

A Sunday Affair

David Evans was at a loss as to what to wear that Sunday. If all his sources proved correct, it would be the day the US began its invasion of Chomumbhar to topple its leader, General Zela. For David and his peers, war correspondents from Western news outlets, the attack was long overdue.

Five weeks earlier, the major US and European media determined that a war was imminent, and dispatched their stable of political affairs correspondents to the sleepy, sleeping island on the Indian Ocean. Electronic and print journalists and radio personalities and photographers descended on the island to stake out a vantage point from which to observe and report the impending war. They were accompanied by retinues and baggage, the size of which depended on their celebrity. The highly paid, skillfully tanned, expensively coifed reporters from the networks arrived not only with large production crews, but impressive cargo—all manner of satellite-bouncing paraphernalia, microwave-resistant videophones and cameras (in case the winning faction tried to censor or jam outgoing broadcasts), bulletproof vests. Armored cars that could withstand most gun and missile fire were dispatched ahead of them from Detroit and Guttenberg.

SNN sent David with a three-man crew, standard equipment, and a lease on a soft -shell car. The group had waited patiently by the airport's rental car lane while the major networks breezed by them in their bulletproof SUVs. Finally, a cheerful yellow Passat with a relaxed island disposition pulled up near David and his crew. A black Hummer, impregnable and arrogant, slowed down in the lane next to theirs, and a window slid down

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like in *The Godfather* movie. “You’re gonna get your ass blown off,” the reigning Golden Boy of American network television mumbled, just like Marlon Brando, before speeding off.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Michael Reed, David’s twenty-three year old cameraman said. Michael was a war virgin. He had told David on the flight over that he had rented *Saving Private Ryan* and *Three Kings* from Blockbuster to prepare himself. Cruising over Frankfurt, he had worried aloud that he might have forgotten to rewind the tapes. David, on the other hand, had been an embedded reporter for two weeks in Iraq. He had even completed a seminar on dressing bullet wounds and surviving as a hostage.

Irshard Sulaiman, David’s sound engineer and second cameraman, was a Palestinian who had emigrated to the States as a teenager. Dressed in disco-era pants and poplin shirts and sporting a full beard and moustache, he looked like everyone’s idea of a terrorist. David didn’t understand why Irshard wouldn’t help his own cause. Why not shave off the moustache and beard and wear a muscle shirt and khaki shorts?

Irshard was never to be seen without his earphones, an industrial pair with ear plates the size of small saucers and a wide connecting band. They either plugged his ears or curled around his neck like a boa. Irshard had once revealed, after David had plied him with several of his own insecurities, that he’d stayed alive in Gaza by running fast and pretending to be invisible. “If you’re not there, the bullet won’t reach you.” Irshard had said. David knew what Irshard meant. He had been a morose, troublesome child himself. When his mother and teachers tried to reprimand him, he would close his eyes. If he couldn’t see them, he felt he wasn’t really there.

Completing the SNN team was Lisa Cohn, David’s producer. She was the only seasoned war veteran among them. She had covered Rawanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and the first and second Iraq Wars. Lisa spoke seven languages, all of them with

American ‘I can do whatever I put my mind to’ self-confidence. She was the kind of ballsy female war correspondent Ernest Hemingway might have married; she even looked like Martha Gellhorn, the third Mrs. Hemingway, and wrote like Mary Welsh, the fourth Mrs. Hemingway.

David thought of her as an androgynous, post-modern chick—no breasts to speak of, no feminine wiles, and no sexual inhibitions. While covering the second Iraq war, Lisa had hopped from bed to bed with both men and women, one night with a reporter from *Le Monde*, another with a Greek anchor who looked like Arianna Huffington, and yet another time with a cameraman from Abu Dhabi. The press in Baghdad had joked that Lisa was on a humanitarian mission for the UN. At SNN, they called Lisa “The Ferret,” because of her amazing ability to find tips, leads, sources, and stories. David hoped to bed Lisa before the war was through, despite the fact that he preferred blondes with big breasts, and mostly because the guy at *Le Monde* had told him that Lisa had pierced nipples and wore nipple rings.

For five weeks, the media corps had been staying at Chomumbhar’s *Michelin* ranked hotel, *The Lisboa*. A few dozen of them had covered every major war since Vietnam. You could separate them from the neophytes like wheat from chaff. You knew they had seen a few things. You also knew they had given up the ghost on something quite fundamental—some necessary for the sake of sanity, God-holding mustard seed. There were also a few dozen war-hardened Australian, Canadian, French, and Japanese journalists who chased wars like tornado enthusiasts chased twisters. A handful of Swiss and Norwegian pacifists with *Reporters For Peace* said they were there to document the tragedy of war. They were treated like Untouchables—if their shadows fell on people, people walked away as if contaminated.

Then there were the happy campers like David, reporters who took dictation from the military, acted as if they were the

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PR wing for the PR wing of the White House and the Pentagon, and still called themselves war correspondents. They liked war. David wondered why no one would admit the truth: that war is the only story worth telling, that it brings viewers home early from work, stops them from switching channels, and keeps them coming back for more. In war, there is drama, pathos, suffering, glory, courage, and death. There's also good and evil, good that turns evil, and evil that vanquishes good. The best part of war: there's no guilt, no one to blame. War is the greatest story. David was sure of it. It turned him on.

Everyone waited patiently for the first strike. In the mornings, the senior members of the press lay in beach chairs by the hotel pool, marinating in SPF 48 sun block. At noon, they showed up at the hotel's bistro to polish off the elegant buffet spread. At two, they recuperated with exfoliating facials and shiatsu massages. They ended the day by getting plastered to the gills and refining their karaoke skills at the hotel bar. Those who had covered the Gulf and Iraq wars couldn't believe their luck—that they were finally covering war in a country where booze was legal. They were also thrilled that the women were quite beautiful and didn't hide their bodies inside potato sacks.

While the correspondents spent most of their time at the hotel, waiting for the action to begin, their crews went out into the field looking for story leads. The assistants brought back nuggets of stories, which the correspondents then reworked and filed. They narrated feature segments on the history of the island and conducted street interviews about the imminent war. Half the population begged the American President to please mind his own bloody business, and the other half wanted to know if they could eat democracy.

The reporters broadcast human-interest stories about the US soldiers who were stationed on aircraft carriers on the Indian Ocean, and analyzed the arsenal of weapons and their powers of destruction. They read White House news releases and news

briefs issued by the American Ambassador. The President said islanders deserved to sit down at the “buffet table of democracy.” It didn’t have quite the sex appeal or resonance of “Shock and Awe,” but the media quickly christened the campaign, “Operation Buffet Table.” David tried his best to come up with catchy leads: “islanders hungry for democracy,” “guests at the table of democracy,” “ravenous diners waiting for buffet,” that sort of thing. In the interest of objectivity, the media interrogated the press secretary to General Zela, who pointed out that the US was hardly perfect. He said that Chomumbhar was perfectly capable of governing itself without outside interference.

The reporters also monitored the high stakes game of global diplomacy that might yet avert a war. Washington called General Zela a tyrant and blight on civilization. Zela called the President an imperialist and a lunatic. The President called Zela a threat to Democracy. Zela called the President a threat to humanity. The President demanded that Zela leave Chomumbhar within forty-eight hours. Zela told the US Ambassador who had delivered the President’s message to go fuck his mother’s pimp. War was inevitable. The reporters were pleased, aroused. They were turning soft from the rest, recreation, and debauchery. Their *Savvy Traveler* wrinkle-resistant pants were growing tight at the waist and crotch. Their extended foreplay needed a climax—a pyrotechnic-caliber, multiple-orgasmic, “I’m coming, I’m coming, I’m dying, I’m dead,” climax.

Freshly showered, toweled, and deodorized, David Evans slid open the mirror door of the closet in his hotel room. His best all-weather blazer, water stained and limp from the previous day’s monsoon rain, sagged from a hanger. His favorite chinos lay crumpled on the floor of the closet. The drawer below the television and above the mini bar—where he kept his laundered shirts, all of them blue—was empty. He had no clean socks. David dressed in his third best khakis, a clean enough white shirt

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that made his skin look blanched and fatigued, a tan bomber jacket, and socks pickled in yesterday's sweat. When he looked in the closet mirror he regretted his ensemble—it failed to pick up the blue of his eyes.

David's agent, Arthur Levy of Arthur Levy Talent Agency in New York, would be livid. He had usurped the role of mother in David's life ten years earlier, and had made David take a vow to wear only blue on camera. Arthur had successfully negotiated a \$200,000 dollar raise for David two years ago on the strength of David's Q rating. David's Q rating, it needs to be said, increased twelve points among American female viewers aged 18 to 89 whenever he wore blue. Arthur, who had guided David's career all those years, made a point of calling David or sending him e-mail everyday. Arthur hurled his toxic bromides inspired by Sun Tzu's Art of War, across the ether and internet. That morning he had called David to say, "You're thirty-five years old, almost a has-been. There are young Turks right behind you from Medill and Missouri. If you don't show the camera that glint in your eye, you're going to end up back where you started."

David had shuddered at the thought. Ending up back where he started would mean the Food Channel, where Arthur had discovered him. David had been reviewing restaurants and blowing the lid off topics such as: garlic—nectar of the gods, secrets of a good tiramisu, and what else to do with chicken, when Arthur first spotted him.

"You've got a great face, and you've got an incredible voice. Cultivate a foreign correspondent's persona and I'll take you all the way to the top." Arthur had said.

Clearly. Arthur knew what he was doing. David was SNN's most popular political correspondent. After his stint in Iraq, he was assigned to head the news team at the network's bureau in New York. David was not an investigative reporter like so many of his peers, with their burnished J-school credentials who broke every story as if it were Watergate. The letters he

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had sent to Ferdinand D'Souza were ghostwritten by Lisa Cohn—the Ferret. However, David had no qualms about claiming the enterprise as his own. It had been the best work of his career, he told his peers. Lisa never corrected him. She was the producer—her work was meant to be invisible. David knew he was never going to be mentioned in the same breath as Edward R. Murrow, Seymour Hersh, and David Halberstam, but his blue eyes and voice were insured by Lloyds of London for two million dollars.

David rode the elevator down to the third floor, where the rest of the SNN crew were camped. He was irritated by his sartorial blunder, which would surely affect his Q rating, and his reeking socks. The door to Irshard's room was open. All three of his crew were there; they had requested adjoining rooms with connecting doors. David envied their communal inclinations, the ease with which they dealt with and tolerated each other. Once, David had begun to worry when some friendly bantering between Irshard and Lisa seemed ready to turn into a bitter argument. He heard the words "occupation" and "Zionism" over the tinkle of ice cubes hitting glass.

"Who was there first?" Irshard glared at Lisa.

"It's more complicated than that," Lisa said softly.

"It's ours from the river to the sea, it's not that complicated."

"Guys." David rose quickly. He hated confrontation. He preferred journalistic objectivity to moral positions. If the President of the United States had said that the sun rises in the West, David would report it without injecting his own opinion into the story. "President says sun rises in the West, some disagree," he might frame the story.

"I'm simply asking what she thinks," Irshard said.

"The whole thing sucks," Lisa said.

"That's a fucking copout," Irshard said.

Before David could make peace between them, Irshard slid

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his earphones into place. Later, when David heard them having a lively discussion about the theme for an upcoming show, he was puzzled. Their anger, upfront and unconditional, ebbed and flowed like the moment-to-moment hurt of children.

Michael was sitting on one of the double beds arranging his equipment in the sponge cutouts of an organizer bag. In a war movie, Michael would be the character everyone would refer to as “The Kid.” He would be the gentle innocent who humanized the cold, stern-jawed hero. His goodness would repair the friction between the hero and his command of bickering men. He would also be the first to die, because the world was never meant for anyone as innocent as that.

The Ferret was on her cell phone, talking in one of her seven languages. She was wearing cargo pants with pockets for everything and a skimpy white tank top. When she didn’t hear what she wanted to hear, she muttered “piece of shit” in English and threw the phone on the bed.

Irshard was hunched at the desk over a laptop filing their latest canned segment.

“What are you doing?” David asked. Irshard didn’t respond. “What’s the deal?” David sat on the bed across from Michael.

Lisa grabbed an incoming fax from the machine, quickly scanned it and snorted.

“Listen to this,” she said, waving it in the air. “ ‘More than a thousand bombs and missiles will be dropped over Chomumbar during the first strike. They are all precision-guided, deadly accurate, and designed to kill only the targets, not innocent civilians.’ It’s a joke and we’re the clowns sent to tell it, ’” Lisa said, as she stretched herself out on the chair. She raised her arms and laced her fingers on top of her head. Her tank top stretched tautly about her. Thick bushes of dark hair flashed from her armpits.

“Yeah, well,” David said. He had no opinion.

“One of these days, David, you’re going to have to

choose a side.” Lisa said. The kindness with which she said it unsettled him.

“So what’s the plan, boss?” Michael looked at David as he buffed his camera lens with the inside of his t-shirt.

“I think we should split up. Irshard and I will stake out the President’s palace since everyone is guessing there will be an attack on Zela. You and Lisa take *Largo do Senado*,” David said.

Lisa rolled her eyes. “If they’re going to bomb Zela, do you think he’d be at the Palace? My bet’s on him being at Senate Square. The tunnels in the basement lead to a bunker, I heard. That’s where you should be. Michael and I will go to the palace, just in case.”

“Yeah. Okay,” David said dumbly, and slipped out of Irshard’s room. He often felt like a fake; without Lisa, he knew he would be back where he started. He thought of Lisa’s nipples, sure that he had seen the outline of the rings. He was sure he smelled raunchy. A war would make him feel so much better.

Two miles from *Largo do Senado*, David and Irshard heard the loud rumble of fighter planes. Immediately, air raid sirens started to wail. It was ninety minutes after the US deadline. Planes in formation circled below the cotton puff clouds, then rose up to hide under them; they looked cheerful, as if they were playing hide-and-peek. The sun streamed through the holes in the cotton puffs. David thought of the music he would choose to score the majestic sight, a John Williams overture from Star Wars, perhaps. When more planes joined the assembly below the cotton puffs, the rumble turned into a thunder and the sirens blared more urgently—with unremitting, ear-piercing shrieks that punctured the still air and curdled it. Birds, many thousands of them (sparrows, terns, herons, gulls, and many David didn’t recognize) scattered in all directions across the sky. The others fell to earth like heavy dark rain. David knew some birds mated

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for life, and others reunited each year to make their spring and fall migration across ancient routes. He wondered if these scattered birds would somehow find each other again.

On the road ahead of them where the cars disappeared from view, they could see giant plumes of black smoke.

“I’m not ready to die.” Irshard swerved the Passat off the road and onto a gravel path. David held on to the top of the window to brace himself, as the tires crunched over pebbles and grit. The dirt road ended near a phalanx of willows. Irshard drove into the curtain of willows so that long ropes and strands of leaves covered the windows of the car.

“We’re not going to die.” David stared ahead with determination.

“What, you feel it in your gut, do you?”

“It’s not going to happen,” David said.

“In the next life, I want to be born an American,” Irshard muttered.

David shrugged. “I don’t feel we’ll die.”

“As long as you feel it, then,” Irshard said, as he reached in the back for his camera. He pulled himself out of the car, hitched the camera strap over his shoulder, and retrieved a large backpack and tripod from the trunk. He slipped the pack onto his back and held the tripod horizontally over the other shoulder.

Though David’s hands were free, he did not offer to help. He followed Irshard onto the curve of a lane that took them to a row of elegant villas on a promontory overlooking Resurrection Beach and the Indian Ocean. They stopped in front of the first house and rang the bell. It was a Christian neighborhood judging from the statues of the Madonna and St. Francis Xavier on the lawns; everyone was bound to be at church. They walked up the lane and back again to the first house, and rang the bell again. The wrought iron gate was secured with an obese Chubb lock. “Smash it,” Irshard said. David picked up a rock and hit the lock and the latch; it opened without protest. Irshard set

his equipment down, tried the knob on the stained-glass front door, then followed the paved stone walkway to the back of the house. David put his hands in his pockets, puffed out his cheeks, and rocked back and forth on his heels.

“The barbarians are now inside the gate,” Irshard opened the door from the other side of the stained glass. The house must have belonged to someone of account. It was filled with expensive furniture and rugs. A framed photograph of the President and his wife leaned on a rosewood chiffonier next to an alabaster statue of St. Francis Xavier and a marble Pietà. The books of Fernando Pessoa and Cesare Verde, the Bible, and *Lives of the Saints* lay on the coffee table.

The villa smelled of warm, bitter, nose-flaring odors of shrimps and prawns and octopus and spices. David and Irshard strolled into the kitchen. A colorful paella bubbled cheerfully in a crock-pot. Whoever owned the house had not left in a hurry. The kitchen sink was clean; the dining table was set for four. Several crystal and ceramic vases filled only with water stood on a table ready for flowers.

“I dunno,” David said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“What if these people complain? Breaking and entering?”

“Laws mean nothing,” Irshard said.

“This is serious,” David said.

“War has no memory, don’t worry about it.”

David followed Irshard up the stairs to a third-story balcony, which afforded them a panoramic view of the air strike. They could see B-2 stealth bombers and F-117 stealth fighters circling the skies. There was shelling and bombing in the distance. David counted 10 satellite-guided Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from warships out at sea. Irshard declared it perfect and set down his equipment. Irshard studied the view; he was forbidden by station rules to show war with context. An F-117 stealth fighter was always good on its own, out there in the sky

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looking like a giant erect penis. A bad image would be to show the F-117 ejaculating—dropping a 2,000 pound payload on a pearl fishery with a serene Indian Ocean in the background.

David leaned against the balcony railings and jotted down notes. He used his cell phone to talk to Lisa and his sources in the military. He was all nerves, his palms were sweaty; he felt too aware of the heat and the smell arising from his own body. He recalled an old woman he met at the island's central market the previous week, who had told him that there would be no war, that the Americans were bluffing.

"But why would you say that?" David had asked, incredulous.

"Saint Francis sees to it," she had replied.

"Snap out of it," Irshard scolded him, as he trained his lenses on David. "Too much shine on your face, lose it," Irshard commanded. David wiped a blotting tissue over his face, and waited for Irshard to count out the seconds taking him to "live." He delivered a three-minute "quick and dirty," announcing the launch of the war, and managed to answer follow-up questions from SNN's desk anchor in New York about the range of the missiles and the objective of the U.S mission. He did not mention Zela. David was secretly hoping that Zela would be killed or captured quickly before the US brought out the MOAB, the "massive ordinance air burst" bomb weighing in at 21,500 pounds. At some point on the balcony, they lost phone contact with Lisa and Michael. Over the next two hours, Irshard and David tried to put a lid on their boiling panic when their repeated calls to Lisa and Michael went unanswered. "I'm sure they're all right," David said, more to comfort himself than Irshard. "I guess," Irshard said, thankful that he could hide his worry behind the camera and his earphones. But David was filled with dread; he was certain that Lisa would have called him by then to brief him on the bunkers. They taped four three-minute live feeds for the prime time and late evening editions,

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and when they still hadn't heard from Lisa and Michael, David called the station chief in New York. As he waited for the SNN operator to patch him through, one hand cupping the phone, an index finger wedged in his other ear to drown out the noise of the planes, Irshard gestured for him to hang up. "It's not right," Irshard said into his own phone.

In David's final broadcast of the evening, he reported the news of his fallen crew. "Sources at Central Command and the field hospital on board the USS Liberty just confirmed the deaths of newswoman Lisa Cohn and cameraman Michael Reed, both of SNN. They were among one hundred and thirty people killed during combat operations at the Presidential Palace in Port Contadu."

By the time Irshard packed up his equipment, night had fallen. Howitzer multiple rocket launchers had stopped lighting the sky like fireworks, but Blackhawk helicopters without lights sliced through the inky sky like Friday night traffic.

David and Irshard drove in silence towards *The Lisboa*. David thought how brave it was of them to be so foolish. Irshard mourned the Gaza he was condemned to carry with him everywhere.