

And On That Day...

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In war there are always casualties, there are those who are caught up in the explosions of missiles, those who lived too close to where invasions began, and those who fought their invader back...I always believed that things would be okay and that my husband was a strong capable man, he was brave and smart. He knew how to make a tent, fix things, and fight, but now that I sit here holding both of our children close, squeezing their heads into my chest while we sit covered in his blood, I don't know what to do next. Is this hell? Did we die during the attack, and we are just living through a nightmare? And on that day, we knew...

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On Thursdays we get home usually around 7:00 from our five-year-old sons' Oliver karate practice, my husband James normally would be home before we leave for it but this time he got home after we had left and texted me telling me that he would just start cooking dinner that way when we got home, we could all eat together. He always cooked our meals, I was never gifted with such a talent, but we both agreed on our roles in the family. I would love and nurture the children, and he would provide and maintain them. What a good partnership we had. We loved each other so much, even though we fought we both held each other in such high regard, and what made us special was that we agreed on so many opinions, we shared the same faith, political, societal, and economic ideas, we always joked about the unpopular musings we both agreed on that no one else we knew should know about. Now I see him, covered in his own blood, with the man who killed him right before me...

James texts me an Instagram link asking if I could open it for him and explain it to him, because he despises social media but still has his curiosities, it was a link from his best friend Chance who told him to get “fucking ready”. It looked like California, from the mountains in the background and the beautiful weather in the video, it was a capitol building ablaze. A man is filming himself running and you see smoke all around him with people screaming, and then gunshots ringing out in the background in the hundreds. He falls over with blood on his face and then, the video ends. I call James immediately and relayed the video back to him.

“I think it’s time we start packing up our things and heading south to your parents’ house. I don’t want to say it’s happening Kate, but I think it is.” James says after I finish telling him.

“I just saw a video on YouTube of the Washington monument falling over, something must have happened, we need to get out of here right the fuck now.” He changes his tone to an aggressive one, so I decide to leave practice immediately. Grabbing Oliver and Louise, our two-year-old, and we rush out of the dojo into the car, I yell at Oliver to buckle his sister in her seat and buckle himself in now, not even waiting for them to be buckled in I speed out of the parking lot to the house. Then my sister Stephanie calls me, “Kate there is a fucking mushroom cloud in the sky, I love you and I am out of here, I’m driving, and whatever I can fit is coming with me, I will see you at Mom’s right?”

I burst through the front door and James has three bags packed, both dogs on a leash and a belt that he calls his “Battle Belt” that he wears to work. He has his AR-15 slung around his body while he talks to his friend Chance on a radio that he tinkers with on the weekends. “Grab whatever is important to you inside, we are leaving now. Stephanie called me and said they

were bombed somehow, that means California, D.C., and now Tennessee. Whatever the fuck this is, is getting closer fast. Let's hurry up and leave, I will get the kids."

He walks to pick up both the kids calmly and slowly, whispering to them "Guys everything is going to be all right, we are going to Gigi's right now. We can't bring much and it's going to be fast, okay?" I know he has thought of this scenario before, he has always been paranoid even when he was still in the military, but I could hear the fear in his voice while he stood there so strong. I race to grab our important documents box and then sprint over to the pantry and start grabbing all the food I can. If only I was faster...

A loud explosion goes off and then we hear water rushing from the river. A powerful blast of air that smells like gasoline bursts through the house after shattering the windows on one side.

Gunshots start ringing out, and then James walks into the house calmly and grabs me by both arms and walks me to the car. We back out of the driveway and go; I still haven't put my seat belt on. Whatever is happening is happening here and now. We aren't the only ones getting in their car, but we are ahead of them. I see the panicked faces of our neighbors as we drive past their houses while they are loading their cars with their belongings. What if we had stayed...?

We make it to the highway and again it seems like we made it first, as we drive south on I-95 we begin to see the northbound lanes flood with traffic. We may be one of the few people wanting to go south. It is only a two-hour drive from Jacksonville to Orlando but every few minutes James would slow down and roll the windows down. "Stop, Look, Listen, Smell" he would say, which meant "I am trying to see if someone is going to shoot us here"

We had driven a little more than halfway to Orlando, and we begin to see parked cars and flashing lights. They were not the lights like a police car would have but rather red lights that

could be surrounded by smoke. James began to turn the car around, then in the lane going the opposite direction, there are men dressed in a woodland style camouflage military uniform with eastern European skin color clambering out of cars and pointing guns at the red lights. Before I realized what went wrong James took our minivan and did a burnout in the middle of the I-4 highway to turn the car back around. The kids started laughing and the dogs in the trunk of the van slammed into the wall making a thud. After the thud came the most terrifying thing that had ever happened to me until that point. The uniformed men began firing at the lights, the sound of gunshots seem so much louder when you are stuck in the middle of the firefight with everything you love with you, James takes the van off the highway into the grass beside it and begins accelerating hard, the car is hitting bumps in the grass as I hit my head on the roof when the kids stop laughing and start screaming. We bolt past the cars parked by the red lights which ended up being uniformed U.S. military soldiers performing a traffic stop, while they are firing back at the uniformed men.

Just then the lights over the highway turn off and the world went completely black. The van abruptly stops and then just completely shuts off only about a mile past the checkpoint while they are mid gunfight with whoever the other uniformed men are.

“It must have been an EMP, we have to get out of the van now. Grab what you can and let’s go. If it comes down to it, I will give you cover fire while you run to the woods. I don’t know who those guys were shooting back there, but I want to get the fuck out of here.” James says while he looks me in the eyes with a look that had no time for a response.

I climb back from the front seat and get both kids out of the car while James opens the driver door and starts pulling the dogs out and the bags. He hands me one when I run around the back, and he gives one to our oldest son Oliver.

“Oliver, I need you to be big and help us. Stay with Mommy and Louise.” James says as he cranks in the scope on his rifle at where our military men once were.

“Go, Kate, I don’t see anyone by the-” he stops mid-sentence as he begins to take shots at where the traffic stop once was.

“GO!”

I don’t wait, I grab both kids under my arms and run for the woods by the highway. I feel their heads bobbing violently while they are in my arms, once I make it, I feel my lungs begin to squeeze like the air was pulled out from them. Before we take the next first step, I can hear him running, “that was the last one let’s move” he says.

The world stops. James falls over in front of me and I feel his blood spray over my face, while my jaw drops in horror.

“I thought he was one of them, I couldn’t see, I couldn’t fucking see!” Says a young man who must be in his twenties, wearing a uniform with an American flag on it. The same one James had worn. The man begins to scream out loud as if he was the one who was shot, with a look in his eyes that made him look more like a child than a man.

I grab both of my children in a desperate attempt to keep them safe while I fall to the ground. Slamming my knees into the root-covered ground, bringing the kids down with me.

“You killed him,” I said without the words ever leaving my blood-covered mouth.

“I didn’t know! I just heard him shooting and thought the worst, we don’t even know who the fuck is attacking us. Why didn’t you guys just come through the traffic stop? They would have never shot at us if they didn’t see your minivan do a full 360 in front of them!”

“Fuck You!” I shout at the top of my lungs, I start to get up with every intention of killing the man before me, I don’t care how old he looks.

The highway lights come back on, and we can see James' body finally, and almost as if on cue more gunshots ring out in the distance. I stand up to take the rifle out of James’s hands to kill this worthless excuse of a man. But he doesn’t let go...

I hear the softest sound coming from James, the blood was coming out of his left arm. He rolls to his right side, with pain streaking his face. He looks alive, like there is still fight in him. As he began to try and stand back up, he turns and looks straight at the soldier saying., “Get me up, let’s go. And kid, you’re coming too.”

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