When The Bomb Went Off . . .

By Moira Johnston

■ To live in San Francisco today is to live with violence at center stage, standing out in stark relief against The City's pastel beauty and uniquely good life.

This irony of opposites was operating on Thursday, when a gentle autumn night was transformed into a nightmare by the bombing of the Iranian consulate on our corner. At 11:44 p.m. October 14.

I sat in bed writing a report for the Friends of the Library — hardly a revolutionary activity — enjoying the near-midnight hush of our sedate and leafy street. One child was asleep; the second, due in three weeks, punched quietly, toughening himself for birth. My husband had just left to pick up our live-in student from school. She'd been unable to borrow the car she usually drove home on Thursday nights. Preoccupied with the report, I half-heard the Porsche revving up across the street. I plumped up pillows.

And then the world exploded in a brilliance and fury of sound, flashes of light, flying glass, plaster and concussive waves that overwhelmed the senses. Window blinds streaked across the room like supersonic sails filled with shattered glass, crashing on the bed and floor. There were successive white flashes, the smell of smoke, and then the shifting glow of fire outside the window.

I saw a piece of glass a foot in diameter sparkling beside my pillow, and suddenly felt more alert and alive than ever before. I froze for an instant but thoughts raced. It had to be the consulate — they had had riots and demonstrations before by students opposing the Shah. And that very night the Shah was celebrating Persia's 2500th birthday with a lavish party at Persepolis. The Porsche. It was parked in the street by the consulate's back door. Did he get out of the block in time? Nothing that close could have survived the blast. I was terrified to look out of the window, knowing what I might see. Woolsey, our boy. Had he been hit by glass? I ran through glass to his room, and found him murmuring, felt him moving. He was in plaster rubble, but I couldn't feel glass or blood in the darkness. I carried him to a hallway corner and barricaded him with quilts and pillows against more explosions.

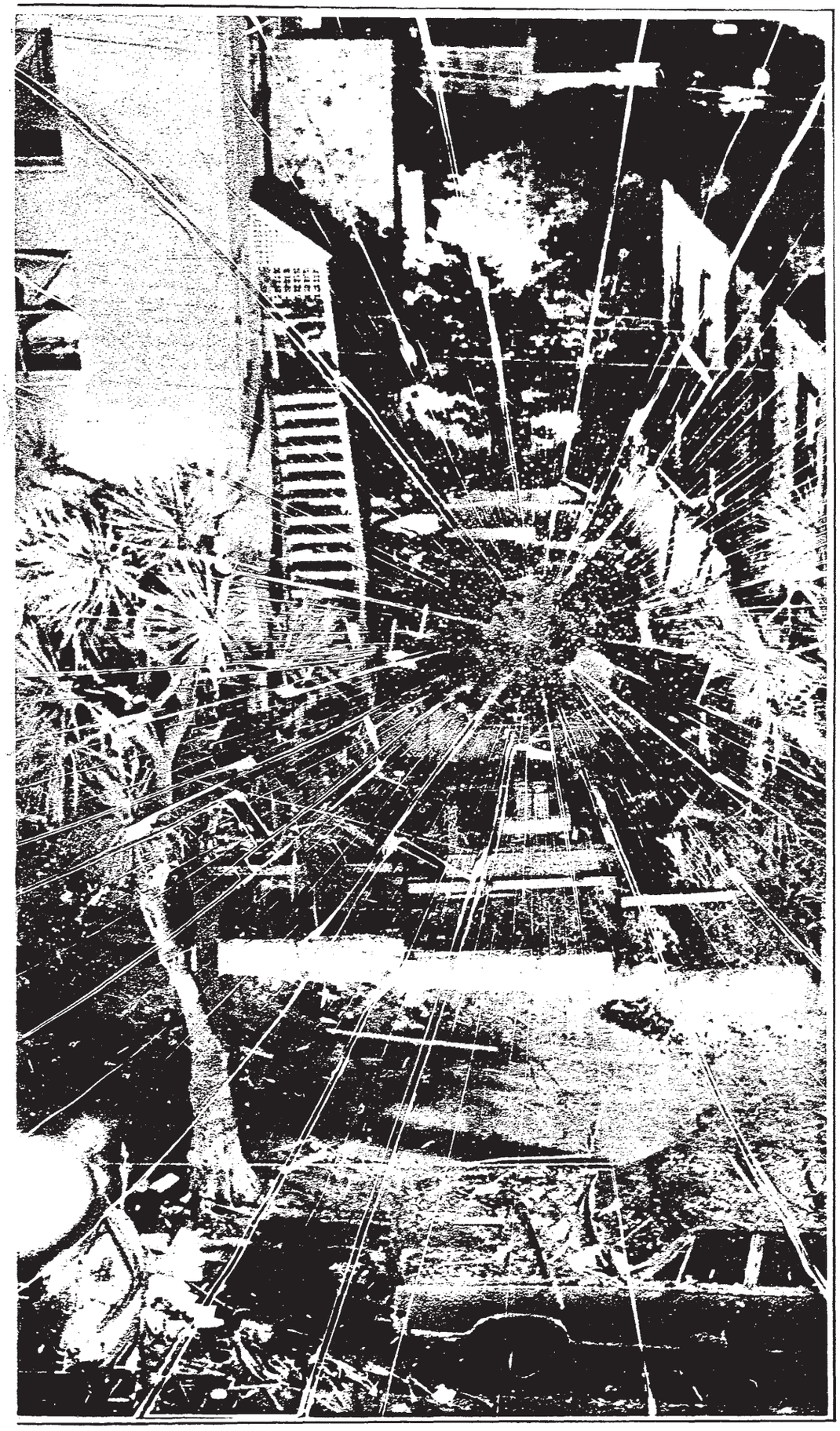
I had to get to the window. There were boots in a nearby cupboard and as I yanked them on, Woolsey whimpered at me not to leave him. His frightened eyes peeked out from his pile of pillows, and as I leaned to reassure him, I heard Don screaming my name as he plunged up the stairs. He had escaped the blast by, perhaps, a minute. And he hadn't even heard it through the noise and motion of the car. When he got back ten minutes later, he saw what he thought was fog, then fire engines, then flames and the shattered consulate. He abandoned the car at the top of the block and ran, with horror growing as he passed smashed cars, ducked falling glass and found our own front door blown right out of its frame. He had last seen me sitting up in bed, facing a wall of windows he knew had taken the brunt of the explosion. Neither of us had thought the other could have survived. But we were all safe. And there had been no more explosions. So far, my labor had not been precipitated.

We began to come down from the heightened consciousness of extreme danger, and to relate to the larger scene. Our home was a devastation of plaster, crashed lamps, mirrors and books. Glass shards had been thrown over everything like a jewelled net. Walls that had stood the 1906 earthquake were laced with gaping cracks and whole walls had shifted an inch away from the edge of the floor. As pictures had torn from the walls, they had brought the plaster with them, exposing 80 year old lath. Leaded windows were twisted grotesquely. Every window at the front of the building and half in the back had blown out. Every ceramic water closet lid had leaped off, and my husband's shaving kit was in a toilet bowl.

Outside, the consulate appeared to be a flaming shell. Could the Adles, the consul-general's family, have survived? The little shingled house right beside them was askew. Where were the Hartleys and their babies?

Technology's accompaniments to disaster had moved efficiently into the block, coloring the night with sirens, gleaming red and chrome equipment moving under pulsing red lights, fat black boa-like hoses and the crash of high-powered water hitting walls, red jumpsuited explosives teams dashing round like devils in the flames of Hell and staticy bursts of speech from radios.

Adrenalin and good will were beginning to flow contagiously, as they do in a crisis. We remembered the feeling from snowstorms and subway strikes in New York. Every broom on the block was quickly put into action, clearing away the worst of the glass. Stories of narrow escapes and rumors about the bombing and the Adles' safety swept through the clustered groups on the sidewalks. Reporters asked questions and made notes. Casual neighbors hugged each other and toured each other's damage. Bottles were found for babies. And the FBI began to sift rubble through screened boxes, and to interview everybody. Brandy and scotch were shared. Red Cross men with shiny



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riot helmets and big flashlights arrived, confirming that we were, indeed, a genuine disaster. We began to feel exhiliration at being part of a major human drama.

The next morning, a cold wind through glassless windows was sobering. And I began to think about how my contact with violence had grown since coming down from Canada fifteen years ago, when my experience had been limited to an indecent exposure, a friend's purse being snatched and seeing a drunk beat up his wife. I had still been capable of deep shock when a president was assassinated.

But as a judge is yanked from his courtroom and shot just outside the library we use regularly; as prisoners and guards kill each other in San Quentin across the Bay; as young Weathermen blow themselves and their basement bomb factory up two blocks from the Greenwich Village brownstone we had restored a few years ago; as the Zodiac killer dumps a victim near our local tennis courts; as an Iranian immolates himself on our corner, I feel my own threshhold of violence rising to the point where I am no longer truly shocked when the building across the street is blown up. And this fact – my own growing acceptance of violence, rather than the nightmare of narrow escape – is, to me, the real terror of the explosion.

As an adult, I can try to get perspective by studying history, behavioral studies and projections for the future; I can explore the historical role of violence in social revolution, and try to see this as a positive period of growth and change – a gnashing of gears as we shift into a new set of social values. At times, I can even feel lifted to wisdom by books like Thompson's *At The Edge of History*. And I know that the Persian empire, one of the greatest, most enduring and most artistic in history accommodated kings who lopped off hands of enemies as casually as a cane lops off a flower. It all helps balance what is happening.

But how many pack trips into Yosemite and weekends on the farm . . . how many hours of quiet explanation will it take to offset the insensibility to violence that must be growing in a four year old boy who is searched for weapons by a uniformed policewoman as he returns his Christopher Robin books to the Marin County Library: who, by having ears and eyes, has daily exposure to riot, assassination, prison massacres, bombings and mass murders in Sierra campsites; and who sat, last Thursday night, in the rubble and glass of a massive explosion sophisticatedly planned to wipe out his Persian neighbors? □