

M.G. CONFORD

Bombing (1)

DESPITE THE OFTEN ABYSMAL heat in the capital, the professor always wears a suit and tie. Each morning his wife teases him as she brushes the lint from his shoulders, but secretly she admires his stubbornness and strict fealty to an image of himself. A tallish man, stooped forward a bit, with a perpetually furrowed brow, he teaches at the prestigious university at the city's edge. His hair has recently silvered, which pleases him.

His classes are renowned at the school for a certain impishness in his lecturing style. He sometimes breaks into funny accents or recites a poem or even sings a song in a great stagey voice. On top of that, some of the girls whisper among themselves, he is still a very handsome man.

He has been offered many positions teaching abroad over the years. Once, early in his career, he took up one of the offers, too good to resist, at a prestigious American university in the Northeast. He found the speed, the breadth of ideas, the casual ease of the students in their own bodies, even the nightly images on the television—all of it—revolutionary, enlarging; but he also sharply missed the city of his birth, and his students there whose lives, so he thought, he understood far better than those open children of American privilege. Also his English, while good, was not quite good enough for the jokes and the puns he longed to leaven his lectures with. His American students, he could tell, found him heavy and boring. His return to the city and language of his birth two years later felt to him like a lovers' reunion. With a single great inhalation he was once again filled with the smells and sounds and images of that elemental stony landscape of which his very bones felt a part.



In the late afternoons he spends a leisurely hour walking home from the university. He takes the long way, wandering down the chalky terraced

hills where the olive trees stand, dusty leaves shimmering in the afternoon sun and breeze, light rippling across their silver treetops in lambent waves, like the breath of God himself. Then across the scalloped bridge arching the wide, shallow river that winds its way through the heart of the city. The walk gives him time to consider the writing he will do when he gets home. When he arrives he is often struck by the pair of trails he has been following, one, with his feet, well-known to him, the other with his mind, labyrinthine, endless.

The building he and his family moved into three years earlier is built on a steep rise on the other side of the downtown and affords them a view over the slow-moving river. The professor sits for hours at his teakwood desk and looks out the leaded window at the small sailing prows as they drift downstream. These moments, hearing his wife preparing a pot of spiced tea in the kitchen, the footsteps of his small son trying to sneak up behind him after school lets out, are a deep well of joy in his life.

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— 2002 Defence Almanac Report

Of course such moments of contemplation are becoming harder to maintain against the rapid spin of political events. In the widening gyre of fear his wife has told him she cannot stand being alone in the apartment. The professor begins taking the bus home; he misses his walks down the chalk-white hills, but he loves his wife immoderately.

"Yes, beautiful," his mother had said, "but very dark, no? More— what?— African than European."

"Yes, yes," he remembers thinking, fully entranced by the fullness of his wife-to-be's lips, her dark almond eyes, a certain tautness in her skin that he could not quite define, other than knowing it was different than the feeling of any other woman he had ever been with.

For a while it seems like the political situation will eventually return to normal. The professor still goes down to the corner café early every morning and reads the various newspaper accounts, both foreign and domestic. He still sees the same faces there every day. K— the butcher his wife haggles with flirtatiously, W— the barber he entrusts with his precise weekly trim, J— the olive man who presides over the market's dozens of barrels of briny

fruit (lemony cracked green olives from Syria, tiny wrinkled tar-like olives from Morocco, bursting purple ones from the Greek mountains) and whom he likes best of all.

“How goes it?” he asks the olive man each morning as he stands at the copper-topped counter ordering a small bitter black cup of coffee.

“Bless God, it continues,” the olive man says, standing next to him.

Amazing, the professor thinks, how much can be contained in such a greeting. “Ah yes,” he nods back, “let us praise continuity.”

Always the same words, he thinks, but in such a case the words are nothing. Vessels only. Why is he so happy upon hearing the olive man’s words (*bless God, it continues*)? Why such a pinprick of joy at the man’s tilt of his nut-brown head, the shrug of his sloping shoulders? He thinks: ah, maybe it is just the gestures, the recognition of the gestures. He drinks his coffee in silence, satisfied with the small thought that how you say something is just as important as what you say.

When the professor turns to the newspapers the rhetoric of the politicians is always the same, but underneath he can feel the testings of alliances, the subtle shiftings of strategies. He can see there is a story behind the story. He is steadfast in teaching his students—for his field is a broad swath of politics and history—to look for such signs as well.

His students are not so apt to listen to him these days though, and he is disturbed by the rising wave of bitterness he sees in their faces. One, a dark haired boy with coal-black eyes and a blood-red birthmark on the left side of his face, stands up one day in class and in sputtering hate-filled phrases, dismisses him as an old fool.



When the radio announces that a blackout is to be strictly enforced throughout the city, he still does not believe it is going to come to that. He reassures his wife that it is merely a bellicose phase, an intricate game of posture and response. There is really nothing else to do; the country has long since closed its citizens inside. They could go north, or south, but is any place really safer than any other? So they have their tea and go to bed soon after the children, studying each other’s faces in the light of the small red candles that burn at the foot of the bed. He begins, unconsciously, as he has thousands of times before, to catalogue her dark Moorish features.

When things began between them she chided him for seeing her as a prize, dark and exotic, an other to his erudite paleness. Inside he knew there was truth in what she said, but he had bigger concerns.

“Are you sure I’m not too old for you?” he asked her in their first months together. She replied by holding the tips of two of his fingers firmly between her teeth and running her own fingertips lightly along his neck and collarbone and down through the scattered tufts of hair on his chest. The roaring sensation deep within him was its own answer. She smiled, and never took her eyes from his.

When the bombs start falling in the North, he begins to apprehend the situation more seriously. Still, he tells himself, the North is where the extremists are. It seems a localized battle, containable and still at a safe enough distance.

When the battle-lines move rapidly southward an uncomfortable feeling begins to grow at the back of his neck. Time seems to be compressing before his eyes; he can see clearly that he has made a serious miscalculation. When the bombs hit the defense establishment just outside the city’s borders he understands with a devastating lucidity how heedlessly death can arrive, and with what arrogance.

The Forged Steel Nose-Cone Of The M-324 Missile Casing Is Especially Designed To Enable The Penetration Of Hardened Targets. An HTSF (Hard-Target Smart Fuse) Allows The Missile To Burrow To Pre-Determined Depth Before Detonation. Launched From Air Or Sea, The M-324 Is A Flexible And Highly Efficient System Of Large-Target Elimination.
— 2002 *Defence Almanac Report*

The professor gathers up his young son and daughter and creates a small cave of blankets underneath his and his wife’s high brass bed. For a little while he feels almost happy; he imagines saving them from smashed windows, crawling out unharmed from the wreckage. He tries to make a game of it for them. He imagines himself an animal, a great old bear, protecting his brood with his body. He moves quickly—he had been an amateur gymnast as a young man and when called upon his body is still strong and limber. Gathered together now he tells them stories about kissing Eskimos and former child emperors of China. He invents villains and lovers and intricate palace intrigues, and mimics the exact sound of winds howling through ice canyons. He embellishes the stories with as many details as he can find, stretching out each tale as long as he can. He thinks they are the best stories he has ever told.

The bombing is heavier and closer now, a developing pattern of percussion he tries to decipher. With the closer explosions from across the wide river the room shakes and groans. He looks at his wife. Her breathing is shallow and rapid and he can see something of a young girl in the lines of her face.

He remembers the first time, in a thick pine forest near a small lake, the very first time he saw her body naked. Her family was more conservative than his and she was shy and nervous and excited, and because of that he became even more shy and nervous than she. And maybe it was more than that, maybe it was the power he already felt her ripe form held over him. He was more than a dozen years older but felt at sea before her lush nakedness. It was as if all the air was pulled violently from his lungs. But in the end it was all right: love and desire had bloomed in both of them. There was nothing he could do wrong.

He holds her tightly now, as the bombs move in their haphazard march through town. He can feel her heart pounding, a frightened bird flinging itself against the cage of her chest. And even now, in the very thrumming chamber of her fear, he finds an echo of her pulsing and inexhaustible sensuality and its precipitous pleasures. Between them, their two children, their flesh, their blood, are starting to cry. (Flesh and blood: often modified in English, he remembers, as *mere* flesh and blood.)

He remembers the birth of his son; here in this very room, on the bed they now huddle beneath. He was shocked by the brute, animal nature of the birth. He had insisted on being present, against the grain of his culture. But what he had seen that day was not the spiritual beauty he had been awaiting, but an act of pure carnality, more raw and violent than any sexual act. So full of blood and primal exertion that he felt he had no comparison. (Perhaps only war, he now thinks with a start.) And then the love that he felt for those descendant fleshy blue creatures, immediate, like a bolt of lightning, first his son and then his daughter. Of course it was expected, socially required, but what of the joy so great it was painful, and what of now, when the secret fear he harbored in his heart then—*that he would fail, be unworthy, be unable of protecting them*—was coming true?

He holds out a small hope that because they live on the richer, more educated side of the river they will be spared. After all, the embassies of a dozen countries are within a few blocks of them. But he is conversant with history of course, knows that it has always moved, in bitter fits and blind convulsions, beneath the covering flags of nations and ideas, through the currency of human lives. What does he tell his students? Not to fall for the illusion of the moment, to hunt for deeper patterns. He has always known this, only life itself is so seducing, he thinks, so rife with illusion. Beneath the whimpering of his children he wonders how long the bombing will keep up, whether there is a limit.

The M-324 Is Remarkably Accurate, And Launchable From More Than 1000 Miles (1500 Kilometers) Distance From Target. The Missile Flies At Heights Of Less Than 100 Feet From The Ground And Allows For A Powerful Aggressive Statement, While Protecting Troops From Hostile Forces. In Sum, The M-324 Is The Very Pinnacle Of Airborne Military Technology.
— *2002 Defence Almanac Report*

He thinks for just a moment of the unfinished manuscript that lies on his desk, the steady work of a year and a half. He had wanted to make a comparison between the travels and thought of the poets Al-Muqadasi and Yehuda-ha-Levi; carefully he had analyzed their writing of a millennium ago, charted the course of their evolutions in consciousness. He wasn't sure such an association had been made before; at least he had never read about it. He thinks: as if that mattered now.

For a while there is a break in the dull thudding. The explosions recede in distance. His wife expels a long breath of air and detaches her fingers from his arms, where she has dug a thin furrow with her nails.

Then, without a moment's warning, the glass in each of the room's five windows erupts, one after another after another. The sound of an explosion, much closer than the others, shakes the walls violently. A hot wind fills the room. And then in the silence that follows, he can hear human screams in the distance. High above, a keening, droning whistle begins.

He is suddenly filled with the desire to tell his wife of a memory from childhood. It was from a trip to the countryside and must have been the first time he had seen a cow. The memory was simply this: the way the beast had raised its head and turned to look at him, a small child. He remembers the sensation of those soft round eyes that seemed to look at him as no eyes had ever before.

And then another memory (where are these images coming from? part of his mind wonders): one spring day, when he had just begun teaching. Rushing to class, distracted by his thoughts. The jasmine had just come into bloom and all at once its sweet, dizzying smell pierced his thoughts. He stood perfectly still, frozen under the wide cobalt sky. The scent was so powerful it forced him, in his new light summer suit, down onto the grass, confused, overcome by a sudden sense of limitless possibility.

The professor realizes now that all the studying he has done, the history he has learned, the lives of nations, ideas, art, all those years of thinking; he realizes he has room for none of it, in fact truly fathoms none of it. He understands now that the only thing he knows is what is before him: the touch of his wife, the warmth of the bodies of his children, the look of love and growing fear in their eyes. He allows himself a moment of comforting

illusion: it will be the next building that will fall, the next building, the next building.

The metal nose of the bomb breaks through the roof four stories above them, slicing between the lemon trees he and his wife planted in the flourishing garden there the last spring.

He squeezes his children and wife in his long arms. His eyes are open and he leans in towards his wife's thick hair. He starts to say her name. His tongue lifts and tucks in behind his front teeth, nestled there in habitual, fractional, pause.

The hardened missile, shaped not unlike an elongated teardrop, passes through the empty apartment two flights up.

The moment seems, to the professor, to stretch out forever. In the movement of his own tongue he recalls the movement of his wife's tongue over his body. His love with her he sees now as an electric current. How extraordinary, he somehow registers, that it is touch, the unmanageable desire of the flesh that releases this endless capacity for love.

He has time only for the first liminal consonant:

"L—" he says.

The delicate sound, released by the faint phonation of his vocal cords, can no longer be heard by his wife.

The missile, metal tip flattened but slightly by the five floors of poured concrete it has just passed through, rips through their high brass-framed bed and then their four huddled bodies hiding below it. The missile's progress is slowed by less than a thousandth of a second by the bones and cartilage and flesh of the professor, his wife and their two small children, a boy and a girl.

Less than a tenth of a second later, the bomb ignites. It explodes with a force greater than twenty-four thousand sticks of dynamite, a force multiplied by an upgraded accelerator recently added to the missile.

The fourteen-story building in which the professor and his family lived, along with its fifty-six apartments and two hundred and twenty three inhabitants, is destroyed in less than three-and-a-half seconds. The force of the percussive wave after the blast is enough to slam the walls of buildings all around theirs to the ground.

Like a fiery tornado, the wind of the blast passes down the street and fans out into the valley between the two hills that define the city. There it mixes with the wind of other blasts on other streets and steadily makes its way down to the flat, wide river. Bits of paper, wood, ash, and fragments of human flesh and bone fill the air and are borne by the wind, among them those of the professor, his dark, pretty wife and his son and daughter.

The fragments fall slowly out of the sky onto the water, like a strange summer snow. They float on its surface, which grows churned and choppy and flecked with froth. Underneath a dark current pulls steadily to sea, a train to oblivion, relentless, unyielding, and devoid of thought.