

‘In *Time and Tide in Sarajevo* Bronwyn Birdsall constructs an intricate world, where old pain and contemporary frustration ignite and hope and despair are tightly woven. A tinderbox of a novel. Finely crafted and absorbing.’

Jessie Cole, author of *Staying*

‘A fine thread of tension and mystery binds this beautiful, gentle story. *Time and Tide in Sarajevo* is both fascinating and touching, encompassing lovely details of life in Sarajevo.’

Mirandi Riwoe, author of *Stone Sky Gold Mountain*

‘A vivid and compelling novel that goes right to the beating heart of modern-day Sarajevo.’

Marele Day, author of *Lambs of God*

‘*Time and Tide in Sarajevo* hooked me from page one. Bronwyn Birdsall has written a triumph of a book – a tender, careful, beautiful love letter to a city and its people that grapples with belonging and the possibility of repair. I couldn’t put this page-turner down!’

Sarah Sentilles, author of *Draw Your Weapons*

TIME
AND
TIDE
IN
SARAJEVO

*Bronwyn
Birdsall*



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This book was written in two places. I would like to acknowledge the Bidjigal and Gadigal Clans, who traditionally occupied the Sydney Coast, and pay my respect to Elders past and present. I would like to acknowledge the Minjungbal people of the Bundjalung Nation and pay my respect to Elders past and present. I respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of these lands and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters, skies and communities.

For good friends, yours and mine

NEDJELJA | SUNDAY

4:30h | 4.30am

What jolted Evelyn out of sleep that morning was not another nightmare, but the ringing of an excruciatingly high-pitched siren. Through her half-asleep haze, she reminded herself, *I'm in my room, I'm at Aida's, I'm in Sarajevo.*

Yes, here she was. The heavy wooden closet Aida's mother had lent her still loomed over her bed, as it did every morning, the floral carvings in its doors illuminated by the streetlights outside. Her empty suitcase sat on top of the closet, and her few books were neatly piled on the low shelf beside it.

Evelyn hauled herself up to answer the thumping on the door, interrupting their affable neighbour mid-knock. Leaning out into the hallway, she smelt no smoke, saw no flashing lights, or anything else to warrant the unwelcome awakening.

'Emergency!' the neighbour was yelling, as he always did with her – alarm or not – as if volume could make up for her lack of Bosnian vocabulary.

Despite the noise growing even louder, all she wanted to do was simply close the door on him and follow the gravity pulling her back to bed. As if he could see right into her cloudy mind, he put one foot over the threshold and dropped his head down, so he was looking her right in the eye.

'Where's Aida?'

Aida! Evelyn snapped into the present. Aida's boots weren't

beside the shoe rack. Her bag wasn't on the kitchen counter. Their former lounge room, now Aida's office, was deserted. The whole apartment was dark and still.

'She must be out working!' Evelyn shouted from Aida's empty bedroom, barely hearing herself over the ever-increasing volume of the alarm.

The neighbour had already taken her thick coat off one of the hooks by the door and was holding it up for her to put on.

'Outside, now! *Hajde!*'

Evelyn raced back to get her phone and keys, pretending she didn't understand him swearing to God that she was a crazy foreigner. He hadn't seemed to notice how much of the language she'd actually learnt in the year and a half she'd been living next door to him.

Out on the empty narrow street, the dozen or so inhabitants of their apartment building were all accounted for, apart from Aida. A blue light above the building's entrance flashed in sync with the alarm, without any apparent reason as to why it had gone off, as far as Evelyn could understand.

She had always assumed that the light didn't work, imagining it was a mere relic from a more dangerous time. None of the neighbouring buildings had this kind of security system, she noticed, despite sharing the same deeply set windows and ornate concrete detailing, and all being built right up to the edge of the footpath, leaving less than a metre for pedestrians.

As the huddle of neighbours argued over who to call, given that the security company listed on the alarm's sticker had gone out of business, Evelyn tried to discreetly check out Koko's, still open across the street, its occupants apparently undisturbed by the commotion outside. Aida loved to sit on their apartment's balcony

and give a running commentary on the men who came and went from the tiny *kafana*, sure that shady business went on behind its frosted windows. Evelyn had never ascertained exactly what Aida was suspicious of, but enjoyed watching alongside her, nonetheless.

She wrapped her coat tighter around herself as freezing air cut straight through her thin pyjamas. Her first winter had been mild, but this one, her second, had been more intense than she ever imagined possible, starting suddenly with a heavy snowfall on Halloween and intensifying into weeks of minus-fifteen around New Year. Her delight at snow had never waned, but these grey March days seemed to drag on and on.

‘Were you here in the siege?’ the tiny woman who lived on the ground floor asked her over the noise, as she did every time Evelyn ran into her in the hallway. Evelyn explained again that no, she was the Australian teacher who lived with Aida, up on the top floor.

‘Ah, *komšinica*, I didn’t recognise you without my glasses.’ She reached up and placed her gloved hands tenderly on Evelyn’s cheeks, the wool soft and momentarily warming. ‘How is our little kangaroo?’

She didn’t wait for an answer, instead stepping away to remind Evelyn where shells had hit the building during the war. Evelyn tried putting her own hands on her face but, without gloves, it was like ice meeting ice. The woman’s description ended with a shrug, and she turned to the same topic on everyone’s mind: Bruno’s son.

Evelyn couldn’t quite keep up as the neighbours abandoned discussing the mystery of the alarm to weigh in on the death of a teenager that had gripped the city. She herself had lost precious hours of sleep, unable to stop scrolling through haunting photos of the boy’s parents surrounded by candles and flowers. The vigil had been outside his school in the centre of town, not far from the

laneway where he'd been stabbed. He was fifteen, the same age as the kids she'd been teaching – kids full of ambition, possibility and life force. The vacant expressions on the faces of his parents spoke of a numbness Evelyn hoped she'd never fully understand.

'After everything Bruno did for us ...' The guy who lived directly below them threw his hands in the air, listing off the achievements of the boy's father's legendary football career.

The neighbour who'd banged on her door repeated the same thing Aida had been saying since she suspected the killer's identity, apparently a privileged eighteen-year-old, had come to light: 'Bunch of rich arseholes.'

He didn't exactly equal Aida's vivid description of the suspect's family as a deep-sea octopus with tentacles stuck to every office of power, but then Aida had a talent with words not many could match.

None of the neighbours could understand why it had happened, but they all suggested their theories now, ranging from a love rivalry, to jealousy, to bullying. As the alarm got even louder, the ideas grew wilder, one neighbour suggesting a drug deal gone wrong, and another raising the possibility of an international conspiracy, prompting mass ridicule that went well beyond Evelyn's language comprehension.

'What the fuck is going on?' a leather-jacketed man yelled out from the doorway of Koko's, making Evelyn jump. She tried to hide it, no one else had budged.

'We don't know, buddy!' her neighbour tentatively shouted back as the shrills of the alarm grew louder still, now at the volume where any form of conversation was impossible. Evelyn forced herself not to stare at the men from the cafe, as Aida had drummed into her not to do since the day she moved in. She pressed her

fingers into her ears, but it made little difference as the alarm seemed to reverberate within her, the way the bass line did in the grimy nightclub her friends liked. The difference was there was no hidden pleasure in this sound, especially not now that she could feel it churning up all the cheap *rakija* she'd drunk the night before, in that very nightclub.

She retreated into the entryway of the *kladionica*, crouching down like many of the others were, but the sound only intensified in the echo of the small space.

Right when she thought she would scream from the pressure, the alarm stopped. Evelyn and the neighbours awkwardly stood up from their agonised poses, like actors at the end of a tragic play.

She felt her coat pocket vibrate. Without looking, she knew who it had to be.

'What's happening?' asked the voice at the other end of the line.

'Did we wake you?' she asked back, trying to remember when they last spoke and whether she was still annoyed at him. 'Or were you already up?'

There was silence. Nedim didn't like to joke about his insomnia, as if naming it brought it out into the world from where he'd tried to banish it.

Evelyn turned to face his building, waving at the silhouette looking down on the street. The deep sigh she could hear signalled he'd decided to let it go, confirmed by the slow wave he gave her back.

'Why don't you come here?' he asked. 'I'll make us some coffee. I want to talk to you about something.'

Evelyn had long tired of how everything was always on his terms, no matter how spontaneous it sounded. She knew what

he wanted to talk about, the exact same thing she didn't want to talk about – her life choices. They'd been broken up for months now, but remained on speaking terms, something Aida found 'preposterous'.

'Come to mine?' she replied. 'I need to turn the heating on.'

'Where's Aida?'

'I think she's working.'

He hated coming over, Evelyn thought, but mostly he just hated being out of control.

'Alright, I'm coming,' he said. 'But I'm bringing my own coffee.'

Evelyn hung up and stretched her leg against one of the yellow bollards that separated the footpath from the street, trying to warm up her body. Her neighbour from the ground floor pointed up at the sky and whispered to Evelyn that she should make sure she dressed warmly, because more snow was on its way. Evelyn saw nothing but a flat deep grey that felt more ominous than snow-like.

'I will, I promise,' Evelyn said, taking the small woman by the arm as they followed the others back inside, the first call to prayer echoing against the apartment buildings from the mosque down the street. As much as she didn't want to discuss her choices with Nedim, she couldn't really hide from having to think about them much longer. In three days, her students would take the scholarship exams she'd been preparing them for, which meant that in four days, Evelyn would have to formally submit her decision on whether she would stay for another year.

First, coffee. Then she would make herself think about it.

4:48h | 4.48am

‘I don’t understand how you can even be considering staying here any longer.’

Nedim walked in without a greeting, straight into it as always, not showing any sign of being puffed after the four flights of stairs. He had a way of being in constant motion, she thought, even if his body was completely still, his eyes would be darting around. Plonking his bag of ground coffee on the counter, he took his shoes off and launched straight into all the reasons why the country was broken.

When she and Nedim had first gotten together, she’d thought living so close was an incredible coincidence – a sign of affirmation, as if fated.

‘Take a breath, Nedim.’

He paused, sucked in a shallow amount of air, and looked like he was about to continue on his rant.

‘Have you tried those melatonin tablets I was telling you about? Did you sleep at all?’ she asked, trying to deflect from the subject at hand. She had been avoiding thinking or talking about this decision since her twenty-seventh birthday a few months earlier, when other people had started asking her what she actually wanted to do with herself. It seemed that the general consensus was that it was fine to spend two years in Sarajevo, as it would be at the end of the school year, but extend beyond that and it could no longer be

considered an experience – it became a path. She longed for clarity, but she hadn't found Nedim to be an impartial person to talk to about it.

'How's your family? Any news from back home?' he asked.

'Everyone's fine.'

He stood beside her as she tried the kitchen tap without luck. Too early for water or their timed heating system – this was a time of day she was not used to.

'So, when are you leaving?' he asked. 'End of summer, as you intended?'

'You're obsessed with this.' Ever since she had told him she might extend her teaching contract, Nedim wouldn't let it go.

'Evelyn, it's less than twenty years since the war ended. This country barely has running water, teenagers are being killed in the street. You're working at the world's crappiest English college, thanks to the American government. It's no place to be by choice.'

He had a point – the government project she taught for was strange, to say the least. But her first group of four teenage students had all been awarded full scholarships to go on a summer study program in the US with other kids from around the world, after a gruelling set of examinations she'd prepared them for.

A senior project officer at the US embassy had phoned her with the students' exam results out of the blue, while she was carrying several bags of heavy groceries home. He'd said that such a rate of success was unheard of – usually they'd hope for one scholarship per class. She was so stunned by the news, that when he went on to say the ambassador would have an official reception for them on their return at the end of the summer, she could only nod, unable to make a sound. As a tomato broke free of one of the shopping bags and rolled down the steep street away from her, she thought it

best not to point out these were the first English classes she'd ever taught.

The study program had concluded with meetings with prestigious colleges. All four students had received preliminary offers for when they finished high school – a flurry of emails had arrived in her inbox through the night, filled with exclamation marks and selfies in front of landmarks. The current group she was teaching, her second, were just as bright.

'You could leave?' Evelyn said to Nedim as she took out a bottle of water from the stash under the sink. As she lifted it out, she knocked over a container of bleach that Aida mustn't have closed properly and it immediately spilled across the tiled floor below her. Her eyes watered as the stench filled her nostrils.

'That's not the point. We aren't talking about me.'

'Maybe we should?' Evelyn said. Nedim hadn't even noticed the spill, or that she was crying as she tried to clean up the mess, placing tea towels all over the kitchen floor. They might not have been real tears, but his absolute focus on the topic at hand meant he had apparently forgotten the actual world in front of him, as he always did.

'Should what?'

'Talk about you. It's always the same conversation about me and my choices.' Evelyn stood up to face him, leaving the floor covered in the towels. Her head throbbed, and the stinging smell of the bleach layered itself onto the dull ache she had already been feeling growing behind her forehead. Why couldn't she have just said no to another drink in the heat of the moment? Moderation, sleep, exercise – she knew these were her magic trifecta and yet, right when she needed them most, here she was, hungover and exhausted.

‘Your lack of choices,’ said Nedim. ‘You spend too long deciding on anything and then take the path of least resistance, always.’

‘Could we talk about you, for once?’ she said.

‘Come on, the country is on the verge of collapse. Let’s drink our coffee in peace?’

She didn’t mention that he was the one who’d brought it all up. A conversation like this would be called an argument in her family. With him, it was a discussion.

‘Nedim, this is not how friends talk to each other. This isn’t a courtroom.’ She picked up the hand-ground coffee he’d brought over, the only kind he’d drink. The bag had the stamp of a tiny store in the old town, down a cobblestoned street in Bašćaršija.

‘Maybe that’s the problem. No one ever confronts your thinking.’

‘What were you saying about peace?’ she asked him. ‘The sun hasn’t even risen, and beneath all this hot air, you can actually be great company.’

He groaned and leant down on the kitchen counter, dropping his head as he admitted defeat.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘You’re right, I’m an asshole.’

Evelyn couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or was as sick of this habitual conversation as she was. She did know without a doubt, however, that her compliment had softened him.

While he was continually frustrated by her slow reasoning and could never follow her logic, he had no comprehension of how far she’d come. When Evelyn had stepped from the thirty-seater plane and onto the tarmac at Sarajevo International, she’d been struck by the mountain air, clear even through the fumes of burning jet fuel. As she’d stood waiting for the blank-faced officer to stamp

her passport, she felt her back straighten ever so slightly. With each additional minute in this new city, the deep dread Evelyn had thought was her only way of being had diminished and finally vanished altogether. It was as if up there at that altitude, her old thoughts couldn't reach her. She told no one this, afraid that she would end up back as she was. And especially not Nedim or Aida, who she knew would never let her hear the end of what sounded like magic – both of them deeply committed to the rational truth of what they saw before them.

She filled Aida's tiny pot with the bottled water, watching Nedim perk up as he found the latest packet of seeds her mother had sent her, another yellow envelope to add to the collection, all of them saved from her parents' garden back in Sydney. He traced her mother's cursive writing with his finger, *Coriander*, and stuck it on the fridge between scattered instant photos, remnants of a party he hadn't been invited to.

'Who's this?' He pointed at a guy Aida had her arm around.

'A friend of Aida's.'

'Is she dating anyone?'

'Not that I know of.'

'And how's the world's greatest journalism start-up going?' he asked.

Aida was normally fairly obsessed with privacy, but she was fixated on it when it came to Nedim. From the first time Evelyn had mentioned him to her, she'd made the same expression – a strange grimace. They'd gone to school together, in the same class the whole way through. That look, not positive or negative, but loaded with a meaning Evelyn thought she was meant to understand and never quite did.

'Seems to be going well, they're all here every day,' Evelyn

replied, glancing around the apartment that was looking like more of an office by the day, whiteboards now on the large wall where artworks had once hung.

‘Are you dating anyone?’ he asked with that studied casualness she’d always found irritating.

‘Not really,’ she said, an easy non-answer for him, who never approved of anyone or anything. And he was certainly not the right audience to hear her latest romantic disaster, a brief thing she never should have started.

‘I heard otherwise,’ he said with a smirk.

‘Hey, what do you know about the guy who killed Bruno’s son?’ she asked, uninterested in hearing what she already knew.

‘Don’t change the subject. I heard something intriguing from a cab driver.’

She turned away from him to see that the water sat cold and still, she’d turned on the wrong stovetop.

‘You don’t want to know about the *strankinja* the driver dropped off at your building, and the man she was with?’

On the outside, Evelyn attempted to appear dismissive, but she rapidly flicked through all the taxi rides she’d taken lately as she tried the water tap again. Gossip so often missed the point in Sarajevo, a web of intrigue so dense that the actual scandal could happen in its shadows, while those prying eyes looked elsewhere. Nedim liked to proclaim he hated all this *trač*, but Evelyn saw how much he lit up whenever something juicy was spoken about. She’d never mentioned the times he didn’t answer his phone despite his light being on, nor the stories she’d heard about him – both when they were together and in the strange friendship they had developed in the few months since they’d broken up.

A clink in the corner of the room, a key turning. Nedim looked

at Evelyn as if he were caught in a trap.

‘Deal with it,’ she said.

Aida’s attempt to quietly open the door was futile. No matter how much she tried, she was an extremely noisy person, the same energy that could fill a room with enthusiasm somehow couldn’t be contained, unlike Evelyn, who could hold a world inside herself. She crept in, and then paused mid-step when she saw them in the kitchen.

‘Oh!’ she said, dropping her bags on the ground and taking her boots and coat off in a sort of massive collapse. ‘Did you have a late night out?’

‘An early start,’ Nedim murmured.

‘Cool,’ she said, with that same frozen smile she always had around Nedim, not too different from the one she’d use on television when she was on a panel with one of the politicians she despised.

‘Do you want a coffee?’ Evelyn asked.

‘You were at the vigil?’ Nedim asked, before Aida could answer.

‘Yes, and yes. Did you see the coverage?’ Aida directed the question at Nedim.

He nodded. She didn’t say anything else.

‘They arrested the guy?’ Evelyn attempted to continue the conversation, knowing that the one and only thing unifying Nedim and Aida was their passionate commitment to politics, and being across every minuscule detail of breaking news.

They both rolled their eyes at her.

‘No, that’s why they’re all there. He was released. Apparently he has an alibi, but no one believes it’s real.’ Aida sighed dramatically. ‘Ev, you need to stop getting your news from your students’ social media posts.’

‘How big was the crowd when you left?’ Nedim asked her.

‘Maybe a hundred? People came and went during the night, lighting candles, shaking his hand.’

Aida placed her laptop on the counter, looking ready to start work. Nedim returned to the fridge, picking up the seeds as if seeing them for the first time.

‘Bruno’s hand? I read about him last night,’ Evelyn said, still trying to push the conversation forward. She’d found it hard to believe they’d known each other so long. ‘No one mentioned how handsome he was.’

They rolled their eyes again, two sides of the same coin, reinforcing Evelyn’s private theory that they might actually get along if only they tried a bit harder.

‘Are you serious, Evelyn? You can’t talk like that about Bruno – the biggest legend of our childhood,’ Nedim said.

Aida nodded. ‘We knew his name before we knew our own.’

‘And the mother? My student was saying something about her?’ Evelyn asked, ignoring Nedim and trying again to keep the conversation moving.

‘She’s much younger, his first wife died in the war.’

‘That’s right,’ Nedim said. ‘I forgot about that.’

‘In any case, they had one kid and some fucker killed him.’ Aida said.

‘That’ll be your headline?’ Evelyn asked.

‘Some. Fucker. Killed. Him,’ Aida replied, laying out the words on her imaginary headline. ‘Perfect.’

Evelyn poured the boiling water over the coffee, then heated it a bit more, the way her student’s mother had taught her.

‘Not like that!’ Nedim said, Aida looking on with horror as the coffee almost spilt over the small pot’s edge.

‘Svako ima svoje mišljenje,’ Evelyn replied, stumbling on the ‘lj’ sound in the last word of the Bosnian saying that Nedim and Aida both loved to say, before either of them could begin an instructive lecture. ‘Everyone has their own opinion’ seemed to neutralise everything.

‘Come on, let’s go outside.’