

ney

brighten again. I told her that her name, with a slight change in pronunciation, was Western, that a character in a famous novel was called Susan.

There was a Sikh immigration officer sitting near the door behind a small desk. He was doing nothing throughout the hours we were waiting there. He came to us and handed out parcels of food. He gestured towards the free drink machine. Suson was hungry and started to unpack her food.

'Don't you want some?' she asked.
But I didn't have the appetite for anything but getting out of here.
'They give rations to refugees all over the world,' I said.
She glanced at me, pausing while biting the plastic with her teeth.
But I was delighted with a discovery. I had found my new identity: I'M A REFUGEE.



DEAR MIMMY

In a diary she calls 'Mimmy' schoolgirl Zlata Filipovic records her departure from besieged and war-torn Sarajevo and her arrival in Paris.

PARIS. There's electricity, there's water, there's gas. There's, there's... life, Mimmy. Yes, life; bright lights, traffic, people, food... Don't think I've gone nuts, Mimmy. Hey, listen to me, Paris!? Me, my mum and my dad. At last... The darkness is behind us, now we're bathed in light lit by good people. Remember that - good people. Bulb by bulb, not candles, but bulb by bulb, and me bathing in the lights of Paris. Yes, Paris. Incredible.

On 6 December, three days after my thirteenth birthday (my second in the war), the publishers told us that on Wednesday 8 December, we were to be ready, that they would be coming for us - we were going to Paris for your promotion, Mimmy.

We had one day to accept that we were leaving Sarajevo, to say our goodbyes to Grandma and Grandpa, the whole family, Mirna, to pack and be ready by 8.00 am when an UNPROFOR personnel carrier would be coming to pick us up.

It's impossible to explain those mixed feelings of sorrow and joy. Joy at being able to leave the war and sorrow at having to leave EVERYTHING behind. ALL MY LOVED ONES.

Wednesday 8 December, 8.00 am. It was all done. We had cried our eyes out, said our goodbyes. Eight o'clock came and went. No personnel carrier. Why? Who knows? Something went wrong. Again that strange mixed feeling, again that feeling of sunken hopes.

At 10.00 am on 23 December, the personnel carrier actually came. Through the little window of the vehicle I watched the Post Office pass by, the Law Faculty, the Holiday Inn, Marin Dvor, Pofalici, Hrasno, Alipasino polje, Nedazarici. Sarajevo was passing by. We reached the airport safely.

Then the Hercules cargo plane, flying over Bosnia and Herzegovina, leaving it behind. We flew over the Adriatic Sea. Our landing point - Ancona. And...we stepped out of the Hercules and together with our friend Jean-Christophe Rufin, we boarded a small plane - destination PARIS. In the plane we were given Coca-Cola, salmon, eggs, steak, chicken, tomatoes YUMMY. Everything I hadn't seen for almost two years.

And then... the lights of Paris appeared. There was electricity. Then I caught sight of the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, cars, houses, roads, people... LIFE. At about 3.00 pm we landed at the military airport in Paris. A wonderful reception, warm words of welcome.

Then a SHOWER. WATER. BATH. HOT WATER. COLD WATER. SHAMPOO. SHOWER. Bliss!

That's how Paris welcomed me. That's how I came out of the darkness and saw the lights. Are these lights my lights as well? I wonder. When even a glimmer of this light illuminates the darkness of Sarajevo, then it will be my light as well. Until then...???

This extract by Zlata Filipovic is from *Zlata's Diary* published by Penguin, 1993.

ILLUSTRATION BY MOHAMED BUSHARA

08:59

Fleeing Afghanistan, Karim Haidari arrives in the West.

THE PLANE MANOEUVRED. I looked out of the window; little signs of activity were becoming visible on the ground below.

I said to Suson: 'I think we are getting there.' She turned her face away. Like a scholar reading verses. The plane descended. I was the authority, giving myself the right to come here. But soon the power shifted to the voice of a man behind the immigration desk: 'Passports please!'

Suson was not bothered. She did not speak English. I pretended not to either.

'Which airline did you travel with?'

The advice of the agent rang in my mind: if they know the airline they might send you back on the same plane.

'No... English,' I hesitated. Oh, my first conversation started with a lie. How many lies should I say before I could prove the truth? Why do reasons fail against the system?

The officers started to search our bags. Groups of passengers were passing by, casting puzzled glances. I felt humiliated, as if I had committed a crime. In my luggage the officers found a tiny bag with the Emirates logo on it and a Swissair pen. There were other items with airline names on them. The tallest of the officers asked me something in German. I wished I could tell them about the woman I knew who used to work for Areana Airline in Afghanistan. She had valued this collection so much. When she was no longer allowed to work [because of the Taliban] she was generous enough to give me the collection.

The officer added another harsh-sounding comment in German and gave me a serious look. I looked into his eyes. I was on the brink of saying in English: 'Listen to me, I'm screwed up by the system of my own country. I need shelter and food for now. I'm capable of putting my own bread on the table. So please let me get in. I wouldn't have left my home if I didn't have to. I understand your concerns but my reasons are strong. Can't we sit and talk as human beings?' But I remained silent. Humanity is not the superpower in this real world.

My wrist watch was ticking towards a late afternoon in Afghanistan. The officers asked us to sit on chairs in front of the desk and wait. I was expecting a thorough search so I checked through my things. I found a visiting card belonging to Angela, a woman who worked in the Geneva office of the organization I had quit 20 days previously in Kabul. I asked Suson if she knew how to get rid of this card. She took it from me, put it in her mouth and chewed it.

Every limb of my body was shaking. It wasn't just the fear of going back home and getting into trouble again. It felt as if a nightmare was about to repeat itself.

At times of extreme emotional disturbance sometimes writing helps me. I opened my blank diary and without thinking I wrote a few lines which turned into a letter to my mother:

Sitting here is not easy. This is making me feel like once again I am accused of an offence, a treason. Dear mum, these guys

have the same rough attitude as the people who were interrogating me at the beginning of my imprisonment. Do you think I will survive a new life with such a start?

One of the officers came and took the diary from me and tried to read it. I had written in a Dari script with Arabic alphabet. He never gave it back. They asked the same questions again. Perhaps our appearance confused them. I had a tourist T-shirt on, a moneybelt around my waist and a stylish haircut. Suson was dressed like a Western Asian returning from motherland. The officer gave us each a form to fill out. 'I wish they would take us somewhere private, even a prison cell,' I thought, when another group of people passed by.

Suson and I were separated.

'For the last time, I'm asking you: which airline have you come in with?'

I shrugged. Another officer banged his bunch of keys on the desk: 'We need to put it on this bloody form. If you want to be difficult you will stay here even longer,' he shouted. The other gave him a disapproving look.

I was helpless and exhausted. After a long search of body and luggage, I was led to a waiting hall where I met Suson again. The air-conditioned room was cold. I found an intimacy with the other people from various cultures. They all had fear and fatigue, like ours, on their faces.

Listen to me, I'm screwed up by the system of my own country. I need shelter and food for now. I'm capable of putting my own bread on the table. So please let me get in

I looked at Suson, her eyes filled with tears, her shoulders hunched. We had known each other barely a day – only since becoming travelling companions. But I felt a wrench in my heart for her. I was 25 and had survived harrowing moments; I knew uncertainty. But she was only 16, had grown up in an era of total male domination. 'She's such an innocent,' I thought. 'How is she going to make it?' She noticed I was looking at her.

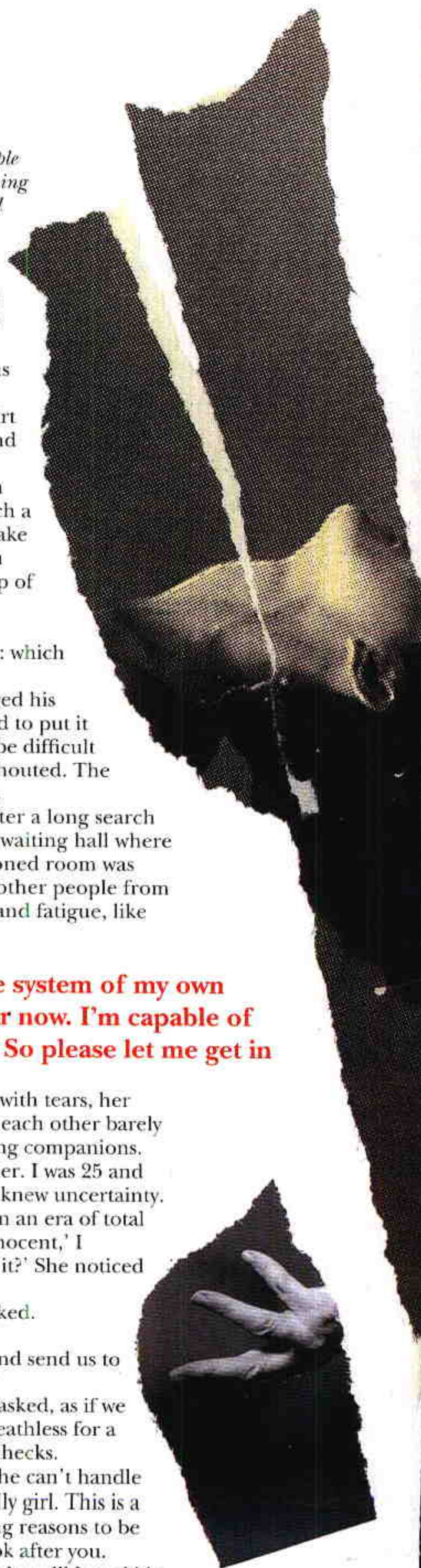
'What's going to happen?' she asked.

I sighed: 'I don't know.'

'Are they going to prosecute us and send us to jail or will they send us back home?'

'Which one would you prefer?' I asked, as if we were given a choice. She became breathless for a moment, silent tears ran down her cheeks.

'How stupid of me,' I thought. 'She can't handle it'. I grabbed her arms. 'You are a silly girl. This is a civilized country, we both have strong reasons to be here. You know a family who will look after you. Someone will marry you one day, and you'll have kids, one after another.' I was relieved when I saw her face



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