

American-born journalist **Janine di Giovanni** and her French husband Bruno Girodon spent years reporting from the most dangerous places in the world. But it was only when they finally settled in to family life that they learned the true meaning of stress

PHOTOGRAPHY **RANNJAN JOAWN**

«Bruno and I fell madly in love in Sarajevo in 1993 but broke up a few months later

and we didn't speak again for many years. Like me, he reported on conflict and war, him for France 2 television.

In 1998, we met again by chance, as two reporters working in Algeria, again during another bloody conflict. We fell back in love, even more romantically, in a rose garden in Algiers. We would drive off in our separate cars to different locations to work in an area known as the Triangle of Death and meet a few days later in a wonderful old epic hotel in the capital. We drank a lot of wine in those days to blot out things we saw.

For the next five years, we played out our love story in Africa and the Middle East and Asia and the Balkans, in airports, war zones, falling cities and amid *coups d'états*. It was not conventional, but it was acutely romantic – so much so that when Bruno would see me at the airport, he would begin to sing the opening bars of the 20th Century Fox theme. That's how cinematic it was, a cross between *Casablanca* and *The Year Of Living Dangerously*.

When you live like that, you aren't grown-ups. We had never really lived together or argued about who takes out the rubbish. I suppose any shrink would say both of us had deep commitment issues, and they would be right. But one day, we both woke up and found it was unbearable not to be together.

Bruno proposed. Of course, it was not an ordinary proposal – I was in Somalia and he was in Rwanda, and it was via satellite phone. We had also split up, rather dramatically, a few months earlier in Afghanistan. When we finally did meet up, he snuck a (conflict-free) diamond into a glass of champagne and I gulped it back and nearly choked on the ring. He said, 'Will you marry me?' The entire room – we were at a party – applauded.

For a year, I commuted between Baghdad, London and Abidjan. Bruno had settled in west Africa and rented a beautiful villa in the Ivory Coast. We loved it there because it was the only country in the region where there was no war, no child soldiers, and no strung-out armies. Instead, we had long golden beaches, a swimming pool and a writing studio for me to write my book, in peace. Then came another war, this one in our home. One day, I woke to shooting in the garden. Soon, there were all the familiar signs: the terrible smell of people being burned out of their houses, bodies in the road, battles in the city. I thought I was pregnant and Bruno had me evacuated by the American Embassy. I went back to London.

He stayed on and on and on, two more dangerous years, and I commuted and phoned and came and went. We had a >>>



>>> beautiful wedding in the Alps and this time I really was pregnant. One December night, he arrived in Notting Hill to scoop me up three weeks before our son was born and take me off to Paris for another new life. I finished reporting the war in Iraq and swore that was the last of my wandering.

Strangely enough, I found Paris scary. After all my travels and all my visions of hell – Grozny, Sarajevo, Monrovia and Mogadishu probably being the scariest – Paris frightened me. People seemed horribly aggressive, the Metro felt like a dark hole with all kinds of dangers around the corner. I feared for my baby's life, worried about predators and paedophiles and weirdos. I preferred Kabul and Ramallah to our beautiful neighbourhood in front of the Tuileries.

«What cracked us was quite simply that both of us were too damaged in some way by everything that had happened»

We weren't exactly prepared for parenthood, either. In fact, I think both of us prepared for assignments with more vigour. The baby arrived prematurely and with slight jaundice, at about the same time as the packing crates from Africa rolled in. Everyone else who has a baby had their nurseries painted and their baby clothes ready but typically, we were winging it. Up until then, both of us lived on our familiar adrenaline-fuelled fight-or-flight mode. Having a baby was no different from our past lives – another adventure, leap before you look.

Bruno took charge and was (and still is) the most devoted and outstanding father. I was more panicked, and the post-traumatic stress syndrome I swore I did not have, surfaced. I started doing strange stuff in Paris – hoarding water and toilet paper and medicine. 'We will not have a siege,' Bruno told me gently over and over. 'We're safe here.' But how could I believe him? Eventually, I was OK, but Bruno took to drinking hard. He ended up going into rehab and quit drinking three years

ago. He is a devoted AA habituate, and he goes to meetings (in English) every night. I am fiercely proud of him.

What cracked us as a couple, in the end, was not the shock of quiet nights in Paris versus the wild Sarajevo rock 'n' roll. It was not the pressure of real life. People had always predicted that I would be bored with the day-to-day mundane routine, but I was ecstatic. I loved doing laundry and unload-

ing the dishwasher. I loved cooking and going to Monoprix to buy food. For the first time in my life, I could tell people where I would be next week, and I went to bed every night without a packed bag next to me. And I loved my husband just as wildly in real time as I did in our cinematic love-story life.

What cracked us, was simply that both of us were too damaged in

some way by everything that had happened. You think that stuff doesn't catch up with you, but somehow it does.

We are no longer together as a couple, but we remain deeply attached to each other, so much so that both of us find it very hard to let go of the other. Aside from our seven-year-old son, Luca, Bruno will always be the most important person in my life, simply because of what happened between us in the places we have been.

We raise Luca together with the same values we fell in love with: compassion, empathy and a desire in some way to make the world a better place. Our son knows where we met and where we lived and what we saw. I hope he doesn't follow our footsteps and do what we did – but, on the other hand, if he did I would be proud of him, as I am proud of his father.

Next year is the twentieth anniversary of the siege of Sarajevo and the start of the war. It's a terrible story, that war, and it still makes me angry and horribly sad. But I owe that city a lot. Every time I look down and see the golden-haired, black-eyed little boy holding my hand, half French, half American, I am eternally grateful that I got on the plane one day and flew alone to my destiny.

'Ghosts By Daylight: A Memoir Of War & Love' by Janine di Giovanni (Bloomsbury) is out now