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We gathered in the ruins of another collapsed building. There were ten of us then and we were paid with food to provide musical accompaniment to the war. Before we even got there another smaller team of men had rigged up our mics and put cheap Tannoy speakers around the whole area. We would be broadcast throughout the northern part of the city today, and combat was set to resume in fifteen minutes.

The sun was already up in the clear blue sky of the early morning. The air was cold, but it would be much hotter later. I noticed that the shattered building we were standing in had once been a supermarket. The leader of our group, Pax, was checking our defences. Just because we were providing music for the battle didn't mean we were immune to attack. I took a piece of dried fruit out of my shirt pocket and put it in my mouth.

There was a stillness, a tension before the day's fighting started that never diminished no matter how many times you felt it. I chewed the dried fruit slowly, gradually feeling it soften in my mouth. 'Okay,' Pax said, 'Time to rock and roll.'

As the low strains from our wood and stringed instruments began, the first explosions of the day rang out from about a quarter of a mile away. I had no idea why they were fighting anymore, but I knew it wasn't likely to end any time soon. I thought, if I could stay alive long enough maybe things would change, but for the time being I counted myself lucky to be part of this group, playing this music, rather than being in the thick of the fighting.

Sometimes I had fantasies that our playing would stop the war, it was that good. Seriously, what we managed to get out of a few old boxes and bits of scrap, cobbled together into makeshift instruments that would fall apart on a regular basis, was, in short, miraculous. There were no radio stations anymore, and we were the only music most people had heard for years. We were regarded like stars in several cities. War musicians were in high demand at that time, and we were among the best. It was said that only by playing in the very midst of the battle could one ever produce music like ours.

As we played, we each immersed ourselves in the music to the point where we lost awareness of where we were and the horrors that surrounded us. This was a rare state to find oneself in at that time, and it was the real payment for our work. There was an unspoken knowledge we war musicians shared, that we had found the only real escape possible, albeit a fragile and temporary one.

I remember that from within my reverie that morning I suddenly detected that something was amiss. I opened my eyes to find four or five others in the group had also awoken from their daydreams. We continued to play along with the band, but now with our attention focused on a wall about 30 feet away. A man, small and dishevelled, crouched there with two small boys, aged about five or six. With a terrified look on his face he stared back at us, holding a boy tightly in each arm. Then from nearby we heard the sound of jeeps arrive and car doors slamming. By now more of us were coming out of our musical stupors and taking in what was in front of us.

Beyond the wall, a group of fighters came into view. There were many sides in this conflict and I did not recognise which one these men belonged to. They walked slowly and deliberately around the front of the demolished building. They knew we were there of course but we were insignificant to them. They were clearly looking for the man and boys, who were crouched in plain view of us, but hidden from the fighters by the wall.

We were all straining to continue playing normally while our hearts raced and we prayed the fighters would move on. Of course we had all seen fighting and killing all our lives, but the sight of that man cowering with his children somehow cut through everything else and it was as if our very last hopes rested on their survival. I don't know why it was like that, but we all felt it and I have never felt terror like it.

The fighters continued to prowl around the outside of the building, their eyes on us as we played. I constantly expected them to come over, and I don't know why they didn't. Maybe they enjoyed making us suffer. The man and his boys kept crouching in their spot and the look on their faces will never leave my mind. We continued playing until we were repeating the same songs over and over and it went on like this until the fighters suddenly, sullenly, moved on. The man and his boys waited through a few beats, then ran off.

After all that has happened in my life since that day—the end of that conflict and the start of the next, my wife, my children, all that I have done—since that day none of it has truly felt real. How I feel is that, really, I am still there, the fighters are still prowling and the man and his children continue to cower afraid for their lives. And I am playing on with my band, helpless and terrified, just waiting for it to end.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Edwin Rostron.*