



JOURNEY FROM THE DARK ABYSS OF WAR TO THE RADIANT JOY OF LONDON

It was August 12 1994 when I arrived in London with my family from the Yugoslavian war, a broken teen with one suitcase that had only one photo album from childhood and thousands of shattered dreams to go with it. We came from a small village on the border of Hercegovina and Croatia where I'd lived with mum, sister and grandma for two years as a refugee while my dad was stuck in war-torn Sarajevo, my hometown, fighting the war on the front line together with our neighbours, regular folks who became a territorial defence army.

Needless to say, my first encounter with London was both traumatic and positive and left me in awe, especially because we'd lived a hard life for a long time, in a small stone house with two rooms and an outside toilet. Life in a small, sleepy village, in which my sister and I had to wash ourselves in large plastic bowls and walk four miles to school every day did not prepare us for such a huge, sparkly, rich and welcoming city.

We came to live in Bayswater and stayed in a hotel. Apart from the fact there were cockroaches coming out of the sink at night, it was alright. They had poisonous snakes in the place I lived before so this was not a big issue and I was very content with London at the time. After just one week we had enrolled in an English school in Bayswater. My sister and I were put in the beginner's class with my mum who couldn't speak English at all.

The teacher's name was James. He was kind and had this typical English pinky skin complexion and warm blue eyes. Unfortunately his class was not really suitable for my sister and I because he used to do things like jump up and down on the floor like a frog so we understood what the word 'frog' meant. This made my sister and I laugh so hard that we had to run out of the classroom in tears of laughter. All praise and glory to Teacher James. He was a great teacher but we had both studied some English at school in Sarajevo so James' class was a bit basic for us.

I was moved up to the intermediate class. My new teacher, Jane, was an absolute sweetheart. She was from Liverpool originally, with dark hair and blue eyes and looked like PJ Harvey, the musician, but more pretty and feminine. I instantly connected with Jane, a beautiful human being and a real lady. She bought me a birthday card, wrote a gorgeous message inside and I was so touched that I kept it for many years.

The road the school was on, Queensway, was a fun area to live in with the famous Hyde Park at the end of it, and all the delights of central London within walking distance. There were restaurants everywhere with lovely smells of international cuisine coming out of the doors and colourful shops for tourists selling sweets,

Igor Pivo

keychains with Big Ben and red London phone boxes on them.

We were slowly but surely recovering from the trauma we'd experienced back home. I was in a beautiful environment and I was beginning to find a new hope for the future. Not long after arriving we met other refugee teens from our country and we discovered new ways to be mischievous. We used to jump over the fences to get into Hyde park after dark and sit by the pond, giggling, trying our first beers, and telling stories to the local ducks as we found it hilarious that ducks were wandering around the park at night, in central London.

My only fear on our night time trips to Hyde Park was the foxes. I'd never seen one before even though I'd lived in a rural area, and London foxes were strange with their staring eyes and their habit of following you around like a dog.

It was all a big adventure and a lot of fun. A couple of weeks after arriving I was enrolled in a Catholic sixth form college not far from the area and my new academic journey had begun. I was going through a rebellious phase and I didn't really want to speak in class. I chose to focus only on art. This was partly because I couldn't really understand the lessons, which were intended for the local British born students, and partly because I was two years older than my classmates and wasn't quite ready to mingle with the local teens.

I did have one friend though, a Russian man called Igor like me. He was very short, smoked like a chimney outside college, was sixteen, and talked really fast. In fact he talked too much but it was a pleasant distraction for me as he was funny and also tried to teach me English.

I also managed to find a weekend job, through an agency, working outside Wembley stadium during football games and cooking and selling burgers and other fast food to the football fans. That was exciting and fun because I had some money at this stage and football hooligans were really funny. To my surprise and amusement they used to ask for lots of onion with their burgers with a big grin on their drunken faces most of the time. Sometimes they were grumpy and had disappointment projecting from their faces, if they had lost the game, but they were always kind to those of us serving food.

All of this has happened to me in the first month of my London experience. Of course, the journey continues, but that's a story for another day.

