The Cellist of Sarajevo

Steven Galloway

Published by Atlantic Books

Extract

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Arrow

Arrow blinks. She has been waiting for a long time. Through the scope of her rifle she can see three soldiers standing beside a low wall on a hill above Sarajevo. One looks at the city as though he's remembering something. One holds out a lighter so another can light a cigarette. It's obvious they have no idea they're in her sights. Perhaps, she thinks, they believe they're too far from the front line. They're wrong. Perhaps they think no one could thread a bullet between the buildings that separate them from her. Again, they're wrong. She can kill any one of them, and maybe even two of them, whenever she chooses. And soon she'll make her choice.

The soldiers Arrow is watching have good reason to think they're safe. Were almost anyone else hunting them, they would be. They're almost a kilometre away, and the rifle she uses, the kind nearly all the defenders use, has a practical range of eight hundred metres. Beyond that, the chances of hitting a target are remote. This isn't the case for Arrow. She can make a bullet do things that others can't.

For most people, long-distance shooting is a question of

the correct combination of observation and mathematics. Figure out the wind's speed and direction, and the target's distance. Measurements are calculated and factored into equations taking into account the velocity of the bullet, the drop over time, the magnification of the scope. It's no different from throwing a ball. A ball isn't thrown at a target, it's thrown in an arc calculated to intersect with a target. Arrow doesn't take measurements, she doesn't calculate formulas. She simply sends the bullet where she knows it needs to go. She has trouble understanding why other snipers can't do this.

She's hidden among the detritus of a burned-out office tower, a few metres back from a window with a view of the city's southern hills. Anyone looking would have a difficult if not impossible time spotting a slight young woman with shoulder-length black hair concealed within the smoking wreckage of workaday life. She lies with her stomach pressed to the floor, her legs partially covered by an old newspaper. Her eyes, large, blue and bright, are the only sign of life.

Arrow believes she's different from the snipers on the hills. She shoots only soldiers. They shoot unarmed men, women, children. When they kill a person, they seek a result that is far greater than the elimination of that individual. They are trying to kill the city. Every death chips away at the Sarajevo of Arrow's youth with as much certainty as any mortar shell battering a building. Those left are robbed of not only a fellow citizen but the memory of what it was to be alive in a time before men on the hills shot at you while you tried to cross the street.

Ten years ago, when she was eighteen and was not called Arrow, she borrowed her father's car and drove to the countryside to visit friends. It was a bright, clear day, and the car felt alive to her, as though the way she and the car moved together was a sort of destiny, and everything was happening exactly as it ought to. As she rounded a corner one of her favourite songs came on the radio, and sunlight filtered through the trees the way it does with lace curtains, reminding her of her grandmother, and tears began to slide down her cheeks. Not for her grandmother, who was then still very much among the living, but because she felt an enveloping happiness to be alive, a joy made stronger by the certainty that someday it would all come to an end. It overwhelmed her, made her pull the car to the side of the road. Afterwards she felt a little foolish, and never spoke to anyone about it.

Now, however, she knows she wasn't being foolish. She realises that for no particular reason she stumbled into the core of what it is to be human. It's a rare gift to understand that your life is wondrous, and that it won't last forever.

So when Arrow pulls the trigger and ends the life of one of the soldiers in her sights, she'll do so not because she wants him dead, although she can't deny that she does, but because the soldiers have robbed her and almost everyone else in the city of this gift. That life will end has become so self-evident it's lost all meaning. But worse, for Arrow, is the damage done to the distance between what she knows and what she believes. For although she knows her tears that day were

not the ridiculous sentimentality of a teenage girl, she doesn't really believe it.

From the elevated fortress of Vraca, above the occupied neighbourhood of Grbavica, her targets bomb the city with assumed impunity. In the Second World War, Vraca was a place where the Nazis tortured and killed those who resisted them. The names of the dead are carved on the steps, but at the time few fighters used their real names. They took new names, names that said more about them than any boastful story told by drunks in a bar, names that defied the governments who later tried to twist their deeds into propaganda. It's said they took these new names so their families wouldn't be in danger, so they could slip in and out of two lives. But Arrow believes they took these names so they could separate themselves from what they had to do, so the person who fought and killed could someday be put away. To hate people because they hated her first, and then to hate them because of what they've done to her, has created a desire to separate the part of her that will fight back, that will enjoy fighting back, from the part that never wanted to fight in the first place. Using her real name would make her no different from the men she kills. It would be a death greater than the end of her life.

From the first time she picked up a rifle to kill she has called herself Arrow. There are some who continue to call her by her former name. She ignores them. If they persist, she tells them her name is Arrow now. No one argues. No one questions what she must do. Everyone does something to stay alive. But

if they were to press her, she would say, 'I am Arrow, because I hate them. The woman you knew hated nobody.'

Arrow has chosen today's targets because she doesn't want the men at Vraca to feel safe. She will have to make an extremely difficult shot. Though she hides on the ninth floor of this depredated building, the fortress is an uphill run, and she must slip the bullet between a series of buildings that stand between her and her target. The soldiers must stay within a space of about three metres, and smoke from burning buildings periodically obscures her view. As soon as she lets off a shot, every sniper on the southern hill will begin to search for her. They'll quickly figure out where she is. At that point they'll shell the building, into the ground if necessary. And the reason this building is burned out is that it's an easy target. Her chances of escaping the repercussions of her own bullets are slim. But this isn't an unusual set of challenges. She has sent bullets through trickier air and faced swifter retaliation in the past.

Arrow knows exactly how long it will take them to locate her. She knows exactly where the snipers will look and exactly where the mortars will hit. By the time the shelling stops she'll be gone, though none will understand how, even those on her own side, defending the city. If she told them, they wouldn't understand. They wouldn't believe that she knows what a weapon will do because Arrow herself is a weapon. She possesses a particular kind of genius few would want to accept. If she could choose, she wouldn't believe in it either. But she knows it isn't up to her. You don't choose what to believe.

Belief chooses you.

One of the three soldiers moves away from the other two. Arrow tenses, waiting to see if the two salute him.

If they do she will fire. For a moment she's unsure, unable to read their gestures. Then the soldier steps out of the narrow corridor her bullet can travel through. He has, in an instant of seeming inconsequence, saved his life. A life is composed almost entirely of actions like this, Arrow knows.

She watches them awhile longer, waiting for a detail to emerge that will dictate which one receives the first bullet. She wants to fire twice, to kill both of them, but she isn't confident there will be that opportunity, and if she must choose just one of the soldiers she would like to make the right choice, if there's a right choice to be made. Ultimately she doesn't believe it will make much difference. Perhaps one of them will live, but he'll never understand how slim the margin of his existence is. He will chalk it up to luck, or fate, or merit. He'll never know that an arbitrary fraction of a millimetre in her aim one way or another will make the difference between feeling the sun on his face ten minutes from now and looking down to see an unbelievable hole in his chest, feeling all he was or could have become drain out of him and then, in his final moments, inhaling more pain than he knew the world could hold.

One of the soldiers says something and laughs. The other one joins in, but from the tightness in his mouth it seems to Arrow that his laugh is perhaps only for his companion's benefit. She ponders this. Does she shoot the instigator or the collaborator? She's not sure. For the next few minutes she

watches the two men smoke and talk. Their hands trace hard shapes through the air, physical punctuation, sometimes pausing, like knives poised in anticipation of a strike. They're both young, younger than she is, and if she wished herself into ignorance she could almost imagine they were discussing the outcome of a recent football match. Perhaps, she thinks, they are. It's possible, even likely, that they view this as some sort of game. Boys throwing bombs instead of balls.

Then they both turn their heads as though called by someone Arrow can't see, and she knows the time to fire has come. Nothing has made a decision for her, so Arrow simply chooses one. If there's a reason, if it's because one shot is easier, or one of them reminds her of someone she once knew and liked or didn't like, or one of them seems more dangerous than the other, she can't say. The only certainty is that she exhales and her finger goes from resting on the trigger to squeezing it, and a bullet breaks the sound barrier an instant before pulping fabric, skin, bone, flesh and organ, beginning a short process that will turn motion into meat.

As Arrow readies her second shot, in the time between the tick of one second and another, she knows that something has gone wrong. The men on the hills know where she is. She abandons her shot and rolls to the side, aware of eyes upon her, that a sniper has been hunting her all along, and the instant she shot she was exposed. They have set a trap for her and she has fallen into it. A bullet hits the ground where she lay an instant before. As she scuttles towards the skeleton of a staircase that will lead her nine floors down and out of the

building she hears a rifle fire, but doesn't hear the bullet strike. This means either the sniper has missed entirely or she has been hit. She doesn't feel any pain, though she's heard you don't at first. There isn't any need to check if she's hit. If a bullet has found her she'll know soon enough.

Arrow enters the stairwell and a mortar comes through the roof and explodes. She's two flights down when another lands, sending the ninth floor crumbling into the eighth. As she reaches the sixth floor the texture of the situation shifts in her mind, an she veers into a dark, narrow hallway and moves as quickly as she can away from the mortar she know is about to penetrate the stairwell. She manages to make it far enough to avoid the steel and wood and concrete the explosion sends her, a multitude of bullets as interest paid on the loan of one. But then, as the last piece of shrapnel hits the ground, she turns and runs back towards the staircase. She has no choice. There's no other way out of this building, and if she stays she will collect on her loan. So she returns to the stairwell, not knowing what remains of it. The sixth floor has collapsed into the fifth, and when she jumps to the landing below she wonders if it will bear her. It does, and from there it's a matter of staying tight against the inner wall where the stairs meet the building, where the weight of the upper layers of the collapsed stairway has had less impact.

Arrow hears another mortar hit as she reaches the ground, and although the front entrance leading to the street is only steps away she continues to the basement, where she feels her way along a dim corridor until she finds a door. She shoulders

it open. The immediate shift from darkness to light momentarily blinds her, but she emerges without hesitation into a low stairwell on the north side of the building, somewhat sheltered from the men on the southern hill. Before her eyes adjust to the world around her she begins to notice the percussion of mortars affecting her hearing, and it reminds her of being in a swimming pool, of a day when she and a friend took turns shouting each other's names underwater and laughing at how they came out, all garbled and distorted and foreign. When she turns east, away from the building, she feels a pain in her side, and she looks down, half expecting to see her stomach distended between splintered ribs. A quick inspection reveals only a slight cut, a small nothing that attached itself to her at some point during her exit.

As she walks towards her unit's headquarters in the city centre, she notices that the sky is beginning to darken. A few drops of rain hit her forehead, make her feel her own heat as they evaporate. When she touches her side, her hand comes away without any fresh blood on it, and Arrow wonders what it means that the insignificance of her injury does not bring her any particular sense of relief.