



Source: Reuters, '60 hurt as fighting breaks out on Lebanon streets', *The Age online*, 24/01/07.

Tags: [bombings](#), [death](#), [streets](#)

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The streets in the centre of the city had been cordoned off. There were large swathes of yellow and black tape, like bees, and armed police. The police seemed unusually cheery. Normally, in my part of town, they ignore you if you try to make eye contact, but now everyone had engendered some kind of false, jolly togetherness. 'Like the Blitz', one paper said.

But of course, there weren't many people around. For once you could see quite how spectacular the architecture is, as if you were the architect drawing his plans. The cityscape gets ruined by its throngs of people: badly dressed, smelly, spitting their chewing gum on the footpaths to make hard, black lumps, swinging their bags and hauling their heavy bodies into the bus queue next to you. They block the vistas and hold up commuters by taking photos of themselves on a bridge. How many cities can you spot from your bridge pictures, when you get home?

Today the city was no longer for tourists. A city that prides itself on its diversity (says the mayor), and which is overwhelmed by property hunters (say the housing agencies), was empty. Warm, sunny, and echoing like a ghost town.

We saw a journalist with a long brown coat and a notebook in his pocket, resembling Inspector Clouseau. He even had a French accent. He saw us hugging, and then asked if we were okay. You really should wear a better disguise if you're going to act the part of the caring Samaritan.

Anything could have happened, that's why we were walking around. Anything could have happened to her, it didn't have to be that. It was extraordinary that that could happen, so anything else could have happened instead. She could have got amnesia from a knock on the head. She could be wandering the streets, staring at the cracks in the pavement, not remembering her name. She could have been taken in by someone, someone who saw she'd been hurt but didn't know the full extent of the problem, and didn't have a TV, or didn't read the newspapers.

It was extraordinary, the whole setup. The whole setup was wrong. And it wasn't extraordinary to imagine that something else had happened.

People were more surprised by the posters in the suburbs. 'That's not where it happened, dear'. 'What? Has there been another bomb? Round here?' No, I tried to explain, but our friend was missing. She wasn't dead. 'She's dead?'. No, she's just missing. It's just a coincidence, that she went missing on the same day.

The centre of town was easy enough. She was beautiful, our friend, and the news crews liked the photos. One of the posters had her boyfriend's number on it. No-one expected them to jam his mobile with their faux-concern. But non-respect for journalists is just another luxury of a free society, I suppose, another luxury that we enjoyed

carelessly, frivolously, before the people who did this decided to take it away.

(The people who did this, counting back in their hundreds, lining up in their thousands in their grey suits and apologetic faces. No, not the suicide bombers, the terrorists whose military force can kill hundreds and thousands in just one day.)

It wasn't really the jamming of the mobile that did it. It was their recklessness with the facts. I read, variously, that the person I knew was 31, 28, 25; that she was a secretary, a PA, an advertising executive; that she was married; that she was a Christian. The funny thing is, I thought to myself, as if I were reading with her, and she were laughing along, the funny thing is that if you were 31, 28 or 25, then you'd either have a few years left in you yet, or this would never have happened. That's the funny thing!

If it hadn't been for the photos they printed, I'd have assumed that it were someone else. And I'd have known that the person I knew, whose vital statistics are no longer the stuff of public display, was wandering the streets with amnesia, or had been taken in by a kind but out of touch stranger. Instead, they blurred the facts, and preserved her memory in a shaft of messy misunderstandings, so that when the archivists find them, in 10, 20 or 100 years' time, they'll really have no idea at all.

Strange how small a city can seem when it's empty. When there are no people to fall in behind you, or to block your way. If you're brought up in this city then you're used to ignoring. You don't look around you, and you never make eye contact. If someone asks you a question, it's London-etiquette for you both to stare at the road while you converse. But now we're told we should look them in the eye. 'Look a terrorist in the eye', as if it was as simple as 'don't pat a guide dog'. Look a terrorist in the eye. Make them see you're human. But surely, I mean surely, the terrorist has already thought that one through?

It was only a week later that we realised the pointlessness of our walking; it had been dawning for a few days. Glorious, sunny, heatwave days, spent in parks with the multitude of her friends who thought that somehow, together, something like jolly togetherness would get us through. Then they took some DNA from her boyfriend's flat and we knew it was over.

All that time we were walking the streets, our bellies full with anticipation, telling each other how touched she will be, when we find her, that so many people cared. All that time she had been lying beneath us. Under the ground, exploded in a bomb by people who never knew she was alive. Silent, and beautiful. Silent and rotting.

We took a taxi to her funeral, and it rained all day.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Mary Paterson.*