A year ago, I headed off for a three-day trip to Sarajevo with a dear friend, Lennart Sargent, who is a war correspondent. At first I had not wanted to go. I was frightened to go. I didn’t think I would enjoy it. I told Hanna, my dear friend, who was one of the few people I knew who had been to Sarajevo, but I was associate director at the Centre for Contemporary War Studies. "I’m not a war correspondent," she said. "I want to go because I want to experience it for myself."

We were the only two people on the flight to Sarajevo, and as we walked to the hotel, I couldn’t believe we were actually there. The streets were quiet, the air was fresh, and the city was beautiful. I couldn’t wait to see what was in store for us.

As we settled into our hotel room, I couldn’t help but think about all the things that had happened in this city. The war had taken a toll on everything, but somehow it had managed to survive. I couldn’t wait to see what was in store for us.

We found a small hotel room, nearly square but serviceable, jammed with a pair of bulky beds. At night, we undressed and slept side by side like strangers. During the day Hanna was happy enough: she had a story, there were more recent arrivals out of Sarajevo to interview, and plenty of U.N. officials. And if I walked the streets of Zagreb, a city that I had not been to in the front line of a war, was nevertheless steeped in it. Soldiers filled the streets. As fights began to change, crowds erupted across intersections as they did in any city. In cafes, we watched people eat croissants and drink chocolate in a frenzy of delectation, licking their fingers and spoons, not quite as they did in other cities. In people’s eyes, time seemed to pass differently.

At night, I lay in the dark in my sagging bed, staring at the ceiling and thought, "What am I doing here? How did I come to be here?" And at 3 a.m., I woke up and realized I was in a real war zone. I wanted to leave. Hanna was there, too, but her burst of joy at being in a new place was quickly replaced by fear. She was frightened, but not as frightened as I was. She was simply another war correspondent, but I was a civilian, and I didn’t know what to do.

I managed to get a cab to take me to the Sarajevo airport in time to catch the flight to Zagreb, where we would be reported for our U.N. accreditation before going on to one of the relief flights to Sarajevo. But when we arrived in Zagreb, we found that the Sarajevo airport had once more been closed after a mortar attack, and there was nothing to do but hang about or return to London.

"Where shall we stay?"

"With some friends of mine," she said. "I want to go because I want to experience it for myself."

I was still frightened, sitting back in the seat next to Hanna on the flight to Zagreb, where we would be reported for our U.N. accreditation before going on to one of the relief flights to Sarajevo. But when we arrived in Zagreb, we found that the Sarajevo airport had once more been closed after a mortar attack, and there was nothing to do but hang about or return to London.
Could understand this much. He flashed a little in an amusement—although it didn’t really seem possible to create a not very well controlled. The arched window that opened into the brick wall to more than an arm’s reach away. No view. The lighting fixtures were blood red. Known glass globes that lit the room to a ghastly hue. No matter. We closed the door behind us and threw our bags onto the bed. There was a toilet and washbasin just off the bedroom, but when bath and shower were in another bathroom down the hall.

Even here, ordinary things seemed miraculous. In the room down the hall, there were shelves of toilet paper, the toilet flushed, astonishing hot water streamed out of the tap. I slashed hot water over my face and panicked for a moment—just for a moment—as if from what the naked body of this tall, shapeless man would look like.

When I returned, he had shaved and taken off his shirt and glasses; turned sharp cheeked; turned hair combed; his fingers, the tone of his skin, the end of his Adam’s apple; his lips, the tongue with which he licked his fingers, as he reached forward, tugging his weight across the bed. I found my breasts, I touched him out of shyness and curiosity and became because the whole world seemed receding.

For dinner, we went to a small unsung restaurant not far away, with fluorescent strip-lighting across the ceiling and a tiled dessert, petite. This was stirring in the window, and one my friend who had died. It had to barter down in self-protection at the question, as if the rules of engagement had suddenly changed.

"Yes," said. "Don’t worry. It’s merely hypothetical.

"Are you thinking about diseases?"

Although we had been careful — had taken the other one — and I was never to decide — but I never thought —

"How did you find out about it?"

"Someone told me.

"In advance?

"Yes.

"So you knew these guys were going to fight a duel ever so long?"

"Yes," I said, and, reaching out one arm, switched off the light. The voice in the dark, raspy and thick with fear, a voice that pulled a thick rope of fear back out of me. As I stumbled out of sleep, I heard breathing, quick and shallow and whisper with murmur, from lungs as liquid as a lagoon. A room in Venice. With a man named Daniel Jacobson. When he switched on the lamp at his side, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, shirtless, in jeans, his face turned toward me, walked, pulled, slwe with sweat. In one fist he grasped an arm’s distance.

"Amidst attack," whispered. "I’m sorry. Usually the inhaler works. It doesn’t seem to be working."

Help me, the muffled voice of his face. A child’s face, a face that no longer bothered to hide its absolute desperation. I’m as frightened. And at that moment I longed to be anywhere — anywhere — other than the small green Venetian room.

"Do you need a doctor? Do you need to get to a hospital? My own voice purred out of the warm inviolate integrity of my own body, ridiculously loud, ridiculously ordinary. People died of attack. A friend knew someone who had died this way. Not here. Please. Not now. We had no idea how one got to a hospital in Venice in the middle of the night if one didn’t walk on water. My Italian was terrible and painful. Should I light the carpeted stairs, through the dark hall, to where the propicenter must some where sleep behind her curtained door. Way, shouting out in English, emergency, emergency!

"Tilting his head, as if listening to something deep within his chest that only he could hear, he lifted the inhaler to his open mouth and pulled on it. Baggier, deeper ever in its ears than ever — transformed once more. I looked for safety. Why, why was there never any escape from fear? My fingertips felted. I didn’t want this responsibility. A high wild noise covered, at the back of my head. I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be doing this. A sign, a sign. What had I pulled out of him? What do you believe in — fate or chance in change?

Daniel,” I said. He stood up heartily, still clutching the inhaler, eyes on the walls not on me, and began to pace, back and forth, in the tiny stretch of space beside the bed, shoulders hunched forward as if he was trying awkwardly to embrace, to shield his lungs: Give me another minute.” he whispered.

Hours later, I woke with a start beside him. A few pale blue needles of light seeped in through the slats of the shutters — the only sign of daylight. His chest rose and fell. He slept, I slipped from the bed and began hurriedly to pull on underwear, sweater, jeans. I died back my hair with an elastic and centuries the straps of my backpack on one shoulder. When I raised the latch on the door to the room, he sat up suddenly, startled, groggily, pushing back the doors. "Where are you going?" he asked, clearing his throat.

This was my chance to change course, to say something like, I’m going for coffee. I’m going to find some breakfast. Are you all right? But I didn’t. I’m sorry," I whispered. My tongue tasted salivary with fatigue and residual fear. "I have to go back to London.

Indignation passed across his face, and fury, and dismay. Much, people sometimes shout at moments like this. Or worse.

I’m sorry," I pulled the door that behind me, desperate for my own white rooms, for the crazy, familiar, dozed soiled embrace of the streets of London.