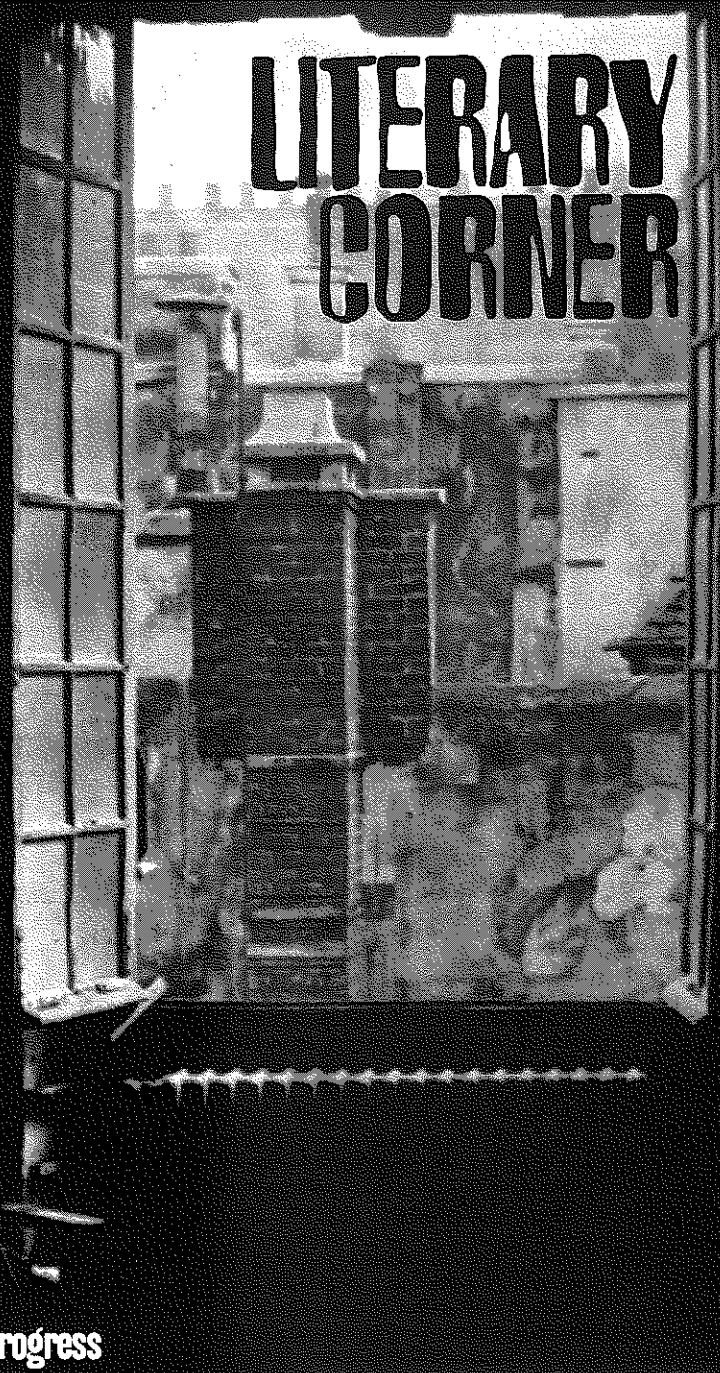


THE RULES OF ENGAGE- MENT

an excerpt from *Radar Angels*, a novel in progress

LITERARY CORNER



BY Catherine Bush

A year ago, I headed off for a three-day trip to Sarajevo with my friend Hanna Sargent, who is a war correspondent. At first I had not wanted to go. I was frightened to go, I admit it. And, as I told Hanna, I did not necessarily see the point in going, or at least the purpose in *my* going to Sarajevo, even if I was associate director at the Centre for Contemporary War Studies. "Hanna," I said, "a war-torn city doesn't need another tourist. It doesn't. Or another journalist to live out the cliché of being able to claim they've stayed in the Sarajevo Holiday Inn."

"We shan't stay at the Holiday Inn," she said decisively. She had a flood of red hair and a manner that tended, at moments, towards brusqueness.

"Where shall we stay then?"

"With some friends of mine." She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray on the table between us, at the back of the Café Sans Souci on Upper Street in Islington, and looked up again, sharp-eyed and scrutinizing. "But someone like you should go, Cay."

I was still frightened, sitting buckled in the seat next to Hanna on the flight to Zagreb, where we would apply for our U.N. accreditation before riding in on 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.

We found a small hotel room, nearly squalid but serviceable, jammed with a pair of lumpy beds. At night, we undressed and slept side by side like sisters. During the day Hanna was happy enough: she had a story, there were the most recent arrivals out of Sarajevo to interview, and plenty of U.N. officials. And I? I walked the streets of Zagreb, a city that, if not currently in the front line of a war, was nevertheless steeped in it. Soldiers filled the streets. As lights began to change, crowds surged across intersections as they did in any city. In cafes, I watched people eat croissants and drank 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 up at the ceiling and thought, *What am I doing here? How did I come to be here?* And raged a little against Evan and Neil, the two young men whom I'd last seen in a Toronto ravine. *What have you made me into?* Hanna's breath gusted solidly in her sleep.

On the third day, the Sarajevo airport was still closed and there seemed little immediate sign of change. It could, of course, be weeks or months before it opened again. I told Hanna I was thinking of leaving, that I ought to get back to work.

"We could try to get in overland," she said, sucking in on one of the strong French cigarettes she liked to smoke. She breathed out deeply. "Or into the countryside."

"Really, Hanna, I—"

"You go back then," she said.

I managed to hire a car to take me to the Zagreb airport in time to catch the flight on which we were in any case to have flown back. Only, the flight was delayed. I imagined Hanna's little snorts of impatience, imagined disasters, airplane crashes. For practical reasons I imagine possible disasters, because it is part of my business to do so, because this seems better than to ignore them. The pall of war still hung like a film, like invisible bacteria, over everything.

Hoisting my knapsack over my shoulder, I made my way to the airport bar and ordered a shot of vodka, which I drank

standing up. The man on the bar-stool next to me, clad in an overcoat, turned and looked up, asked me in English where I came from. London, I told him.

"But you aren't English, are you? American?"

"Canadian."

He told me his name was Daniel Jacobsen, and he was originally from Boston, although he hadn't lived there in years. He assumed I was another journalist until I told him otherwise. He'd flown out of Sarajevo four days before, which I could feel on him, a strange superabundance of energy pouring from his skin, a stunned fixity as his gaze latched on the walls across the room or the glass in front of him. He stared at his fingertips through oval glasses, then tossed his head up, blushing slightly, fawn hair mussed, cheeks shady with a day's growth of beard, and said, "I know this is crazy, but I'm going to Venice for a few days' vacation. Do you want to come with me?"

I thought about it for a moment before I said yes, as if it were possible, by doing this, to act both out of deep selfishness and selflessness, as if the extremity of the world abandoned demanded it as a form of relief or release. A celebration of escape.

I had to buy a new plane ticket and Daniel Jacobsen insisted on helping me pay for it. We flew to Venice but did not touch. He told me he had a flat in Prague, where he was based when he wasn't on the move through Europe. Had I been to Prague? I hadn't. The shudders upon landing were the jitters of ordinary plane travel. On the ferry into the city, he slung his arm around my shoulders and asked me if I were married and I said no, though I had been, and asked if he was, and he shook his head. The shock of arrival was thickly sensual. Mere miles away across the water lay a city under siege. Now I was approaching a city in which I hadn't in the least expected to find myself. Pigeons wheeled in a high arc across the wide and oceanic sky. Water slithered along the edges of the boat we travelled in.

Once before I had been to Venice, with Matthew Cale, shortly after we'd married; we bought charter tickets from London. Now I walked beside Daniel Jacobsen through a sea of metal café

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tables spread across the Piazza san Marco, past the swirls of camera-laden tourists, and down a narrow street on the far side. It was as if we had bestowed a marvelous contingent trust upon each other. We crossed a small bridge over a deep green canal so still it seemed somehow interior, and then, on the far side, the street we followed grew narrower and narrower, the walls greenish and mossy, although Daniel insisted he knew exactly where we were going—to the *pensione* where he always stayed when in Venice.

And around the corner where he said the Pension Alberti would be, it was. A woman slipped through a dark curtain into the vestibule to greet us but shook her head when Daniel said in Italian that he'd made a reservation. I

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could understand this much. He flushed a little in annoyance—although it didn't really seem possible to use his recent arrival from a besieged city as leverage. No, the woman insisted. Oh, but there was another smaller room.

Any room would do.

It was small, small as a fishbowl, with lurid green walls and wooden shutters over the single window that opened onto a brick wall no more than an arm's reach away. No view. The lighting fixtures were blood-red, blown-glass globes that lit the room to

a garish 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 the bath and shower were in another bathroom down the hall.

Even here, ordinary things seemed miraculous. In the room down the hall, there were sheaves of toilet paper, the toilet flushed, astonishing hot water streamed out of the taps. I sloshed hot water over my face and panicked for a moment—just for a moment—as to what the naked body of this tall, slope-shouldered man would look like.

When I returned, he had shaved and taken off his shirt and glasses: turned shiny-cheeked and hollow-eyed. He had folded down the starched white sheets. When I switched off the red globe of the bedside lamp, it could have been any hour of the day or night. I reached out my hands and touched skin. Vigour, a pure adrenaline ardour, won out over exhaustion. Touched nipples, the furze of hair on his chest, his throat, the bob of his Adam's apple, his lips, the tongue with which he licked my fingers, as he lurched forward, tumbling his weight across the bed. He found my breasts. I touched him out of thankfulness and gratefulness and because the whole world seemed ravishing.

For dinner, we went to a small unassuming restaurant not far away, with fluorescent strip-lighting across the ceiling and a tiered dessert tray spinning in the window, and ate *linguine al nero di seppia*, linguine with black squid ink, which dyed our mouths glistening purple. I drank *café macchiato*, breathing in the smell of sex that rose from my own body. In the morning, we would stand on the creaky wood of a floating dock and ride in *vaporetti*.

We discussed issues of intervention, rules of engagement. What was necessary, we both agreed, in the case of any intervention, was for the rules of engagement to be clearly delineated.

"Isn't one of the questions—" I said, stirring my coffee, "— isn't the question partly whether the intervenor

is interested in peace or justice? I mean, is the point of the intervention to maintain peace, to accept both sides as warring factions and ignore the fact that one may be a hostile aggressor, the other an internationally recognized state trying to defend itself? For instance. Is that a useful impartiality or a corrupt one? Is it fair? Does your right as an individual to be protected from attack and fed take precedence over any civic notions of self-determination? But what if one internationally recognized state is born out of the struggles of another state that is still, at least partly, recognized internationally? I'm not sure I know the answers—I'm asking."

I stepped from the toilet back into the tiny green fishbowl room, where Daniel Jacobsen lay sprawled naked on the bed, arms folded behind his head, companionably and languidly exposed. The sheets twisted underneath him. The bedside lamp glowed. All this seemed startling and strange again, the world thick with sharp, incomprehensible yearnings. I sat back down beside him, twisted back my hair, pulled my knees to my chest. "What would you be willing to risk for love?" I asked, and fixed my eyes on him.

He stiffened. "For love?" His thin hair, flying in all directions, looked faintly ridiculous, lips thickened and puzzled. He looked, now, merely exposed, almost frightened, as if he had to batten down in self-protection at the question, as if the rules of engagement had suddenly changed.

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

"Are you thinking about diseases?" Although we had been careful—had taken the usual precautions.

"No," I said adamantly, "no I really wasn't, I—"

"You mean would I be willing to throw myself in a raging river to save the woman I loved?"

"More that sort of thing, yes."

"Why?" He had recovered some aplomb, some essential self-possessed inquisitiveness.

"Because I'm curious."

"Would I settle in some city I couldn't stand, say some disgusting, polluted, mid-sized, middle-European city like Dusseldorf just to be with someone? I don't know. Have a kid just because she wanted one? What about you?"

"Not sure," I said, and licked my lips. I eyed the enclosure, the haven of the green walls that kept the rest of the world at bay, felt the heightened thrum of the tiny room between us. I stretched my hands out tight over my raised knees. "When I was twenty-one, I had a duel fought over me," I said.

"A what?"

"A duel. With pistols. And seconds. It's true. At dawn in a Toronto ravine."

I watched him carefully, as I do whenever I tell people this. There's always a risk. In the beginning, I did not tell people at all. Even now, it's not something you can toss out lightly. One way or another it shocks people. It does. If they believe you. Some days, it's like unbuttoning a blouse to reveal an old scar; other days like flashing a glow-in-the-dark tattoo. But to tell people, and watch them then, offers its own sort of revelation.

With an exhalation of breath, he pushed himself up until he was sitting. His gaze, which didn't leave me, had a new avidity. "Was anyone killed?"

"Shot but in the end not killed." I smoothed one hand across a patch of white sheet.

"Why did they do it?" His lips stayed parted—in a fever of fascination, in faint anxiety, which was perhaps what I would have predicted as a response from him.

"Because they were both in love with me—or is it crazy on my part to assume that? One of them I'd been going out with for a couple of years. Then I met the other one—and I was trying 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 over you?"

"Yes," I said, and, reaching out one arm, switched off the light.

"Arcadia." A voice in the dark, raspy and thick with fear, a voice that pulled a thick rope of fear back out of me. As I tumbled out of sleep, I heard breathing, quick and shallow and wheezy with mucus, from lungs as liquid as a lagoon. A room in Venice. With a man named Daniel Jacobsen. 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, drawn, pallid, sleek with sweat. In one fist he grasped an asthma's small plastic inhaler. "Asthma attack," he whispered. "I'm sorry. Usually the inhaler works. It doesn't seem to be working." *Help me*, the stretched lines of his face said. A child's face, a face that no longer bothered to hide its absolute desperation. *I'm so 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 poured out of the warm inviolability of my own body, ridiculously loud, ridiculously ordinary. People died of asthma attacks. A friend knew someone who had died this way. Not here. *Please*. Not now. I 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 paltry. Should I race down the carpeted stairs, through the dark hall, to where the proprietress must somewhere sleep behind her curtained doorway, 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 puffed on it, haggard, eyes deeper in their sockets than ever—transformed once more.

I longed for safety. Why, *why*, was there never any escape from fear? My fingertips prickled. I did not want this responsibility. A high wild note careened 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 choice or chance?

"Daniel," I said.

He stood up heavily, 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 were 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 tied back my hair with an elastic and hoisted the straps of my knapsack onto one shoulder. When I raised the latch on the door to the room, he sat up suddenly, startled, groggy, pushing back the sheets. "Where are you going?" he asked, clearing his throat.

This was my chance to change course, to say something like, *I'm going out for coffee. I'm going to find us some breakfast. Are you all right?* But I didn't.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. My tongue tasted silvery with fatigue and residual fear. "I have to go back to London."

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

"I'm sorry." I pulled the door shut behind me, desperate for my own white rooms, for the crazy, familiar, diesel-soaked embrace of the streets of London.

