

Sample Chapter

An American Mother in Beslan

Driving past Beslan School No.1 was an eerie experience. I noticed the broken windows with pieces of delicate lace curtains blowing in the fall breeze. All around the area are broken red bricks lying in static patterns surrounding the roof's gaping buttresses exposed to the open sky. It's quiet, and difficult to imagine today the explosions and blistering fire that happened less than fifty days ago in this quiet place. Black cows graze unfazed near the railroad tracks that follow the walls along the outside of the school. If I stop and am still, I can hear silent screams in the air.

As I begin my first walk into the school, I know that I will be affected even though I'm a very strong person. I have handled horrible situations in the past. I worked in warehouses for the mentally insane children of Romania after the revolution in the 1990s. I tried to help the hundreds of street children who were living in the sewer systems of Bucharest. I worked to find a way to save their brains from dying on Auralac, a highly addictive furniture glue that the children inhale to numb the pangs of hunger. I've picked maggots out of infected sores and helped children with disfiguring burns they received from their home's leaky gas stove that exploded from a careless cigarette placed a little too close to the stove. I believed that I could easily handle a bombed-out school building.

Walking closer to the room that once was the gymnasium of Beslan School No. 1, the first thing I noticed was the array of different colors: reds, whites, and yellows, with hundreds of shades in all. The flowers stand against the broken, burned walls and in the windows. Groups of limp and dried flowers, wrapped in cellophane, which resemble tired dancers in wrinkled ball gowns, lie everywhere. The smell of fire is pungent and permeates every molecule in every inch of air that I breathe. It is from the burned walls, the wood gymnasium floors, and the hundreds of candles that have been lit to honor the dead.

The tall concrete walls are a hodgepodge of gray, green, and black blisters, their surfaces full of thousands of holes, from coin size to blasts as big as my fist. The plaster is falling off in chunks, leaving light-green paint in a dance with whitewash over cement. In each smooth spot, people have written messages of sadness, pain, and anger mixed with warnings of revenge and unbelievable forgiveness.

The first poster I notice is against the longest wall in front of me, in what used to be the gymnasium. It has obviously been hand-drawn and lovingly painted. On it is a young boy sitting on the ground, holding a rifle that has been sawed in half. The saw lies next to the butt of the gun on the ground, and the barrel of the gun is in the boy's mouth. It appears that the boy is blowing big, colorful bubbles through it. It is at this moment that I lose my breath. This poster is the anti-terror image that I want to remember. It reminds me of the daisy put in the soldier's gun during the Vietnam era, only this time it is an innocent bubble from a child, like the children who died here.

Walking to the other end of the gym, it seems like my athletic shoes are walking over unevenly-packed snow. It's not. It is what is left of the wood basketball floor that is charred with black dirt, melted wax, and dead flowers ground in to it. Above me, I can't help but stare at the mangled basketball hoops at both ends of the gym. Before I arrived, I wanted to make sure that I noticed them. Now that I am standing only feet away, I almost want to avoid looking, although I can't. I have to look, to burn the image of these round

metal hoops that held the bombs the terrorists taped on them the very first day, then exploded, causing mass murder.

The small doorways under each basketball hoop held a terrorist who played God by deciding who would live from moment to moment. I remember the video tape that the terrorists made during the siege that was televised over and over again around the world—a masked terrorist in all black, leaning inside this doorway holding a gun, watching out over hundreds of women and children sitting on the floor. Many had their hands behind their heads, dazed, scared, and quiet. The detonator wires wove underneath little children trying to be "as quiet as a mouse."

Ten-year-old Georgy Farniyev was the young boy in that video. He sat only inches from the pedal that controlled the bomb. He held his hands behind his head underneath the basketball hoop, with terror in his eyes. He survived the explosion and crawled through a hole in the wall at the opposite end of the room, into a Russian soldier's arms. I could feel the fear lurking within these walls.

In the middle of the gym lay a pile of flowers—dried ones and dead ones in groups of ten and three, and a single one. There were flowers simply tossed on the ground and ones that were gently placed in plastic bottles of water. Pepsi bottles, open juice cartons, cookies, and religious icons of Jesus and Mary share the memorial with personal photos, pieces of clothing, and hundreds of open containers of water.

Black-and-white photos of men sitting stoically for their portraits look like daguerreotypes next to recently-taken, glossy color photographs of children playing and laughing. They are carefully placed on top of the pile next to pages of books with poems and favorite readings that open up to the sky of the roofless gym.

I haven't been alone, even though I didn't notice anyone else in the gym until now. Several men in brown and faded green police uniforms are standing near the mound of flowers in a semicircle, heads bowed, their arms draped down their sides. They pour each other small glasses of water from a large single bottle, then slowly take sips until each drop of the wet liquid in their glasses is gone. It is a heartfelt and moving gesture done in the memory of the captive children and adults who were denied water in the sweltering heat for two days.

There are bottles of liquid everywhere to satisfy the thirst of those who never drank again. The men in the police uniforms quietly wipe away their tears, which are freely dripping down their faces, and then they turn to leave. They each leave behind their empty glasses and the empty water bottle near a group of flowers on the charred floor, as they walk out in single-file, gently touching each other on the shoulder.

A young woman in her thirties, wearing a black headscarf and a plain black skirt, is accompanied by a man who appears to be her husband. They are common people devoured in despair. Their faces are worn and drained of life itself. He softly holds her arm and helps her to lower herself, to kneel at the edge of the memorial piled high with flowers, food, and water; then he kneels by her side.

They light a tall, pencil-thin orange candle, just like the hundreds that have burned here since the attack came to a bloody halt. These candles are lit and placed in the entrances of the Orthodox churches to celebrate holidays, happy events, tragedies, birth, and death, and as a flaming prayer. This couple has done this many times. On their knees, they let the burning candle drip into a bottle cap and then secure the thin-lit candle into the melted wax in the cap for stability. They carefully place each candle they light among the flowers in front of their bended knees. She crosses herself in the Orthodox way, hangs her head, and softly cries. He covers his face with a cloth handkerchief, steadying himself with one hand on her shoulder. I can see his back shake as he sobs. The candles crackle

and the flames flit as time continues. I feel the crushing sense of loss, and feel the need to walk away leaving them alone in their sorrow and grief.

As I stumble through the doorway into a hallway, the rubble is difficult to step over. There are chunks of plaster, charred wood, broken red bricks, and burned shoes that block the entryway. It's dark in the narrow hall. Like a lot of school decor, the halls are painted a creamy white from the bottom to the halfway point, and a soothing light-green the rest of the way to the ceiling.

The walls are splattered with mud and shrapnel holes. Pushed off to the side, running the length of the hall, is a gymnastic balance beam with two unmatched female dress shoes that have been placed along the narrow top. It's almost as if a practicing Russian gymnast suddenly evaporated, leaving her shoes behind, dust covering them in her absence. I can't bring myself to touch anything, I am so in awe at her imagined beauty and grace.

Beyond the end of the balance beam, at the end of the dark hallway, is a beautifully-tiled washroom and toilet area. The tiles gleam a shiny white and pale pink, with a natural marble swirl through each one. The tiles look new and recently-set during the repair work done during the summer. The large window glass is shattered and lying around the ground outside. In the middle of the floor, a large square hole has been strategically cut, with a very heavy metal lid, like a puzzle piece, leaning against the wall. The first reports were that the terrorists used the storage space beneath the floor to hide weapons, wire, and bombs before the invasion. Now the hole is filled with trash and crushed, empty water bottles.

The long, wide hall in the main classroom building that held hundreds of children every day seems to barely hold up the remnants of the building. The long walls are riddled with bullet holes and huge gaping pieces that have fallen on the floor. The only sound I can hear is the crunch of my own footsteps on broken glass and plaster. Dust still hangs in the air, visible in the sunlight that is filtering through the broken windows. A child's schoolbook sits on a windowsill, which is pierced by a jagged shard of glass like a knife through its heart. It is a math book from the fifth grade.

In this quiet moment, my mind is throbbing with the sounds and visions of children screaming, reaching to grab onto their friends, mother, or teachers to help guide them out from the whizzing bullets and falling plaster. Behind my closed eyelids, I see absolute chaos. Their bodies are falling; people are trying to hide in classrooms, their bodies jerking with each loud explosion. When I open my eyes again, all is still and serene; yet I can smell burning flesh.

At the end of the hallway and up a short staircase, I walk down to another washroom. This one is larger, with multiple sinks lined along the wall and a few toilets in a smaller room through a doorway. The room is beautifully tiled, as was the first washroom, but the fixtures are in pieces and have been nearly destroyed. The broken tile on the floor cracks and breaks under my weight as I walk into the room. Exposed pipes jut into empty space, and suddenly I feel as though I am entering a sacred place instead of walking onto a crime scene. Backing out of the room, I must not disturb what is.

Across a wide hall in front of the washroom is the cafeteria door, flanked by rows of windows on each side. Inside the dining area, the room is a disarray of broken metal, remnants of the kitchen counters crammed helter-skelter toward the back of the room against the outside windows, and thousands of bullet holes.

In the center of the room are still-shining chrome poles, mangled and twisted together. I can't determine whether the sculpture of metal were once chairs or a table. It doesn't seem to really matter now. Perched methodically on the top, three items of clothing have been draped.

The first identifiable item is a woman's bra, padded with foam, most likely a teen size, hanging over the edge. It is a dirty rose-colored pattern with lace that hangs stiffly. Next to it is a child's long-sleeved, button-down shirt covered in brownish-gray dirt. It looks starched in places and terribly wrinkled in others. Another small shirt is draped near it, also filthy and rigid. I'm sure its life before was carefully washed and lovingly ironed for the first day of school. Someone has picked this room to make a shrine to whoever wore these pieces of clothing that morning and the days that followed.

Since I am the only one in the room and the display is meant to be observed, I step in closer, being careful not to infringe on the boundary that I feel is too close. I can see that one of the shirts has sparkling jeweled buttons and delicate tailored lines created for a fashion-conscious teen.

Now that I am so close, it is obvious to me that the rose-colored dirt is her blood. I can't breathe, and my own blood races to my fingers until they burn. I feel weak and want to drop to my knees in grief. The shirts could fit my own children.

Recoiling in anger, I turn and walk towards the only thing in the room that does not seem violated or blown apart: a Russian lace curtain, still hanging perfectly in the window next to the door. Just as I catch my breath and feel my heart again, the dried blood splatters and drips down the wall jump out at me, as if to scream its history of terror and pain. I see it all now. Blood is everywhere, on the walls and curtains and in dried pools staining the floor. The death of children fills the room, and the air screams in terror with the cries for their mothers, fathers, and their God.

In one of the many classrooms that once held rows of desks and chairs, it is empty of everything that would show its purpose except torn books and papers. There are still paintings on the wall of Russian literary figures, who seem to stare blankly into the emptiness of the room. Near the doorway, I stumbled upon a tall, light-green door, splattered with blood like a Jackson Pollock painting, lying on the ground. I suppose it may have been used as a stretcher. Now it carries a single wilted red carnation, a green bottle of water, and some dying yellow daisies.

In a window sill, someone has collected brass bullet casings and placed them in a straight line, standing upright like little soldiers. I am overwhelmed, tears welling up, tightening my throat and choking my air. I feel faint. My heart is pounding in my brain. I'm alive, a witness to the aftermath. I'm here to tell the story that is too painful to tell. I am an American mother on sacred ground of shattered innocence. We will never be the same again.