

IN LOVE AND WAR

Reporter Janine di Giovanni returned from the front lines to face another battle at home: her husband's alcoholism and treatment.

My husband, Bruno, and I had settled down in Paris. Magazines came to interview us, two war correspondents who had finally made a home. Why Paris? they asked. “We wanted to feel safe.” Why was it, then, I still did not feel safe? “Do you think,” I said to Bruno one night, “that this stuff really fucked us up for good?” “What stuff?” “All of it. The graves, the fires, the bombs. Did it hurt us?” After a while, he finally answered me. “How could it not?”

When the body breaks down, it does not all go at once; it goes piece by piece. First it was Bruno's back—20 years of hauling a camera and sleeping on floors. Then his entire immune system seemed to cave in. His two bouts of African malaria came back. Once, in Abidjan, he had a crisis during the coup d'état. It was curfew, and no doctor could get to his house. So he lay in bed alone, in his sarong, sweating and freezing, sweating and freezing, with a drip hooked up to him. He says he does not remember drinking water or eating or getting up to go to the bathroom. Someone took a photograph of him lying in a bed of sheets soaked with sweat, his fever rising, his head damp, and his limbs splayed. I hated that photograph.

Once we took a taxi together to a depressing hospital outside Paris when he felt another bout of malaria was coming. He asked me to leave him there, to go home, to take care of the baby, because he felt he had to do it alone. We took pictures of the two of us in a photo booth downstairs in the hospital before



BEST FOOT FORWARD
THE AUTHOR, IN LANVIN, WITH HER SON, LUCA (AGE SEVEN), IN PARIS.

the nurses took him away. I am wearing a white wool hat; he is trying to make me laugh because he knows I am worried.

Then the malaria passes, and he is smoking two packs of Camel non-filters a day. Now he is not eating. Now he is really drinking heavily. Sometimes I say something. “Do you have to open another bottle? We just had one.”

He lights cigarettes off the end of each other, a chain of nicotine. “Let me handle it myself.”

If you read books about alcoholics, there is always a scene—cinematic, almost—where the end comes crashing down. Where something gives way to something bigger. Ours came in the late summer, around the time when Paris Plages, the beach set up by the city council, draws crowds of people to the edge of the Seine. We had dinner at a Mexican restaurant in the Fifth. Bruno had already been drinking. At dinner he drank several more margaritas, more wine. Then he got on the motorcycle.

“I think maybe you shouldn't drive,” I said.

He handed me my helmet. “I'm fine.”

We drove along the quay, the summer air hitting me in the open place that my helmet did not cover. I drove fast, weaving in and out of cars. I wondered what would happen if the bike skidded, if we fell, if my head smashed like a melon. Our son, Luca, at home, was innocently asleep, waiting for his parents to come home.

“Slow down,” I said.

“I can handle it.” He sped up. He cut off a kid, a North African teenager from the *banlieue*, on a dinky scooter. The kid gave him the finger. What happened next *up front* >84

happened fast: Bruno drew his moto right next to the kid's, dwarfing his tiny scooter. He kicked the kid's bike, and it veered slightly off the road.

"What the fuck? You could have killed him. And us." We were so close to them I could see the fear in the eyes of the kid's girlfriend, who rode behind him in a miniskirt and high-heeled boots. It was like bumper cars, but real.

"God, Bruno, don't do this."

But he was at war, like when he played *Age of Empires* all night on his computer with various strange addicted people all over the world, and when I came in to interrupt him, he would shout, "This is war, baby!" Then a cop was on top of us. A big cop, also North African, mustached, pissed off, aggressive. "Get down off your bike." Bruno got down. I got down. He let loose a torrent of complaints to the cop, who appeared not to hear him.

"Papers?" Bruno handed him his papers. "Ah," the cop said. "I see you live in the First Arrondissement."

"No, the Sixth. We just moved."

"The Sixth; I see." Even I could read the expression on his face: rich bastard, thinks he can kick some poor kid from the suburbs. And he lives in the Sixth! The cop, after some kind of negotiation, let the teenager go. Bruno exploded. He shouted back it was unfair, that the kid had cut him off, that he had been driving a moto in Paris for 20 years and knew what he was doing, that the kid was wrong, he was right.

"You're drunk; just shut up and take a ticket," I said. "If he Breathalyzes you, you're finished."

"I know what I'm doing." Suddenly I saw my husband, who had been such a heroic figure to me, as someone ferocious, angry, slightly deranged.

The cop decided he would take him to the station, back brace and all, and he could spend the night. I imagined him getting beaten by French cops, sleeping on the floor of some cell, waking up with the taste of all that tequila in his mouth.

"Good, take me to jail!" Bruno said as the cop called on his colleague for help. I pleaded and begged. It took time. Bruno walked to the river and smoked cigarettes. "We have a baby at home; I promise this won't happen again." The cop let us go with a huge, fat ticket. He said to me, "You look like a good person. But your husband"—he looked at him, staring off into the summer river—"is in trouble."

The relationship one has with drugs or alcohol or whatever it is that takes you into another realm is something I struggled to understand. I had tried everything in my life, but nothing ever caught me in its grip. I could smoke a pack of cigarettes under stress, then not smoke again for a year. I could drink, but if I did not drink ever again, I would not miss it. I did not think I was addicted to the adrenaline that seemed to affect other people when it came to reporting war. But two of my brothers had struggled with addiction, and I was beginning to see that Bruno's addictions were similar. He was unable to do anything in a small way. Everything he did, from falling in love to building a house to having a baby, was done with tremendous attention and all his energy until he was depleted, emotionally

and physically. He could not have one glass of wine; he had the bottle. He could not just fall in love and marry; it had to be the greatest love story in the world. He could not have a child without being the one to do night shifts for a year, feeding the baby, being the protector of the household, until he exhausted himself to the point of no return with his unending love and sense of responsibility to his family. So he cracked.

A few days after he kicked the scooter, I found the number of a writer friend in Paris who had made his own voyage back from addiction to drugs and alcohol, and called him.

He did not seem surprised to hear from me. "I need—we need—help," I said.

"I'm here," he answered.

Bruno went to a military hospital in Paris. Some months later, he came back from a trip to Spain gutted. "I'm tired," he said, crawling into bed, pulling the sheets over his head.

The second rehab was a place in the country with bars on the windows. It was more a detox center than anything else: At night, Bruno went to the sitting room and Skyped me. His face was white, hollow, and thin. He was not allowed visitors. I placed my hand on the screen, trying to touch the harshness of his face. I felt unbearable sorrow at my inability to help him. How long had I been in love with him? And why, I wondered, had I fallen in love with someone who was so distinctly disturbed? Fragile?

When he came out a few weeks later, we went together to see a woman named Irene. She was French but had lived in America for many years; she had a strange, Woody Allen-style New York accent, entwined with French inflections. She was in her 60s and beautiful, her gray hair pulled back in a chignon.

We sat in three chairs, like the three little bears, and she didn't say much but watched us. I cried, Bruno smoked, Bruno cried.

Outside, we climbed on the motorcycle and drove home, passing Trocadéro, passing the river, going by the Ferris wheel where Bruno had carried me over the threshold in the millennium year. There's a photograph of us: happy people, in love. Afterward we probably went and had a drink.

In time, I grew to alternately resent and hate AA because in some ways it stole my husband from me. He stopped going out at night or socializing with anyone who was not a member. He went to meetings at least once a day, sometimes twice. The only person he spoke to, aside from me, was his sponsor. I knew it was keeping him sober, but I was not sure, as someone had told me, that it was not one addiction replacing another.

I went to a meeting and listened to people talk about their worst moments—hating themselves, waking up in gutters, ruining marriages and lives. I went to Al Anon—for family members of alcoholics. I read the twelve steps, and books on codependency. I began, as best as I could, to detach.

But Bruno says he really stopped drinking *up front* >86

Part of our love was based on the passion, the drink, the fury, the drive that made him so intense

because of Luca. One day, the two of them went to the shop across the road, a place run by Algerian immigrants, where we buy milk when we run out. Luca looked at the high shelf, the bottles of dark wine, pointed, and said, “Daddy.” After that, Bruno had one more drink on my birthday, lapsing from sobriety about a year after he had stopped drinking. He opened the bottle of wine that had come from our beautiful wedding in the Alps, the idyllic day with Luca nestled in my belly and me in a white dress, smiling at the sky.

It was the saddest birthday. Not because I grieved the passing of his alcoholism but because I knew, instinctively, that he would change and never again be the man I married. Because, in fact, part of that love was based on the passion, the drink, the fury, the rage, the anger, the drive that made him so intense.

Without it, there was a slight man who looked sad and hardened by life. He opened the wine. My mother-in-law served a lamb casserole she had baked all day; the house smelled of beautiful spices from Provence. Bruno toasted, “To my wife,” and gave me a long white silk dress that wrapped around my body. Then he drank his last-ever glass of wine and went to bed.

It was four years after our wedding and three years after Luca’s birth that Bruno tried to get sober. The first February of Bruno’s recovery, when he went to an AA meeting every day and isolated himself in an effort to reconstruct himself, something happened to me. The cocoon of my family life opened a crack, and I realized I had to go out into the world—perhaps by myself.

Luca was five years old, in his first year of real school, *école maternelle*, when he went away on his first school trip alone for two nights. Leaflets were distributed weeks in advance with instructions for packing, for writing letters to our five-year-olds that they would be given while apart from us.

“Let’s go,” said Bruno, rising suddenly from the floor on the day of the trip. “It’s time. The bus leaves at 9:00 sharp.” He and Luca took the motorcycle, Luca in his new red helmet, and I walked along rue Notre Dame des Champs, pulling his suitcase to the meeting point at Closerie des Lilas, where long ago Hemingway was usually found getting drunk with his friends. *A shot of brandy*, I thought, *would make me feel better now*; and I briefly thought of the old Bruno, the fun one, the one who ran down the length of a bar in Nairobi while the barman tried to catch him, just so that he could lean down and kiss me passionately.

There were crazy nights and even crazier resolutions . . . the most romantic man I ever knew. We would reunite with the ferocity of firecrackers when we found each other again in airports, in war zones, in cities. Me running in the door after a brutal bombing in Kosovo to find Bruno playing poker with his TV colleagues in a seedy hotel in northern Albania. He put down his cards and dragged me by the hand outside. “Such joy!” he said, seeing my dirty, bedraggled face. Bruno on a Burmese train, opening his wash bag and finding a small bottle of my perfume he always kept. “And I opened it, and wished I had not,” he wrote to me later, “because all the memories came flooding back.”

But now we were parents, Bruno was sober, and the intensity of those days had exhausted us. We wanted peace.

Bruno always told me the reason he loved me, the reason he



ON THE JOB
DI GIOVANNI WITH
K.L.A. SOLDIERS IN
KOSOVO, 1999.

married me when he always said he would never marry, was that no matter how much it hurt, I always let him go where he wanted to.

It was not about other people, about other women, other places. It was about his need to be alone and unencumbered.

“Go if you have to go,” I said, and kissed his cheek, while his eyes filled with tears. I knew he loved me. I knew no one could ever replace me. What else mattered?

At the meeting point, we loaded Luca’s red suitcase onto the bus, and I gave his teacher the two letters I had written. Bruno and I went for a coffee at the café on rue d’Assas, where he drank an espresso silently, smoked two Camels, pecked me on the top of my head before heading off on an assignment “to the suburbs, the rough neighborhoods.”

“Do you want to go to a movie tonight? Or hear some jazz? It’s the St.-Germain Jazz Festival,” I asked. Bruno loved jazz. He had listened to it, endlessly, all those long but wonderful nights when he stayed up with the infant Luca.

My wounded, fragile, impossible husband frowned. His beautiful face creased with pain that I could not read.

“I have my meeting tonight at 8:15. It’s about the Big Book.”

The Big Book, the bible of AA. The meetings were at the American Church on Quai d’Orsay, right next to the Musée d’Orsay. I had stood on the balcony of our first apartment in Paris looking at the huge illuminated clock at the top of the building and felt such hope and happiness. Now I hated passing that church in a bus. I hated the smell of the rooms where AA held their meetings. It was the alien spaceship that had opened its doors and taken away my husband.

But this was selfish. Because AA, of course, had saved him.

I smiled. “Don’t worry,” I said. I was not disappointed.

I was saying goodbye again.

My husband rode off on his motorcycle down the rue d’Assas, smiling behind his new helmet, driving to the suburbs to work, and I finished my tartine and read the day-old news in the *Herald Tribune* while Luca, on the school bus headed for Burgundy, rolled off to his first adventure. □

Excerpted from the forthcoming Ghosts by Daylight, by Janine di Giovanni, copyright © 2011 by Janine di Giovanni. Reprinted with permission by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved.