

Fiction from Sara Nović: After the Attack

Well, nothing at first, not right after. In those initial moments panic is still optional.

At the grocery store, the one across from your building on Frederick Douglass, or farther up on Ft. Washington near your boyfriend's place, depending—a shrill, unfamiliar tone piercing the Muzak. It startles awake a sudden bond between you and other shoppers, people with whom you'd so far avoided eye contact, mumbling a continuous apology for bumping into one another. Now there is camaraderie in the unison groping of pockets, the rifling for phones among purses and reusable totes.

Across the river on Atlantic Avenue, in the urgent care waiting room, you and the receptionist both jump. The emergency alert system, this is not only a test.

Or on your couch at home, your phone dead from the night before, you receive no alert. You won't see the special report ticker tape because you are watching Netflix. At the moment, it doesn't much matter. At first, there are only unconfirmed reports.

It can, as it has before, happen at any time, and therein is the bulk of its power. But city mornings offer certain opportunities—more people on the street, on subways, concentrated in office buildings. People running late, or still bleary-eyed, unseeing, unsaying. See 9/11, 8:46 AM; see Oklahoma City, 9:02 AM.

The West Fourth Street station is bombed in the morning. In your Columbus Circle office tower, a splay of technological gadgets laid out before you on the conference table sound unanimous alarms. The first alert does not contain the word

“attack”; it only says “explosion.” So you and your colleagues ignore it. Because the meeting is about to start.



Because New York is a big city, and old, and badly-kempt. Because, though you have watched your share of terror unfold live and on screens, it is still possible that this is not that. Possible is all you need, and in New York possibilities are myriad—gas line break, signal malfunction, flood, or trash fire. You’ve read the posters; the MTA boasts hundreds every year.

Nothing more will happen for a while. You get in line to pay for your groceries.

The receptionist will turn on the television just as you are ushered to the exam room, and you’ll scroll through Twitter in your paper gown, seeking a hashtag.

Or you’ll lie on your couch with your feet atop the armrest and let your eyes glaze hard against the electro-glow,

allowing one episode to flow into the next. It is, after all, your day off.

When, that morning, about halfway through the meeting you remember it is a Tuesday, you pull your phone beneath the table and text your wife. She would've passed through West Fourth on her way to class. *U ok? Saw the alert*, you write, then put the phone back on the table, designating half an eye to the task of monitoring the indicator light that might signal her response. A moment later you see the graphic designer making a similar move. The meeting facilitator, who flew in from LA, does not notice.

The second alert changes things. It goes off mid-walk-up, echoing through the stairwell, and you abandon your grocery bags on the kitchen floor and turn on the television. There has been another explosion; cops are in pursuit of a suspect; there is speculation about his race and religion.

You shiver in your paper gown while your doctor, a Pakistani man from Jackson Heights, wishes for the attacker's whiteness, laments the hate crimes his neighborhood will be in for otherwise. Why, when there is an attack, must they always suffer twice? As he talks you reach for your phone to text your roommate.

Or you fall asleep there on the couch before the computer, waking only when Netflix stops its auto-play, seeking validation that you are, in fact, still here.

After the second alert, you step out of the meeting to call her. She doesn't answer. It doesn't even ring. Maybe, you think, she has made it to class and is mid-lecture. Maybe she is stuck underground, train traffic bottled up beneath you. Maybe, you think, New York should get its shit together and get some goddamn phone service in the subway like every other city in the goddamn world. Some Russian oligarch is probably dragging his feet, trying to figure out how to wring more

money from it first. Fuckers, you think, aware that in your glass skyscraper on the Circle, many have thought the same of you. You call her again—no dice. You see Adrian—your partner on the project—in the hallway. He is on the phone, and you nod at each other as you pass.

An inactive group text once made to plan a reunion dinner (failed due to irreconcilable schedules), is reanimated as friends check-in. Quickly, most everyone says they are fine—stay safe—and you wait for the stragglers to respond.

You ball up the paper gown and jab at your phone with one hand, pull your clothes on in brusque, awkward bursts with the other. You hop on one leg as you yank at the backs of your shoes. You hear from your roommate, or you still haven't heard from your roommate.

You finally plug in your phone and the missed calls from your mother, seven in total, are how you find out something is wrong. You try to piece together the story from her news jumble. No, you rarely go to the place where it happened, but this is cold comfort, and you do not attempt to detail the reality of city living for her. You wake up your computer while you listen to her relief set in. Of course you take the subway, everyone does, but you're home now. You remember a guy you'd had a crush on at your last job and wonder if he is okay, then if it is creepy to seek him out online and ask. You refresh Facebook to see if he surfaces.

The attacker's manifesto has surfaced, though what it says doesn't matter much. Whatever the angle it serves as fuel for someone else's vitriol. Already the feeds have been coopted by trolls of diverse hatreds, practically gleeful in how the dead people are indisputable proof of their political stances, casualty numbers collected and laid out as evidence like a good hand of poker. As if in defiance, the body count fluctuates all afternoon. NBC volleys between 30 and 33 while CNN holds steady at "dozens." A reporter reads snippets from

the document, lines they have also turned into an infographic, to be shared and repeated in and out of context in the weeks to come.

Around the table, you and your colleagues are each engaged in your own ceaseless scroll, searching for a live newsfeed online. But the streams are jammed, or they are an erratic, pixelated froth—frozen in one moment, blurred and jerky the next, altogether unwatchable. Adrian drags a TV cart into the conference room, the kind the gym teacher used to pull out of the closet when it was time for the Sex Ed videos. Aptly, someone has drawn a penis in the dust on the screen. Once the TV is on you can no longer see it, but while the news flashes grainy Chopper 7 footage of fire belching up the subway stairwell, you still wish someone had wiped it off. You send another text as you watch the FDNY charge the flames. The hose water does not look like water; it looks solid, a length of rope lowered into the chasm, its impact on the flames inconsequential.

You want to go home, but with the subway down and traffic gridlocked, you are told to remain in a safe place as the police sweep the city for IEDs. Despite being forced to stay in the office, you are wholly unproductive. The guy from LA, trying to be kind, passes in and out of the room intermittently. At a borrowed desk he calls his home office, where the day is still new and unmarred.

The feeling when her message comes through: relief pushing up your chest with such force it is almost nauseating. Like eating something so sweet it burns your tongue, makes your stomach jump.

I'm good. stuck on train for a while. class canceled so headed home. love u.

You yelp when you read it, a weird, strangled sound, and you aren't even embarrassed. "She's okay," you announce. And they

are happy for you.

Politicians from all over the country call in to news shows to offer thoughts&prayers, having less to do with either endeavor than with being on record as having said the phrase.

You are out of the way and grateful to be so, way uptown in a place no one has yet thought to blow up.

You leave the doctor's office and try to decipher the map of bus routes that might get you back to your place.

Or, when you hang up with your mother, you remember you were supposed to meet a date tonight. You text him to ask whether you are still on.

You cut out at 4:30, a rarity for you, but you weren't getting anything done anyway, and you want to see your wife. You try to call, but it goes to voicemail. You're grateful you had some contact, you feel lucky. On your way, you notice the receptionist has been crying, but you don't stop to ask. Outside it is Sesame Street weather, such sharp contrast to the smoke screened footage of downtown, it feels as if it had all happened much farther away. Your phone rings but you don't recognize the number, so you ignore it and contemplate the nerve of telemarketers these days. You walk home, thirty blocks, and think it really is a nice commute on foot, that you should do it more often.

The doorman greets you, searches your face and, finding no distress, looks reassured.

"Good to see you, sir."

"You, too. All okay in your family?"

"Yes sir. And the missus?"

"She's fine. She's upstairs, actually."

He gives you a look that suggests he is trying figure out what he might say next. You register the question in your arched eyebrows.

“It’s just—I’ve been here all day, sir. The other doorman couldn’t make it in, because of the trains.”

And you remember him bidding you goodbye early that morning. You excuse yourself and get in the lift and rush to your door, though you know before you open it—she isn’t there. You call and call on the landline but it goes straight to voicemail like the battery is dead. A while passes before you remember the unknown caller.

You never hear the whole message. You hang up as soon as you realize it is the police, call the number back. They are uncharacteristically polite as they cast you around the circuit board.

Finally, an officer says your name, your wife’s. Apologizes. Asks if you could come down to make an ID.

“There must be a mistake,” you say. “I heard from her after the attack. She said she was okay.”

“You spoke with her?”

“She texted.”

“Sir, we’d still appreciate if you came down.” He gives you directions to Washington Square Park as if you are an alien, and in that moment you feel like one.

You call your boyfriend and tell him to come over for dinner, you have been grocery shopping today and can make a nice stir fry; you can catch up on that show you’ve DVR’d.

You get a phone call from your roommate sounding groggy, saying yes, he is fine, but they’re taking him to the hospital—somewhere nearby, maybe Brooklyn Heights. Or you hear

nothing and lament your morning quarrel over toast crumbs, or hear nothing and invent grand schematics for his escape from peril—perhaps he is still deep underground, inching along the wall of the tunnel, making his way home.

Or you flat iron your hair and put on extra mascara and things go back to normal. You feel guilty about it or you don't. You take a cab in a wide arc around the affected blocks and look away when you see caution tape. You arrive at the restaurant right on time.

You take a cab, get out after ten minutes, feeling sick, remind yourself that nothing is for certain. You run twenty blocks buoyed by that hope, hail another cab. At the scene it is not yet night, the NYPD's neatly ordered mobile generator streetlamps muted by a fuchsia sunset so striking it makes you want to punch something. The police have cordoned off the park, one corner swathed with tarps where the EMTs swarm. You know this is where you are supposed to go before anyone tells you; the policeman at the gate who checks your ID confirms.

In the makeshift tent: ferric scent of blood and antiseptic-as-cologne. A policewoman leads you down the row to a stretcher tagged with your last name. On the ground beneath it is your wife's purse.

"I don't understand. She messaged," you say when the cop pulls back the sheet.

"It's possible the message was sent with a delay, after extraction," she says. "As they're brought above ground and reconnect to the grid—the phones—it's been causing some confusion."

You stare at the cop as if she is speaking another language. She expresses her condolences, tells you to take your time and then return to the front table for the paperwork.

Beneath the sheet you take her hand, except she doesn't feel

like your wife anymore—fingers cool and taut—so you settle for stroking her hair, soot and shrapnel flecked through like glitter. You cry until you think your ribs might crack; you sign your forms and push your way out of the tent into the twilight. You stand there on the grass, holding your wife's purse and wondering what the point of that goddamn arch is anyway, wondering what the hell you are supposed to do next. Once, when you were fourteen, you and your best friend skipped school and got high in this park, but you have never been as dazed as you are now, generator stars boring through your eyes and into your skull, no hope of an exit wound.

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