

The Butterfly Effect

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By that time the two youths – around Theo and Jacky’s age – have already stormed into the hotel, tearing the lobby to pieces.

They’re dressed in western clothing, including baseball caps and sports watches. One is wearing dark jeans and a black T-shirt, the other cargo trousers and a gray long-sleeved T-shirt. They also have the kind of vests you can buy from camping shops, the expensive windproof ones. Bulletproof, presumably, in their case. Bulging rucksacks are stretched across their shoulders. They’re gripping Kalashnikovs.

I don’t know what happens. Nothing and everything all at once. Like when you board a train. You sit in the stationary carriage. On the next track another train starts moving, and for a moment you’re confused, unsure whether it’s you or the other vehicle moving forward or backwards. The only way to be sure is to swiftly train your eyes on a fixed point ahead. I have no fixed point.

One moment Theo, Jacky and I are lying enjoying ourselves on our loungers, the next we jump to our feet. Another nanosecond and we’re crouched behind a broad bush with thick foliage and butter-yellow flowers.

No idea if it was Theo who dragged us to this spot behind the loungers, against the side wall of the hotel, or whether Jacky or I can take the credit. Theo in any case had the presence of mind to grab his rucksack from under his chair. Jacky’s rucksack and my handbag are still lying by the chairs, as is my notebook.

Hunched behind the bush, my trembling arms around the boys, I think, what I’m seeing here isn’t real. We’re at a film shoot – that’ll be it – and they’ve forgotten to inform us. Mumbai is India’s film city and a hotel like this one is the ideal scene for a feud or romance. Of course I don’t recognize all these Bollywood actors and actresses – no reason I should. What do we know about India, apart from the fact that it’s the country that produced Gandhi, who in turn produced Ben Kingsley?

Or perhaps not. I must have missed the security announcement. That’s what happens when you’re so consumed by your work and by seeing your son again: you lose sight of the world at your feet. There must have been one of those laminated signs in the lift or reception. And wasn’t there a note on my bed last night? I clipped it to my hotel report with the intention of reading and analyzing it later. Stupid of me. It was probably an important notice. Something along the lines of: Dear guests, on the last Wednesday evening of every month we carry out a general hotel alarm drill. As

tomorrow is the last Wednesday of the month, in order to keep security up to scratch, around ten o'clock in the evening we will be staging an attack. Please accept our apologies in advance for any inconvenience and thank you for your cooperation.

Yes, I tell myself, a director is just about to jump out from behind a screen shouting, 'Cut, cut, cut!', clapping his hands authoritatively and sincerely thanking all the actors and extras for their efforts. Then he'll bark out orders, his hands folded around his mouth like a loudspeaker: 'Okay folks, we're going to repeat the scene!'

This must be a joke. That's it. A joke on the hotel's part. I'm experiencing the ultimate test of a mystery guest; I must have committed some faux pas on my secret mission. The personnel, whose every interaction I've been scrutinizing for two days now, know I'm the mystery guest on duty and are of course playing a dirty trick on me.

I remember a painting behind the front desk. I don't know all that much about art, but I immediately recognized the middle panel of the three when I checked in. A few years ago I stayed in Madrid for my work. Normally I never go to museums during my hotel missions. I can't stand the busy walls, the crowded rooms and the dry air of those shrines, and I soon tire of ambling from one painting to the next, all the people looking through their mobiles, swarming along the same route filming as they go, milling around in front of the handful of paintings promoted everywhere as must-sees, their backs to more valuable works of art. I also come in contact with more fine art than your average Joe. Top class hotels boast art collections which would turn international curators green with envy. There's more art hanging – and standing – in some suites than in the municipal museum. There are lobbies worth millions, certainly in South Beach.

So anyway, in Madrid I made an exception. I booked a guided tour and visited the shrine exhibiting the most famous Picasso.

One of the panels of the canvas behind the reception desk depicted that work; it was a failed reinterpretation of – or reference to – the *Guernica*. The artist had taken Picasso's suffering horses in hand and colored in their original gray tones with screaming red and orange. I even asked the receptionist about it when I checked in: did she know why the hotel had picked such a morbid painting? 'Morbid?' she replied. I thought she hadn't understood the word, so I said, 'Murderous,' and taking in the disgraced *Guernica* with admiration, she then replied that the piece was neither morbid nor murderous, that she rather considered it exceptionally beautiful and even agreeable, with all those warm colors at her back, those deep, fiery red tones. 'The painter, M.F. Hussein, is our own contemporary Picasso,' she said, her head dancing.

Don't you see those horses behind you dying though? Don't you feel the Evil Eye? I wanted to object, but I restrained myself, also refraining from mentioning that the *Guernica* depicted the bombing of a village.

Now I clutch at the thought that of course this canvas, which conceals a massacre, does not always hang behind the reception desk – it's just there for this film shoot. Surely no hotel, not even in India, would come up with the idea of welcoming its guests against a backdrop of extreme violence?

My knees touch my chin. Theo stares at the ground. Jacky peeks through the foliage at the swimming pool and the short stairway connecting the gallery and the pool.

‘Those are AK-47s those men are carrying. I know the sound from my games.’

‘What did you say?’

‘This is war.’

In front of us tables and chairs are hurled far and wide, catapulted across the patio. The deafening rattle of machine guns causes us to hunch up into an even smaller heap.

The guys direct their steps towards anything that moves, and everything that doesn’t. Under the galleries lamps, chandeliers and windows shatter. The flying shards wound guests searching on hand and foot for a way out of this sudden hell. Doors are thrown from their frames. Guests and personnel are mown down in the colonnade. Some are smacked into the wall with the powerful impact of the bullets, remaining stuck like flies for a few seconds before slowly, hesitantly even, sliding downwards.

A crow has alighted on the table next to the loungers, where a moment ago – it feels like a century – we lay dreaming aloud. It picks a slice of lime out of one of the cocktail glasses. A few others begin to caw, like a choir for the dead.

I’m going to be sick. The gin and tonic spurts out, followed by the lunch I ate this afternoon when trying out room service. A club sandwich. I had a hankering for chips and bread together, as I do all too often. Theo has my vomit on him and is about to hurl now too.

They say that the body moves faster than the soul. The soul gets going but lags behind the physical matter. I have my doubts about this claim. In my view there are moments in life when the soul dashes ahead at cruising speed, leaving the physical body miles behind. Moments like now. In my mind’s eye I see us opening our own hotel; the boys in magnificent tailored suits, their feet in shiny loafers, receiving the first festively dressed guests. ‘Welcome to Ocean Paradise.’ That’s the name we have in mind; we’ve already had the sign designed, but we’re still deciding between two fonts, one slicker, more art deco, than the other.

Warm urine runs down my leg. Jacky plays with his moustache. His eyes have gone dim, like the burned down sandalwood incense sticks I’ve seen from the taxi, smoldering on pavements by altars and house doorways. Theo kneads his neck with his left hand. He’s as pale as a ghost.

An Indian lady wearing make-up and a purple sari takes a shot to the back. She falls forward, her head on the edge of a table, a mist of blood swirling down on her. The woman beside her hides herself under the victim’s shawl.

The guy in the pool tries to push himself up on the edge. His arms are muscular. His purple swimming trunks could have been a size bigger. Before he makes it up, he’s penetrated by bullets and thrown back into the water. His body floats in the pool, which is already full of rubbish. The blue water slowly turns pink.

The pool attendant throws himself in front of a table to shield some guests and is shot down. Only his socks remain white.

A dark man, screened by an overturned table he's crawled behind, where he remains sitting as if paralyzed, is riddled with a rain of bullets. The blood gushes out of him. He howls, the thin sound rising above the gulls, crows and rattling weapons.

The child wearing the shoes with the flashing lights flounders in the stairwell to the garden. He lies sobbing on top of a man with a silver beard. His shoes continue flickering, his breaths seemingly reanimating the man, who may well be dead but who appears resurrected by the child's sobs.

The armed men don't notice us. They storm back into the hotel and let fly with their weapons – apparently they have other explosives as well as machine guns. There's no way of knowing what exactly they're doing or how many of them there are.

I don't know what to do. I know all the procedures that apply in the main hotel chains by heart, but this scenario just isn't catered for.

Phones are ringing all around. Mine is still in my bag. I'd like to have it. I have to have it. I want to call Michael, my mother, my father. I want to send them a text: I love you, I miss you, take care of yourself, love each other. That's what happens in situations involving real danger to life. That's when the essence of things, that which on ordinary weekdays never seems essential enough to win out over other activities, suddenly lights up.

One radio broadcaster filled the airwaves for hours with messages people sent on September 11th. An uninhibited string of I-love-yous. A shorter, but no less arresting chain of sorries. Nobody calls work in their hour of need.

Higher up the hotel a balcony explodes. Debris rain down. The garden is swathed in a gray-white layer of powder and rubble. A woman jumps from a window from which smoke is also spiraling. Her fall ends in a dull thud.

Through the covering of leaves we see the man in the light gray cargo trousers approach the courtyard garden again. He strides in our direction, his steps determined, like those of a hunter who knows his prey is just a couple of meters from him. I feel for Theo's hand. His pulse is hammering. In his wide eyes I read a fear I've never seen before and which at the same time looks primeval, older than the earth. I pull Jacky to me. He jerks away.

The man in the gray cargo trousers shoots at the lion spitting water by the swimming pool. The bullets rebound. He continues to fire until the lion's head flies apart, sniffs in satisfaction and walks on, stepping over the pool attendant. He shoots directly at a row of lights. The last pool light has now been extinguished. He bends down and picks something up off the ground. It's one of Jacky's flip flops. He flings it into the pink water. He's caught our scent. Machine gun at the ready, he peers at the bush with the yellow flowers.

Jacky dashes away from us, barefoot. Zigzagging, he flees to the other side of the garden. Someone fires at him, not the man who approached us, who has not fired a single shot. I don't hear a cry. No thud. I cross myself, and again.

The man points his AK-47 at us. He pushes the gun under my chin, which turns towards the sky, and sneers. He has the scrawny look of an addict, the skin of a teenager.

'Fear is a misconception,' I tell myself. The maxim comes from the calendar hanging on a hook on our toilet door, which swings back and forth as it opens and shuts. I think it's October's motto – Halloween – although it might be the one for this month, November.

With a curious ceremoniousness I stand up straight, assuming the posture we Americans adopt when making a military salute or honoring our flag. I have no idea where my blazing feelings of pride, nationalism and self-esteem come from, but Theo does the same. We practically squeeze one another's hands as good as flat.

'Lie down,' says the man in English.

My profound feelings drain away as quickly as they arose. I fall to my knees. I crawl on my stomach to the armed guy and grip his trouser legs. A large yellow flower from the bush lies in front of his feet. I hold it out to him.

'You're dead,' he says.

I hook the flower behind the laces of his combat boots. He pushes his gun, a weapon of war, into Theo's back and orders him to lie on his stomach, hands behind his back, by the swimming pool.

'Inshallah,' says the Kalashnikov in the cargo trousers.

My mobile rings in my handbag. The ringtone: 'Life Could Be a Dream. Sh-Boom, Sh-Boom.'