

The Library

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You hear the whistle over your head. It's followed by the odd moment of suspense, and then below, somewhere in the city, there's an explosion. You can always see the spot clearly from your window. At first there's a tall, thin column of dust which turns to smoke and flames. You wait a few minutes to work out what sort of building it is. If the fire is slow and lazy, it means that the burning flat belongs to some poor people. If it bursts into a huge, blue fireball, then it's somebody's nicely decorated attic with panelled walls burning. If it burns unremittingly, then the flames must be coming from the apartment of a wealthy shop-owner, full of massive antique furniture. But if the flame suddenly shoots up, wild and uncontrollable, like the hair of Farrah Fawcett, and disappears even more rapidly, allowing the wind to spread paper ash over the city, that means somebody's private library has just burned down. As you witnessed many such vigorous fires over the months and years of shelling, you got to feel that the foundations of Sarajevo must have been made out of books. And even if they weren't, you'd like to say, as you stroke the bound volumes on your shelves, that the city still contains many books that have not yet been destroyed. In any private library most of the books have not been read. No doubt you bought this one or that one because of its cover or the author's name, or simply because the smell of the paper appealed to you. You pick up such a book often in the early days, open it, read a few lines and then put it back. After a

while you forget about the book, or else you look at it from a distance with mild disgust. You have often wanted to take it to the nearest public library and to give it to somebody, just to get rid of the thing in some way, but you you've never been able to do so. It will always remind you of your tendency to hoard useless things, and will soon transform itself, in a painful burning moment, into a host of other memories. All those unnecessary and unread books will prove to be a burden when it's time to leave them behind. You may almost come to understand the fire's rapture as it engulfs similar books around the city.

There are a few books which you have not opened since childhood. They remind you of a time when you still hadn't learned to scan the pages, to read from the top left-hand corner to the bottom right. These are probably the only books you have really enjoyed in your life. All the best children's stories had an unhappy ending which didn't teach you anything, except that sadness is a place where fiction becomes more important than reality. In John Huston's film *The Dead*, a woman bursts into tears and is unable to say why. As you watched the film, you thought that this was in fact the way life is — and you too felt like crying.

There are even fewer books that you imagined you'd always carry with you. When you read one for the first time, you'd try and postpone the ending. Later on, you found them exciting in both content and appearance. But you will have to leave them behind, just like

all the others, with the bitter conviction that not only in this city, but also in the world at large, a book's natural state of aggregation is fire, smoke and ash. Somebody in the future may find this pathetic, but for you, especially when you end up in other cities where bookshops still exist, Farrah Fawcett's flaming hair will always be the plain truth. The only thing that burns better, more beautifully and more thoroughly than a book is a manuscript. With the illusion of a private library also vanishes the illusion of a *bibliotheca*, or civilisation of books. Its very name, which is just a Greek word, like any other, but which is, for you, tied to the name of the Holy Scriptures, was enough to make you a believer. But, as they burned, disappearing irrevocably one after the other, you stopped believing that there was any purpose in a book's existence. Or perhaps the only one to have worked out their purpose was that Sarajevo author and bibliophile who, instead of using expensive firewood, warmed his fingers last winter on the flames of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Cervantes... As a result of so many deliberate and accidental fires, a new kind of person has been created, a person who has come bitterly to understand how things go and who, as a result, would coolly watch flames rising from the Louvre and not even reach out for a glass of water. There's no point in not letting a fire swallow up things that human indifference has already destroyed. The beauty of Paris or London is only an alibi for the criminals who have allowed Warsaw, Dresden,

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Vukovar and Sarajevo to disappear. But even if they hadn't ceased to exist, they would have become places inhabited by people who even in peacetime were ready to evacuate, who were prepared to abandon their books.

In this world, as it is, there is one basic rule; Zuko Džumhur mentioned it when he was thinking about Bosnia, and it relates to the two suitcases that you always have packed in the hall. All your possessions and all your memories have to fit into them. Everything outside is already lost. There is no point in looking for reasons or mean-

ings or excuses. They are just a burden, like memories. There is nothing left but to return the books you have borrowed in the past, trying to avoid or to miss out the ones you were given as presents, and the others you've made a note about to send to friends who live elsewhere, so that those books would not be engulfed in flames — or, at any rate, not until the day the world returns to the condition it was in a few million years ago.

You can never list or recall the private libraries that have burned down in Sarajevo. And why should you? But the

fate of the Sarajevo University Library, its famous city hall, whose books took a whole night and day to go up in flames, will be remembered as the fire to end all fires, a last mythical celebration of ash and dust. It happened, after a whistle and an explosion, almost exactly a year ago. Perhaps the same date you're reading this. Gently stroke your books, dear stranger, and remember they are dust.

*This section translated by
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