

Janine di Giovanni Transcript

Janine di Giovanni: The village where I was with all of the fighters was encircled by Russian tanks. And then they started bombing us with helicopter gunships. So we were completely encircled. There was no way out. I finally resigned myself that I was going to die - that the Russians would come in and, of course I was there illegally, so I knew, and I had been told this before, that they would just assassinate me because they didn't want any witnesses.

Ramita Navai: From *Aurra Studios*. This is **The Line of Fire** with me, Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talk to fellow journalists about covering war and the life-changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**.

My guest today is the extraordinary and multi award-winning author, journalist, and war correspondent, Janine Di Giovanni. Janine made her name covering the war in the former Yugoslavia.

And in 2000, she was one of a few foreign reporters to witness the fall of Grozny in Chechnya. She's currently foreign affairs columnist for foreign policy magazine and a senior fellow at Yale university. Janine, welcome.

Janine di Giovanni: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Ramita Navai: Janine, this is the first time that we're really meeting, but I have been a huge fan of your work for such a long time.

And you are such an amazing role model for the younger generation of foreign correspondence coming up. How did you get started in journalism and why war?

Janine di Giovanni: Well, I absolutely never wanted to be a war reporter. I don't even think I wanted to be a journalist. I wanted to be a writer my whole life. I always wrote short stories and then I wrote poetry.

And then after university, I went to this very elite writing program which trains fiction writers. So my dream was that I'd be an academic and I would write novels and I'd be married and have two kids in a very neat, organized life. And it didn't work out like that.

I got married, very young, to a wonderful man. And then I was doing my post-graduate work in London. And one day I picked up a newspaper and I rarely read the newspapers. I just wasn't involved at all with global affairs. But I saw an article about an Israeli lawyer, a Jewish lawyer, who defended Palestinians in military court.

And at that point she was one of the only lawyers doing this. And basically what intrigued me, was that she lost all of her cases, but she continued to do it because

she believed in justice. I don't know why, I have no idea why, but something inside of me shifted forever. And I wrote to her and she wrote back to me.

I mean, it was before email, it was actually a letter. And she said I would welcome you to come visit me, but you have to come to Jerusalem. And I literally like on my spring vacation from doing my studies, I got on a plane, stayed at the YMCA in west Jerusalem, and met her. She was called Felicia Langer and the moment I walked into her office she was seated behind a desk and she was crying and there was a Palestinian family there and she was openly weeping because she had just lost a case for this family. Their teenage son had been beaten to death in Israeli custody. And that was it. I can't tell you what internal thing happened in my world, but I literally hung around with her for a while. She gave me a list of contacts in the west bank and Gaza. I started - I didn't know how to be a reporter, but I learned very quickly. My marriage dissolved and life then took on an entirely different shape of what I ever imagined it would be.

Ramita Navai: And how did you get into war reporting?

And I love the fact that you never wanted to be one. Why wasn't it the attractive proposition that is for so many young foreign correspondents for you? And then how did you get into it?

Janine di Giovanni: Well, first of all, I'm the least courageous person in the world. I cannot tell you like the list of things I'm afraid of, you know, starting with spiders and the dark and being alone at night and a million and one things. Like I have such anxieties about everything that I'm not the kind of person that could easily, you know, march into the woods with a group of rebel soldiers.

But what happened was when I was working in Israel and the West Bank in those days, I saw what was happening to the Palestinians. And I knew nothing about the occupation. I learned very quickly. And what became ingrained in me from her basically was this deep sense of injustice. And she said to me, "If you have the ability to go to these places and write about them, then you have an obligation."

Very soon after that, the war in Bosnia kicked off. And it's really interesting. Telling this from the perspective of the Me Too generation now, I was working then at the Sunday Times and I was championed by another woman called Susan Douglas and by Andrew Neil, who was the editor in chief, but the rest of the staff, the foreign editor, the other reporters hated me because I, you know, I'd been brought in and they wouldn't even give me a desk in the foreign desk.

I had to sit with the subs, which was great. The subs were great, but, you know, I had a lot of balls I think, and Andrew Neil basically said go to Sarajevo and you'll either sink or swim. And I literally had no guidance. They gave me £3000, a satellite phone and they told me to come back with a good story.

And meanwhile, the foreign desk tried to sabotage me every step of the way. The reporter that I was replacing or was shifting with, literally like everyone, it was a minefield of my colleagues rather than, you know, the bullets and the shrapnel. It was more worrying about what was happening in Wapping and who is trying to pull me down.

Ramita Navai: Classic.

Janine di Giovanni: But somehow that made me more determined. And I just thought I'll show you. So I ended up, I just refused to leave. And the other thing that was interesting, and I'm sure you will identify with this, was the number of male reporters in the field who tried to scare the pants off me. Literally, and every way, you know, just try to terrify me.

And they were all fascinated by guns and, you know, talking about AK 47s and howitzers and what artillery this was.

And I had no clue. What I wanted to do was to talk to people. So I just, you know, I have this great expression in life, which carries me through to now, God looks after fools and children, and I really was a fool.

You know, I didn't, I realized that I could get shot by a sniper, but I seemed to think that I was protected in some way. And from Bosnia, for the rest of the wars. Unfortunately the 1990s was a terrible time of conflict and it went from one to the other, to the other. But I remained in Bosnia. That was my, you know, Martha Gellhorn said, "You can only love one war. The rest is responsibility." Bosnia was and is my great love. Everything else, from what I learned there took me through to the rest of my life and my career.

Ramita Navai: So Bosnia was the first war you covered?

Janine di Giovanni: Yes. I mean, well look, the Gaza strip and the West Bank during the first Intifada was pretty hairy and scary.

And the first time I really learned about, how, you know, an occupation or how rebel groups work.

Ramita Navai: [Explainer] The first intifada was a period of Palestinian protests and riots against Israel's military occupation of the Gaza strip and the West bank. It began in 1987 after an Israeli Defense Forces' truck crashed into a civilian vehicle killing four Palestinians and wounding 10. Gaza Palestinians saw the incident as a deliberate act of retaliation against the killing of a Jew in Gaza several days before. They took to the streets in protest, burning tires and throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at Israeli police and troops. The unrest lasted nearly six years.

Janine di Giovanni: And I was extremely naive. I did things like carried goods out of the West Bank for people, innocently, pamphlets and things like that, you know, and didn't realize that one has to - I learned a lot of lessons.

So, while I wouldn't say the first Intifada was a war it was certainly dangerous. There was a lot of rock throwing. There were a lot of raids on villages. So I think I learned the first layer of it there. And then Bosnia, certainly the guns, the mines, the snipers, the artillery, you know, the death of colleagues and friends, the dismemberment.

So that's really, that was my finishing school, I suppose you'd say. My gruesome finishing school.

Ramita Navai: Was war as you'd expected it to be?

Janine di Giovanni: No, you know, it's interesting.

Ramita Navai: How was it different?

Janine di Giovanni: Two things really struck. One, is how young soldiers are, because I remember always thinking soldiers were old guys that knew what they were doing, but in fact, as you know, they're 18, 19 years old, they're the age of my son. They're children.

And when they die, when anyone dies, they call for their mothers. It's unbelievably poignant and heart-breaking, but everyone or nearly everyone, you know, we know that from George Floyd, most recently, they call for their mothers and that's what soldiers do. And the second thing was the chaos. I assumed that war would be like a kind of Napoleonic marching into cities and taking them.

But in fact, it was utter chaos. It was frontlines of people that didn't know how to use weapons. It was trenches that were so close that you could see the enemy. It was people not knowing how to take the safety catches off guns or mines. It was random shooting. It was ethnic cleansing and people firing at things they didn't know whether it was their side or another side. It was a mess.

I think the other thing, and this might be too graphic, was that I didn't realize how much human beings could bleed. In Chechnya, which we'll talk about later, they had to do a lot of amputations without anaesthetic. And people, the soldiers, were laid on - it was a school house that was being used as a hospital. And, you know, they were amputating their limbs because they had crossed over a minefield. And I just, I was shocked. Like, it's interesting how the little things, but the amount of blood that a human being can lose and stay alive and how sticky it is and how thick. So things like that.

Or the other thing that really struck me was how quickly you adapt to fear, you know, like the levels of fear. For me, you know, being a true blue scaredy cat that how you

can kind of talk yourself into and calm yourself down that you're not going to die and you're going to survive.

Ramita Navai: Janine, can I just say. You're calling yourself a scaredy-cat and saying you're not brave at all, but can I say that is the sign of a truly brave person, someone that goes into a situation with anxieties and with fear.

How do you think reporting conflict has changed since you first started? If it has.

Janine di Giovanni: Well, the danger, I mean, the elements of bullets and guns is still there, but what's different is kidnapping. And, you know, the kidnapping in Bosnia didn't exist. Very briefly in Mostar there were some threats that people were taking journalists for 50 Deutchmarks, so insulting, so little money. But then it became with the rise of the Abu Syyaf in the Philippines who were kidnapping journalists. And then finally to the stage of ISIS were people we knew and loved Steve Sotloff and Jim Foley were kidnapped by ISIS and beheaded. So I think the element of kidnapping is a real danger. And yet when people ask me. Young people come to me and say, I want to be a foreign correspondent. I always encourage them to do it because we need to train a new generation of truth tellers. It's essential. You know, we have to pass the baton at some point and we need to train them to do it well.

So absolutely go for it.

Ramita Navai: Do you think it's still harder for women and how has it changed since you first started out?

Janine di Giovanni: Well, I do think and again, this is a wonderful thing with age and I say this to all young women out there who are listening, you know, the greatest thing about getting older is that don't give a damn about things.

So you're able to reflect back and be extremely honest with yourself. I never really wanted children because I just didn't. I don't know why.

I mean, I didn't have that burning desire in my early thirties or my twenties, like many people do to have children. But then when it did hit me, it really hit me. And I realized, and I looked around and I think there's this extremely unfair unwritten policy that women reporters, if they don't have children and they don't have families are sent into the most dangerous places or that's what the Sunday Times did to me anyway, and the Times, and on things like Christmas, Easter, my birthday, summer holidays, because I didn't have kids.

So I felt they began to mistreat me in a way they would not be able to get away with now.

Anyway and then the other thing I want to say is when I eventually did become pregnant, a very old mother, my foreign editor, who was a man, who had, I think, five

or six kids hauled me into his office and screamed at me saying, "I have a war reporter who can't go to war."

And I said, you know, there's nothing in my contract that says I'm a war reporter. There is nothing that says I'm a foreign correspondent. It says I'm a reporter. So why can't you send me to Brussels? Or why can't I cover Parliament? And he was livid. And then he said, "Because you're really good at getting into places that other people can't get into."

And it suddenly dawned on me that I was just cannon fodder. That if I was killed there'd be a big ceremony for me at St. Bride's and people would go to the frontline club and cry. But their lives would go on. And I would be dead aged 37 or eight or 42 or whatever. And, I suddenly thought, you know, I deserve a life too, and that's when I kind of had a big life change.

Ramita Navai: And would he have said that to a male correspondent with kids - of course not.

Janine di Giovanni: Are you kidding? No. And there were male correspondents who had various issues, drug issues or alcoholism, and they were treated with the greatest of sympathy and, oh, we must look after so-and-so, he's very fragile, but I was an old toughy that, you know, could handle this.

And the interesting thing that, of course you learn much later is a lot of these guys are really afraid of you know, Men. For whatever reason, the poor dears are terrified of strong women. And I remember Anne Leslie, the great Daily Mail Anne Leslie said to me - she used to show up in Bosnia; Floor length, fur coat, her hair recently done, full makeup, false eyelashes. And she said to me in a very, and it wasn't patronizing, but she just said, "Look dear, men are fools, just shake a few bangles at them at the checkpoint, show them some pretty glittery thing and they'll let you pass." And I just thought it was the greatest, you know, at that point she was the doyen of all doyen of reporters.

And, I think that's quite applicable in many situations.

Ramita Navai: I love it. That's very honest and I'm so glad you talking about this partly because some of our female colleagues take issue with being asked how it's different being a female in our world. And I think it's a really important question because it is different.

Janine di Giovanni: Absolutely. And, you know, I did take umbrage when people would say, do women report differently? Because I don't think we do report differently. Although individuals report differently, I do go to hospitals and schools and orphanages because I find that's where I could sit on the ground and talk to people at length.

I'm not really interested in talking to UN officials or diplomats. They don't interest me. They lie and they never tell the truth anyway. **[Ramita laughs]** I want to hear it from people.

But we are different. We're physically different. And I'm sorry if I'm offending anyone, who's non binary and I don't mean to. I'm just saying for myself. First of all, can I be really Frank when you're in the field, we need to pack tampons. Right? And if you're in a situation you're caught, I'm thinking about when I was in Kosovo for weeks and weeks and weeks with a unit of soldiers and I was the only woman, you've got to deal with physical things, right? Second, if you do want a child, you must be strategic about it, where men don't have to be. And we all know that.

The anguish that people have gone through. Men don't have that anguish. And I'm sorry, if you remove that anguish, you've got a lot more freedom to do your work and to focus on your career. Women have this added dimension. So I'd stand up to anyone and say that.

Ramita Navai: And what about the way women correspondents have been treated in the industry by our editors, by the business?

Has that changed since you started out?

Janine di Giovanni: I certainly hope so.

I certainly hope they're treated better. I was really mistreated. I have to say that. By the way, not just by my male colleagues, by female colleagues.

And I know we're not allowed to say that, but, there's always women like that right? Like Madeline Albright said, "There's a special place in hell for women who don't like other women." And we both know plenty of them right?

Ramita Navai: We do. I mean, I feel that it's got better, certainly since I started many, because I think people would now get sacked for some of the stuff that they said and did. I mean, I don't think you'd be able to get away with some of it. Though there's one story, that you have written about, and I'd love for you to tell it. And it's a note from an editor when you were in the former Yugoslavia.

Janine di Giovanni: Okay. Well, that person is still in a very high position of power when he did a lot more than that.

Ramita Navai: Wow.

Janine di Giovanni: No, I'm happy to, I'm not going to say his name. He knows who he is. It was freezing cold in Sarajevo. It was Christmas, 1992. So it was the first year of war and it was gutting and the deprivation of the people, the shelling, I mean, it still to this day, when I think about what those people endured in that three-year siege I still get very emotional.

Ramita Navai: [Explainer] During the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Bosnian Serb nationalists laid siege to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. 13,000 soldiers encircled the city, trapping over a quarter of a million people who came under daily mortaring, shelling and sniper fire. More than 11,000 people were killed in the city. It is the longest siege in modern history lasting 1,425 days.

Janine di Giovanni: So I was filing, I think Christmas day fell on a Sunday. So I had to call the desk and he happened to answer. And he said grudgingly, because he hated me because I had replaced *his* boy. "How are you?" And I said, I'm okay. It's really, really, really cold. And he said, "I'm sure you'll find a warm Willie to keep you warm."

And I literally thought I hadn't heard him correctly. But then on the other times when I would call he would say these kinds of horrible things and also, you know, has touched me inappropriately. So you know *Me Too* he would not have his job now today. Absolutely.

Ramita Navai: Yes. Yes. And Janine, this is why I think it is so important for us to talk about. And this is why I do argue with our colleagues who just say it's no different, we get treated the same. Because we don't. And the shocking thing is that the incident Willie gate that you talked about, I mean, people like that are still in our industry.

Janine di Giovanni: In high positions.

Ramita Navai: Yes.

Janine di Giovanni: In very high positions,

Ramita Navai: Yes. Janine you've written so honestly, and rawly about being in love and covering war. And you've said that, you know, war intensifies everything. That love feels deeper, it's more passionate. So I want to know, do you think you would have fallen in love with the same types of people and had the same types of relationship if you hadn't been covering wars?

Janine di Giovanni: You know, it's such a good question because certainly the man that I married when I was very young was probably the kindest best person in the world and what split us up, it's so interesting, was Gaza. Because we went on that very first trip together. We both met Felicia Langer together, and then we had a chance to go to Gaza and Gaza at that point was really intense, the first Intifada.

And he didn't want to go because he felt that if he was with me he would feel too protective and that it was so dangerous and it wasn't worth the risk. And I really wanted it to go. And as time went on then I had somehow caught this bug of wanting to be in the middle of history. Basically, you know, the Berlin wall had come down.

The former Yugoslavia was breaking up. African countries were at war. Everything was changing and I wanted to be in the middle of it. It was so exciting and he was a very wonderful laid back, calm guy that didn't have this burning ambition that I did. But it is true that the man I did fall in love with the next time and who became my husband and the father of my child was a wildly romantic, wild character, that I'd have to make up in a novel or a French film. Would I do it all over again?

Absolutely. Because those kinds of moments of great intensity of romance sustain me throughout my life. You know, I, of course I look back now and I think, well, maybe I should have married a banker or hedge fund manager or that Italian venture capitalist.

Ramita Navai: No!

Janine di Giovanni: But that's not my path, it's not me. And I'd rather have, you know, the - and Bruno and I certainly, you know, had so much love and joy, but also deep heartbreak.

But you know, that is the price you pay for passionate love. You can either have a passionate life, but there is an enormous price to pay. And I say this to all young women, not always, but if you're going to have that level of intensity, you're going to have that level of misery at some point, too. So you either choose to be safe, but you know, that old expression that a ship in the harbour is safe, but that's not what it's built for.

And I think fundamentally you have to know who you are. And I knew from the time I was very young. That I was desperate to get out of the kind of background I came from, which was very conventional and conservative and, you know, I was meant to kind of marry a doctor or a lawyer and go to the country club and play tennis.

And I just couldn't abide that. I had something wild in me and I still do. And, so that frightens people too, you know, people can sense when you've got like a wild race horse inside you. You're not, you don't fit into a box, but I deeply encourage all women and men out there who just feel like you to be true to yourself because otherwise you're going down the road, if you're lying to yourself and you're married to the wrong person or with the wrong person, it will come back at you.

Ramita Navai: You've also written about motherhood. How do you think that changed the way you approach your job? If it did at all. And did motherhood in any way temper your wild streak?

Janine di Giovanni: It did and it didn't.

When Luca was six months old, this was another like cruelty by my office. They sent me back to Baghdad and it was the height of the insurgency.

I had a six month old baby, I was still breastfeeding, and they did it to test me. And it was really horrible because I was upstairs in our office at the Al-Hamra hotel literally, sorry to be graphic, but I'd been breastfeeding so I had to pump my breasts and I was throwing the milk down the sink.

So I was crying because I was very emotional anyway and I was separated from my infant. And I heard the guy downstairs who shall go unnamed, but who is still working at a very high level again, talking to his friend going, "Yeah, Di Giovanni's had a baby and she's lost her nerve. It's great."

I just, I couldn't, I was on the stairs and I went back upstairs and I called Bruno and I told him, and I was crying and crying and he said, "But it's true. And isn't that a great thing? You lost your nerve, you had a baby that's wonderful. And this trip will show you how you want to carve out the rest of your life, how you want to work, how you want to take your trips, how you want to juggle the two of them."

Well, Bruno and I didn't make it in the long run. We split up when Luca was four, but we both have a deep conviction to raise our son with the most love and the most, um, most kind of, without the holes that both Bruno and I had in our own childhoods. So we wanted to raise him to be, as I always say, a conquistador.

You know, that he would be strong and know he was so loved and know that no matter what was thrown at him in life, he could cope with it.

Ramita Navai: Janine which has been the conflict that's affected you the most?

Janine di Giovanni: Bosnia, you know, I still can't. I teach at Yale and I teach a course called Four conflicts through a human rights lens.

And in the autumn, I teach Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone, which are humanitarian interventions that failed or worked. And in the spring, I teach Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan. So proxy wars, you know, inevitably in the autumn, when I start teaching Bosnia and I get to the, the massacre at Srebrenica, the genocide, excuse me, the genocide at Srebrenica.

I literally, I get really emotional and I have to stop myself. And I think it was this last autumn. Like I actually, I started crying and it's so unprofessional to do that in front of your students and they get very confused.

Ramita Navai: [Explainer] *The Srebenica genocide was one of the worst acts of mass killing in Europe since the end of World War Two. In July 1995, 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were systematically murdered in less than two weeks by Bosnian Serb units. The massacre exposed the shocking impotence and failure of the United Nations - for the slaughter had taken place under the gaze of UN peacekeepers, who did nothing. Remains of victims are still being found and identified to this day.*

Janine di Giovanni: But I realized that for the longest time I was carrying around this weight of guilt that especially with Srebrenica, because we as journalists and Rwanda equally - where a million people were killed in three months - that we, as witnesses did everything in our power to try to prevent the genocide that happened there at Srebrenica. And we couldn't. And, you know, it's interesting, everyone I know who worked in Bosnia in that epic for sustained periods of time, whether they were UN officials or diplomats have exactly the same thing, because it really was like, you could see a car crash coming. We saw Srebrenica coming. We, you know, as far back as 1993, I write about it in my book where I was in a radio call with someone in Srebrenica. I was sitting in Sarajevo in the presidency and they were saying in the name of God, do something, in the name of God, do something. And I always think we did nothing. And you know, that really, really haunts me. Hard to bear.

Ramita Navai: Janine, you have been in so many dangerous situations. I mean, reading your book, your book is just this *Ghost by Daylight* is the one I'm reading and it's an absolute page turner. And it manages to be a page turner and poetic at the same time. And I'm just jaw on the ground at some of the scrapes that you've been in.

And you're incredibly honest about the fear that you feel. I want to know what was that one moment where you faced death and you thought this is finally it.

Janine di Giovanni: 1999 for me was the year that nearly broke me. It was four months in Chechnya where a unit I was traveling with, we accidentally got bombed by NATO and most of the men died. And then from there it was East Timor and back and forth to Africa.

My two colleagues, Kurt Shork and Miguel de Moreno were murdered in Sierra Leone when I was working with them both, and I had given them a tape of some UN soldiers who were tortured and they went off to check it out and they never came back. They were murdered by rebel soldiers.

Ramita Navai: [Explainer] *The civil war in the small West African nation of Sierra Leone raged for just over a decade, between 1991 and 2002, leaving at least 70 thousand people dead and over two and a half million - nearly half the population - displaced. It was marked by extreme violence - decapitations, amputations, gang rape and the use of child soldiers, who were often drugged or given alcohol to give them courage.*

Janine di Giovanni: So that was also another big, big trauma for me that year.

And so by the end of the year, I was well and truly burnt out. Exhausted. And scared. And also again, I was at the point then I was in love with Bruno and I really want it to settle down and have a kid. And my foreign editor kept saying, got to go to Chechnya, got to go to Chechnya, got to go to Chechnya. I really didn't want to go to Chechnya.

It was the middle of winter. It was a gruesome war. My colleagues who had been there before said that told me out right, that the aerial bombardment would drive me to the point of madness.

Ramita Navai: [Explainer] *The tiny Muslim republic of Chechnya in southern Russia has a history of resisting Russian rule. Rebels began agitating for independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in 1999, Russia unleashed a major invasion with the siege and assault of the capital, Grozny. Thousands of fighters and Chechen civilians were killed. The UN later described Grozny as the most destroyed city on the Earth. The country is now ruled by a Russian-backed leader.*

Janine di Giovanni: It was impossible to get into Chechnya. It was a completely closed country. You had to walk over mountains through Georgia or go through *Ingushetia*.

It was a nightmare. It was a closed - when countries are closed, there's a reason for it. There was no UN there, there was no doctors without borders. There were no, there was no one. There were no foreigners, except for myself, a German photographer, and a French reporter who was somewhere elsewhere - wasn't with us.

The German reporter and I went through Ingushetia and managed to get inside.

I really didn't want to be in Chechnya. And I kind of had a sense, you know, the great thing about our work is you get - the more you do, the more intuitive you get. And I had intuition telling me like, do not go, but my office put a huge amount of pressure on me so I went.

And the fall of Grozny, Chechnya in the end of January, 2000, I was trapped in this village outside of Grozny with the Chechen fighters, and they had crossed over the minefield.

The Russians had laid a trap for them. They told them they could retreat from Grozny, but in fact, they laid a minefield. So they lost many, many, many of the men. I think a third of the men stepped on mines and blew up and some of them actually went forward. Once they realized that it was a minefield, some volunteered and went forward and blew themselves up.

But the ones that made it to this village, where I was, were covered, their winter white uniforms were covered in blood and they were angry.

The night that Grozny - a few days after Grozny fell - the Russians, the village, where I was with all of the fighters, was encircled by Russian tanks. And then they started bombing us with helicopter gunships. So we were completely encircled. There was no way out. And we were under the care of a local commander who was deeply suspicious. He was, he - Chechens kidnapped. So that was like the one place

where you had to be really careful. So we had set it up very carefully. This German photographer, Thomas Dworzak, who's an extraordinary photographer at Magnum.

He spoke Chechen and he spoke Russian and he had made contact with the Chechen commander who was meant to protect us. But the minute I got, I met this commander, I was deeply suspicious. And Thomas actually translated something that he said, which was "The girl has three passports. That means three different bounties on her head."

So, you know, we had in addition to the bombing and the how are we going to get out? Because the other danger was once you got in, you couldn't get out, it would take weeks, maybe months for you to find safe passage out. I also was worried that we were going to get kidnapped and I really did not want to end my days chained to a dungeon somewhere in Chechnya.

So I was deeply anxious. And then this one night, the Russians encircled, it was the end and there was no way out. So there were various...

Ramita Navai: Where were you sleeping at this point? And kind of what were nights like?

Janine di Giovanni: I wasn't sleeping. I wasn't sleeping. I was up all night that night. But we were staying in a house of some civilians.

And they had, there was some teenage soldiers there. We were trying to be brave, you know, but at one point the bombing got so bad that I went into the basement where the women were and like, it was a potato cellar and they had, you know, jars of beans and things. And the women and children were there.

And, you know, people are extremely resourceful in those situations. They had mattresses laid out and they had candles. And, but I was going between the potato cellar and the soldiers upstairs because I wanted to know what was going on. And it was two in the morning, three in the morning. And, this old woman said to me, you know, "Well, if I die, inshallah, I've had a good life. I will go to Allah."

And I remember thinking, looking at her and thinking what? Well, I haven't had a good life yet. I haven't been, I haven't married. I haven't had a kid. I haven't, I haven't lived. It's not my time to die. I don't want to die for Chechnya. But then I remember I went outside my, of course, as it always does, my satellite phone died, right? So with the last draining batteries, I dictate my story to my foreign editor. And I got out like the last word and the headline was **Grozny Falls to Russian Forces**. And it was like a massive thing, and I was the only witness there. Like there was no AP, there was no Reuters. There was no BBC. So that was it.

Like, and I thought, oh my God, what if I called it wrong? What if Grozny didn't fall? What if there was some holdout? But, I had to rely on the commanders I was with

that they said, you know, and even they didn't want to admit it had fallen, but I made that call and thank God it was right.

But that night what happened was that I finally resigned myself that I was going to die, that the Russians would come in and of course I was there illegally. So I knew, and I'd been told this before that they would just kill, they would assassinate me because they didn't, they didn't want any witnesses. But I did have this small smidgen of satisfaction that I got my story out. So I thought, well, if I die, at least I died believing in something and that's not a bad way to go, right?

I, you know, I did what I accomplished and I kind of exposed these Russian war crimes. And what I had seen in Grozny was horrific. So I got it out. I got it out there. And then I was going to die.

And the weird thing is after my initial anxieties and fear, and I didn't get to say goodbye to my parents. I calmed down. It was strangely peaceful. It was, I suppose, like drowning, you know, you fight it, you fight it, you fight it. And then apparently when you drown, there's a great, once you, once you resolve yourself that I'm going to drown, it was, there was almost a sense of peace. And I just, I knew I was going to die. And, at that moment, and I still don't know how this happened and I really believe this was divine intervention.

You know, I'm a Catholic. So I believe in miracles. And the guy who had driven us in, this shady dodgy smuggler, drove into the village, threw some clothes at me, like Chechen clothes, handed me a baby and I, to this day, I don't know where that baby came from. And I don't know what happened to that baby. But he said, get in the front seat. You cannot speak. You're deaf and dumb. You're mute. When the Russians asks you something, make sign language, hold the baby on your lap. And I was covered in a, you know, a Shawl. I had Chechen clothes on and he drove through the, on the way out, he drove through the line of Russian tanks, bribing them along the way.

And on the way out dawn was breaking and I could see the tanks entering the village. And, you know, I mean, by all rights, I should have been dead. But I lived. Four years later I had a son. And so for whatever reason, that was the moment that was the moment.

Ramita Navai: That made me shiver just seeing the tanks roll in.

Janine di Giovanni: Yeah. And seeing them in, you know, I looked behind me and I could see them, those, you know, how creepy tanks are and how slowly they move like reptiles.

And I saw them entering the town. And they would destroy everything in their path and they would have, they would have assassinated me immediately and they would've killed all of the civilians and just burnt the town to nothing.

Ramita Navai: What happened to the family he'd been sheltering with?

Janine di Giovanni: I don't know.

I don't know. I mean, I tried, I think I tried to keep in touch with people, but you couldn't because even in Grozny I had entered a house of the blind. It was a terrible, terrible moment because I walked into this destroyed - I mean, aerial bombardment is like nothing on Earth. Whatever I had witnessed in Sarajevo or any other conflict was nothing, nothing like being under Russian bombardment and constant.

I mean, the Russians wanted Grozny so they levelled it. My friend Miguel had said to me, before I went, Janine makes sure that when you realize you are at the breaking point of your insanity, make sure it's two weeks before that, because it will take them two weeks to get you out. So you need a two weeks grace period, before you lose your mind.

And aerial bombardment does make you lose your mind. And I remember entering this house, which was completely blown away and there were these blind people sitting there with their white canes and sunglasses. And I said, what are you doing here? What are you waiting for? And they said, we're waiting for someone to come and help us.

And they had lost all their touchstones, you know, because everything. So like the house was completely, there was no roof and they were just sitting there. So answer to your question. When I did get out, I did everything in my power to try to get some help to those people. And I couldn't. We couldn't manage it.

Even with the Royal society of the blind, really trying to help me, we couldn't get in touch with them. And you know, what war does, it means a lack of all communication and disconnection.

Ramita Navai: Were you surprised at your reaction when you were certain that you were going to die, the fact that you were so sanguine and philosophical?

Janine di Giovanni: Well, I wasn't at first, you know, it took again, there was like, maybe a few hours when I was, I didn't cry, but I knew all the things that I wanted I never was going to have. You know, I was never going to be with the person I loved. Oh, I did call Bruno. And he did say to me, and usually, you know, Bruno for me had always been the person that was my rock and had really, you know, made - everything will be okay he would say. But this time he couldn't, you know, and he just said, "You have to find a way to get out of there. I can't help you. I can't send the French intelligence to get you. That's what happens in Hollywood. It's not what's going to happen here. But you need, you need to keep your wits about you and you need to get out of there now."

And he said, and then he said, you know, "Don't worry, you have angels all around you." [Janine cries] So I guess I did.

As a Catholic, I think it was a miracle.

Ramita Navai: *[INSERT] Hello, it's Ramita Navai here. And thank you for listening to my show. I hope you agree that these stories are not only powerful but important. As I speak to some incredible journalists from around the world about what they've learned from working in dangerous places and how it's changed their perspective it would be great to get your help in sharing their personal stories.*

So please do spread the word and subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you get your podcasts. I hope you continue to be inspired by the series. And I look forward to you joining me for more episodes.

Ramita Navai: I'm an atheist. Your miracle is for me, some of those incidents in life that can never be explained. And it's funny, a few of our friends I've been speaking to for this series, they have no explanation. And as an atheist, I think it's quite beautiful that you see it as a miracle, actually, I really like that.

Janine di Giovanni: Absolutely. And my son is a miracle, you know, I know that too. So I do, you know, I understand when you say you're an atheist and I don't in any way, I never judge anyone for what they believe in, but I have friends that say to me who are atheists and they say, I so envy that you have this faith which even if I wanted to, I couldn't get rid of it.

It's just who I am. But I, you know, it has gotten me through some really dark moments.

Ramita Navai: And are you, I mean, it's been years and you're still, it's still there. You know, the pain of it is still there. How do you live with that, Janine? How do you do, do you want to exercise it from your system?

Janine di Giovanni: I don't think so. I think that it's, you know, that's, that's what makes me able to write about these things, you know. Many, many years ago in Sarajevo, there was an old people's home and in this old people's home, all of the people had died from the cold and they were left.

They were left to rot basically. And I went with a reporter, Kurt Schork who was killed in Sierre Leone. And we went and we were trying to count how many were dead. And suddenly this woman reached up and grabbed me. She was still alive. And I knelt on the bed and I held her hand and I tried to like resuscitate her do what I could.

And I remember turning around and there was another reporter there from an American newspaper who saw me and I said, help me help me. And he walked away. And he later wrote about it to his great credit. He wrote about that scene and said he was really shocked to see me a reporter so personally involved because we were meant to be so objective and he was questioning his own ability.

I mean, he wasn't criticizing me. He was criticizing himself. And, I'm glad I have that. You know, if I didn't have that, I wouldn't be able to write. I wouldn't be able to believe in what I do. And if I didn't believe in what I do, I wouldn't be able to do it anymore. So, um, that kind of compassion and also that empathy, but that emotion, is what guides me, you know, and I still want to be angry about what happened at Srebrenica or Syria.

And if I don't have that anger or that passion, then I wouldn't be able to do what I do.

Ramita Navai: How has facing death changed your perspective on life?

Janine di Giovanni: You know, I lost two brothers who died very young. I lost my father very when I was very young. Well, in my early thirties, devastating for me. And you know, death as a Catholic again, I have a very different view of death because I believe very strongly that I will see the people that I love the most to died.

I'll see Kurt again. I'll see Miguel, I'll see Steve Sotloff. I'll see my brothers. I don't feel that they're so far from me. You know, I always feel that they're very near me and they're guiding me and they're with me. And I don't mean in that airy fairy, Arizona spiritual thing. I just mean that I truly believe that there's a very thin line between life and death and that we you know, in the midst of life, we are in death.

So I don't fear death, and I know, you know, I'm going to die. You are going to die. The scariest thing in a way is that life will go on. Life will just go on. People will wake up the day after we die and they'll make coffee and they'll go to the office and they'll grieve us and they'll be sad, but their lives will go on and their children's lives will go on, et cetera, et cetera.

It's just, it's almost as though, what do you leave behind? And I think you and I can very much say that we are leaving something behind and that's why we do it. So, how did those incidents change me? I think it profoundly made me want to leave a mark and you know, that day in Chechnya, I had filed the story.

I'd gotten it before the satellite phone died I got **Grozny Falls to Russian Forces** as the headline of the Times. So I don't know how many people read the Times these days, but thousands or millions or whoever woke up to that headline and they understood what was happening in a place very far from them because I was there.

So I think that basically says it all.

Ramita Navai: And has that been worth the fallout of trauma from having experienced these incidents?

Janine di Giovanni: Yes. Absolutely because I think I managed my trauma pretty well. You know, again, I mean, I think there's a whole kind of rage now for people to say they have PTSD from this or that. And I'm very cautious of that because I was involved with one of the first studies ever done by Dr. Anthony Feinstein of the effect

of war on war reporters. And it was published in the American journal of psychiatry back in 2000. And he followed us extensively for three years and I did not have PTSD. And I don't think I have PTSD. I mean, I think PTSD is a verified mental illness where you have a category of things from nightmares to shaking.

I mean, I did have nightmares and I did shake and I did have deep anxieties, but I think all those things were absolutely normal. If you stick your hand in the flame and you pull it out, you're going to have burns. And those burns are going to hurt and be painful and leave scars. But that's normal. Because your flesh will then regenerate and you'll have new tissue.

And that's what I think we do. You know, we stick ourselves into the flame and we burn and it hurts and it's painful and it's difficult, but eventually our new skin rejuvenates. And I think I'm tremendously resilient. I think you're tremendously resilient. I think that we are able to go beyond the unbearable knowledge of what we have and what we've seen. And we have a mission and our mission is to bring that to people that are unable to do that themselves.

Ramita Navai: I mean, Janine, I think this is so important and fascinating that you have seen so much and experienced so much. And you're part of this massive study and found not to be suffering from PTSD.

And I think we can learn from you. Do you think it's because you accept that you're going to feel a bit shitty. And so when you do feel a bit shitty, you don't over analyse it. Like, what is it that you could tell to our listeners who are trying to deal with something terrible?

Janine di Giovanni: Look, if you lose your father or your boyfriend breaks up with you or your cat dies.

Ramita Navai: Tick, tick.

Janine di Giovanni: Right.

You are going to feel awful. This is a normal, normal reaction to bad things happening to good people, right? It's exactly what I said about the burning your hand. If you didn't have those reactions, there would be something wrong with you.

Now, if you are in a very different situation and you're a war reporter and you're pre genetically disposed to PTSD and you come back and you want to take an AK-47 and blow away a shopping mall, different story, right? Then you do have a form of mental illness. The vast majority of our colleagues - and yes, we may come back and drink too much.

Or the other thing that Dr. Feinstein noticed a greater promiscuity, inability to stay in a sustained relationship. Well, all these things are normal. If you stand by a mass

grave and see decomposed bodies pulled out for a month on end then you are going to come back and drink yourself to death with vodka to numb that kind of pain.

But you're going to wake up with a hangover and you're going to feel awful and you're going to then go on with your life. And so that is the normality of it. And the healthiness of it. I'm not saying what we do our work is healthy. I'm not saying it's for everyone because it is not. Not everyone has the constitution or the ability to be resilient.

And there are people, you know, who have deeply damaged backgrounds. And we know some of them and they end up in the field and you just think, honey, this is not a job for you. Find something else, be the arts correspondent or something. and I think if you want to thrill seek, do bungee jumping or something, don't put yourself, I mean, it really hurts to get shot. Bruno, Lucas's dad got shot by a sniper in Libya.

It's, you know, effected his hearing for the rest of his life. And it was this close to his arterial vein. So, you know, I could have been raising a kid who had a father who died, was killed in Libya. I think anyone, you know, there's people that do it for thrills. The minute they're in a really scary situation. I think they realize like this is not the job for me.

It's not glamorous and you need to be a very strong, you need to have a strong constitution to start with because it's going to be your strong constitution is going to be tested every step of the way.

Yeah. But having said that again, it is the most noble job I can think of. And, you know, I literally like I have no regrets about anything I've done in my life. Nothing, not, not one thing.

Ramita Navai: Janine I'm going to end with the question that I asked all of my guests. And that's, if you could impart one piece of wisdom from the experiences you've had from facing death and working in danger for our listeners, what would that be?

Janine di Giovanni: Well, I guess I live my life by the Winston Churchill, you know, never, never, never, never, never give up.

If I had given up wanting to be a journalist because of the mistreatment from the Sunday Times, you know, I never would have done it. If I had given up when every doctor in the world told me I'd never have a baby, I wouldn't have a beautiful 17-year-old son. If I had listened to the numerous people who told me I could never do it, you shouldn't do it, you can't do it, you won't do it. I never would have done anything.

So I think my greatest advice would be if you really believe something and you know it's right. And you know, your inner voice is telling you go for it. Never, never, never give up, just do it.

Ramita Navai: And what about that one piece of wisdom specifically from thinking that you were going to die and living your life on the edge, like that.

Janine di Giovanni: Well, living your life on the edge really shows you how extraordinary life is too. So I think it would be my answer to that would be then you live life as fully as you can. Whatever you are doing, whether you're in London or New York, that old Zen thing, if you just live as fully as you can within the moment and with the capacity of what you could do. It's in the Bible, you know, in the midst of life, we are in death and there will come a moment when we're gone.

So you want to leave as great an impact as you can to make the world a better place. And I know that sounds corny, but that's what I want my legacy to be.

Ramita Navai: Here, here, Janine. Thank you so much. I mean, I could just talk to you for hours and hours. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Janine di Giovanni: We will.

Ramita Navai: I hope so. I hope so.

[Janine laughs]

Ramita Navai: To learn more about Janine's incredible work, I recommend starting with the most recent of the eight books she has written: *The Vanishing* - a heart-breaking and deeply researched account of the plight of Christian communities in the Middle East. And you must read her memoir *Ghosts by Daylight: A memoir of war and love* - it's beautifully raw and honest and manages to be both poetic and a page-turner. You can follow Janine on both Instagram and Twitter - @janinedigi

Thank you for listening to this episode of **The Line of Fire**. If you'd like to follow me, my Twitter handle is at @RamitaNavai.

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Until next time.

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