

The Power to Destroy Worlds

By Virginia Shewfelt

The Explosive was an idea from a nightmare. Once dropped, it promptly destroyed. It was designed to obliterate, and according to all the tests, it was fully capable of doing so quite effectively. As to how many it could kill, and how fast, estimates said something to the effect of the population of Mexico City, in a hundredth of a second. And what radiation it left behind was convenient for invading armies; it had a half-life of a few minutes. And people were not vaporized or blown apart: the deaths, though instant, were far grislier and thus left quite an impression on the affected country. It was a grand triumph for the military engineers, and certainly a milestone in the middle of the bleak war.

It was enough to drive the pilot insane.

He knew what his little bomber carried. He knew that once he reached the enemy's coast, he would pull the lever, and millions of people would die. The men at the base had given him the firmest of instructions as to where to let it drop. But, of course, when it came down to it, it made little difference what they *told* him. It was his job to unleash the thing. He was the one who had the power to snuff out so many possibilities.

He had tried to push that fact out of his brain. In the beginning it had worked: *I'm just doing what I'm told. I have no choice. I didn't create the bloody bomb, anyway. Not my fault it exists.* But the rest of the truth had begun to seep from the blocked cubbyholes soon enough. It had started like tears: minute, just a pooling of thought, a gentle pressure. Then tiny whispers – *you could've refused the mission* – slipped through one by one.

They started to flow more heavily with time. By the time he reached his half-way point, there was an ocean of accusations – *murderer! Coward! **Murderer!***

At last, the pilot could take it no longer. With the screaming pounding against his skull, he grabbed the lever, switched off the safety, and let the Explosive freefall from its cradle. The screaming dwindled to nothing as he squeezed his eyes shut and let out a deep breath. He let the plane loose altitude; pass through the cloud cover that was so rare in that region. *It's just me, then* he thought contentedly, and let the machine dive into the crushing black sea, only a short distance from the island he had been too distracted to see on the radar.

A flash of white light woke Kua up with a start in the middle of the night. At first she just assumed it had been one of the lightning storms that were so common this time of year. The sound of the rain would lull her back to sleep like it always did, anyway. *Nothing worth being alarmed about.* She settled back deeper in her pillow and listened for the falling water on her traditional thatch roof.

All that met her ears was silence. The woman wondered briefly if she'd finally gone deaf in her old age, like her father had. She was in the middle of searching her side table for her glasses to look out the window at the weather when a sound finally made itself known.

She knew immediately that it couldn't be thunder.

It started at first like a high pitched scream in the distance that grew to an ear-splitting volume in just a breath of time. Then it became a rumbling so deep it was like the entire world was being shaken. Kua's glasses quivered in her hands from the noise.

After half a minute the noise began to fade quickly into an angry grumbling, and after a time was gone all together.

Kua didn't move for some time. The sound still rang painfully in the back of her mind, despite it having fallen silent on the outside world. She hesitantly wondered what it had been.

U'uta's spirits, I'd say. She decided. Spirits of this island – something is wrong.

It took all her strength to slip out of bed: not because of her age, but from the fear and automatic reverence of whatever it was she would see outside.

The dim streetlamps of their village made the people gathered on the road look yellow and glowing. They were huddled close with their feet in the dewy grass, jaundiced faces close together. Kua heard the sound of their terrified whispering as she shuffled her way over. There were a few families congregated there, hushed English words limping out of their mouths. A man saw the old woman come near them and lifted his head.

“Kua,” he said in the native language, voices stumbling over the words “are you all right?”

“Fine, Christopher.” She heard herself croaking. “What about you?”

“We're all fine.” Christopher pulled his jacket tighter around himself. “Did you see the cloud?”

“I didn't see a thing.”

“It looked like a mushroom.” A child on the edge of the group told her quietly.

“It was like those clouds that come from bomb explosions.” Christopher nodded as he spoke. “Over there, far in the distance.” He pointed to the east, toward the ocean. “In the direction of the city.”

“Any news?”

“None. We don’t know anything yet.”

They waited for half an hour by the curb, close together and whispering questions. It was a warm spring night, the type of night vacationers relished. The locals shivered in unison.

A shriek in English made everyone jump. A teenager waving her cellular phone above her head was rushing down the dark street toward them. She stopped inside the circle of light and started speaking too fast for Kua to understand. The other villagers listened intently and let out a collective gasp of horror. Christopher turned back and translated shakily for Kua.

“There’s been some sort of attack on the capital. She managed to get some information off some update-every-five-minutes news website, but there’s not much information on it yet, of course. They say it’s related to the war, despite us being neutral in the whole thing. Not much else reported yet, other than that they know it was some sort of new bomb, and there are many dead. No one’s gotten a close look; they’re afraid of radiation.”

“A new kind of bomb?” Kua looked him in the face. The light made him look gaunt and sickly. He nodded.

She looked away at the black weeds she was standing in, barefoot. “I always said, you know,” she murmured to no one “I always told my grandchildren that the world changes too fast these days; they could never understand.” She abruptly turned away and marched back to her tiny house. She pulled a suitcase out from under her bed and started to fill it.

“They never understood.” She sighed, laying a pack of traditional funeral incense on top of her clothes and closing the bag. “They don’t speak my language.”

Reverend Thomas Birham had lived on the island of U’uta for two decades. He was a missionary, and had been since the beginning. He was well known by the people, and well-loved. So it was only natural that he would be selected to speak at the national memorial service. It was taking place a week after the tragedy - to give the survivors ‘time to recover’, organizers said. *They’ll never have time enough*, he thought to himself. *Never in a hundred years*. Nevertheless, he’d agreed to it without even thinking about turning it down.

That did not diminish his dread. On the day on the ceremony itself he was shaking still as he walked up to the dais, papers with carefully chosen words quivering like birds in his hands. Thousands of eyes seemed to be trying to drag him down as he stepped up toward the podium. He regarded the microphone coming closer and closer like a bottle of poison he knew he had to swallow. When he reached the pinnacle of the stage, he stopped silently to look at the crowd. He let the faces of the audience sink in. *I need to remember my audience*. The remaining population of an already tiny country looked back at him.

Many of the faces were a soft tan, some of them were chocolate brown, and a few were a soft peach like his own. He suddenly felt very comfortable, as if he was presenting to an intimate group of friends; the faces seemed so very familiar. The colours all mixed as he watched. The reverend found himself standing at the rim of a great lake of humanity. The tide rose and engulfed him welcomingly: every face seemed like it was a part of him. They gazed at him, he looked back at them.

There was another group there, he felt: one they could not see. Invisible, solemn, reassuring, joyful.

These were people he knew, he realized. He had baptized them. He had married them. He had buried them.

Now he was going to sing them a requiem.

“You’re a lucky boy, son.”

Welcome Kulana only half-heard the doctor’s words. He had woken up from his coma to discover he was deaf in one ear. The blast that had burst every single blood vessel in most citizens’ bodies had knocked him unconscious and broken his eardrum. The fourteen-year-old had been breaking his curfew, sneaking into a junkyard on the very edge of town, when the blast had gone off.

By the time he’d been discharged from the hospital his parents, little sisters, and baby brother had already been buried.

The arrangements had been made. He was going to live with his Aunt Hannah and Uncle Oin’o. He would go to school in their town on the other side of the country. Make new friends, since most of his old ones had been shattered from the inside out. His own life would go on in a different place.

That day, he had to be at the main bus stop by six in the evening. Before then, he had to go home and collect his things.

The small, middle-class apartment was quiet for the first time in Welcome’s memory. Looked different as well; for one there was no glass in the entire place. Every window pane was empty, the good dishes gone. From what he understood, foreign clean-

up crews had descended on the city during his week-long coma and picked up the hundreds of bodies and mopped up what else they could. So all the shards had already been swept up. All of the beds except his own had been taken away, too; they had been covered in blood, not worth saving.

It felt odd to be home. He wanted to turn a corner and see Isaac writing on the wall, or Honey and Ruth gathering supplies for a practical joke they were going to pull on a stressed-out Dad. But Welcome was alone; he watched his feet instead. *There's nothing you could've done anyway*, he reasoned. *You'd've been gone, too*. It didn't help.

He walked into his room. It was the only place where it seemed everything was as he left it, except for the boarded-up window. Numbly, he found his duffel bag and packed as much of his clothing in it as he could. He didn't have to worry about the bigger things like furniture. It had already been arranged: those items would be packed and shipped by government workers. His stuff would be brought to his aunt and uncle's house. The rest of the things would be distributed as the wills of his parents ordered.

Zippering his luggage shut, Welcome left his room and went toward the front door. He made it through the hallway without looking at the family photographs on the wall. He almost managed the living room the same way, but by the end of the worn couch he had to stop.

A stuffed toy dog sat on the pilled cushions. It was a ratty old thing, with large lumps of its fur missing and the fabric turning a dirty grey. It had been Welcome's as a child. It'd been passed on to Ruth, then Martha, then Honey, then Silvia. Isaac had been sucking on its remaining ear just over a week before.

Welcome slowly picked it up and cradled it lovingly in his elbow like the relic it was.

They saw each other in the public park. Something about them caught each other's eyes: the ancient native woman, the immigrant reverend, the local teenager with forlorn toy.

Barely anyone else was in the park, despite it being a very sunny afternoon. The trees had all lost their leaves in the explosion; most of the flowers, strangely, were still alive.

Kua stopped first. She could not say what possessed her to stand still, but when she looked down there was a flower by her feet. It was a native plant: a pale, pink, delicate thing. Still in the growing stages, it was only as tall as her ankle.

God seemed to draw Rev. Birham to that same plant. His feet brought the rest of his body, finally quiet from his experience at the service, to stand by the old woman.

Welcome decided to follow, to fill in the gap between the others.

The three generations stood still together, side by side. They all kept their heads bowed toward the ground and the resilient little flower sprouting up from it. All of them were looking past it and the soil. They did not say a word to each other.

Outside of their ring, the island went about its cycles as it always had. People let out the breaths they had been holding. The world began to turn once more.