

# *Constant Comfort*

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*Ramola D*

## **Tender Spaces**

Daniyah was sucking a sweet red cherry lollipop when the ceiling caved in on her, the weight of several stories of concrete, brick, mortar, and steel whistling down to avalanche on her skull, so her hand involuntarily released the lollipop stick and her lungs, choking with fine grey dust, released the world. A breath had passed, maybe two, in which, believing she was still alive, she had raised her lollipop hand to the back of her skull where the wrenched concrete slab which had once held up a bedroom wall had impacted, and incomprehensible wads of tissue and blood leaked onto her fingers, and dripped into the tender spaces between her fingers. She withdrew her hand, marveling at the stickiness of life, the ease with which parts of the body could crack blindly open, spill

their most secret contents, even the youthful crimson glaze streaming out of her five-year-old self thick with its own burden of wants and unwants, long threads of memories, viscous friendships, slow pools of regret.

The Bomb had arrived like a freight train, a tornado, a cataract, from deep inside a fighter jet. She had heard it ripping through the cauldron of space just above their building in Gaza, hissing its intent as it tore open the walls. For comfort, she had been sitting on her sister Aaliyah's bed.

Beyond the sound, beyond the ungainly explosion of brick and concrete in large, unmanageable confetti all around her, streamers of ash rose like cirrus and floated. Now she noticed she was still sitting on the bed although the room entire had been demolished. Debris had torqued her feet inextricably into a devil's arabesque. Ash still rose. It feathered the shattered brick, stopped up childish nostrils, climbed the torn-open curtains, sought out the glottis of every child and settled inside the moist alveoli of childish lungs.

## Come to the Ball

Her sister Aaliyah had been reading a book, lying on her back in bed, flipping through pages of illustrations: fairies with tall butterfly-edged wings, fairies with pixie caps, fairies rising out of flowers, their legs stemmed and petalled, their thighs subsumed in bright corollas. Laboriously, words being sounded: *She whispered to him, it was permitted, he could come to the ball.* Aaliyah held inside her mouth like an unbreachable crevasse a learning disability which had once held her back in school. Words she could

not pronounce pirouetted inside her. Words whose meaning eluded her flickered like constellations visible on rare occasion through blowing cloud. Some phrases and juxtapositions flummoxed her. Often she slipped into verbal transpositions and transgressions lucid only to those, like herself, who could not read in straight lines, word upon word. Because of these matters, she had only recently learned how to read in ways that could infallibly disperse inside her the certain seeds of story. This, astonishingly, had excited her to the point of undiminished hunger. Now all she wanted to do, in between eating, sleeping and going to school, was read.

Seven-year-old Aaliyah was reading when the Bomb tore through the upper stories of the building and exploded in a fireball that set fifty-six rooms above them ablaze, collapsed hundreds of walls, shattered windows, and tossed numerous body parts and dreams along with lullabies for infants, fabric from curtains and clothing, house pets, once-enclosed bricks, and just-made evening dinners into the pulverized air. The book was dragged from her hands, as were her hands from herself. Parts of her limbs scorched and melted, parts of her limbs disintegrated. Her eyes, still scanning a line of text, followed the exit of her unclad feet through the newly-exploded window, into the night-lit air, into the shuddering vibration. Black smoke and white ash plumed abruptly around her, obscuring vision. Coughing, she leaned forward to tilt a cup of bedside water to her mouth, her reachings with a phantom hand suddenly visible even to herself. Bone stood out white inside a shell of macerated flesh scorched to coal on the skin. Burning dreams from floors above fell with building debris on her desecrated limbs. In the whitening that ensued, of skin, lungs, and breath, a part of her still floated on butterfly wings, wrapped in diaphanous silks and glittering with rare crystalline stones, toward a fairy ball in an

enchanted forest. Other parts of her reached for parts forever gone with an unregistering insistence.

## Constant Comfort

A long time ago, their thirty-seven-year-old father, asked by a visiting Dutch journalist, what his children meant to him—he had five of them then, and the sixth on the way—said, tentatively (he was a shy man, unwilling to draw attention to himself) in his usual, retreating way: they were a constant comfort to him and his wife. They were the creation of family succeeding the death of his own parents. Children, he explained, were the meaning of home.

## Womb-Like

In the moment the Bomb hit, their mother, holding the seven-month-old baby, in the room furthest from the one in which the children played, had bent down to rummage beneath the bed for a new blanket for the baby's crib. Joists crashing around her miraculously shaved a womb-like space surrounding her bent-over body. In this she froze, bent-over. The screech of matter ignited abruptly to oblivion around her cascaded, rippled, echoed. Walls crashed and fell, smoke and ash unwaveringly rose. The baby

choked, she coughed, for a moment she held a still-whole hand to a still-whole mouth, deathly afraid for her children's lives.

## An Instant's Ravaging

The second-youngest, three-year-old Isra, was on the carpet playing with her doll, a gangly mini-skirted Barbie with unruly golden locks, narrow lips, blue eyes, and red Mary-Jane stilettos, combing the knotted hair with a doll-brush, bending the legs sideways and forwards, backwards and back, readying her for school, she said, smoothing down the upturned sequined collar, when, in an instant's ravaging, concrete confetti from the explosion needled through her spine and out her abdomen, crushing vertebrae, slushing together spinal fluid, blood, muscle, intestine, and intestinal contents in one gory mass that extruded beneath the doll's golden hair and lay, for a brief moment, steaming before her eyes as the greater mass of the ceiling pounded all over her.

The oldest, Hadiya, was sitting by the window, staring into the deepening dusk, yellow window lights coming on all around them, dim swathe of stars above, dreaming of lean, handsome Fuad, the brother of her friend Mariam, with whom she had recently exchanged a series of letters, tentative and breathless, when she noticed the ominous congealing of sound around them, saw the fighter jet plummet and loosen its dark, silvery load of terror directly above, heard the raw Doppler crunch of its coming and going, and half-rose, shaken from her windowseat, when the end of the world sliced her sideways and with glass and metal she was blown to the center of the room, bleeding profusely

from head and neck, legs paralyzed in one instant, and covered the next in the flaming, smoking debris that descended from above and kept on descending.

Her seventeen-year-old body slammed into the second-oldest, Malaika, the sleeping one, who had been sick that day and not ventured to school, curled in a ball on her bed, a single cotton sheet over her fourteen-year-old limbs, which boiled instantly to flame and sealed her skin at roiling temperatures into its fibrous threads, delving deep through layers of epidermis, dermis, muscle, to reach the hidden bone and surge against it. Flame, ash, bone, and shards of metal embedded. The weight of the rooms and objects above thrust onto shoulders, ribs, ankle bones. When she opened her eyes, blinking past the ash coating her lashes, weighting her lids, Malaika believed she had transformed in her dreams into a caterpillar's tight cocoon, so fully was she encased in ashen, fallen plaster, and brick.

## **One Moment to the Next**

Except for Hadiya, who had, for an instant, observed the blinding arc of terror dislodged from the roaring fighter jet, none of the girls had had an inkling of the enormity of what was about to happen to them. None comprehended what had occurred either, after it happened. The desire to move, from one moment to the next, within one's own footprints, is rife in all of us. The girls blinked their eyes, touched their heads with shattered fingertips. Aaliyah wished to turn the page. Isra wished to clean the doll's suddenly bloodied hair. Hadiya longed for Fuad, to reach down and lift her up to her feet.

Daniyah wanted the sweet lick of cherry once more on her tongue. Malaika wanted merely to go back to sleep.

## Supernatural Lift

Instead, they rose, five slaughtered sisters, holding their parts together, or striving to, Daniyah pushing back the mass of extruded brain and blood as best she could, Isra tucking in stringy layers of intestine, Aaliya grateful for the supernatural lift which obviated the need for limbs, the burned Malaika still able to smooth scraps of burnt skin away from mouth and eyes, Hadiya, floated above the bed with its cover of smoke cloud, still paralyzed but able to see, rotating her head, where they were heading. Stars drifted loosely above. Smoke occluded parts of the night-time sky. Lights in buildings below flickered, went out. Other Bombs were flaring fiery mushroom clouds into the sky. Other balls of smoke rose, other streamers dissipated into the weedy blue of dusk the ashen white of burning phosphorus. Low, violet hills duned to a dim horizon from where artillery shells arced destruction. Missiles flew about them, bodied and silvered, making the air sing. Everywhere, cries could be heard, of people attacked or bereaved, of fear or terror, of unstoppable grief, first plainly, then muffled, as great heights intervened between their bodies and the earth. Date palms and olive trees, for a moment so close, diminished in size steadily until miniscule rivets of green waving timidly from below were all that was left.

Now clouds approached, and more of them, fluffed-up columns and roofs and porticos of silk-shower cloud, endless galloping battalions of styrofoam cloud, stained the colors of battle—blood-red, earth-brown, gunmetal-grey. Cool mist dampened burned skin as swiftly the ascending children pierced layers of soaring cloud, into a sudden vertical sea of calm. Night skies stretched out here, starry and clear. Now they could hear the thrum of the speeding jet, the singular roar of powerful engines already past the sound barrier and booming their shifted velocity into the violet atmosphere. Their bodies lifted naturally toward the sound and dusk-lit metal sight of it, sleek, tearing beauty of the long-nosed jet, the very one which had discharged its artillery over their building, and so easily secured their death.

## Sand Angel

As she rose, Daniyah felt as if she were floating on sea-green waves on a safe golden beach lit with evening sun. Around her shone white cone shells, narrow spirals of rose-petal augers, softer bluegray coquinas, half-buried in the sugary sand. She made wide arcs with her arms and thrust fingers into the half-damp sand and let the blue heavens pour liquid honey on her skin. She remembered the horses by the water, and the children flying kites, and the sound of laughter. She remembered how often her father would take the children to the beach near Dayr-al-Balah. She tasted sweet nut and honey confections in her mouth, crunch of roasted peanuts, long, strawed sips of fresh mint

lemonade. They had often used to picnic on the beach, in the days when it cost less to get there.

She rose from the sand angel she had made and ran forwards, into the water. The feel of it on her feet smooth and foamed, a spread of coolness, like vanilla icecream melting in the mouth. She held her sister Isra's hand, drew her to the water. Ancient Mediterranean seas rolled long toward them and back, gently in thinning waves and foaming forward in sudden gushes. Long she gazed at their side-by-side buried feet in the sand, tiny bits of shell that hid between their toes, scraps of seaweed that touched their ankles.

Slowly the sun was going down. Everything—sand, water, shells—was glistening a mother-of-pearl pink.

## Paper Houses

From the sheer glass of his bubble canopy in the speeding F-16, the thirty-eight-year-old IDF pilot, Raphael Even-Zahav gazed steadily into the future: clear navy skies to left and right, starry foam of the Milky Way above, distant surround of coastline, dune, city lights, white memories of clouds below. These long-gone clouds had come already between his past and his future, or so he believed. He was flying at thirty-six thousand feet and climbing. Behind him sat his buddy, thirty-nine-year-old Doran Ben-Ami, with whom he had grown up on the same street in Tel Aviv and with whom he had trained

once at flight school. A long time ago, they had been boys together, flying paper houses on strings. Now they were IDF men in fighter planes, several years of frenzied adulthood behind them.

Many things having happened in those years.

Raphael had married, had one child, divorced. A bitter divorce, with his wife refusing joint custody, citing abuse. In the throes of ego and passion, he had hit her once or twice. Raised his voice to her, that was only as much as he had grown up with, from his father. Never hit the child. Didn't drink that much. Combat pilots had more sense than that. But he'd come home late a couple times, drunk. After the baby, things had wrenched apart between them. She said she had no time to herself, all day at home with the baby. He had laughed. After the baby, he thought, she'd had no time for *him*. She had gone off to America, to live with her mother in New York. From seeing his baby girl everyday, he saw her once in two or three years. His wife remarried, had other kids. He had never wanted to marry again. He lived in a one-bedroom apartment and changed his girlfriends when they mentioned any possibility of future. Raphael, whose name meant Angel, did not practice being angelic.

Doran was not that much different, although he had not married young, like Raphael. He married in his early thirties and his first child, Aviva whose name meant Springtime, had been mown down at age six by a bunch of drunken men in an oversized SUV on New Year's Eve, two streets from their home, near a neighbor's house. He had a second child, she was two then. But the marriage cracked and splintered. Too much grief can paralyze, he learned. His wife became depressed. He stayed out with Raphael in bars. There were nights the two-year-old was not fed, nights he came home to nonstop crying

and frantic searching in the refrigerator for something to give the child. It was a relief when his wife's sister took the child and his wife in to live with her in Haifa.

## Children, Sitting

Raphael did not witness the steady rising because his eyes were on the upper skies. But he was the first to notice the motley crowd of figures on the nose of the fighter jet, as the girls sailed onto the smooth curved fuselage and wedged themselves in upon its metal curve. He rubbed his eyes, he had been awake until the wee hours the night before, prey to his latest curse, insomnia. The round, childish figures did not dissolve or disappear. A mirage of paper lanterns, he thought at first. Light reflected into shapes of conch shells. Desert pottery. Dolls. From this he progressed. Not mirages of dolls but dolls themselves? The figures had childish limbs. Children, he saw finally, his mouth inside the oxygen mask agape. Small children. Teenagers. And the masses attached to parts of their heads, stomachs, chests, were body parts, extruded. That was blood, in jagged streams. That was skin, burnt and mixed-in with flesh. That was bone he saw, and brain, and the insides of a person's guts. That was stiffening and rigor mortis, the waxen look of death.

That was a small group of children, sitting where no-one could sit, forty thousand feet above the earth's crust, in icy cold, thrust forward at tremendous speed, on the nose of his fighter jet. All dead.

His hands slipped on the throttle then, disbelief pocking holes in him. His entire body, clad in his heavy G-suit, tingled. But he was a combat pilot, trained to take evasive action. Doran, he called. Doran!

Doran, who had been momentarily asleep and dreaming of space travel, white-hot neutron stars, cold burn of space, jerked his head up and saw Aaliyah, reading a book, streaks of red pouring down her forehead. Behind her, stars glittered. Aviva, he whispered. Are you here?

## **A Vision for a Day**

When the Bomb had fallen, its target guided by lasers, its moment of release planned and executed with supreme precision, a small jerk had rocked the aircraft for a small period of time, smaller than a minute. Then the Bomb had plunged, the noise of its going masked by the tremendous thrust of the engine and afterburners. Visually, a large occluding mass of metal became a sleek and noiseless silver shape lit by the rays of the dying sun, a plummeting noiseless bird, a rapid speck, erasure. The jet thundered forward. All things below seeming to happen in slow motion, in a world of no sound, so distant a world, untouched and untouchable by the two motionless bodies in the Bomber jet. The roiling fireball, rounder and larger than any synagogue. The tremendous plumes of smoke. The dust and cloud of explosion. The building flattened. All sealed in a capsule of silence. Over Raphael's shoulder and below the plane's landing wheels it hung, jeweled in an upward-arcing container of space, the remote, unfurling Target.

He was a fighter pilot, he did not need to hear the sound or see the explosion. The discharge was smooth, anticipated, on plan. The sight was a bonus, and always surreal, as if it were happening in another dimension. It was a vision for a day, and then to be forgotten. In his career, his cachet of wars, sorties, target airstrikes, he had seen many of them.

But this—what was this?

Do you see it, he asked Doran.

Yes, said Doran, briefly.

He did not know what Doran was seeing. He wanted someone to explain the vision to him. What is it, he fumbled, what are we looking at?

Doran was silent for a long minute.

Beats me, he said, finally.

## **A Layer of Happiness**

Meanwhile, the girls dreamt.

Isra, gathered up in a cloud of pink frosting, was dreaming of birthday cake: fresh pineapple on a bed of cream sandwiched between soft vanilla sponge cake.

Malaika was swimming in shining blue ripples in a lake. Snow geese swooped above her, and swans gracefully bent long necks as they floated.

Their parents were not far. Hadiya, dazzled by textures and colors, was shopping with her mother for her eighteenth birthday, they were hand in hand in a large department

store, they were choosing transparent, flyaway scarves. Aaliya, lost in dream, was reading a story to her father, sitting in a wicker chair, rocking on the balcony. A story with unicorns and spiny-tailed dragons and princesses growing long yellow hair.

Every dream had music or singing in it, a layer of happiness. The Wiggles were singing in Isra's dream, about Dorothy the Dinosaur. Wild birds in Malaika's.

## Positive Gs

Suffice to say they tried everything. They thrust vertically up, the positive Gs almost flinging them backward so they were forced to press their legs together, embark on the Hick maneuver, tensing legs, thighs, abdomen, to keep the blood from constricting in their lower parts, and send it back up to the head. They did a roll, an inverted roll, a sashay to the right, left, forward, back, they spiraled, did a spin, a torpedo, a cache of spins.

The girls clung stubbornly to the nose and seemed indeed to find no trouble in doing so.

None wobbled or slipped or dropped.

Each, engaged with her own particular trouble, smoothing a coil of intestine back into place, or reconstructing cerebellum and nerve ends from indiscriminate mass, seemed absorbed, and unconcerned about the plane's repeated, desperate maneuvers.

Raphael plunged a ninety-degree plunge. Nothing happened, save for the loss of his own equilibrium, a wave of nausea. Then one upward. Positive G again.

He wanted to duck. He wanted to wake up. He wanted, irrepressibly, to clamber out of the cockpit and onto the plane, crawl to the nose, and push them off, even as he felt melancholically certain he could never *push* them off. He wanted most of all, not to have to *look* upon them, for the sight of the unlined, ravaged faces, the dripping blood, the silent masks of death, was making him think of things he had never before contemplated nor indeed been asked to. Was this truly the Bomb's doing? Had these kids come from that ball of flame and coal-colored smoke he had created? He felt tormented, and shook his head, even as he oscillated the plane, climbed steep, banked, turned, plunged, all in an effort to shake them off. He wanted not to think about it. He would *not* think about it.

Doran, behind him, shouted instructions. He too, wanted the sky clean once more, the nose cleaned off, the children gone. They needed to land, he thought, they needed to get at that nose with a hefty broom.

## Baby-Hands

Behind Daniya's head, her hair now sticky with blood, her brain tissue recalcitrant in its determined slide downward onto her neck, a trillion stars shone. Distant nebulae cast a faint halo around the tangle of sticky blood, brain, and hair that now jointly adorned her neck. Her body distorted into an unimaginable curve. The burned, mutilated Aaliya painful to look upon. Burnt, her face unrecognizable as human. Eyeholes peering out from a jelly of flesh and skin. One step from the cockpit, legs drawn up, as if in the middle of some gymnastic curl, her feet and ankles nonexistent, the bloodied stumps with

raw glimpses of bone—Raphael shivered, looking. The sight of Isra worse: the damaged spine, the central part of her three-year-old body burst open like a flower to reveal the intimate, unflowerlike insides of abdomen, blood pooling in abandon, smooth pool of blood on the steel dark enough to reflect starlight back upward into the black canopy of space. Hadiya could not move. Raphael observed the two halves of her existence—the upper bloodied and broken, the lower bound as we are bound to earth, flopping like a wounded seal on her side, stuck like a harpooned fish. And the burned Malaika, whose sheet, half-welded to her skin, rose like a wing around her, studded with reddest flesh, reddest blood, gray matter of nerves and cells, stringy white muscle, coated with ash and concrete debris.

It was the look of the trusting, questioning child in all their faces, underneath the blood and burning, the soft peach-bloom of child-skin, the tender, growing ungainliness of child-limbs, that proved, in the end, his undoing. Swept on a tide of unprecedented need, Raphael experienced a passionate yearning to see his own eleven-year-old daughter in New York again, touch her soft child-face with his hands, reassure himself she was still alive.

He fumbled with the joystick but hardly knew what he was doing.

The sky pulsed in front like a neutron star. The breath scraping him raw in the throat.

Raphael spoke urgently to Air Control.

He needed to land, he said, Abort Mission. There were other Bombs to be dropped, other Targets to be found. He could not drop them, could not find them. Because he appeared to have some trouble getting his message across to his commanders,

he found himself screaming. *He could not fly this plane*, he screamed, which, across the distant airwaves, arriving in a darkened Control Tower, proved at least materially comprehensible. Less so his second announcement, delivered in tones of high-pitched panic: He could not get rid of the *dead children!*

Behind him, Doran was seeing once more the crushed face of Aviva, his six-year-old Spring. The pain he had withheld for years, the stowed-away, stepped-on pain, rushed to his head like sudden blood. Aviva, he cried, my Aviva, why did you have to leave us! Memories of her baby-face, her toddler-face, her little-girl face, her pouty, three-year-old “big-girl” face swept through him.

When she was two, she had used to jump and stamp her feet when met with the word “No.” When she was three, she was still sticking out her lower lip when she cried. When she was four, she was singing Honey Honey and Mamma Mia from the Abba movie remake.

She had wanted to be a ballet dancer, a child actress like Shirley Temple, a fighter pilot like Daddy. She had wanted to be a baker of frosted cupcakes, a fashion designer, a model like Mommy. She had wanted to sing like Taylor Swift and act like Marilyn Monroe. She danced without thought at folk music festivals and open-air concerts. She held wildflowers up to her face as if they were the greatest creations on earth. She had wanted to fly to the moon.

And her baby-laugh! He heard once more the crazy, tinkling tones of her baby-laughter the first time he leapt, lion-like, into the room when he had pretended to mimic the animals in Lion King. Her baby-hands, curled comfortably in his. My baby, he wept, oh my baby, where are you now?

Each child on the plane's placid, speeding nose rose damply into view.

Doran Ben-Ami remembered his angel, and wept.

## Cast Lead

Now dropping rapidly, the children did not move.

When the plane halted, an emergency landing on an emergency runway in a remote airport, lights flashing, fire engines thrumming, ambulances at hand, the entire cabinet of the government waiting on the runway, including the prime minister, the media held back by police, news of the situation on the fighter jet having spread already to news rooms, web sites, iPhones, iPads, iPods, Droids, Raphael Even-Zahav and Doran Ben-Ami, dazed, faces wet with tears, able to speak only in jumbled fragments, were led away toward psychologists.

Aircraft maintenance technicians, firemen, police, cabinet members could all now see what they had flown with: on the F-16's aerodynamic nose, the twitching tableau of five dead girls, unconcerned by observers, striving to stitch themselves together with their own dead hands or memory of hands, absorbed in this.

The plane was hustled into a hangar, select elite from the IDF summoned. Everyone stood back, and the soldiers in a group, with some hesitation, approached the children. One reached out, touched a child, leapt back as if stung or burnt, screaming, *They are alive, they are alive!* This the others confirmed. Multiple hands reached to touch. The children appeared to be made of flesh, of human blood and bone.

It is not possible, said the members of the cabinet.

These are apparitions, said other members of the cabinet. Chimeras.

Others did not speak, having no explanation.

Feel for yourself, said the soldiers, who had retreated.

Confirm-kill! shouted the top shot in the crew of the elite.

The prime minister sent him a nod, the top gun stepped forward and pointed his weapon at the children. He fired, once, twice, five times, at the tender, bloodied foreheads. There was still movement. He pointed his gun at hearts: once, twice, five times. Still movement. Again he fired, at heads, hearts. Nothing happened. The group of preoccupied children remained oblivious to every new violence.

Because of what they perceived as unnatural, the people in the hangar had, imperceptibly, started to move back from the plane.

The soldier was still firing, compulsively, at the children. One member of the cabinet spoke, his voice like cast lead: Tell him to stop, he said. Tell him *it is not possible to kill a dead child*.

This plane must be condemned, said a technician, speaking his thoughts aloud.

Where are the pilots? The prime minister called for back-up. Where are the techs? We are not condemning any planes. Arm the jet, he directed. Fly the plane. Make those targets!

Those among the pilots who felt they could fly the plane along with its supernatural cargo came forward. Those among the crowd who had seen the obvious signs of violent death on the children yet could carry the sight inside their craniums and not break, as Raphael and Doran had done, returned to their work.

There is no time to waste, said the commander of the armed forces. We must return to the Bombing.

## Night Journey

From another life, that evening, on television, Raphael witnessed the removal of five burned and mutilated bodies from the wreckage of a building. They were the bodies of children, and he did not have to see their faces to recognize them. One father, one mother, and one baby wept and threw themselves on the ground. My children, cried the father. My girls, wept the mother. The father explained what the names of each girl meant, in Arabic. My Daniyah is Close or Near. My Aaliya is Exalted. My Isra is Night Journey. My Hadiya is Gift. My Malaika is Angel.

The bodies were wrapped, over and over in white cloth.

At that moment, Doran spoke to his wife on the telephone, asked for his second child, Meira, whose name, in Hebrew, meant Illuminates.

A father belongs with his child, he said.

Above the city, the F-16 rose, gaining height. The five dead children held on in starlight, blood streamed down their bodies. The new soldiers manning the jet looked through and past them. Then the jet dropped its fresh cargo on the besieged city, another Bomb exploded.