

THE BOMBING

August 7, 1998: Nairobi, Midmorning

The building swayed; a teacup began rattling; shards of glass and ceiling tile sprayed the area. One thought swirled dreamily around my brain as every muscle in my body clenched in revolt. “I am going to die.” I was on the top floor of a high-rise office building that I knew was going to collapse.

Moments earlier, it had been just another Friday morning. Another day, another meeting. I was, after all, the U.S. ambassador to Kenya, and ambassadors meet a lot. This one concerned the upcoming U.S. trade delegation that Secretary of Commerce William Daley would be leading. An advance team was already in town helping with the preparations. Two Commerce Department colleagues had joined me for the meeting taking place on the twenty-first floor of the Cooperative Bank Building in downtown Nairobi next to the embassy chancery, which housed many of the U.S. government staff in Kenya. Like most meetings with ministers, it had begun with a press briefing and photo op, followed by a cup of tea to settle in. The tea had been served.

An explosion from the street below drew us to the window. I was the last to get up, and I had moved only a few feet from the couch I was sharing with Commerce Minister Joseph Kamotho when a loud wave of freight-train force hurled me back across the room. Everything dimmed. Shadowy figures silently moved past me. Then nothing. I woke to find myself alone. Where had everyone gone? The man lying face down on the other side of

the room was surely dead, I thought, and in a second we would both be plunging down multiple stories of concrete. I would not be the first U.S. ambassador to die in the line of duty with her boots on, or in my case, Ferragamo shoes—but, oh my God . . .

The shaking stopped. The teacup went silent. The man across the room raised his head just as my Commerce Department colleague rushed into view. “Ambassador, hurry, quick, we need to get out of here.”

We made our way through the smoky debris and deathly calm into the hallway, checking for other survivors as we went. The man on the other side of the room had disappeared. A woman rushed past us and vanished. The atmosphere was hazy, or maybe it was me. I felt like Alice at the bottom of the rabbit hole. Out of nowhere, the elevator operator who had escorted us into the minister’s office appeared.

“Sorry, so sorry,” he muttered, wringing his hands as if he himself had caused the explosion. He showed us to a stairwell, its access barred by the heavy exit door blown off its hinges. I hiked up the skirt of my dress-for-success business suit and climbed up and over, careful not to lose my footing on the slippery steel. My colleague, my purse slung across his chest, stepped over a pool of blood to join me. The minister and others who had attended the meeting were nowhere in sight; they must have already left.

We met only a few people coming out of the top floors, dazed and silent. As we descended, we joined a parade of slowly moving, shocked and bloodied Kenyans, crushed together and morphing into a multiheaded reptile calmly slithering down steps and over doors. “Keep your feet on the ground,” I told myself. “Focus! Hand on railing, feet on the stairs.” I was desperate to keep at least that much control. Now and then someone would cry, “Karibu,” the Swahili word for “Welcome,” to the people who joined us. A woman’s body materialized from above us, and we ever so gently passed her to the people below us. Dead? Unconscious? I had no idea. Another woman sang a Christian hymn. We continued down. Someone began to pray. Blood dripped steadily onto my hair and my arm. Was that my blood? Was it getting into the open cut on my arm? Survival instincts banished

idle thoughts: “Keep a grip on the railing and your feet on the floor!” Down we went.

Idle thoughts returned. Then we stopped. “This must be some horrible event. Wasn’t a teachers’ strike going on? Bank strike? We’re in a bank building, yes? Just have to get out of here, and all will be well.” I focused on that: “All will be well. Keep your feet on the floor!”

“Fire, fire! Hurry, hurry, hurry!” a man yelled in panic. We were at a dead standstill, smoke washing over us. No one moved.

“I’m going to die.” This time I knew it. “At least I will be asphyxiated, not burned to death.” The thought consoled me until impulse intervened again. “Think straight.” We had been descending stairs for so long. Surely, we were close to the bottom! Get out of the building, and we will be fine. Our medical unit was in the basement of the chancery, separated from this death trap by only a small parking lot. Once in the embassy, we would be fine. All will be well. Stay focused.

The slow-motion descent resumed, and we soon saw light and felt air. We had made it. A frightened-looking Kenyan soldier hurried us down the few remaining stairs and out of the building.

I stumbled out, astounded to see thousands of people restrained by men in uniforms across the street staring at the bloody parade of people emerging with us. My colleague looked around and hissed, “Quick, Ambassador, put your head down; there’s press.” Who knows what made him think that? “I think I saw it in a movie,” he said months later. The journalists in attendance at the minister’s pre-meeting press conference had reached the street just minutes before the explosion. Many had stayed to record the carnage. I bowed my head, stemming the blood from a gash in my lower lip, and took a few steps forward. I saw the sidewalk littered with glass shards, twisted metal, and puddles of blood. Another step and I came upon the charred remains of what had once been a human being. I felt my head jerk up.

The parking lot we had walked through earlier that morning had disappeared, replaced by hell. Flames rose from burning vehicles as smoke billowed into the building from which we had just exited. Nearby, a large mound of concrete guided my sight into

the remains of the rear of our chancery—much of the back wall had dissolved into shattered rock. A few yards away, our neighboring seven-story office building had turned into an even larger hill of smashed concrete precariously supporting hundreds of people digging frantically through the piles of stone debris with bare hands to find anyone buried under the rubble.

In the middle of the usually busy street next to us, a city bus smoldered, most of its incinerated passengers still in their seats. It had stopped for the red light on the corner. The schoolboys in another bus had been taken to a hospital to have shattered glass dug out from their eyes, faces, and upper torsos. Ahead of us, outside the fence of the chancery, an angry-looking American civilian I did not know stood duty, his suit covered by a flak jacket and a weapon in his hand.

Then came shouts. “There she is! Quick, get her out of here. Get her out of here!” Someone grabbed my free arm, rushed us past the front of the chancery, and pushed us into the back of a garishly painted safari jeep I recognized as belonging to an embassy colleague. Another Commerce colleague was in the backseat trying to staunch the blood pouring down his face. The embassy’s senior Kenyan security officer jumped into the front seat. Someone banged loudly on the back, yelling, “Go! Go! Go!”

We shot forward, almost running over a woman who had stepped out from the mass of humanity on either side of us. I was jolted out of my dream state.

“Stop!” I ordered the driver. “We are going to take this slowly.” Okay. Now where were we going? I did not want a hospital overflowing with emergencies when my colleagues needed attention now. A hotel? Why not? The luxury spots that catered to tourists might just have a resident or visiting doctor. I must have been thinking out loud because my companions agreed to the idea, and one volunteered: “I’m staying at the Serena Hotel. We can go there.”

I do not remember the drive. I do remember my colleague once again reminding me to cover my face as we entered the hotel. I took one look at him and thought, forget it. I wanted to see what was ahead. So, bloodied but unbowed, we three Ameri-

cans scurried through the luxurious lobby past astonished tourists, photo-equipped for a safari. Once in the hotel room, we miraculously located both a doctor and a nurse, who took one look at the wounds of my colleagues and raced off to find an ambulance. As for me, I was scratched, cut, and filthy, but most of the blood on me belonged to other people.

I cleaned up as best I could and started pacing. From the clunky, embassy-issued handheld radio on the bedside table came staccato conversations interrupting terse commands from the chancery grounds. It did not occur to me to interrupt. I was too focused on trying to piece together what in the world was happening. Clearly we were experiencing a catastrophe, but beyond that I had a whole lot to find out. Then I heard a familiar voice: Duncan Musyoka, my driver and the operator of the State Department-issued, fully armored, right-hand-drive burgundy Cadillac with red-orange diplomatic license plates. A former military driver, Duncan had quick instincts and common sense, and he was still alive. I broke into the radio chatter to tell him where to pick me up. The people listening to the embassy radio net learned that their ambassador was still alive. It was hardly a dramatic intervention, but I was working on my to-do list.

The pre-cellular Nairobi phone system—erratic in normal times—was for the moment working, so I could phone my husband, Richard Buckley, to ask that he contact Mom and Dad and stay away from the downtown area. Army veteran, civil rights lawyer, husband of many years, and currently Top Spouse, Richard knew about coping with crises. That done, I was free to pace, waiting for the doctor to reappear and clear me for duty. The wait gave me the chance to continue the mental checklist of things to be done.

I had been in Nairobi two years, serving my first ambassadorship after three years in the State Department's Africa Bureau (AF), where I had earned my disaster stripes. I had managed the transnational policies portfolio for forty-six sub-Saharan countries. Transnational issues included democracy, development and conflict resolution, prevention, reality, and aftermath. I was a go-to person for kidnappings, political anarchy, embassy evacuations,

and, in 1994, the genocide in Rwanda. What I had learned from American missionaries escaping a Hutu militia helped in the rescue of an American Peace Corps volunteer in Central African Republic. The Africa Bureau team had taken care of a head of state overturned in a coup d'état who sought asylum on a U.S. Navy ship. Communicating via a radio station, we had negotiated the release of a diabetic American. Not one American citizen had died on my watch, and I was proud.

This was different.

Time slowed and expanded against a backdrop of urgency as my to-do list got longer. The doctor returned to declare my vital signs okay and my split lip something that could wait to be stitched. Stunned but uninjured coworkers from another part of downtown met me in the lobby and drove me to the suburban office building that housed the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), now the only large chunk of office real estate the U.S. government had left. Now high on adrenalin, I bounded up the stairs to find the control center I knew someone would have cobbled together. Sure enough, Linda Howard and Sheila Wilson, Foreign Service office managers who ran my life by day, already had started organizing. Neither of us knew the other had survived until we threw ourselves into one another's arms, and I asked for a steno pad. I simply had to get the to-do list out of my brain!

I do not know into whose hands I thrust our embassy telephone book. "Get teams and find every person in this book," I ordered. Volunteer bomb-response teams formed of Kenyans and Americans from various U.S. government agencies searched hospitals, neighborhoods, and morgues until we accounted for all of our people. It would take days.

A Kenyan colleague described the chaos we were facing at ground zero:

Around 10:30 I was right in front of my office. After talking to this lady, then I was—I went back to my office, was trying to send an email, and then I heard the first explosion. It came like a tremor. And I don't know, I thought it was something out-

side the embassy. So, somebody asked, what was that? Then I said, I think it's a bomb.

Then people were rushing to the window. Then I thought about locking my office before I could also join them. So, I was heading towards the open area, which was on the Budget section, to see what people were going to see. And on my way, there was a computer room, which was a sealed room. On my way there, just reaching the corner, that's when the second deadly explosion came.

I didn't know where I was . . . the ceiling came on me. I was thrown down. The house was dark. It was dusty. It was smoky. Choking because the duct smoke somehow choked me, and I could not open my eyes. I cannot see nothing. Then I went down. I was thrown down. Then the bodies were burying me. Then I heard people cry and some of them were—I could hear, I could get their voices and could know, that's so-and-so's voice, but I could not open my eyes.

I could not breathe. I could not do anything. Though I prayed. I said a prayer, about three seconds, that, Lord, just take my soul. Then I remembered, I fumbled for my I.D. because I remembered my dad and my brothers loved me so much that I would want them to see my body. And so, I was looking for a form of identification where if I'm found, they would get an I.D. It didn't occur to me that an I.D. would burn if the house burns.

I started crawling after that when I could feel like I was alive. I started crawling because I was choking. I started moving towards a place I could get fresh air. Then all of a sudden, I felt a breeze come from a direction. I didn't want to open my eyes. I didn't want to breathe. I started crawling towards that place. I didn't know where it was. Then after reaching that place, I realized there was a cold breeze coming from outside. So, I started moving towards that side. It was the window that had been blown. So, as I moved, and I wanted to like keep moving, I realized that I was at the edge. Then I slept there for some time. I was shaking. When I opened my eyes, I saw the garden, a green garden. I said, where am I? As I was moving toward the window, I could feel people's—could feel bodies of the dead people.

After that, then I realized that I was looking for an I.D., I could not get it, I would like my dad to see my body, so I have to jump, to die outside. So, I looked at where I was going to jump. It was far, and I closed my eyes because I didn't know where I was going to die. I wanted my body to be found by my dad. So, I just closed my eyes and then jumped through the window. I was not conscious for some time. When I raised my head, I realized that I did not die.¹

Like other survivors who had crawled through smoke and dust, debris and bodies, George Mimba joined those who organized themselves into rescue teams to go back into the building to help others. We had no 911, no fire and rescue, no emergency and police assistance. We were on our own.

August 7, 1998, Nairobi, Afternoon

The area around the chancery was chaos. At what was a seven-story office building next door, Ufundi House, hundreds of people were clawing through the rubble with bare hands to locate survivors. As an American colleague later reported:

Meanwhile, a crowd of perhaps 10,000 had quickly formed in front of the embassy. Most, shocked, were just gazing; many others wanted to help, while scores of looters started to swarm into the building through its gaping holes. With the surviving embassy marines—one was dead, another wounded—and a few Army servicemen who were on temporary duty at the embassy, we set up a security perimeter around the building. Part of the crowd, however, suddenly surged forward. They had spotted an embassy guard who had made it from the back of the building to the front and was trapped behind the security fence that fronted the building. His clothes in shreds, his face and body a welter of bloody gashes, he gripped the bars of the fence gate, wailing pathetically.

The surging crowd threatened to sweep our cordon away; had that happened, we would have been engulfed in a sea of humanity, and any attempt at an organized rescue would have been futile. A couple of us stepped toward the lead group of