peace. It's idle to pretend that war can just stop.

March 10

Woken by the motel generator at five. Stick tissue in my ears and back to sleep.

A walk around Bihac. Essan seems tired. It's Sunday morning and in the marketplace old women sell oranges and chocolate, which makes for a good breakfast. We walk along the river the Serbs said they'd wash in and drink dry. A Catholic church has adolescent graffiti - 'Punk' and 'Fuk'. (In Zagreb I've seen 'Plink Floyd' and 'Chelsee') English is the language for those who daub on walls. I'd like to meet these punks, stoned on solvents and Bihac beer.

Have lunch with the guitarist in last night's band. Ask him about the tanks. He has little to say. Did I really expect him to thrill me with brave stories of his daring do? He is a quiet, modest man with a winning smile who now works in the power station. He takes fascinated interest in my pocket watch when he asks the time; wants to know the story behind it, who gave it to me; he turns it over with delight in the hand that stopped two tanks. He doesn't want to fight again. He has a wife and young child. He owns a small plot of land in Croatia, which he will either build on or sell. For him war was "A man

is shooting at you; so you shoot back at him." He arrived for our meeting on the minute; and now he excuses himself because there is somewhere else he must be. Feel quite emotional about saying goodbye to Hussen; he seems alone, there must be some good woman for this good man. (There must be a woman for me.) Essen is quieter in his goodbyes; perhaps a weekend showing tourists the heart of his town is too long. Perhaps it wears him and he just wants to sit with his family. When I ask him to pass on gifts of chocolate to kids he is bored with me. I hope I can bring some of the economy of film making to Bihac; spend some heavy Deutchmarks in this town. I know that Essan would find that a less boring, more real and useful gift.

Drive out of Bihac feeling empty. All the towns and villages we pass on the way back speak for the tragedy averted in Bihac; Bihac has survived, while most towns haven't. What happened to the people in these towns is well documented for those who wish to find it; and that journalistic evidence has tormented my nights. But I am numb with the thought that those front rooms in Bihac were so nearly like these skinned and charred front rooms we drive past; that those pink children so nearly had their throats cut in the middle of the madness; that Hussen and Essen and his wife were so nearly left hanging in the trees. And my thoughts when coming out here, that soldiers did this, must be wrong. Because soldiers are people, with families and little plots of land; soldiers are people with dreams for the future, and a love of music. Soldiers will read the inscription on a pocket watch and smile with human recognition. A soldier could not do these things.

The question remains. Who did?