

Story for performance #907
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death's necessities

Source: Martin Chulov, 'Blockade of Gaza even makes dying difficult', *The Australian online*, 14/12/07.
Tags: [death](#), [husband/wife](#), [workplace](#), [bombings](#)
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When she was a girl she made a decision that if the atomic bomb dropped, she wanted to be right underneath it. She couldn't bear the idea of crawling over rubble, hearing the cries of injured people, watching her own body turn sickly grey in a nuclear winter. No, she wanted to die instantly, preferably when she was asleep, although most nights she couldn't sleep. She lay in a narrow bed watching long rectangles of light slide through the venetian blinds then stretch across the top of the wall and ceiling where they disappeared out of the window again, like the tail end of a snake.

Her family lived in a basement apartment in the outskirts of a cold city somewhere under the flight path of imagined missiles launched in Russia. The kitchen window was eye-level with the paved ground of a parking lot, and the bedroom she shared with her brother and sister looked out at the wheels of passing cars. Sometimes people crouched by the window, pulled faces at her and laughed.

She wasn't poor. That's what her father told her. If she wanted to see really poor people he could take her to the places where they lived. Indeed he would take her one day.

At night she imagined those people living in the corners at the top of her bedroom wall. Little stick people as tiny as spiders and flies. Sometimes they scrambled on the edges of the sliding bars of light cast by passing cars. And four floors above in an indigo sky that curved around the flat roof of the red brick apartment building, an atomic bomb hovered. She held her breath.

As she grew older she wanted to believe the bomb and the poor people were all make-believe—that there would always be warnings about things that didn't really exist. She was relieved years later when a young man asked her to be his wife and offered to take her away to a country in the far south where the sun shone most of the time. This was a world without basements and shadows—without little stick creatures that she might have to save crouching in the corners of ceilings. There were no bombs passing over that country and she wouldn't feel guilty.

She had been a bit disappointed to find that safety came with such beige mediocrity. A tan brick bungalow on a suburban street and the sound of her mother-in-law tap, tap, tapping on typewriter keys in the office garage. The family ran a small transport business and Marge, which was the mother-in-law's name, was in charge of the books and correspondence. Sometimes the drivers came into the house, big slow men, who made a cawing sort of sound when they laughed and whose necks craned, and faces bristled, with the same surprised look as an alarmed cockatoo. The birds were everywhere. They settled on the lawns. They shrieked in trees.

The drivers, her mother-in-law, and people in shops,

asked her about her life in the cold northern city and she knew by their faces that they wanted her to express a continued gratitude that she'd been lucky enough to be brought down here. The ground was flat. The sky was wide and empty. The lawns were neat and brown.

In the evening the sun disappeared in one sudden swoop. There was none of the twilight hours she'd been used to—where those things that were hidden by the bright light of day began to materialise: bombs in the sky and poor people living in the corners of your room. And so she'd been surprised when the crying woman appeared in the front yard. Or had it only been after Marge began to tell the story that she imagined that wrung face, the mouth contorted into a horizontal box, and the boy lying on the hospital bed with a sheet collapsing into a grotesque flat plane beyond his hips?

Marge had been laying knives and forks on the table. A leg of lamb was roasting in a pan. She said she'd had to think fast. If the police had arrived at the accident and found her driver drunk, a kid pinned to a bridge, then her business would be gone. She'd sent another driver to sit behind the wheel before the ambulance arrived. Later the mother had turned up on her front lawn to howl at them, said she didn't know how they could live with themselves. Her boy, her innocent boy walking in the sunshine, and now his legs were gone.

Marge told this part of the story with a hard little laugh, a protective little laugh. She had her own family to look after and what was the point of doing anything different? Owing up to a drunk driver wouldn't have fixed anything. And what was that kid doing loitering on the bridge?

She'd listened to Marge's explanation and said nothing. Perhaps this had been her greatest failing, not to ask a single question about the accident, about the wailing mother, about the boy who had lost his legs. These characters were like the poor people crouched in the corners of a long-ago ceiling, like herself huddled under a falling bomb. She thought about survival and then the necessities of death. That it be quick, a sudden shutting out of lights and then a dreamless sleep.

Years later, when she had left her husband, the suburban house and even the country, she wondered over and over again if that boy saw the truck coming and then she realised it wasn't imagining his sudden fear that tortured her so much. It was that *she* hadn't seen the truck, or rather, that she had ignored it. She'd always known that it was snaking its way down that road, lurching toward that bridge. There were so many vulnerable people, so many bombs high in the sky. She would have to witness it all and had no idea of how she might help.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Carol Major.