

# AFTER THE SIEGE

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Four boys sit huddled together by a fireplace passing around a can of peaches and a bottle of šljivovica. Such has been their life for the past three months.

The quartet has been inseparable since their youth, so they've spent the months-long siege of their hometown hidden away in Nikola's basement. "Brotherhood" was Yugoslavia's foundational characteristic, but it's hard to imagine anything less brotherly than the federal army pummeling Vukovar. Thank god the four boys have each other.

Time passes arbitrarily here in the makeshift bunker, and routine has fallen by the wayside in favor of rationing. The boys once spent their free days sitting on Nikola's porch discussing everything from American politics to their dream of a road trip from Vukovar to Vienna to Luka's latest crush. Now those conversations are paused – they have no access to the outside world, the farthest they can travel is the bathroom, and they have no way of knowing whether any of Luka's crushes are even alive at this point.

Their most treasured pastime was basketball – the foursome had properly exhausted the possible two-on-two combinations over the years and reveled in dominating Vukovar's pickup scene. Basketball is the one thing they still have – they can't play it themselves, but Nikola had stockpiled enough NBA magazines

and hung enough posters of Dražen Petrović and Dino Radja on the basement walls that there is still one precious topic left where they can manufacture new conversational material.

A fresh šljivovica-fueled debate erupts as to who will win the 1992 NBA championship. Nikola, Luka, and Ante are all in agreement that the Chicago Bulls are *definitely* going back-to-back. Ever the contrarian, Ivan insists that Magic Johnson will go on a tear and the Lakers will get them back in '92. He doesn't know that Magic retired weeks ago after being diagnosed with HIV. The last newspaper they have is from August.

The debate carries on through a round of gunfire outside. The boys don't even bother to lower their voices anymore. The sound of federal guns and bombs laying waste to the only place they've ever called home used to be enough to jolt the boys awake on the pair of mattresses they shared deep in the basement. Now it's the rare absence of house-shaking explosions that keeps them awake. The bombs have become white noise to the exhausted survivors.

They finally balk as they hear shrapnel from an explosion pelt the kitchen window upstairs. The neighbor's Yugo hatchback has been blown to pieces by an indiscriminately-thrown grenade and nearly taken the house with it. Nikola runs his hands through his sun-bleached mess of brown curls, his distinctive nervous tick, and the boys shuffle away from the basement window.

Ante has been hit particularly hard by the siege. The boys have been trapped in the basement since August 25th, and Ante was supposed to move to Zagreb on August 29th to enroll in engineering school. Anxiety over missing out on school has faded into depressed resignation. Ante is easily the brightest of all the boys, and the four had long dreamt of the days when he would become the top government engineer in a newly independent Croatia and buy them all a house on the coast in Zadar. It's been months now since it's even come up.

Once the house stops shaking, the boys settle into a game of briškola. Nikola has been playing the longest, but the wily Ante has learned to read the cards better than anyone. He wins almost every time. Briškola is an anchor for the boys when the sound of bombs overhead becomes too much to bear – it's almost an unspoken codeword. When someone asks to play a game of briškola, you never

say no. It is understood to soothe the founded fears of death and destruction overhead.

Packed like sardines onto two twin mattresses on the floor, the boys have made a routine of always reading before bed. Ante is deep in a collection of Kirkegaard essays, Ivan thumbs through an old economics schoolbook, Nikola is on a third lap through *Dubliners* by James Joyce, and Luka is immersed in an oral history of Italian football.

After twenty or so minutes, it's bedtime – not that when the boys go to sleep or wake up matters in any way.

Nikola rolls over to face Ante mere inches away. "I love you, bro. Goodnight."

The moment the boys' mortality came into question back in August, they made a habit of telling each other they loved each other every day. For four seventeen-year-old boys, the weight of never knowing if they could be seeing their best friends for the last time had rapidly matured them far beyond their years.

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The boys were awoken around 5 in the morning by Nikola's father.

"Dečki!" he whispers. "Get up and grab your things. It's time for you to get out of here!"

Nikola's father had been woken up by the rumbling of a United Nations Peacekeeping truck coming in to rescue the refugees hiding in the nearby church. Minutes later, he watched the truck drive away, packed full of so many people that some of the teenage boys clung to the side of the vehicle. He had seen an old schoolmate, Tomislav Pavić, and his three children make their escape. He saw a chance to free the four bright young boys and send them off to a better life.

For the next several hours, the boys were euphoric. For the first time in months, dreams and ambitions returned to their psyche. Ante envisioned his

dormitory at the engineering school and made a mental itinerary for when the boys would come visit him in Zagreb. Nikola thought of playing two-on-two basketball with his three best friends for the first time in months, the chain net and cracked concrete representing the last vestiges of a childhood that had been pillaged by the federal army. Ivan thought of the boys piling into his Volkswagen van and driving to the national park in Hungary for a camping trip. Luka dreamt of taking the bus to Zagreb or Budapest and flying to England to watch a football match – he'd always wanted to see Liverpool play. And all four thought once again of the house on the coast in Zadar that Ante would buy for them.

Given how cramped the UN trucks were sure to be, they had to pack light. Each boy brought his passport, a change of clothes, whatever cash they had, and the minimal necessary toiletries. Nikola brought his Game Boy and copies of *Tetris* and *Super Mario Land*. Luka brought his favorite Liverpool jersey. Ivan brought a gold coin his brother had brought him home as a souvenir from a trip to Bratislava; his brother had been enlisted in the Croatian army and sent to Dubrovnik, and Ivan had no way of knowing whether he was dead or alive. Ante brought no personal wares.

The four boys and Nikola's father devised a plan: Each would pick a window on the main floor of the house to stake out for a sighting of a UN truck, and the minute one of them saw one, it would be all hands on deck. There would be a few seconds for some parting pleasantries before the boys would make the perilous sprint to the church – they could be facing anything from snipers to grenades en route to freedom.

The stakeout lasted until around 2:30 in the afternoon when Ante spotted a caravan of three UN trucks speeding up the highway.

The four boys huddled together with Nikola's father by the front door. He handed them each 200 German marks to find food and shelter wherever it was they arrived. "I'll see you guys soon," he said. "When you get where you're going, catch the next bus to Poreč – you can stay with Nikola's uncle Kristijan."

"Hvala, tata," Nikola said. "I love you."

Nikola and his father were not particularly affectionate toward one another –

their love was of the more unspoken type – but the two embraced for longer than they ever had, knowing the likelihood one or both of them was killed in the coming weeks bordered on inevitability.

The four boys gathered into a group hug, said their I-love-yous, and took off running at a full sprint. The sounds of bullets and bombs levelling their hometown to the ground provided the frantic soundtrack of a mad dash to safety. Nikola had always been the fastest when the boys played basketball, and he stayed a few paces ahead of the other three.

The 250-meter sprint to the church was quite literally life or death. Two minutes felt like two days. Nikola thought of his father being trapped alone in Vukovar, but the adrenaline of the sprint prevented any sense of guilt from setting in. The other three blacked out everything around them and just ran.

They rounded the corner toward the final sprint and passed by *Slavonski Sladoled*, the ice cream shop the boys frequented since they could walk. They had gotten really close with the owner, Boban, over the years. Boban was a large, jovial man who always wore a stained apron over a white t-shirt, and if the boys came in on Sunday, he always gave them an extra scoop for free.

But now the windows were boarded up, the patio tables and chairs were strewn about the street, and Boban was dead. The first house the federal army bombed was Boban's, where he and his wife had been sleeping.

As the boys closed in on the church, the gunshots grew louder, the federal army making a conscious effort to take out as many fleeing refugees as possible before they reached the church.

Twenty meters stood between Nikola and the church, with the other three boys another five meters behind him. As freedom and safety edged within the boys' reach, Nikola heard a single visceral scream bellow out. Ante collapsed forward, a bullet having torn straight through his chest.

Nikola, Luka, and Ivan all craned their necks mid-sprint to see the corpse of their best friend lying face-down in a pool of blood. Panic and adrenaline pushed the boys all the way to the church, where they hung on to the sides of the packed UN truck and hitched a ride out of Vukovar for good.