

the cellist

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In 1945, an Italian musicologist found four bars of a sonata's bass line in the remnants of the firebombed Dresden Music Library. He believed these notes were the work of the seventeenth-century Venetian composer Tomaso Albinoni, and spent the next twelve years reconstructing a larger piece from the charred manuscript fragment. The resulting composition, known as Albinoni's Adagio, bears little resemblance to most of Albinoni's work and is considered fraudulent by most scholars. But even those who doubt its authenticity have difficulty denying the Adagio's beauty.

Nearly half a century later, it's this contradiction that appeals to the cellist. That something could be almost erased from existence in the landscape of a ruined city, and then rebuilt until it is new and worthwhile, gives him hope. A hope that, now, is

one of a limited number of things remaining for the besieged citizens of Sarajevo and that, for many, dwindles each day.

And so today, like every other day in recent memory, the cellist sits beside the window of his second-floor apartment and plays until he feels his hope return. He rarely plays the Adagio. Most days he's able to feel the music rejuvenate him as simply as if he were filling a car with gasoline. But some days this isn't the case. If, after several hours, this hope doesn't return, he will pause to gather himself, and then he and his cello will coax Albinoni's Adagio out of the firebombed husk of Dresden and into the mortar-pocked, sniper-infested streets of Sarajevo. By the time the last few notes fade, his hope will be restored, but each time he's forced to resort to the Adagio it becomes harder, and he knows its effect is finite. There are only a certain number of Adagios left in him, and he will not recklessly spend this precious currency.

It wasn't always like this. Not long ago the promise of a happy life seemed almost inviolable. Five years ago, at his sister's wedding, he'd posed for a family photograph, his father's arm slung behind his neck, fingers grasping his shoulder. It was a firm grip, and to some it would have been painful, but to the cellist it was the opposite. The fingers on his flesh told him that he was loved, that he had always been loved, and that the world was a place where above all else the things that were good would find a way to burrow into you. Though he knew all of this then, he would give up nearly anything to be able to go back in time and

slow down that moment, if only so he could more clearly recall it now. He would very much like to feel his father's hand on his shoulder again.

He can tell today won't be an Adagio day. It has been only a half hour since he sat down beside the window, but already he feels a little bit better. Outside, a line of people wait to buy bread. It's been over a week since the market's had any bread to buy, and he considers whether he might join them. Many of his friends and neighbors are in line. He decides against it, for now. There's still work to do.

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When the mortars destroyed the Sarajevo Opera Hall, the cellist felt as if he were inside the building, as if the bricks and glass that once bound the structure together had become projectiles that sliced and pounded into him, shredding him beyond recognition. He was the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Symphony Orchestra. That was what he knew how to be. He made the idea of music an actuality. When he stepped onstage in his tuxedo he was transformed into an instrument of deliverance. He gave to the people who came to listen what he loved most in the world. He was as solid as the vise of his father's hand.

Now he doesn't care whether anyone hears him play or not. His tuxedo hangs in the closet, untouched. The guns perched on the hills surrounding Sarajevo have dismantled him just as they have the Opera Hall, just as they have his family home in the night while his father and mother slept, just as they will, eventually, everything.

The geography of the siege is simple. Sarajevo is a long ribbon of flat land surrounded on all sides by hills. The men on the hills control all the high ground and one peninsula of level ground in the middle of the city, Grbavica. They fire bullets and mortars and tank shells and grenades into the rest of the city, which is being defended by one tank and small handheld weapons. The city is being destroyed.

The cellist doesn't know what is about to happen. Initially the impact of the shell won't even register. For a long time he'll stand at his window and stare. Through the carnage and confusion he'll notice a woman's handbag, soaked in blood and sparkled with broken glass. He won't be able to tell whom it belongs to. Then he'll look down and see he has dropped his bow on the floor, and somehow it will seem to him that there's a great connection between these two objects. He won't understand what the connection is, but the feeling that it exists will compel him to undress, walk to the closet, and pull the dry cleaner's plastic from his tuxedo.

He will stand at the window all night and all through the next day. Then, at four o'clock in the afternoon, twenty-four

hours after the mortar fell on his friends and neighbors while they waited to buy bread, he will bend down and pick up his bow. He will carry his cello and stool down the narrow flight of stairs to the empty street. The war will go on around him as he sits in the small crater left at the mortar's point of impact. He'll play Albinoni's Adagio. He'll do this every day for twenty-two days, a day for each person killed. Or at least he'll try. He won't be sure he will survive. He won't be sure he has enough Adagios left.

The cellist doesn't know any of this now, as he sits at his window in the sun and plays. He isn't yet aware. But it's already on its way. It screams downward, splitting air and sky without effort. A target expands in size, brought into focus by time and velocity. There is a moment before impact that is the last instant of things as they are. Then the visible world explodes.