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Life's cruelest lessons are behind her

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From a window, the little girl looked out to see the clouds. She heard thunder, but she could see nothing -- just a sunny September day, her town below, and the mountains beyond. No clouds.

"That is not thunder," her father said.

"What is it?" asked Dijana, then only 10.

"Bombs," he said. "Serbian bombs. The war is coming here."

Her next thought was silly, she knows now, and she should have said nothing. Looking from the window of the fourth-floor apartment, she also could see her school, the little elementary school in the town of Sanski Most in Bosnia. School for the fall term, 1992, would start in a few days.

"Maybe they will bomb the school and I will not have to go."

Soon, she did not have to go. The school was closed after the soldiers came.

Much changed in Sanski Most in the next three years.

And as she grew into adolescence, Dijana Behremovic could see the changes from her window. When the mosques were razed, and the Catholic church, too.

Her two brothers fled, urged on by their father. They heard that young Bosnian men had been arrested, taken away and not seen again. Especially Muslim men.

Dijana did not worry too much. Her father had a Muslim name. Abdulah. But he did not go to the mosque. He was a Communist, an atheist, once a high-ranking policeman in town, now retired. His wife, Zdravka, Dijana's mother, was Christian.

Outside her window, Dijana could see her neighbors. Sometimes she would wave and wish them good day. Then they stopped waving back.

"Why don't they say hello to us anymore?" she asked her mother.

"They have forgotten we are neighbors," her mother replied. "They have forgotten how we shared food when they had nothing. Now, we are just Muslims."

Some days, Dijana would watch from her window as her father walked into town to ask what happened to relatives. Their family was large. As the war closed in, cousins and uncles disappeared. He demanded to know what happened.

"They were my friends," her father said of the other policemen.

One day, a sunny September day, Dijana watched out the window as a bus filled with Serbian paramilitaries -- the so-called Arkan's Tigers -- pulled up. Dijana's father was not in the apartment. He was hiding in a garage next to the apartment building.

Zdravka told Dijana to leap from the window if the men broke in.

"Why?"

"Because they will rape us."

"But we will die if we jump," Dijana said.

"Yes," said Zdravka.

They did not jump, and were not raped. The soldiers searched the house, looking for her father, found nothing and left.

But hours later, from her window, Dijana saw them return. They talked to some neighbors, then headed toward the garage where her father hid. Then she saw him, his hands tied behind his back, soldiers pushing him across the street and into a bus.

Years later, Dijana, an adult, would remember her father was smiling.

"A sad smile, as if he could not believe what had happened to his country."

In 1997, Abdulah Behremovic's body would be found in a mass grave, along with that of his brother and nephew, Zeljko Raznjatovic, or Arkan, the leader of the Tigers, would be indicted for murder by the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague. The first victim listed in the indictment would be Dijana's father.

Raznjatovic was never tried; he was assassinated in Belgrade in 2000.

By that time, Dijana and Zdravka were in the United States, living in Passaic. They had been driven from their home, kept in a detention camp, then abandoned as Bosnian troops liberated the area. She and her mother were nearly killed in a cross-fire.

Dijana was a top student at Passaic High and was admitted to the Honors College in Rutgers-Newark. She will graduate from there today and, after a year's break, go to dental school. To honor two Bosnian dentists she met in a camp, a man and wife who treated detainees.

The young woman will spend the next year assisting in medical research at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey -- and volunteering as a tutor at Newark's 13th Avenue School and at Goodwill Industries.

"I have been helped and I want to help people," she says.

Dijana became a practicing Muslim. "God saved me and my mother," she says.

So, she remembers a certain day four years ago in a way a little different from many of us. She was working at police headquarters in Passaic when Muslim hijackers flew two airplanes into the World Trade Center. When she heard what happened, she and others ran to the top floor to see the New York skyline.

From a window, Dijana Behremovic saw at first only a sunny September day. But then she saw the smoke in Lower Manhattan.

"Oh, no, my God, the war is coming here," she thought to herself.

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