



## **We were made for these times**

By Masha Shukovich

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I've been reading it all: the action alerts and news about school closures, university classes moving online, botanical gardens locking their gates, heart-centered workshops being canceled to ensure that we are not recklessly spreading the virus about which we still know so little and yet enough to warrant extreme caution. I've read it all and I can feel it: the whole world is bristling, its flanks made of spiny fear. I, for one, have never experienced this kind of shared, communal fear in my adult life.

I've experienced other forms of terror that can make a grown man, someone's father, weep in the street and drop his hat like an afterthought, letting it roll into angry traffic. As a child and a young adult in ex-Yugoslavia, I lived so near the civil war, I could feel its shallow breath on the back of my neck. Thousands of boys only a few years older than myself got drafted and returned home after months on the battlefield, either struck dumb by PTSD or in a coffin.

I lived through economic sanctions and abject poverty, with no access to basic necessities such as electricity, gas for cooking, fuel, oil, flour, salt. The whole world

hated us, and we didn't like ourselves much either. We couldn't fly anywhere for years. There were times when we had to wipe our asses with newspapers (yes, toilet paper was a hot commodity back then, too). My family and I, and millions of our neighbors and compatriots, lived day after day with air raids and civil defense sirens painfully stapled into the bruised skin of our lives.

If one were to create a soundtrack for those times, it would have to include the high-pitched wailing of sirens warning us to go seek shelter, the way meerkats squeal and bark to tell their brethren to run for their lives, to hide. Twenty-one years later, I still shudder when an airplane flies low over the Wasatch mountains. My body still remembers.

It all began in March, the month named after Mars, the Roman god of war. March is hard for me.

Day after day we would feel the earth shake beneath our feet as bombs were dropped all over our already extremely shitty lives. I remember the day I watched a giant, black mushroom cloud form on the horizon across the rivers Sava and Danube, like a putrid cosmic fart. Seconds before, we heard the NATO planes approaching, panting like Triassic beasts. In the middle of the day on April 21, 1999, they bombed the Ušće Towers, which was squatting like Jabba the Hutt right beyond the water.

This is what I remember: It was a gorgeous, sunny day, the sky a ridiculous, cartoonish blue. I and dozens of other people were out in the sun, exhausted from hiding and hoarding and barely surviving, many of us wearing T-shirts with red or black targets on them, wielding humor like a weapon. Our form of resistance was both genius and utterly insane: we fought the NATO bombers the only way we could: by strolling in the park and eating expired ice cream while they bombed the shit out of us. Sheer spite was the cheapest, most easily accessible food in those days.

This is what I remember, too: I was holding a bag of ripe, blood-red strawberries which I bought from a farmer at the green market earlier that day, a man brazen and crazy enough to brave the dangers of open roads with his sweet crop. We all looked up at the rumble of bomber planes coming closer, immediately followed by the earth-shattering sound of an explosion, but none of us ran for cover. We just stood there, arms heavy and limp, watching it all unfold in front of us, like a strange movie of our implausible lives.

But, the thing is, you adjust to abnormal circumstances. You have to, to survive and to keep whatever is left of your sanity.

Now, as an adult with young kids of my own, I'm recognizing some of the signs of things falling apart in the face of uncertainty, and it's a sight that fills me with remnants of my old friend, fear. It's like upsetting long-settled dust.

“Here you are again, fear,” I find myself thinking, many times a day. This fear, it has a smell. It smells like overripe strawberries.

I thought this kind of unease went the way of dissolving mushroom clouds, but it turns out that it's still alive and well, in me. Those were difficult times and these are as well. A different kind of difficult, but difficult nonetheless. But here's the thing: we are not unprepared. As once my dear teacher said, “Do not lose heart. We were made for these times.” So I'll tell you what I wish someone told me twenty-one years ago, back in March of 1999, before the first NATO bomb ever touched the ground of the only home I knew, and cracked it open, like a wound:

I know that you, Dear One, possess resilience beyond your wildest dreams. Your very presence on this Earth is the evidence of your ancestors' survival. You already have all the tools you need to stay alive and thrive, neatly tucked into the matrix of your cells. These tools are your special form of magic, waiting like pale green bulbs in the soil, to be awakened into life, at the mere whisper of the West Wind. You don't need to do anything to claim this magic, but acknowledge that it's here for you, should you need it. And you will.

But for now, all you need to do is remember this: there is sun, there is moon, there are millions and trillions of stars above you. There is a vast, blue sky. There is cool

water, down below. You are breathing. The earth is holding you in her lap like a beloved child that you are. Just keep making friends with your breath.

You already know what to do: follow the map folded tightly inside your bones. Ask yourself: “What did my ancestors do when they looked the terrifying unknown in the eye?” and trust your inner knowing for the answer.

Remember: you are never alone. Remember our best chance for survival, now and at all times, is to recognize our deep connection to everyone and everything around us, and to honor it. Remember: everything but interconnectedness is an illusion of a fearful, grasping mind.

Do not forget: you and I, we were made for these times.

