

A Story of Resilience and Sisterhood in *Three Summers*

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As a genocide survivor, so much of my life has been defined by my survival of the unimaginable during the Bosnian Genocide, as told in [The Cat I Never Named](#). While the physical scars of hate, including the Serb military's bombing of my home on my birthday, starvation, and isolation of living under the siege in my hometown of [Bihac, Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), for nearly 1200 days were easier to heal, the particular harms that were inflicted by hateful language never did. They are a lifelong mark on my existence and define who I am today. After the Bosnian Genocide, I immigrated to the United States, dedicating my life to the prevention of hate.

And to prevent hate, we must share and receive stories that humanize the dehumanized, those deemed lesser simply for who they are.



So, in [Three Summers](#), I travel back to a time before the Bosnian Genocide when I first began to understand what dehumanization is and how it manifests early in a child's life. I move upstream

in my life to narrate a story of five cousins, including an 11-year-old Amra, to show how our love for one another allowed us to become closer than sisters despite our differences. *Three Summers* takes place in 1980s Yugoslavia and warns us where hate can lead.

I had grown up in the happiest family imaginable with a loving mother and father, funny younger brother Dino and brilliant, charismatic older brother Amar. But Amar's sudden death left me depressed and lonely. Desperate to help me rediscover joy, my parents invited my two cousins from Belgrade (Serbia) to visit in the summer of 1986. I have never met them, but the instant I saw Zana I felt like we would be friends for life. Zana was positive, radiant, a romantic rebel. Zana's little sister Vedrana was quiet, introspective, and followed us around everywhere, taking in their exciting pre-teen adventures.

The pain of my brother's death wasn't forgotten, but now I had someone to share my deepest feelings with. We were so different – Zana snuck cigarettes and fell in love every ten minutes, while I was a cautious goody-goody – but our connection was so strong it could survive any difference. And there was in fact one vital difference between us: Zana's mother was Muslim, like me and my family, but her father was Serb, a high-ranking officer in the army.

In that first summer, we were joined by two other cousins. Cucana was struggling with her mental health and learning disabilities that no one really understood, but Zana and I made a pact to do whatever we could to help her, even as she drifted away from the people who loved her. Cousin Sejla was older, about to start high school. Though her family was poor, Sejla was fiercely ambitious. She was also passionately in love... with a Serb boy named Slobodan. We came together to help her keep this forbidden love secret from her disapproving parents. Bound by ties of love and kinship, we formed a sisterhood that summer. On the banks of the river Una, we swam and flirted and began to discover who we were. Somewhere between childhood and womanhood, we challenged and teased each other, even competed with each other. But in the end, we always had each other's backs. Zana and I developed the closest bond. When Zana went home to Belgrade – the capital and Serb stronghold – we vowed to remain resilient – to be like sisters.

The next year, Zana and her little sister returned, this time for the whole summer. Almost every day my family went to a little island in the middle of the Una River that was once owned by my great grandfather before WWII. Connected to the mainland by a winding, rustic wooden bridge,

the island had an old flour mill on it. The mill – at times a changing room and at others a cool shady place for couples to sneak away to – was a magical remnant of the past.

On the island, teen friends clustered around my family, lured by the savory smells of my mother's cooking and the allure of the fascinating cousins. Zana fell madly in love with a boy named Haris, and I discovered my own summer crush, when I slipped on wet rocks and a boy whipped off his shirt, dipped it in the river, and used it to cool the bruises on my thighs.

But growing up wasn't all about flirting, freedom, and fun. There was a darker side to maturity too. One of my friends was being beaten by her father. Even more dire, I became increasingly aware of pervasive anti-Muslim attitudes plaguing my homeland. As I witnessed the world through older eyes, I began to see the hatred that could tear a country – and cousins close as sisters – violently apart.

There were purges in the military, and powerful Muslim businessmen and politicians were brought down by manufactured scandals or died under mysterious circumstances. Everything came to a head when my father – one of the prominent Muslims in Bosnia – was taken away in the night, detained, and interrogated.

My father was eventually released, but I was shunned and bullied by some former friends after my father was targeted. Everything around me was changing over those three summers – my body, my emotions, my friendships, and ultimately my sense of security in the world.

By the last summer, Zana's father no longer wanted her to join us for the summer, but he finally relented. During the last summer, I helped Zana get through her first broken heart, and wondered if there was any such thing as pure love, except for the love we felt for one another. Through this, Zana's father was always busy with military duties, going to the Bihac airport most days on mysterious business. One day, Zana's mother overheard her telling me about her unrequited love for Haris. She stormed in and screamed at Zana that she could not love a Bosnian boy, a Muslim because she was better than that.

This was one of the defining moments during the last summer – I was shocked to realize that even my own Muslim aunt is anti-Muslim. If my aunt could think this way, what could I expect from the rest of the society?

Luckily, the five cousins still had our magical island in the River Una, and our love and support for one another got us through heartache. But I started to wonder: what did the future hold?

Though none of us could fathom the genocidal horror that was approaching, we glimpsed

foreboding premonitions. On our last night out together, dressed in miniskirts and heading to the discotheque, Zana and I made a pact. Every day at 5:55 p.m., no matter what, we would pause and think about each other, say a prayer for each other. We would each pray in whatever way worked best for our own unique selves. We thought, “There is the world, and then there is us. The world may change, but we never will. We will always be sisters.”

At the end of *Three Summers*, I share the story of what happened to each of the main characters, including my cousins. Was our sisterhood sustained by love or broken by hate? You will have to read the story to find out. But what I will share is this — during the Bosnian Genocide, these three summers I spent with my sisters, particularly with Zana, sustained my hope that humanity still exists. And every day at 5:55pm, even if bombs were falling, I thought of my sisters, our love of laughter, life, and one another. I vowed that if I survived the horrors of war and genocide, I would ensure that we see each other again one day.

But unlike me, many children don't get to survive and never get to live their dreams or experience their first summer crushes. *Three Summers* is therefore a warning, a lesson, and an act of love and solidarity with all children who feel disempowered, erased, and voiceless. By telling the stories that humanize the dehumanized I hope to inspire resilience to hate in all of us. *Three Summers* is also my call to action – to you — to help uplift the lessons of unity and together build a future where each and every child feels they have a chance to live, laugh, love, and learn.

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