

5. **IF THEY DON'T HAVE BREAD,
 LET THEM EAT CAKE!**

Milan Susak

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War is a time when strong,
strange things in life happen.
Good stories, bad stories,
sad and happy ones get made in
wartime.

This is a war story. But this
one is not a sad one. On the
contrary.

In the deepest dark, a single
spark of light seems the
brightest. This is the story of
how a simple apple cake became
one of such sparks.

I don't remember which year,
which month or day it was. With
the help of some history book
I could probably find the exact
date, but I don't want that, I
don't care about that. It was a
bad time, bad years, bad days,
as bad as any day in war.

As a child, you look at the
world with different eyes.
Some things are inexplicably
beautiful, something else is
same way ugly. You are not
thinking how and why, you just
let your emotions overwhelm
you, nice ones, bad ones.
Without keeping your guard
up, you let them into you, and
spontaneously you let them
get processed and go out of

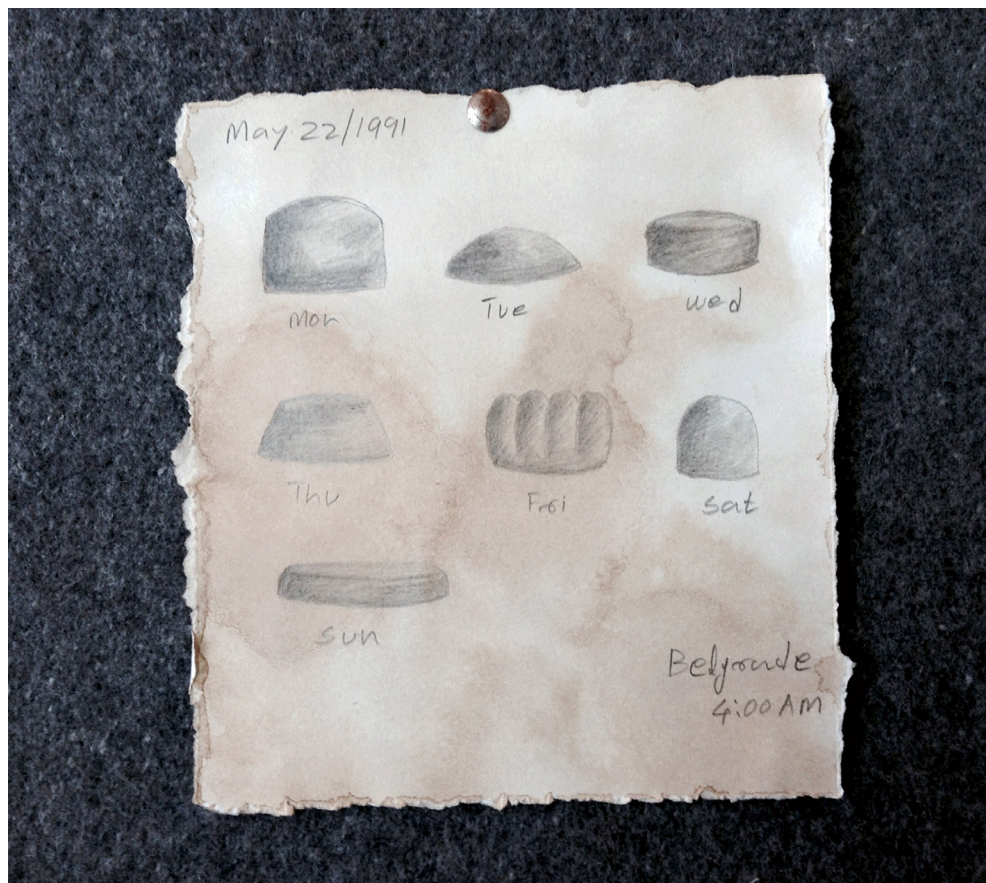
you to continue their way.
Nevertheless some of them leave
something in you. No matter
how young you are, some things
get engraved in the memory and
permanently leave a mark in
your mind and heart.

That's how that day left a mark
in my memory. It became a part
of me.

I am not a fortune teller, but
about this day I certainly know
that I will always remember it.

It was a typical day of my
childhood when the Yugoslav
War of the early 1990s was
underway. My granddad, who was
one of the many refugees that
fled from Croatia, then the
official state of Yugoslavia,
persistently harassed us with
the TV set at the highest
volume from which, all day, bad
news filled the air. It wasn't
the first time that he kindly
threw us out of the living
room, saying that it was news
time and not a play time.
How come it's not play time?
Why? How can you explain that
to my sister and me?

Those were the days when my
boyhood was falling apart and



I was violently expelled from a world of innocence and youth into the crueler world of elders.

Let me be clear about one thing. No one was shooting at me, no one close to me was killed, and during the whole war I didn't hear any gun shot. But then, every day I watched TV reports from war zones, lines of refugees, dead bodies, burned houses, music concerts of nationalists, music concerts of pacifists. Every day I was

surrounded with strange faces on the streets, distorted, deformed in anger, grey in sadness, mortified by poverty.

When I would ask why, how, wherefore, my parents had no answer. Their faces would turn pale and their uncontrolled glances would be lost somewhere in the distance. Finally I learned not to ask questions, and began to accept war and its disgusting quotidian.

Though people, at some hours of



drive away from us, were eating sachertorte and tiramisu, walking on the street, serene and blessed, there was a raging war set in the distressed hopelessness in my environment. The Yugoslav war scene was a typical one, but additionally seasoned with external interference. Especially with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 757, paragraphs b (prevent the sale of all products and commodities to Yugoslavia) and c (not make available any commercial, industrial, or public utility, funds or financial resources to Yugoslavia) affected everyday life the most. This resulted in empty shops, naked food racks, long lines of people who waited for milk and everyday fights over few loafs of bread. To put it bluntly, the UN used a well-known method employed in Iraq and Iran, that of imposing economic sanctions and embargo. In these cases divide et impera (divide and rule) can be read Esuriente et impera (make hungry and rule).

But like a small ray of light in a solitary confinement room or a small golden detail radiating in Rembrandts paintings, there were somethings to look forward to in my childhood amidst war. At

that time, the smell of apple pie represented an ultimate happiness for me. Anguish forces man to think and use his intellect. This was how the Embargo cake was born. Embargo is a dreaded word, but it wasn't a hated sentiment for me. This strange word evokes only the most beautiful feelings in me, reminding me of nice things in hard times.

Ingredients that went into this war cake were the only available food components in almost all of Yugoslavian households during the war. A little bit of sugar, some oil, flour, apples and cinnamon. Mixed in a proper way basic things like this can make many faces smile. One of them was mine, that day when my mother put on the table this new delicacy.

Although my Mom tried hard to make this cake as appealing as possible using powdered sugar to make some flower, or geometric shapes on top of it, it was quite obvious that the Embargo cake could never be called the prettiest cake in the world. But for me, it all seemed quite impressive at that time. More impressive was the taste of it. The lack of regular sweets such as

chocolate, lollypops, etc.
made this cake extraordinary
for me. I can still remember
the sensational taste of the
apple-cinnamon mixture. Now, I
know that it was the simplest
thing, made with the cheapest
ingredients. I have eaten
prettier looking and tastier
cakes in life, after those war
years, but somehow, the Embargo
cake remains the best. After
the war ended mom made upgraded
versions of the Embargo cake,
enriched with nuts and raisins,
or mixing different types of
apples. Sometimes she would
pour syrup glaze on top or
even chocolate. The cakes
tasted better but the basic one
remained a staunch favourite.

It was perhaps because when the
going gets tough, we end up
looking for small things to help
us survive hard times. The war
became about small things. It
became about trying to survive
hard times with the help of
small, ordinary things. Food
is one of the small, ordinary
things that can make you feel
good, and that can bring you
some normalcy when life doesn't
otherwise spare you.

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[1] Photograph by Milan Susak

[2] Sunoj D, *May22nd*, 17cmx15cm, Coffee stain and graphite on paper, 2015

[3] Photograph by Milan Susak