

To Mirza and Daliborka, my youngsters from Bosnia,

To all children who have suffered from war.

in all its guises...

THE CHILD OF WAR

When war breaks out, the child is small.

His mummy and daddy no longer have any work. Their work place was hit by a shell.

Mummy says that snipers are hidden in the hills and that they fire at anything that moves, at any time of the day, or night. That it is dangerous to play outside. Stay indoors.

Indoors, there is no electricity, no heating. It is so cold that the water in the flower vase sticks to the stem of the frozen rose.

Then, the child with nothing to do peers out of the window. Sometimes boys from around the block walk past his front door and ask him to go with them. And so he slinks off.

They all go to the waste ground where they invent games in the rubbish. The children play football. They shout. They run. They knock each other over.

He is the goalkeeper

He stretches out to catch the ball.

Silence.

Suddenly, he is thrown to the ground. There is a big bang. He does not know where he is. He gets up and finds the others as best he can.

His friend is covered in blood and lies in the mud.

People flock together after the explosion.

Sirens wail. There is blood everywhere. People are panic-stricken. They jostle and howl.

The friend is carried off on a stretcher, his leg torn to shreds.

On his way home, he meets his mother who is beside herself with worry. She shouts at him and scolds him. She tells him off for having left the house, for being disobedient. She never stops talking about all the dangers and what is forbidden.

The boy is sad. He is completely at a loss. The accident and the words uttered in fury by his mother silence him. He finds refuge in his favourite corner at home

“How is it that the bomb went off when they were playing and minding their own business? Why?

Who? What is going to happen to his friend’s foot? Where is the enemy? He must be punished.

In the meantime, he stares into nothingness and slips into a dream world to get out of the cold. There is no longer any light. Only spaghetti handed out by humanitarian aid organisations. And a tin of beans. You could make out in a foreign language some barely legible letters. And a date: 4 JAN 1969.

When was that? A long time ago?

Years later, the war is over.

Water and electricity have come back.

And so has the heating.

There are no longer any snipers in the hills firing haphazardly at anything that moves. But there are reportedly anti-personnel mines on the waste ground.

Children had been playing and had stepped on them.

They were dead. Just like that.

His friend was still alive, but he hobbled along on one leg.

That's how it is.

And the boy grows up.

In the morning he goes to school with his friends.

In the evening, he goes home.

But he does not put the light on in the bathroom.

- "Why don't you put the light on? " - shouts his mother when she finds him on the toilet - How am I to know that you are there?

I must practise seeing in the dark - he would say to himself.

When it was very cold in winter, he would go outside with hardly anything warm on.

-"You're out of your mind! Put your fur-lined coat on. You'll catch your death of cold

But he hurried out. She must not catch him.

I must practise putting up with the cold - he thought to himself.

Sometimes, he cycled out of town.

He took paths he didn't know so that he would get lost and have to practise finding his way.

- «Where have you been? It's dark! Why do you come home so late? This time you can go without your dinner. That's your punishment. »

Then he would go without food to practise being hungry.

His friends called on him to go out with them.

- "Come on, we've found piles of boxes full of chewing gum. They're in old Elma's abandoned house."

But the boy would not go.

- One day my friends may no longer be with us. I must practise fending for myself - he thought.

One day, he went out and said to himself:

- What happens if my parents run out of food?. I must be ready. I must practise stealing.

So he went to the market and practised stealing: an apple, a piece of cheese, a cake. In one shop, he took a bottle of wine and tried to hide it in his trousers. When he looked up, he saw a tall man staring down at him with a reproachful and threatening look.

It was the grocer. He had observed all the boy's movements in the mirror

hanging over the shelves.

The grocer suddenly snatched the neck of the bottle tucked under the belt of the scrawny boy's trousers.

- "What are you doing with that bottle? he shouted. Do you think your pants are the larder? You can't pull a fast one on Boris in his own shop! I'm going to call your parents, you naughty little so-and-so!

The boy nimbly slipped behind the tall man's legs and ran off like a rabbit. He ran and ran so fast that he was back home in no time. He puffed his way through the flat. Without_a sideways glance, he disappeared at the end of the corridor. The father was surprised. He slowly followed the trail. He was intrigued and carefully pushed open the boy's door.

The father, silently, sat down with him, watching each of his movements.

The boy was sprawled out. He was trying to catch his breath. His shoulders heaved. Tears welled up. Each tear was full of bitter memories.

- "Tell me, son, what's going on? -he whispered. With your mother we noticed something ...tell me, son ...".

The son heard his father's voice, and began to cry.

Then he started telling about all his secret "training": darkness to see in the dark, fasting not to feel hunger, being on his own to keep going, light clothes to overcome the winter, stealing to know how to do everything...

- I wanted to practise, you understand. If the war comes back, I must be

ready!

The father's eyes stared into the distance and beyond. Leaning over his son, he took him in his arms and tapped him on the back to calm his sobbing.

- War is terrible, Sajo. But it's over, at last, and we are alive. We must build peace Sajo. And you will become big and strong, as we are all now....»

Next day, Sajo got up early. He put the light on in the bathroom and started to wash. He saw the reflection in the steamed-up mirror and gazed at his face, his eyes, his look .He was engrossed. What had happened?

He wrapped up warmly and went out to see his friends. He enjoyed laughing with them and listened to all the stories about the tinned food in Elma's abandoned house.

- «No chewing gum, Sajo! Only those tins of beans! We thought of reselling them, but they dated from the Vietnam War! Do you realize, Sajo, beans from another war! Nobody wanted them! The beans have become has-beens» They started chanting in chorus.

They were laughing derisively - and Sajo was so happy to laugh with them!

In the mists of winter, he let out a long sigh.

The echo of his father's voice was ringing in his ears: "war over... build peace... grow... grow up... become ..."

The cold, like every year, was bitter, but he was warm as toast in his fur-lined coat.