

NATHAN DEUEL

## Friday Was the Bomb

I WALK DOWN THE BLOCK to the nearest ATM as the lights in Lebanon flicker. I think to book tickets to anywhere but here. But the websites won't work and the travel agency is closed. Everything is closed. The streets are empty. Security gates are locked. I return to the house. Our friend Richard is gone, having consumed the too-sweet cocktail I made him. Kelly is on the phone with an editor. The already shitty Internet slows to a crawl. I check the fridge. There's almost no milk, and our daughter—cherubic three-year-old Loretta—might wake up any minute and cry, though she almost never does that. Not in Riyadh, not in Istanbul, not even that crazy night in Beirut the previous spring when there was a seven-hour gunfight on our block. Even then, with men in full combat gear on our front steps, their APCs parked in the alley, bullet casings bouncing off the concrete, she slept, and still we didn't leave. Tonight is somehow different. A very big bomb has exploded not far away, killing the country's intelligence chief. Many will applaud his death. Others will seek revenge. This is the way things work here. Like in 1983, when the U.S. Marine barracks were bombed, this could be the beginning of the end. It's 2012, nearly thirty years later. The Syrian uprising is now a civil war, and all across the city ten thousand families are reconsidering their plans.

And what had been a low boil of panic becomes an all-out grease fire. I have been managing as best I can, but it is increasingly difficult to be superexcited about Kelly's job as a Middle East reporter as she repeatedly sneaks across the border into Syria, rushing toward the bang-bang, getting the story from the bad guys at every turn. No matter how important the news or however many precautions Kelly might take, the math is grim, the consequences inescapable. Colleagues have been killed, and it feels like it's just a matter of time.

Our life here is quite good most of the time. Our daughter does indeed go to an excellent school—the best, really—and we have so many friends, and I have begun writing again, and the beach is warm and the mountains cool. But I stand on our plant-choked balcony an hour or two from Damascus thinking about what has come and what is coming, and maybe the booze is doing its trick or maybe it's adrenaline, but the

little lava handshake occurring in my mouth is maybe helping me feel a little more brave or at least a little more detached from my body and the people I love. It's like I could float away, high above the city, see it finally for its great and right size. But then my mind brings me back to the block of rubble and the one hundred wounded, to the three dead, to the image of a father rushing past mangled cars with a bleeding girl in his arms. There is this truth, that Loretta will grow up and when bad things happen there'll be nothing I can do. Except everything. You know?

Then I am thinking: Maybe I should go lighter on the vermouth next time. Should I make more ice? I stare into our freezer, the cool darkness and the quiet, the orderly rows of whatever, and I become convinced that yes, we have plenty of ice. Enough to last all night.



FRIDAY WAS THE BOMB, and it is now Saturday morning. The ice in my drink has melted and we parents are gathering at the park, where we are more hungover than usual. (There's always this plan to bring a pitcher of margaritas, or at least a thermos of coffee, but instead we're always clutching animal crackers and tiny sun hats.) We sit in the shade and watch our children run around, their small faces reddening, their skin slick with lotion. The really intense mom—an exasperated lady who is probably a better parent than all of us and who is always superpatient with her two kids and always speaking Arabic and acting cool—she says she'll never leave, that her husband is Lebanese and she's raising her kids to be locals. And yet she always makes sure to have a supply of Cheerios. Her Arab children eat almost exclusively these American O's, which are really very tasty. Meanwhile, an olive-skinned American husband and wife are going straight to a conference in Denver, where they will drink good beer and contemplate staying for good. There is no direct flight from Lebanon to the United States.

Richard is married to a Frenchwoman, who is like a preoccupied film star somewhere in her fifth decade, and she travels almost as much as Kelly and because of that feels as much at home in Libya as in a smart leather trenchcoat here in Beirut. Today Richard is alone, his eyes working madly, us dads always a bit of a mess when our women are gone, and I notice sweat running down his forehead. I have to admit I am always sweating—my wife in Iraq or Yemen or somewhere worse, while I spend so much time accounting for things—and then I realize my Welsh friend with the adorable accent can't find his three-year-old daughter, same age

as mine, and this is why he is particularly agitated. So he and I, imbued with clarity of purpose—which I'm momentarily awed to find I'm still capable of—dash around the soft padding of the playground, searching, looking behind slides and among screaming children for a little girl.

A parade of tanks drives by going faster than I would expect, treads clanking on the asphalt—a sound you never want to hear. But, now that I think about it, the tanks may have gone by the following weekend, when we were back at the park again. It is now much later, and I am having trouble remembering. . . .

We think we have lost one of the children and it is a horrible feeling and I try to keep my eyes on my own girl, and then at last there is Charlotte, and we smile and laugh, and we sit down to hummus and bread and there's this shared sense that we are all a group of people in something together and we will remain this way for at least the duration of the morning here in the park. In this kind of community someone is always going home, alive or dead, leaving the others behind.

We walk home from the park and I hold my girl's hand and my wife smiles in the sun and a big BMW nearly runs us over. I see, in the window, the ghoulish smile of a man who doesn't give a fuck and I wonder, what is it like not to care? In front of the police station there's a son and his middle-aged mother. I try to imagine what they were doing during the various minor clashes that erupted last night after the bombing, when people set dumpsters on fire and fired shots into the air and shook their assault rifles at each other, when the tear in the fabric ripped a little more. I'm not asking for much, just to have things blow up less frequently.

That's the thing: dogs get walked or lost, the playground is safe or it's not. I can hear the cats crying in the bushes or maybe it's someone in pain, and you never know exactly how the mounting violence, or at least the threat of violence, is going to make you feel, how it's going to affect your wife, your friends at the park, or your daughter's ability or willingness to hold your hand. For now she is young enough that she will endure whatever I've asked her to endure and she will not run away and I will not let her disappear or be flattened by the tires of a giant BMW.

Then it's Monday, and I'm relieved to see the milk truck making its delivery. I am having trouble recalling Sunday because, hoooo boy, did I get started early on the old vino. And to atone for my unproductive, hungover state, I decide I will go to the gym for the first time since the bomb. But first school, then breakfast. Not everyone is sending their kids back yet—in fact, some schools haven't reopened—but we want to act

like everything is normal, so to school Loretta goes, holding my hand.

Kelly and I are standing in the kitchen. I make coffee. She eats cereal. We continue an ongoing conversation: can Loretta dress up as a shark for Halloween?

“A blue T-shirt?” I say.

“She needs a good fin,” Kelly says.

“Attached to her head?” I say. “Or to her back?”

Then I check my e-mail and remember a note the school had sent before the bomb about a new policy. “Costumes are to be fun and child-friendly so please avoid any scary types of costumes. It will be a fun time for children and adults alike.”

No shark. It feels good to follow a rule. So maybe she will dress up as a doctor, like my sister in Illinois, where Kelly’s from, where all the grandparents live, where a spare bedroom awaits us if it comes to that. I don’t want it to come to that. But I also don’t want for a second to imagine running past mangled cars, a girl in my arms.

Later that morning, Kelly is reporting and I’m at our subterranean gym. I take my usual spot on an elliptical machine, which feels harder to climb, and I look up at all the monitors tuned to various news channels, most of which air tape of the bombing, looping it over and over. Politicians utter their incendiary words, the protesters at the funeral for the intelligence chief throw rocks and sticks, and then the army fights them back with clubs and tear gas. The tape loops again, and the black cloud of the explosion reaches into the sky, and people are dead and the politicians mouth their words and the rioters pulse and then the gas sends them scattering.

I change the station but find more war. On National Geographic there is footage of French villagers fleeing the approach of the German army in World War II. Women and children teeter around on bicycles, diving into a ditch when a tank goes by. Buildings explode and young men in Europe look like they’d rather be at a bar or anywhere else and yet they are wearing uniforms and shooting at each other.

Two women beside me are also watching war. A tank roars down a street, but this isn’t France, this isn’t archival footage from World War II. This is Syria, a couple hours’ drive from where I am right now—climbing and climbing in place—dreading the fact that Kelly will soon enough set off again.

Then the younger woman turns the channel to Fashion TV, skeletal beauties on a catwalk. I envy her ability to think about something else. The old lady on the machine beside her, who might be the woman’s

mother, continues watching the darkness unfurl, and maybe, like me, she is used to handling delicate things all day, such as a little girl's warm hand, and thus, like me, she has a certain tolerance for routine and the occasional persistent need for a tender touch and this requirement of patience in the face of adversity. On her screen Syrian rebels are firing shells into the air, and then the old lady gets off and sobs. I can't help it, I sob, too.

Outside there's a white hibiscus folding in on itself. The taxi guys smoke cigarettes and gossip and listen to the radio. The water is choppy. There's a stiff breeze. I search the sea for the blue-gray foam of a military ship. Can I just be honest and say that, actually, I don't want to leave Beirut? That I am really proud of the work Kelly does and mildly proud of the writing I have begun doing. We both want to stay, actually, but we both know we need to go.

It's time to pick up the little girl from school and at an appointed time on a corner not far from everything, I meet Kelly so we can get her together, two adults guiding a little girl through a city. It's hot on the Monday afternoon following the bomb and when Loretta emerges from the school, she has what looks like dark circles under her eyes. Like a sack of vegetables that has been gently tipped by a person who was not fully paying attention, she collapses into Kelly's arms, all carrots and celery. How, if at all, did the administrators, teachers, and kids talk about the bomb at school? Wondering this, I notice Kelly huffing and puffing, so I take Loretta's bones into my own arms. We climb the hill together like this, carrying our tired child through city streets, past the police station and the old buildings and the traffic and the heat and the grocery store and the place where she always likes to pick a flower, and Kelly and I talk about how sad it will be to say goodbye to this. But this is real—not some late-night fantasy, a hilarious caper like driving all night from New York to New Orleans or from Phnom Penh to a beach in Sihanoukville—a fast-moving Middle East situation involving blood and guts and plane tickets and fists full of cash and Kelly's body armor and a three-year-old girl and evacuation and exile. Our hand is being forced. There is no joy or spontaneity, and I am toggling between rage and resolve, sadness and exhaustion. I pause to imagine the family who will replace us. Because replace us some family must. This never ends. The characters just switch places.

In our kitchen, before Loretta's nap, we talk through the mechanics of leaving. Overhearing our uncaredful words, the little girl picks up on things in a way I don't totally understand. "If you don't bring me," she says, "I'll have no parents." She cocks her head.

“Honey, we’ll always be with you,” I say. “You’ll never be alone. I promise.”

She eyes me warily.

In the bedroom, I sing “Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight”—with the refrain “I hate to leave you but I really must say, ‘Goodnight’”—and with those words I dream up a list of cities. I worry about whether I’ll ever break my promise and leave Loretta alone.

Loretta sleeps and I greet our smiling babysitter, who is urging me to leave, to go to the café like I do every day, and so I head out, wanting to spend a few hours in front of a computer, but my neighbor yells after me to stop. This is Steve, who has been here for too many years. He is upset and tired and the father of two kids. The time on the mountain when we built a snowman feels far away. We stand on the street in the sun, staring at each other. He is married to a woman of Lebanese origin, and she is unsure about leaving. Even after the bomb, or the next one, or the next. A whole war full of bombs could come and still, some will stay. (“You never evacuate,” an old woman tells us later. She’s lived in Beirut for fifty years. “When you evacuate, the bastards win.”) Between his wife’s local connections and Steve’s British passport, they can reasonably assume that no matter what, they’ll have options. In 2006, when Israeli jets bombed the city, Steve had the opportunity to board a boat that took British citizens to Cyprus. In 2008, when Hezbollah soldiers streamed into our neighborhood, rattling off machine guns into the sky, they could have driven up to the mountains to stay with his wife’s parents. Both times they decided to stay.

“You leaving?” he asks.

“Probably,” I say. He sighs. A motorcycle rips by. “You?” I ask. I know the answer.

“Not yet, not yet.” We size each other up. Squint in the sun.

“Well, good luck,” I say.

“Same to you,” he says.

I walk down the street, head throbbing, thinking about the balance of fear and imagination. I’m desperate to go and can easily imagine the horror of being separated from my family, or worse. But the day is brilliantly sunny, and what if I’m just crazy? I find it both difficult and all too easy to compare myself to my neighbor, Steve. His son is two. His daughter is a few months old. The price is clear but the math is impossible to calculate. So what if the bastards win?

The streets are empty still. One of the few stores pushing goods is a novelty shop: in the window hang witches’ hats, pumpkins, and pitchforks,

alongside rubber masks of Bin Laden, Bush, Hussein, and Wadi Jumblatt, a local political figure. The man behind the counter has his head in his hands.

At the café, which never closes, having stayed open even during the years of the civil war, I fire up the laptop and brace for another wave of images and information, of blood and bones. Instead I come across a message from my daughter's school:

News of the explosion reached us a short time before dismissal. First, we made sure that all Early Years children who ride the bus had made it safely to their homes. Then we identified 11 children who ride the 3:30 bus to the area congested by traffic and rescue vehicles. We prepared a temporary place to keep these children in our community lounge, with two counselors. Fortunately, and true to ACS tradition, our parents bonded together and took care of most of these children before it became necessary for our staff to be involved.

After school activities were cancelled and the Halloween Dance has been postponed in deference to the tragic loss of life. If you have any questions or concerns, you may let me know by replying to this message.

I picture a dance and the eleven kids who were stranded in the lounge. I picture the two counselors consoling them. I think about what it means for a school to say we should band together. I think about a Halloween dance, and how I might reasonably reply to this message.

At the café, a woman at a table of what I take to be professors shakes out a mane of long curly hair, lights a cigarette, and unbuttons her tailored suit jacket.

"Your kids even show up today?" she asks, sighing smoke.

"Some," an old man says. He lights his own.

"They leave halfway through?" she says, exhaling.

"I was hoping no—but yes," he says, blowing a cloud. "They were scared."

I sip coffee and stare into space. When I first came to Beirut, I had imagined afternoons like this. I knew Kelly's job obliged her to go to terrible places. I knew there'd be nights alone, days without word. But then her colleagues started dying, killed by gunfire and bombings. I went to a funeral. I cried in a pew. I hoped, made myself believe, after years of worry, that it wouldn't happen again. Would you believe that part of me stopped worrying, or that I thought maybe after a certain point I couldn't worry anymore? Do you believe me when I say it's one thing to worry about your wife and another thing to worry about your daughter?

My computer dings. A new message.

“Are you okay?” Kelly writes.

“No,” I reply.

On the way home, I stop at Sam’s Liquors. A sad-eyed man presides over a small room full of booze.

“They worked so hard to do that bombing, to kill that man,” he says, his eyes red from crying.

I set a bottle of wine on the counter and stand there, waiting for him to tell me the price.

“The thing is”—and here he sighs—“you create a team of killers and what do they want to do? They want to keep on killing.”

I look back at the shelves. I contemplate what my wife is trained to do. What my daughter is being trained to do. What I am training myself to do.

I place a big bottle of bourbon next to the bottle of wine.

“I’d leave if I could,” he says. He shakes his head.

After dinner, my daughter nestles herself into my lap, putting her hand on my leg. My mind spins: stay or go, stay or go.

Loretta gives me a pat—slowly at first, then more insistently. *Pat pat pat*. When I put her to bed I lay my head on her chest.

That night, as I’m trying to sleep, my heart pounds. We all have a job to do. Kelly loves hers. I’ve been relearning mine. Our shared responsibility—this little girl—is something we’ll renegotiate the rest of our lives. There are no promotions. There are only promises. I know in my heart that staying is wrong.

Then the stillness is broken by a terrific series of concussions. The earth is shaking and my teeth are grinding, and my muscles coil with fear and with resolve. Have they come for us? I roll over, reaching for Kelly, who is snoring softly. In that moment, I believe I will do whatever I must do.

The noise is just a garbage truck. The machine tips a dumpster, letting loose a thundering avalanche of waste.

Then the sound of a plane roaring overhead. I imagine the arc it makes through the sky, the people inside, their luggage packed and tagged, a black ocean swallowing them whole.