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As the bus entered the suburbs of Sarajevo, I felt my stomach flip-flop. It was getting dark, and the sky was filled with clouds. It was sprinkling a bit, and I could feel the cold through the thin glass windows of the bus. As far as the eye could see, on both sides of the road, were massive, uninspired cement apartment buildings. Many looked at least 30 or 40 stories high. Some buildings had huge chunks taken out of their sides or entire floors that looked burnt out and uninhabitable. Still, residents occupied the areas below, on top of, and to the sides of these destroyed areas. These crumbling gray buildings against the darkening sky looked anything but inviting. As if in support of this desolation, thick black wires cut through the blocks of apartments, guiding battered metal cable cars. Destruction, desolation and cold--as I looked out the window, these were the only three words the gloomy landscape inspired. My first thought was that I wanted to leave this uninviting place.

A few minutes later, the bus pulled into an equally gloomy, large cement bus station with about 20 cabs out front and a large group of cab drivers standing around waiting. My friend and I hopped off the bus into the cold. We had arranged to stay in the home of a former university professor. We were supposed to call her from the bus station when we arrived. However, our Bosnian phone card didn't work in Sarajevo. Fortunately we had her address. Since we had no idea where we were or how far away she lived, and we didn't speak Bosnian, we realized that our only option was to take a taxi. I told my friend, "You have to speak to the drivers since at least you know about 10 words of Bosnian compared to my zero."

She groaned and said, "Okay." We approached them and after a few minutes of arguing among themselves about where the address was, we climbed into one of the cabs. By this time, it was almost pitch black outside.

The driver took us up a steep hill and stopped in front of a house set back from the street. We paid the driver and got out. We were incredibly nervous. We didn't know if we were still welcome, since it was late, or if this was even the right house. When we reached the glass front door, my friend said, "You have to knock, since I talked to the cab driver."

Lacking a good counter-argument, I smiled weakly and said, "Okay."

I knocked, but nobody came. I swallowed and knocked again--still nobody. Looking through the glass, I could see that the TV was on, so surely someone must be home. Maybe they just didn't hear. I knocked again, and we waited ... Suddenly, running full-force toward the door, in flowing purple robes, was a large woman, close to six feet tall, with curly, dark hair going in every direction. She was smiling and shouting gleefully and waving her arms like crazy. "I guess we're welcome!" I said as I eyed the most expressive person I'd ever seen.

She opened the door, pulled us into the entry room and hugged us vigorously, talking enthusiastically all the while in Bosnian. She pointed for us to take off our shoes, as this was a Muslim household, and led us into her living room.

Every inch of the place was covered with carpets. Carpets hung on each wall, and several layers of carpets covered the floors, including a small, bright pink rabbit pelt that had been spread decorously across the single stair that divided the dining and living areas. As she motioned for us to sit down on the couch, I noted that even the couch was covered in a carpet. "Kava?!" (coffee) she shouted forcefully.

Not about to refuse this woman anything, we immediately nodded yes. She flew into the kitchen and rattled pots and pans. Then she returned bearing a pair of slippers for each of us to wear. Amazingly, we all happened to wear the same shoe size. We slid into these wedge-heeled plastic shoes and admired the gold and sparkly straps that crossed the tops of our feet, feeling almost like royalty. The second time she came back from the kitchen, she carried a tray with Turkish-style coffee (much thicker than American coffee), milk, sugar cubes, and an unopened pack of cigarettes.

My friend and I served ourselves sugar cubes using the tiny spoon inside the dish. But, when we handed it to her, she just reached in and grabbed a cube. She dipped the cube into the coffee, removed it and then sucked the coffee out before stirring the cube into her coffee. I was completely stunned, as was my friend. For the past few months, I had been performing this very same ritual each time I was served a coffee. And each time, my friend had been making fun of me. What's more is that I'd never seen anyone else do it. But there we were in this lady's house in Sarajevo, and she practiced the very same habit! I wished desperately that we could tell her about it, but I knew gestures and expressions were insufficient for explaining this coincidence.

Nevertheless, we talked with her for quite a while, her in Bosnian, us in English and French, with lots of miming. She told us her son and husband had been killed in the war. The TV had been on since our arrival, so we even talked a bit about current events. Finally we had to go out to find some dinner. To show us where to go, she drew a map, complete with stick figures, one with wavy hair (me), one with straight hair (my friend).

We were very sorry to go when our last hours in Sarajevo came. The lady we stayed with seemed sad to see us go as well. She hugged us again and even

began to cry as we went out the door. We kept turning back and waving to her again and again until she was out of sight.

As the bus pulled out of the city, I realized how quickly a single person could change my view of an entire place. When I arrived, all I could think about was leaving this dark, gloomy city, but in leaving, all I could do was wish that I were staying in this warm, welcoming place a little longer.

--Nicole Degli Espositi, Eugene, Oregon.

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