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WE SEE EVERYTHING

BLOOMSBURY

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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

How can you sleep through this? How can you even think of sleeping? And yet, sleep deprivation will drive you mad in the end: the flares in the sky, the symphony of explosions, the roar of mortars, the whirl of drones ... all this chaos will beat you, if you let it.

Atef Abu Saif, *The Drone Eats with Me:
Diaries from a City Under Fire* (2015)

The City

I don't know if I can go through with it.

Pressed against a shrapnel-pitted wall, I stare out over the expanse of collapsed brick, crumpled tarmac, crushed concrete and twisted steel at the blackberry bush I spotted yesterday, a short distance into the exclusion zone.

I could run there in a few seconds. Anywhere else it would be so easy. But anywhere else, the berries would be gone.

A woman with grey-streaked hair, wearing a thick winter coat despite the bright September warmth, emerges from the apartment block behind me. She eyes me warily before shuffling away.

You don't see many people on the streets round here, at the outer edge of London. That's why I come, to look out at the exclusion zone and feel briefly alone, away from the noise and crowds of the city. I don't do it often – it's an eerie

place – but there’s nowhere else to catch a breath of wind or look at anything further away than the other side of the street.

All night I’ve been turning over whether I dare risk going out into this lethal, barren area between me and the fence, wavering one way then the other, but even now, having returned with bags to collect the berries, I still can’t decide.

Is it really likely that someone is watching this desolate space all the time, alert enough to spot one teenager breaking cover for a few seconds? If they did see me, would they really shoot?

I look beyond the wasteland towards the nearest watch-tower, attempting to gauge the distance, scanning for a flicker of movement or a flash of reflected sunlight, but the concrete and tinted glass give nothing away.

When my eyes fall back to the bush, picking out the glisten of dark, ripe berries, my mouth begins to water, and all the dire warnings I’ve heard about entering the exclusion zone evaporate from my mind. After a whole night of anxious wavering, my legs rather than my brain seem to make the final decision.

I crouch low and sprint, scurrying like a cockroach out into the troughs and hillocks of rubble, my knees almost knocking my chin with each step. As soon as I’m in motion the distance to the bush seems to stretch. I barely breathe, feeling utterly exposed, braced for the impact of a bullet I wouldn’t even hear until it had ripped through my flesh.

While every cell of my body drives me on over the angular, dusty surface, a disembodied voice drifts through my skull,

asking, *Why are you doing this? When did you get so dumb? Why would you risk your life for something so small?*

I fling myself to the ground in the shelter of the bush, cutting my knee on a jut of broken concrete, but I feel only a dull echo of pain, even as blood pearls through my jeans. I can barely believe I have come out here, into this vast flattened rectangle of land that surrounds what's left of London.

I lie still under the spiky foliage, willing the sickening judder of my heart to slow down, waiting for my mind to settle, then slowly raise my torso from the earth and look around. I don't know anyone else who has dared set foot in this forbidden place, but under cover, shielded from the border fence, I feel strangely detached from the reality of where I am, as if the boy who is out here, under this bush, cannot actually be me. Even though I know I could be killed, a vague sensation of immunity, almost of immortality, closes over me. This feeling, of being present but absent, in the moment but outside it, of being someone other than myself, reminds me of being lost in a video game.

In this city, death seems to perpetually hover nearby, like a needy bully requiring constant appeasement, but for all his vicious unpredictability, sometimes you get the feeling he's forgotten you.

I can't remember the last time I had a single minute away from the claustrophobic press of the city. To have emptiness stretching around me, low curves of soil and rubble in every

direction, feels bizarre and delicious. Most exquisite of all is the silence.

Or near-silence. I can hear only my own breath, a distant rumble of traffic, and the usual incessant buzz from the skies.

Each lungful of air feels like a small, weightless parcel of time, held and then released. It's a sensation that makes me want to stay for the rest of the afternoon, hidden away from all the noise, the crowds, the stress, the cramped, struggling millions.

I know I should stand and pick, should get out of here fast, but the thrill of being alone, quiet and unseen, seeps through me. I roll on my back and look up. Instead of fighting on through the day, I could just lie here and let the hours wash over me.

It's a long time since I saw this much sky. Only in the largest bomb sites or out here can you see anything that resembles a horizon, or feel the sky to be more than narrow corridors of air hanging over each street.

The clouds are high today, distant pale streaks against which the drones are easier to see than ever, giant locusts with digital bug eyes which circle over London day and night, watching everything we do.

The closest one banks directly above me, changing pitch slightly as it turns back towards the city.

Sunshine prickles deliciously against the skin of my face. Beads of sweat begin to form on my forehead and upper lip, and I fight the instinct to wipe them away, thinking of how

they will evaporate, then float away out of this prison-city: a tiny part of me staging an invisible escape.

On the underside of a leaf, I notice a ladybird. I haven't seen one for years. Reaching out an index finger, I coax the insect on to the back of my hand. It ambles towards my wrist, its feet giving such a light tickle that I can't be sure I've actually felt anything at all.

I squeeze my cuff closed so it can't walk up my sleeve and the ladybird butts a few times against the obstruction, then turns back and walks up my thumb. At the tip, it runs out of ideas, waves its antennae in mid-air, suddenly seems to wonder where it's going.

This is probably how I look to whoever is in that drone. Though of course, nobody is in a drone. Somebody somewhere is watching, but wherever they are, it isn't in the sky above me.

My limbs are heavy now, enjoying this moment of laziness too much, but I need to get the blackberry-picking done and leave. I rise to a squat, pull two plastic bags from my pocket and spread them into basket shapes on the ground. The first few berries go straight into my mouth, and I feel my eyes prickle with tears, partly from the sweet sharpness nipping my tongue, partly from a surge of hot, tangled emotion. Among all the chaos – the bombs, the death, the grief and strife – this simple act of finding a berry and eating it feels like a miracle, and that something so small can seem miraculous feels unutterably sad.

But I can't waste time on self-pity, and I can't eat too many. These berries aren't for me. They'll fetch a good price, and I need the money.

I pluck from branch after branch, working my hands between the thorny stalks to pick the bush clean. My fingers are soon streaked with cuts and stained dark red. How much is juice and how much is blood I can't tell, but it hardly matters as I pick and pick, gradually filling my bags with the dense, black fruit.

I have no idea how long it takes. Everything beyond the bush seems to disappear as I work, until I hear a voice calling my name, shouting frantically.

'LEX! LEX! What are you doing? What the *hell* are you doing?'

I look up. There, at the corner where I was standing only a short while ago, is my father. His face is red with fury, his arm jabbing at the air between us.

I can think of nothing to say. The sight of the terror and rage on his face snaps me out of myself, dizzying me with the sudden awareness that I have no explanation for why I am picking berries in a military exclusion zone.

'LEX! LEX!'

It's like he thinks I'm drowning – as if I'm being swept out by a receding tide and he's calling to see if I can be rescued.

'I ... I'm coming,' I say.

'No! Don't! They'll shoot!'

'Stay there. I'm coming,' I repeat.

'NO! DON'T MOVE!' he shouts.

He springs into motion, bent double, running out across the uneven ground towards me.

He's on me in seconds. Still crouching, he grabs me by the shoulders and pulls me down towards him.

'WHAT ARE YOU DOING?' he screams. 'HOW COULD YOU BE SO STUPID?'

He raises his arm, and even though there can only be one reason for this movement, I still cannot believe that he is about to hit me, because this is something he has never done. So I am not even flinching when his open palm whacks against my face, snapping my neck to one side, bringing an instant, roaring burn to the flesh of my cheek.

I topple from my crouch and fall to the ground. He pulls me up, then hauls me into him, under cover of the bush, squeezing me so hard to his chest that the buttons of his jacket dig painfully into my ribs.

'Lex! Lex! Lex!' He's saying my name over and over, high and thin, like some strange, stuck song, his voice wavering as if on the brink of tears. 'Why would you do this? You want to be killed?' he says.

I don't know what to say. I have no explanation beyond a useless, inexpressible idea that sometimes you just have to do something – anything – to break loose.

Eventually he goes quiet and slackens his grip, but still doesn't let go of me. He squeezes my shoulders and turns his face aside as if he is trying simultaneously to hold me and hide from me.

'Why?' he says again.

I shrug, a swelling prickle of tears beginning to fight its way upwards from my throat. I feel suddenly, hopelessly, lost, swamped by a helplessness that seems for a moment to be reflected right back at me in the infinitely weary expression on my father's face. In this ocean of rubble, we are two despairing castaways.

Dad waits and waits for an answer, but I have none.

'How did you know I was here?' I ask eventually.

With a croaking, thin voice he says, *'A friend,'* and points vaguely towards an apartment block at the perimeter of the city. *'He saw you. He called me. He was worried.'*

'It's fine. I'm safe.'

A renewed flash of anger crosses his face.

'Don't be an idiot! You're smarter than that. Don't insult me by trying to tell me this is safe. Now let's get out of here. We'll talk at home.'

He tentatively peers through the foliage, towards the border fence. Above, I see a drone again, lower now, making a tighter circle than before. Its buzz is louder, higher, insect-like.

Dad grabs my arm and takes off at a sprint. I only have time to reach for one of the bags, snatching it clumsily by a single handle and gathering it up as we run for cover.

Again, I brace myself for gunshots from the border fence, but there is no sound, no attack.

Even when we escape the buffer zone Dad doesn't slow

down. We hurry past the city's outermost apartment block, round the first corner and continue at top speed down Camden Road, past a long row of identical old brick houses, most of them still standing. Just one block in from London's stark perimeter the claustrophobic press of the city returns. Choking traffic fills the streets, lines of rusty and dilapidated cars fighting for every inch of tarmac against bicycles, scooters, motorbikes and traders pulling handcarts, but even as we dissolve into the crowds Dad continues to run, dragging me with him.

A gaggle of students is hovering in front of the City and Islington College sign, clutching books and notepads, tussling and flirting under the flapping grey tarpaulin facade. Dad hauls me across the road and we weave towards a gateway which leads us behind the building, into a dim alleyway loomed over on all sides by grey brick and boarded-up windows. Next to an overflowing dumpster, in heavy silence, he finally releases me from his grip.

It takes my eyes a while to adjust to the murky air, which is thick with a stench of rot. As I listen to his fast, wheezing breath, his face slowly reveals itself: cold, exhausted and angry.

He takes off the black wire-framed glasses that usually seem like part of his face and wipes the bridge of his nose. The skin under his eyes is puffed and shiny, stippled with tiny pockmarks. He looks momentarily frail and helpless, but when he replaces the glasses and fixes me with a chilling

stare, an anxious jolt pulses through me. I take a step back, away from him. He's never hit me before today, nor have I ever seen him so close to tears. It's almost as if I can see a man who is not my father bubbling through those familiar features. He has always seemed, above all else, predictable. Steady. But at this moment, I have no idea what he will do next.

'I'm sorry I hit you,' he says after a long silence.

I nod, raising a hand to my cheek, which feels hot under my fingertips.

'But you deserved it,' he adds.

I shrug.

'Why did you go there?'

I shrug.

'Tell me. You think you're special? Some kind of superhero who can bounce bullets off his skin?'

I look down, my eyes falling on a disc of sky reflected in a greasy puddle.

'You know how long it takes to get shot? A split second. You think they care who you are? You think they only shoot adults?'

I shake my head.

'How could you be so *stupid*?' he spits.

A surge of suppressed rage zips through me. Suddenly, I feel as if everything is his fault, as if this imprisoned, constrained, terrified life has been designed by my father to torture me. For this I want to strangle him. Only by closing

my hands around his neck and squeezing could I show him what it's like to be me.

But I say nothing.

He steps forward, closing the gap between us, and speaks in a slow, menacing voice that seems to be hauled up from his guts. 'I understand that you have to be your own person. I know what it's like to be sixteen. You're not going to do everything you're told. But don't defy me on this. Do not ever go out there again. If you get killed, it's not just you that dies. You'd be killing the whole family. Do you understand?'

I nod, but I haven't yet given up on the bag of berries that was left behind.

'If you want to be selfish, be selfish, but not about this. The warnings are clear. They'll shoot on sight.'

I nod again, turning away.

'SPEAK TO ME!' he snaps, jostling my shoulder.

'What do you want me to say?'

'Tell me you won't go there again.'

'I won't.'

'Tell me properly.' He places a rough thumb against my chin and lifts my head, forcing me to look at him. I can feel my eyes betraying me, but I meet his stare.

'I won't.'

He doesn't let go. I sense him struggling to read me, knowing he can't.

He gasps, exasperated, and spins away, kicking out a spray of gravel.

'Take those home to your mother,' he says, pointing at the bag of berries. My heart plummets. All that effort and risk, for nothing.

'I was going to sell them.'

'No. You can't.'

'Why not? They'll get good money.'

'Exactly. Then you'll want to do it again.'

'I won't.'

'Why should I believe you?'

'I won't.'

'Give them to Mum. Tell her what you did.'

'If I tell her, she'll only worry.'

'You want to lie to her?'

'I don't know ...'

'You want *me* to lie to her?'

'It might be better.'

'Take the berries home. Tell her the truth. We'll talk later.'

'You're not coming?'

'I have to go. I'm late.'

'For what?'

'A meeting.'

It's the end of the day and he's changed out of his work clothes. Since when does a car mechanic finish work then go to a meeting?

He walks away, out of the alley; I hurry to catch up.

'What kind of meeting?'

'It's nothing. Just a get-together.'

As soon as we reach the pavement, he looks up. I follow his gaze and see two high, circling drones. I half register the strangeness of seeing a pair of them so close together, but when I look down again Dad has already headed off at speed, and by the time I catch up with him, the drones have slipped from my mind.

‘Where are you going?’ I ask.

‘IT’S NOTHING!’ he snaps. ‘Just forget it! You need to get home.’

Near the shattered bulk of Holloway Prison, he pauses, looks around, and glances skywards again. A middle-aged man in a scruffy suit, with a dark baseball cap pulled low over his face, crosses the road in front of us, and I notice him catch my father’s eye, then look away sharply. Their contact is fleeting, but I sense something pass between them. They know one another, and know not to acknowledge it in front of me.

Motionless at the kerb, Dad watches him enter the nearest building, a run-down corner pub whose sign, a cracked painting of an old castle, is dangling precariously, swaying above the entrance. He then looks back at me, his forehead knotted as if he’s making a complex private calculation.

‘I’ll walk you some of the way home,’ he says, setting off at speed down Camden Road.

‘What’s the hurry?’ I ask.

‘Will you stop this?’

‘Stop what?’

‘The endless questions! Just get yourself home.’

‘I only asked why it’s such a rush.’

He walks on, faster than ever, keeping himself a couple of steps ahead of me. We pass the gnarled, spidery mess of a bombed construction site, scaffolding twisted and fallen in on itself like giant spaghetti, and continue walking in silence. As we get further from the edge of London, the pavement becomes thicker with pedestrians: teenagers roaming in jostling packs; dirt-streaked children dragging carts of all kinds, scavenging in bins and bomb sites; occasional mad people bundled in stinking clothes, muttering furiously to themselves; and streams of sour-faced Londoners clutching tatty bags of whatever food they’ve cobbled together that day.

At the next corner, he stops, looks at his watch, the street, the sky. ‘Go home,’ he says. ‘I have to go this way. I’ll see you later.’

With a quick nod of farewell, he scurries away down a side street lined with the stumps of trees long since cut down for firewood. I see him glance up, but not back towards me.

He turns left again, doubling back on our route. This is when I decide to follow him. He’s concealing something. I don’t know much about his past, but I know enough to guess where he might be going, who he might be meeting.

I break into a run, past an apartment block, the top few floors of which are windowless and smeared with soot, and pick my way along a makeshift platform of old pallets which

have been laid across a stagnant pool of rank, greenish-brown water.

Rounding the corner I spot him again, still speed-walking, too far ahead to be aware of me. I match his pace, weaving through a stream of lumbering, weary pedestrians along a narrow street lined with laundry-draped balconies.

At the next junction he takes another left, completing his circuit of the block. I keep my distance now, hiding myself among the parked cars. Within a couple of minutes, he's back where we encountered the man in the baseball cap.

He pauses, looks up yet again, glances at his watch, then turns towards me. Before ducking out of sight, I glimpse his face. He looks closed in on himself, locked into a thought so intense he doesn't entirely know where he is. I have a feeling I could step out of my hiding place and he wouldn't even recognise me.

In this instant, it occurs to me that perhaps he didn't just hit me to punish me for straying into the buffer zone, or even because he was afraid for my safety. Something else has happened to him.

I peep out between the cars, just in time to see him cross the road and enter the corner pub we walked past only a few minutes earlier.

My father is not a drinker. I've seen him have the occasional beer with friends, but he's not a pub man, not a boozier. He must be meeting the guy in the suit and baseball cap who we saw enter this same building a short while ago.

I have only an instant to register my suspicion of who this might be, to contemplate who else could be at this meeting, but that is enough to make a difference. Even though it's the worst shock of my life, I immediately understand what happens next. Part of me is less surprised than it ought to be. The streak of light across the sky, so quick I can't even be sure I've seen it; the white flash an instant before the ear-splitting boom; the suck and whoosh of air; a breath of heat across my face; the mushrooming crawl of an approaching dust cloud which wraps me in filth as I pointlessly, too late, throw myself to the ground.

When I stand, my ears are squealing so loudly I can hear nothing at all, not even the screams from wide-mouthed people all around me. It is hard, at first, to balance. The ground seems to be tipping. I use a parked van to steady myself. I look down at my chest, arms, legs, feet. There's no blood; nothing is missing. I am intact. I raise my head and stare through the dissipating dust cloud, which slowly, agonisingly reveals that there is no longer a pub at the corner of this street, only a charred, flaming mound of rubble.

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