

# A ROUGH GUIDE TO THE DARK SIDE

DANIEL SIMPSON

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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT  
A ROUGH GUIDE TO THE DARK SIDE

Daniel Simpson's amazing book should be read by everyone who is interested in how the human side of this world really works which means EVERYONE! He uses humor as Shakespeare did to lighten the load of a heavy, dark, and important story.

**John Perkins**, author of the bestselling *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*

*A Rough Guide to the Dark Side* is a funny, angry and insightful indictment of modern media practice. Daniel Simpson shows us a remarkably dangerous world shaped by the fantasies of the elite and journalists who have embraced subservient fear, savage cost-cutting and institutional laziness. Simpson's writing demonstrates that we not only deserve better journalism, but that it's still out there: observing, investigating and informing with humanity and passion.

**A.L. Kennedy**, writer and comedian; author of the *Costa Prizewinning Day*

The archetypal innocent abroad, Daniel Simpson thought he could help the locals. He dropped out of journalism to run a music festival in Serbia, imagining himself a jaundiced man of the world. But his project became a study in modern corruption, with a learning curve so steep it was more like a suicide's screaming spiral. Witty and compassionate, yet merciless on himself, he tells a story that's a constant pleasure to read.

**Michela Wrong**, author of *It's Our Turn to Eat. The Story of a Kenyan Whistleblower*

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Daniel Simpson



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For Guy

## Author's note

I hope this isn't fiction, or one-sided. I've tried to record the truth as I perceived it, but no reporter's work can be objective. In keeping with media convention, some facts are more factual than others, and a few of the details are blurred to protect the guilty. One or two walk-on characters are composites, and occasional quotations are doctored, for clarity. As Rudyard Kipling emphasized: 'The most remarkable stories are, of course, those which do not appear for obvious reasons.' He was also a stoner.

London, September 11, 2011

*'I imagine that every historian is similarly affected when he begins to record the events of some period and wishes to portray them sincerely. Where is the center of events, the common standpoint around which they revolve and which gives them cohesion? In order that something like cohesion, something like causality, that some kind of meaning might be revealed and that it can in some way be told, the historian must invent units, a hero, a nation, an idea, and he must allow to happen to this invented unit what has in reality happened to the nameless.'*

Hermann Hesse

*'The bigger you build the bonfire, the more darkness is revealed.'*

Terence McKenna

## ZERO

I never really meant to join the underworld. I fell in. Fate proved far more powerful than me.

If our story began with a word, that word was lost, and the world appeared to have lost it more than me. I'd been asking people why for most of my life, but it struck me that this question might be pointless. The one that mattered more was how to change things. And I'd struggled with that for a while before meeting my partner.

Back then I didn't see him in those terms. Our earliest encounters came at random; or so I'd assumed as a skeptical journalist. I felt streetwise when I first set foot in Serbia. In a way, I was sure I'd seen it all before: another country stewing in selfpity, fiercely independent in character, while pimping itself around foreigners for cash. From afar, this sounded rather like a turn-off, with none of the furtive thrills of Balkan wars. The cartoon villains who started them were long gone, and they'd left behind a miserable pariah state. Who cared if it was festering in woe?

To my amazement, I found that I did. This was largely down to my partner's sense of purpose, and the visions it awakened in us both. Music had revolutionary potential, he said. Young Serbs could be the masters of their destiny, provided they organized ways to come together. The forces that oppressed them would be sidestepped.

There were so many reasons to think he had the answer. Being safe might not be one, but that didn't bother me. Although it was clear we'd face risks, they mostly seemed trivial. I was hot off the achievement conveyor belt from Cambridge, with boundless expectations for the future. I'd grown accustomed to getting my way if I put my mind to it, and was convinced that if I only kept talking, I'd summon the words to persuade other people of anything.

But nothing's quite that simple in the Balkans. My partner said we'd need a cunning plan. And for the past few weeks, he'd supplied them in abundance, while puncturing my ignorant assumptions. Despite this affront to my pride, I felt inspired.

'You know, most stories are like parody of history,' he'd said one evening, plying us both with savage shots of firewater, in a bar at the foot of a tower block in Belgrade. 'What you tell me is grotesque hallucination. No one here believe those lies of West. Speak Serbian, fuck it, so whole world understands you.'

Although I didn't always understand him, G made sense. Most of what I was paid to write was bunk, especially the bits from politicians. As my partner said, they routinely spouted fiction. Serbia wasn't a nation in transition, as most of my articles implied. It was stuck in a rut and it needed urgent help. But since there wasn't a hope of any such thing arriving, our only option left was to intervene: we'd have to hijack its election for a president, and engineer the outcome that we wanted.

G wasn't the kind of guy you'd want to say no to. And whatever it was he came up with, he sounded for real. His English had a confident authority, with the captivating ring of a pie-eyed piper. It rattled out in blasts of manic brass, which bludgeoned you into surround-sound submission. He'd strut across the city like a battery bunny, while I trotted willingly to heel. Yet despite this perpetual performance, he seemed sincere. 'I don't give a *fuck!*' he'd exclaim, because he did. Though he was patently absurd, I

couldn't help liking him. His recklessness was infectious, like his laughter.

When the bar had started spinning, he leaned closer. 'This place became laboratory for future,' he explained, gesticulating vaguely round the room. 'For centuries Balkans was battleground of empires, so now we show to world whole different model.'

What was there to say, except why not? G appeared to know what he was doing. Though he must have been twenty years older than me, he looked ageless. Beneath the greying mop atop his head, the expression on his face was like a baby's, gurgling with unencumbered energy. He walked tall with his shoulders braced back, and he chortled through my ethical detachment. He appeared to believe almost anything was possible, and talked as if we'd already seen it was.

The morning of truth was upon us before I'd thought twice. There was nothing to fear, he assured me, as we zeroed in on our mission's first objective. Everything would be fine if we kept it casual. I couldn't help agreeing. Reporters aren't meant to be actively political. But I hadn't felt professional for months, and the October sun glossed over my objectivity. G slowed to a halt at my side, shielding his gaze with the morning's unread tabloid, and together we surveyed the square in which we found ourselves. Revived by autumn gold, its statue to a footnote of history gleamed with majesty.

I've always loved this time of year the most, perhaps because it's when I was born. The crisp bright light felt fresh with possibility, and the academic promise of renewal. I thought back to an afternoon just two years earlier, when I'd watched what looked like a televised revolution, beamed live to my sofa in Zurich from Belgrade. In those days, it wasn't a place I'd thought of visiting, and like most of the rest of the world I'd soon switched off. But now I was here, I was learning I'd been wrong.

Slouching on a bench, I let my partner's words blow over with the breeze. Beyond the gravel park that yawned before us, oppressive walls of tenements receded. Their rusting terrace irons oozed faded charm. It mightn't be the prettiest of cities, but Belgrade wasn't so dreadful, I decided, as long as you were squinting through shades. I lifted mine to my head and turned to G, who'd clutched two horny thumbs towards his lips, palms cupped as if to imitate an owl. Instead, he inhaled throatily, until a joint between his little fingers buckled. A murky cloud of dope smoke masked his face. Exhaling like a laryngitic dragon, he flicked the spliff to the ground and pronounced it kicked.

'Whoa, that shit is strong,' he boomed through the haze. 'I gotta be careful.'

Having already smoked myself senseless, I concurred. Although our rendezvous was nigh, we both sat still. The birds around my head cheeped frail excuses. That building didn't look like a party headquarters. Its entrance was a residential stairwell. The sole distinguishing feature was a patchwork of plaques. But I knew one belonged to our quarry, whose logo was as clunking as its name: G17 Plus hadn't fired up the public, and a chorus of foreign endorsements hadn't helped. At his final rally, their candidate was egged. Now he was facing defeat in a run-off for president, against a populist with next to no charisma.

This was where we came in. Plan B was disguised as an interview with *The New York Times*, the most self-regarding paper on the planet. As cover for meddling outsiders, it was perfect. I was their correspondent in the region, and my interest would by nature sound tangential: the office up for grabs possessed no power.

Such was the zombie state of Yugoslavia, which staggered on in name if nothing else. At the start of the 1990s, it had six theoretically Communist republics. Now, in 2002, just two survived: Serbia, which attacked its neighbors in the name of ‘brotherhood and unity’, and Montenegro, which demanded independence. When it broke away like Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia, Yugoslavia would formally be dead. And at that point, the Serbian president would call the shots again, as he did when he was Slobodan Milosevic, who’d presided over crimes against humanity, before promoting himself to run the union he’d destroyed.

By the time I arrived in the city, he’d been sent to The Hague, deported to rant at a trial for coordinating genocide. Though some Serbs watched proceedings on TV, most preferred *Sex and the City*. Pigsty politicians made them queasy. All the mouths in the trough talked democratic platitudes, yet no one seemed to benefit but gangsters, the wartime elite who became the nouveau riche. Popular anger had wilted into boredom. Voters were so downcast they stayed at home. Barely 50 percent, the legal minimum, turned out for the first round. The second looked a cert to be annulled.

We had to get our act together fast, before we got too twisted to care much either. As a properly accredited reporter, I had to convey some semblance of chasing the story. Against the better judgment of nausea, I stood up. ‘Come on,’ I urged my partner, who was puffing out his cheeks while walking in circles. ‘Let’s get to work.’

G strode ahead, bolt upright in a suit of bilious check, which appeared to be trying to emulate Highland tweeds. An impish grin topped off his gaudy aura, eyes glinting like costume gems in a Serbian moon face. G’s burly frame clattered through the doorway as if he owned the place.

‘We have appointment with Mr Labus,’ he beamed at the receptionist, and any colleagues within earshot down the corridor. ‘He is expecting us.’

I trudged demurely behind, unused to such a forthright translator. My regular assistant barely spoke when spoken to, which suited me just fine as an idle hack. But it wasn’t what was called for today. An androgynous aide in jeans burst out of an antechamber, and told us in jaunty English to step inside. I’d scarcely lit a cigarette when the target joined us.

One thing was clear from the start: he wasn’t a statesman. Bearded like an unassuming uncle, Miroljub Labus was patently a wonk. He’d have been happier drafting someone else’s budget. That looked like his lot in opposition. But when Milosevic was toppled in 2000, people like Labus got chronic delusions of grandeur. Having formed their ‘democratic’ coalition, they duly gridlocked government with infighting. While Serbia stagnated in recession, politicians mostly jockeyed for position. And stalemate suited most of them but Labus, which was why all his allies backed his bid for president. If no one bothered to vote, he’d be the fall guy.

Our interview got straight to the point. ‘How are you going to rouse the electorate?’ I asked, after navigating awkward small talk about harvests.

For all its metropolitan pretensions, Serbia was at heart a land of peasants. Politically, they split themselves quite neatly. A third still drooled over warlords and heirs to Milosevic. To them, Labus was a stooge of Western enemies, effectively an agent of The Empire. If they voted at all, they’d back his conservative rival, who also had a third of people’s support. That left the Labus bloc of ‘reformers’. The Western media labeled them ‘proWestern’, which meant ‘those least unlikely to do as they’re

told.’ Though marginally less numerous than the others, their ranks included a wily prime minister, who used Milosevic’s laws to cling to power. This made him as widely reviled as the former tyrant, and that gave Labus little hope of winning.

Not that he’d admit it to a journalist. ‘Serbia is one big family that is voting for its future.’ The contender smiled at us, as if addressing cameras. ‘I am sure that it will make the best choice.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said.

‘I started with nothing and received almost one million votes. This is a great success for me.’

‘Perhaps,’ I repeated. It was barely more than a quarter of the total, which was little more than half of what he needed. If Labus refused to see the problem, how could we solve it?

‘What about the young?’ I asked. ‘They’ve all lost interest.’

For years, they’d been the vanguard of resistance, exposing the old regime’s self-serving lies. Their parents were either jaded or co-opted, but younger people weren’t so easily cowed. Activism became a rite of passage, until they saw how little they’d achieved. Democracy was rich in televised insults, but a poor source of hard currency, or work visas. Serbs with big ambitions tried to emigrate. Their country’s outcast status ruled out the only goal that most people shared: joining the European Union tomorrow. Labus knew in theory how to get them there. He was the closest thing in Serbia to a blueprint from Brussels. But he didn’t know how to persuade disgruntled youngsters.

‘You’re their natural candidate,’ I said. ‘Can’t you offer them something they believe in? Otherwise they’ll carry on ignoring you.’

He didn’t have a talking point for that. Nor did he mind much. We all sipped fizzy mineral water in silence. I opened a folder, and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

‘We can help you,’ G translated, as I pushed the printed bundle across the table. Labus looked baffled. My partner tried English. ‘You know, this gentleman did wrote first positive story I read about our country in Western media.’

The dossier stayed unopened where I’d placed it.

‘Presidential Campaign Phase II,’ its cover announced. ‘In which Miroljub Labus invites the young people of Serbia to a free party on October 5, in front of the Federal Parliament, to celebrate the second anniversary of the day Milosevic was driven out.’

I’d finished the text around dawn, after staying up all night. The concept was simple. A few weeks beforehand in England, a quarter of a million people had swamped a beach. They’d gone to hear a balding man spin records. Though he’d done the same thing for years, he seemed unique. Fatboy Slim was a festival personified: funk, soul and disco rolled into one, as big a hit on adverts as in nightclubs. If only we could bring him out to Serbia, he’d probably pull an even bigger crowd. Serbs wished the outside world would treat them normally, but no one remotely famous ever toured there. The last big act to visit was The Prodigy, who flouted Western sanctions in the war years. In return they’d been given the keys to Belgrade. Simply by virtue of being there, they were legends. Local counter-culture didn’t have much to shout about.

Of course, rocking the vote was a dismal cliché. And it might not change the country in itself. But what if it woke people up and got them active? That sort of movement builds momentum. Serbs were desperate for any kind of kicks. A fortnight

earlier, they'd won the basketball world championship. A hundred and fifty thousand went on the rampage, smashing up cafes and shops in celebration. Surely there were better things to do. And who'd say no to a big free gig on Saturday? I reclined in my chair while my partner got into details.

We had seventy-two hours left to make the show happen. That was more than enough. G had already met the DJ's agent. A few calls and we'd have everything sewn up: TV promos, radio hype, and megaphone salvos fired from flatbed trucks. Posters could be pasted overnight, and the streets would be littered with flyers that afternoon. We'd rig up the stage the next day, if someone got a permit from the police. All Labus had to do was address the nation. We'd written his lines, and could film him within hours. The networks would screen our tape on constant loop. It was breaking news.

On and on G went, jabbing at the paperwork for emphasis. 'We have wasted time here because of what we've been through,' he read from the speech. 'But it is not too late. Now is the time for change. We need to be united again to make it happen.'

Cut to some footage of protests in 2000, then whack up a banging soundtrack, and wait for the hordes of punters to descend. Labus could tell them to vote if they liked the show.

'What have you got to lose?' our pitch concluded. 'Do you have any better ideas?'

Well? Do you? The candidate glanced from one of us to the other, then down at my *New York Times* business card.

'It's really very simple,' I said. 'If you give us fifty grand, we'll get you elected.'

## LIMBO

In hindsight, our adventure sounds misguided. Although G made life more fun, it felt surreal, and the closer we grew, the stranger he became. But he was also undeniably exciting. His example would constantly tempt me to do as I pleased, the opposite of what editors required. Suppressing my opinions in print only made me outspoken. I'd talk about ideas without daring to act. Though I didn't like following orders, I lacked convictions, and an outlet to express them. Suddenly, I felt challenged to take a stand. It was like being brought back to life from a highbrow coma.

From the first conversation we shared, G had seemed eager to impress me. Initially, this roused my mistrust. But it didn't take him long to win me over. He reminded me of myself, only much less self-conscious. He was earnestly romantic and irreverent, an idealist with a wicked sense of humor. And best of all he seemed entirely fearless. Around me, this combination worked like rocket fuel. I felt sure I was on the cusp of liberation.

When we met at the start of the summer, I was floundering. The job that had brought me to Serbia unsettled me, even more than my efforts to stay straight enough to do it. I didn't see how I could do it especially well. My employers had minimal interest in the Balkans. This meant there was nothing to send them most of the time, apart from a few hundred words of 'nothing changed'. But I had to pitch ideas to prove my worth. In the absence of news, they liked cultural features best. So I scratched around to find one that inspired me. And when I did, it couldn't have been a stronger tonic.

Everyone I asked said 'go to EXIT'. It was an event that had morphed out of protests against Milosevic. Designed to radicalize students on the quiet, it began as a series of concerts in 2000, which ran for 100 days in a provincial square, and ended in calls for the president to kill himself. A year later, EXIT honored his demise, by occupying a fortress on the Danube. Stages were wedged between grassy moats and turrets, and for nine balmy evenings in July, the music played from dusk until well after dawn. The afternoon heat was far too hot for dancing, and Serbs preferred to party through the night, regardless of whether they had work to do in the morning. By its second incarnation, in 2002, EXIT drew tens of thousands every day, among them a token handful of foreigners. One was a *New York Times* reporter. Me.

When I interviewed the festival's youthful founders, G had sat in on our colloquy and yawned. He seemed to have the manner of a shyster. Attired in ostentatious clashing fabrics, he spoke with all the focus of a Catherine wheel that was spinning off its nail. His sole contribution of note was to declare that he was 'man in charge of program'. This brought to mind *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*, and Malcolm McLaren's insistence that he was the Sex Pistols.

The duo I'd come to hear from sounded sharper. Like me, they were both in their 20s, but they'd hit upon a more uplifting lifestyle. 'We want to do what we enjoy,' one said, 'and gather hundreds, thousands of creative, capable people around us who think like we do and try to have an impact on society.'

These words were disconcertingly impressive. They also seemed true. They were

ordering police around the fortress. From a lookout on the sunbaked veranda, which crawled with A-list visitors most evenings, the organizers of EXIT scanned their domain. As a setting for a festival it was perfect, with a sunken DJ amphitheater out back, where thousands stomped and gurned their way to sunrise. By day, it looked a little like a tourist trap, which is what it might have been had there been any tourists.

A radio crackled on the table between the Guarana cans, and a girl barely out of her teens skipped up in hot pants, asking where she could find supplies of vodka. Her job was to pander to performers. Others her age were lugging racks of kit.

The brasher of the two youths beside me swelled with pride. His cherubic cheeks gushed unaccented English. 'We're showing people that what looks impossible can be achieved,' he said. 'So anyone who claims change is impossible here has a concrete example of that not being true.'

Corporate logos tempered his idealism, but our Stella Artois parasols kept the rays off, and I guzzled down the product feeling grateful. My hosts didn't seem too fussed about who they worked with.

'Part of our aim,' said the serious one, 'is to show you can cooperate with local authorities and still achieve what you want.'

The chubby chap even spouted half-baked Zen. 'Our motto is: If not you, who?' he said. 'If not now, when?' They'd sold me at once on selling them wholeheartedly.

Their festival's name was its history, as in 'EXIT out of the ten years of madness'. But it was hard to escape the bombast of their rhetoric, which remixed Milosevic's with 'civil society' newspeak. Apart from a sublime setting for excess, their event was said to be 'one of the greatest marketing campaigns in the country'. Lashing on the 'third sector' jargon, they promised it would 'establish a new discourse for the young people from the whole region', while 'promoting positive democratic values' and 'becoming an unavoidable part of the transition mechanism.' If they didn't get rich off music, politics beckoned.

From the ramparts behind where we sat, a vast red banner was dangled at Novi Sad, urging citizens to heed what was brewing in the ruins. 'SERBIA ARE YOU READY FOR THE FUTURE?' it screamed in English, a strong political statement in itself. They'd spurned Serbian to distance EXIT from nationalism, and the decade of dark bellicosity it spawned.

The river below held reminders of the Nineties. It lapped at the carcass of a bridge that was bombed by NATO three summers earlier, ostensibly to drive Serbian troops from Kosovo, while pursuing a broader goal of regime change. This had climaxed in the downfall of Milosevic, and the story behind that was murkier than the waters.

EXIT was born as a spin-off of U.S. policy. A substantial amount of its money still came from America, which was why *The New York Times* had shown an interest. Uncle Sam was investing in Serbian political futures, by funding influential student activists.

Being bombed didn't make most Serbs big fans of The West, or keener on giving up Kosovo to Albanians. But some people blamed their leader for getting them blitzed, as well as having bankrupted the country. American planners raced to take advantage. Dollars were funneled to a youth group called Otpor, which had sprung up to mount resistance to Milosevic. Its cadres had a flair for self-promotion, and their stenciled fist graffiti surfaced everywhere. The U.S. Army trained them how to take beatings, which

police supplied without much provocation. Crackdowns were widely reported, by alternative media financed from Washington, enlisting more young people in the cause. To round off their plan, the Americans helped unite the opposition, and enticed them to field a joint challenger to Milosevic. When the strongman lost an election but wouldn't stand down, the capital's streets were filled with young protesters. The army defied an order to send in tanks, and chose instead to recognize his rivals. The machinery of oppression had switched sides, because the old regime's tyrannical boss was 'finished', precisely as Otpor's signature slogan forecast.

It was textbook non-violent direct action, and the U.S. aimed to repeat it far and wide, ideally across the former Soviet Union. Serbs could teach Georgians to oust a leader backed by Russia. Despite misgivings about American imperialism, several of Otpor's alumni spread the word, briefing youth groups from the Balkans to Belarus.

They weren't the only ones still on the payroll. EXIT got almost \$200,000, from some of America's shadier three-letter agencies. The Office for Transition Initiatives was part of the Agency for International Development. And like the National Endowment for Democracy, and its IRI and NDI subsidiaries, it did in public what the CIA does secretly: interfere in other countries' politics. The OTI even put out a bragging press release. 'The revolution is over,' this missive decreed. 'The evolution now rests in the hands of the youth!'

Whatever else EXIT achieved, it helped me evolve, providing me with a personalized 'transition mechanism'. Once accredited, I decamped to the press hotel, and embarked on a weeklong stint of immersion reporting, sozzling myself insensate every evening, and dancing like an amphetamine-powered windmill.

Why should I stew all summer in Belgrade, in an apartment that doubled as my office, struggling to follow complexities few readers cared about? Far better to be a strategic hour's drive north, on hand in case anything newsworthy happened, but too far gone to worry much about it. As long as I kept my phone on, who'd even notice?

Come the final morning of EXIT, I was woozy. When a figure approached backstage, I could barely see him. Through the muted hues of daybreak and lights on the gantry, to say nothing of all the chemicals in my bloodstream, I could have sworn his head was a ball of flaming gas. He had a hypnotic air about him, as if smiling through me. Grabbing my arm, he began gabbling at my ear.

When the amplified break-beat subsided, I heard it was G, the self-styled master of ceremonies. He suggested taking a walk behind a tent. In the shadows, he looked the measure of his swagger. There was none of the usual Serbian machismo. If anything, he seemed a bit effeminate. His face had the sheen of a barmaid at Oktoberfest, and his trousers were cut from stripy curtain chintz. His hair sat clumped round his ears as a pair of muffs. Yet something about this appearance stopped me laughing. His every movement flowed, swift and precise. And his eyes shone wide from effervescent depths, as if glimmering with esoteric insight.

'Yeah man,' he announced, by way of greeting. 'You having good time then, or *what?*' When I'd met him before, he'd sounded barely lucid. But now he seemed to be singing out his words, which took the edge off their Kalashnikov delivery, and addressed you as if you were all you'd like to be. Some gesture of respect appeared in order, but before I could think what it was, he'd steamrolled on.

‘You know, this show it was born in my shop in a Shepherd’s Bush,’ he said, cackling wildly in the direction of the stage. This contradicted everything I’d been told. But rather than start with an argument, I sought common ground.

‘So you used to live in England too?’ I said. Though employed by an American paper, I was born there.

‘Man, I spent my best times in London,’ G sighed. ‘I was travelling to city for years since I was kid. We organize whole project from my store.’

I stared at him, no less confused.

‘That place was pretty much everything but business,’ he laughed. ‘First floor it was juice bar, kinda coffee shop selling ice cream and smoothies. Basement was illegal social club. All day were coming Rastas and Crusties. You know like poets, buffoons and socially devastated people. So one of these guys did bring me up to Glastonbury. I’m telling you experience blew my mind. It was beautiful night, yeah, clear with stars quite visible, and he brought me up to Tor there on the hill, and he said long time ago those Pagans practice rituals here, until day that hill was repossessed by Christians. So he told me I should disregard monastery, right, just to lay straight down, open eyes and desire something beautiful. And I did wish I wanna do festival. Like this.’

He motioned at the throng. Backlit by the first shards of sunlight, twenty thousand faces bounced around. The front row heaved with adolescent beauties, with a dress code of crop tops and boob tubes. From the apron, MC Dynamite ogled their contents, raising a glass of lager in salute. Behind, Roni Size dropped grinding drum and bass, undeterred by continual threats to shut down the system. When security intervened to bundle them off, they decamped to another stage by the fortress entrance, where they remained until they’d almost missed their flight. Eventually, someone stuck them in a taxi, and sent them home to play in sweaty rooms.

‘These guys, they my lifeline man,’ G said. They’d headlined the previous year too, and like all the other performers he’d imported, they’d gone back to Britain dazzled by their reception. ‘Here, the people act like they are superstars. You know, I call them and they came because of those times.’

Except we both knew it wasn’t quite like that really. All week, I’d been told the line-up sounded stale, with too many acts that had already played before. A constant gripe was the lack of foreign bands. The DJs could just about stretch to a blowout weekend: Darren Emerson, Derrick Carter and LTJ Bukem. But nine nights had spread them too thinly, especially over a dozen different stages, including a cinema and theatre. For all that the crowds were in raptures, the consensus seemed to be that EXIT had peaked.

G’s response was dismissive. ‘Round here people totally confused,’ he scoffed. ‘Serbs think because they value themselves that everyone else is gonna treat them special.’

The first year, mere existence was a triumph. With the end of international isolation, people would have paid to hear buskers from abroad. But EXIT didn’t know anyone who’d send some. This was where G came in. He had contacts who’d helped him run parties in England. And when he returned to Belgrade in 2000, he’d gone looking for student activists he’d heard about. They had the local manpower for a festival, and he had access to artists and their agents. On a budget too tight for names most Serbs had heard of, they scraped together the makings of a bill: Finley Quaye, Tony Allen and

Banco de Gaia. It went down a storm. Yet twelve months on, disillusionment was rife. G put this down to an ingrained national mania.

‘You realize not much changed here man,’ he said. ‘I came from London like ten days after end of the Milosevic, and it was one of my worst experiences in this country.’

He’d gone to a football match, he explained, between the Belgrade rivals Partizan and Red Star. It erupted in a riot on the pitch. Rockets were fired at the stands. Players and the visiting coach were beaten. The fixture was scrapped in three minutes.

G put a hand on my shoulder and stared at me hard. ‘It was *weird*,’ he said. ‘Somehow in that game I knew whole saga about revolution is not genuine, and this violence is just going to transfer.’

He started laughing. ‘You know, here lotta people still have same bullshit attitude. But fuck it, we take kids with guns and get them looking you in the eye man and smiling. That’s what festival can do, hey. It’s beautiful.’

I nodded, none too sure what he was getting at.

‘Now question is how we take things to next level,’ he said.

I tried to sound agreeably non-committal. ‘It’s not easy, I guess.’

‘Exactly, my friend,’ he said. ‘People here don’t wanna *work*. We should show to them what is real transformation, not to change just heads on the Godzilla, or build up some new monster here for masters. I sometimes think was better with Milosevic. At least there was a talk about alternative. Now it seems they all go back to sleep. You know, all these Serbs and Croats they were same. People used to say about Yugoslavia that it had head in Russia and a stomach in America. Now Serbs have the head in fourteenth century and their ass in twenty-first. They get fucked by world while thinking they do fucking.’

He’d lost me, but my mind was drifting anyway. From his pocket, he’d pulled a blob of black hashish.

‘You wanna make joint?’ he asked, proffering his palm. ‘S’aright man, no one gonna trouble themselves back here.’

I picked up the piece and held it to my nose. It smelled rich, and crumbled easily when heated. It mightn’t be the cream of the Himalayas, but it had to beat the local rope-grade weed, which was all I’d been offered since moving to Belgrade. That stuff swelled the skull like a vodka espresso, and wore off just as roughly shortly after. I’d left it alone. Being hired by *The New York Times* was my big break, and I was anxious to exploit it to the full. It was only a matter of weeks since I’d joined, and I was trying to ape the paper’s sober style. G’s hash was different. It reminded me of a life I’d been denying myself. I knocked up fast, and lugged back three deep tokes.

‘Not bad,’ I said, and it wasn’t, even through the accumulated booze fug. ‘Where did you get it?’

Dumb question, I thought, the moment I asked.

The reply was as unexpected as his smile.

‘I’ll introduce you,’ he beamed.

We were friends.

There was only one intruder on my stupor: the Serbian prime minister.

When I first arrived in Belgrade two months earlier, I’d tried to meet some senior

politicians. As the newly appointed *Times* correspondent, I'd assumed they'd want to talk to American bigwigs. But no one obliged. Instead, I had to call an American, who was embedded in the government advising on public relations. Having helped me get accredited for EXIT, she also got me summoned back to Belgrade, for an hour-long chat with the premier, Zoran Djindjic. Unfortunately, I knew nothing much about him, except that he'd led an opposition party, but hadn't been popular enough to get himself elected, so the Americans built a coalition round him. Once in power, it quickly splintered, when Djindjic overruled his partners to extradite Milosevic.

That was the last time Serbs made worldwide headlines. Nowadays, Balkan affairs were news in brief. It was nine months since the September 11 attacks, and the *Times* was full of fighting talk and terrorists, regaling itself in American hyperbole. My dry reports on stagnation were 'overheld' for weeks, waiting for a stray 'shelf' or 'gutter' among the jewelry ads. I generally looked for reasons not to write them, and most of the time my editors approved. Quite what I was going to ask Djindjic was a mystery.

I briefly indulged the notion of snorting speed, which appeared to be the festival drug of choice, but a dullard sense of duty overcame me. I sweated through the interview in German, which Djindjic spoke far better than me, but nothing he said sounded worthy of a story. Short of declaring war, or deporting investors, it was hard to see how he'd make *The New York Times*. So I buried my notes in a drawer and drove back to EXIT.

Everyone's priorities felt warped, my own included. Americans might not care about the Balkans, but foreigners had been meddling there for centuries, mostly without consulting the inhabitants. And the *Times* didn't have much space for their point of view, except as a colorful sound bite now and then. My task was not to ask what people thought, but to explain how Western planners thought they should.

As Djindjic had complained: 'It is unfair.' Foreign powers behaved like Americans abroad, repeating their orders loudly and slowly, as if hoping they might yet sink in, while persistently ignoring why they wouldn't.

'Most world leaders are very realistic at home but very moralistic when dealing with us,' he'd explained. He was always being told to arrest more war criminals, but no one offered incentives for him to do so, which might have persuaded Serbs to go along with it. Instead, most people thought they were being victimized. So Djindjic agreed that they were, to keep his job. The most wanted men had protection from the army. Confronting them alone was political suicide.

Serbia couldn't change overnight, Djindjic had said. 'To say now we will determine who was guilty in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, it's too much. It's more important for me that society recovers internally so that what happened can't be repeated.'

It took Germans a generation to confront Nazi guilt, he stressed, and 'in Germany they did it under occupation, but we are not under occupation and we also didn't murder six million Jews'. No: just tens of thousands of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. But even so he clearly had a point, though it wasn't one my bosses would have printed.

News comes packaged in narratives for convenience, and most of these are defined by the powers that be, which set the agenda by announcing what they're doing. Reporters simply write down what they say, and explain what it means from official points of view, to put the information 'into context'. Government spin is therefore

background fact, but to draw one's own conclusions would be biased, which was how the U.S. was rebranded 'the international community'. Other perspectives were published, of course, but only if you labeled them as partisan. I couldn't frame the news the way I saw it, and certainly not with comments from a Serb. They'd have to appear as a line in a broader story, which would need to reflect American assumptions. And if I didn't write it that way, editors would. I soon gave up trying. So much for hoary journalistic clichés, like the *Times* editorial code of conduct, which urged staff to report 'without fear or favor'. Toeing the line was less hassle on the whole.

Initially I'd meant to be more rigorous. My shelves were stacked with books I planned to read, until I realized my assignment. Covering the Balkans for *The New York Times* consisted of monitoring whether The Serbs had agreed they were Bad Guys. Trying to explain why they hadn't, or how 'we' made the opposite more likely, was tantamount to 'understanding' suicide bombers. And in the fog of War On Terror, this wasn't on, especially not at a paper boasting 'All The News That's Fit To Print.'

My boss, the foreign editor Roger Cohen, had started his job on what he called 'this solemn date': September 11, 2001. The response to being attacked defined his remit. While Americans asked each other 'why do they hate us?' the *Times* had asked the White House who'd get bombed. A year on from The Crime That Changed Everything, Cohen sent a memo to reporters. 'To judge by the President's plans,' he confided, 'the first half of next year may be busy.'

Well, that was one way to describe the invasion of Iraq. He wasn't finished. Declaring himself 'in awe of the commitment and dedication of everyone to ensuring and sharpening our excellence,' Cohen urged us to 'celebrate life' by 'chronicling its every nuance and its every possibility'. Except, of course, for those that might derail 'the President's plans', because war is stuff that happens when he says so. Since journalists are obsessed with what's going to happen, they fixate on What Powerful People Plan To Do. And if no other powerful people obstruct them, then why should the press? Our task would be to chronicle the cavalcade.

Not from the Balkans, however. There, my directions marched me backwards, to dredge up Roger Cohen's recent past. He'd covered the Bosnian war in the 1990s, and called it 'as morally indelible to my generation of correspondents as Vietnam,' only this time he thought Americans were the Good Guys; at least once they intervened to bomb the Serbs. He'd also written a book, which strove 'to consider Yugoslavia's destruction through families broken asunder, for this was a war of intimate betrayals.' I hadn't read it. Reviewers praised his 'forceful, elegant prose.' I found it flowery.

When he hired me, Cohen promised: 'Your scope to write about whatever you wish would be broad.' In practice, this meant: 'Tell the same old story at regular intervals.' Once a month, the desk demanded war porn, and dispatched me to dredge up brutal recollections. I begged Bosnians to peel off their scabs so I'd look good in print.

'A lot of this is about picking the right situation,' a veteran editor suggested, recalling Balkan gore with abhorrent glee. 'A place of hideous atrocities, of course, but also a place where people had been quite friendly before the war.' That was 'loaded with dramatic possibilities,' he said, such as: 'what do they say to their neighbors, who at least stood aside, if they didn't actually participate, when the nasty stuff was going on?'

This was what *The New York Times* excelled at: overwrought reportage in hindsight. One guy specialized in resurrecting the Khmer Rouge. Survivors recalled its savagery at length, but there wasn't the space to mention American carpet-bombing, or how it wiped out hundreds of thousands of Cambodians, and helped bring Pol Pot to power to till his Killing Fields. These stories taught a simplified morality, beseeching readers to yell 'Never Again!' without examining 'our' role in the process. They had style, if you liked cod literary flair. But there wasn't much substance behind the 'vividness and immediacy' that Cohen prized, in his regular email eulogies to 'wrenching issues', and 'every expression of the mystery of the human heart'. This sort of stuff left me cold. I was hopeless at it.

According to more illustrious reporters, witnessing a conflict is a privilege. In the words of Kurt Schork, who died doing it: 'every day I see the grace and dignity of ordinary people trying to survive under extraordinary circumstances.' I just asked them to cry into my notebook. It was seven years since fighting stopped in Bosnia, and still the tears would pour forth on cue. A quarter of people lived as refugees.

I kept being asked if their country could be salvaged. But a peace deal struck by Americans had divided it, handing Serbs the bits they'd already won at gunpoint. The two halves of Bosnia were separate, and only pretended they weren't because they were occupied, by tens of thousands of well-armed foreign troops. It was preferable to combat, for the moment, but it didn't help most Bosnians move on.

'My life has no meaning,' sobbed one woman whose son had been murdered by Serbs at Srebrenica. 'It would have been better if they'd killed me.' Another scoffed when I apologized for intruding. 'You can't upset me,' she sniffed in her poky flat. 'I've been through everything, apart from having my throat slit.'

The bereaved mostly languished alone, and rarely gathered together except to mourn. Their ceaseless grieving started to depress me. I wondered if they'd ever see beyond it, or would they carry on and wail themselves to death? And if so, would the next generation seek revenge?

I found answers when somebody lent me the Bhagavad Gita. 'For all things born in truth must die, and out of death in truth comes life,' it advised. 'Face to face with what must be, cease thou from sorrow.'

The situation couldn't be clearer. I had to stop wallowing in Bosnia, at once.

After EXIT, I spent several weeks with G, whose protégés had vanished for a holiday. Our days were spent pleasantly stoned in my apartment, where I was technically at work. It didn't take long to find a common goal: both of us needed something new to do, and music mixed G's expertise with my frustrations. Together we'd hit on the plan to hustle Labus. If a DJ could get him elected, we'd be able to finance even bigger projects. Unless something gave people hope, Serbia seemed to be set for another lost decade, and I didn't fancy hanging round to watch.

Amazingly, the candidate hadn't said no. To be fair, he didn't actually say yes, but he sent us to see his campaign manager, an activist whom G knew from EXIT. This aide agreed to get us police permission. That took care of immediate concerns.

Whether Labus could raise fifty grand was a technicality. First we had to book Fatboy Slim. To buy ourselves more time to find the cash, G said we could fax him lots of paperwork. We'd drown him in logistical information. As long as he promised