

Thursday, July 7th:

Jesus Fucking Christ.

The day begins standing at a bus stop waiting impatiently for a number 73 bus. Bloody bendy buses and bloody Ken Livingstone for getting rid of the Routemasters. (I did e-mail him and warn him that if he got rid of them I'd never vote for him again, but did he listen to me? Did he hell. He didn't even reply to the e-mail. Bastard.)

As I stand there I'm struck, certainly not for the first time, by the transformation of Church Street in the past fifteen years. It's hard to believe, looking at all the trendy restaurants and shops and boutiques, how different it was when we bought the house. I love the area now that I've got over the culture shock of being back in London full-time. That said, I do rather miss the days when the shops which weren't boarded up offered goods and services one actually wanted.

The bendy bus eventually arrives and, as usual, there are no bloody seats. I brace myself, get my book out and read until we get to Angel where I change to the tube to get me the rest of the way to the charity's office near London Bridge. Get to the platform, which is fuller than usual, and sigh when I hear the announcement: Sorry for the delays, power surge down the line. Thank God I don't have to do this every day. It would drive me mad. And what the hell is a power surge?

Then the announcement: Everyone leave. We're closing the station. There is an audible collective sigh which says: What now? Why oh why is this line such crap? One of the regulars at the Beggar, who does this journey every day, tells me that at least three times a week he walks into his office late, saying the same thing by way of explanation, "Fucking Northern line."

So, I'm back outside, heading for the bus stop. I fumble in my bag, dig out my mobile and ring Chris to apologise, telling him I'll be late. He tells me something's happened at Liverpool Street station and the tubes are screwed everywhere. I tell him I'll get there as soon as I can. No sign of a 43 to London Bridge, so I get a bus that's going past St Paul's and walk across the Millennium bridge.

All the pasty-faced office workers crossing the bridge have mobile phones glued to their ears. Two guys are walking beside me. One says to the other, "Oh, yeah, we'll have the public transport sorted by 2012 for the Olympics." Both laugh. My mobile phone rings. I fumble in my bag again, find it, manage to

answer it in time, which I usually don't.

"Jesus Christ, Jessica, are you okay?" Howard sounding frantic. Why would he be frantic?

"Fine," I say. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Haven't you heard?" And so he tells me. Bombs have gone off at Aldgate, Liverpool Street, Edgware Road, Russell Square and King's Cross tube stations. The whole city is shut down. No one's saying it yet, but it's pretty fucking obvious that London is finally having the terrorist attack we've all been expecting since our beloved leader did the four minute mile up Dubya's backside in September 2001. One of the reasons I found it hard to say no to the house thing. I'll take my chances. After all, I lived through the IRA blowing things up in London. But Sadie's my goddaughter, the daughter of a man I love, and she needs to be safe.

I stop walking. "Jesus Christ." I look around me. People are still swarming across the bridge with mobile phones glued their ears, but it isn't pasty English pallor. Their faces, I now realise, are ashen.

"What about you guys?" I ask. I still can't say "you and Cassie". Stupid, but true. "Safe in Kent?"

"Yes," he tells me. "All present and accounted for. Sadie's playing in the garden. We're just sitting here watching it on TV."

Suddenly Cassie's on the line. "Jessica?" she says. "Jesus, you must be terrified."

Oddly enough, I'm not. It isn't sinking in. But she sounds terrified and I am also touched by her concern. "I'm okay, Cass," I tell her, "nowhere near anything bad." Fuck, as if anyone knows what's going to blow up next. I look down at the metal bridge beneath my feet and quicken my pace. "Gotta go."

I just want to get to the charity's office. I know there's a TV there. I need to find out what the hell is going on. I scurry off the bridge, past the Globe and down the side streets to the charity's office.

There's no one around to ask me to sign in. Everyone is in the press office clustered around the television.

"What the hell is going on?" I ask Chris. My eyes zoom in on the screen. Emergency vehicles, roads blocked, stretchers. "I guess the press call's off," I say.

Chris looks at me, we manage a weak smile. "I guess," he says.

And then the news comes on. The top of a double decker bus has just blown off in Tavistock Square. People gasp. At first the news is confusing. There is a suggestion that it was a tourist bus,

not a regular double decker.

“Must’ve been targeting American tourists,” someone says.

“Who the hell else would be on a tourist bus this early in the morning?” someone else replies. There is a bit of a chuckle. American tourists, eh, what can you do with them? Gallows humour.

A young woman walks in, the last unaccounted-for member of staff. Her colleagues hug her. Like me, she’d been chucked out of a Northern line station. The battery on her mobile was flat and no one on the bus would lend her theirs to call the office. “Oh my God,” she says, staring in horror at the TV.

Bloody hell. I suddenly think of all the people I should check on, all the people I should let know I’m okay. I get through to Tilly. She’s fine. I get through to Mark. He’s fine. The next mobile call I try to make the phone won’t work. Everyone else is having the same problem.

“They’ve probably shut the mobile networks down in case they try to detonate any more bombs with them,” says a young Asian man. Everyone looks at him, uncomprehendingly. He shrugs. “I heard they used mobile phones to explode the bombs in Madrid.” Ah. We all nod. That makes sense. They’ve shut the mobile phone networks down to protect us. That’s good. No one asks or perhaps even wonders how anyone can remotely detonate a bomb with a mobile phone a hundred feet underground.

I ask if I can use a landline, someone offers me their desk, tells me to dial 9 first. I start dialling numbers from my mobile, but of course, they’re all for other mobiles and I can’t get through to anyone. No one carries an address book round anymore, so I have no idea what anyone’s bloody landline numbers are. My phone beeps with a text message. I look at it, surprised. It’s from Charlie: *Always knew there had to be a benefit in you living nowhere near a bloody tube station.* As I’m reading the message (smiling, I admit), there’s another beep. Charlie again: *Fucking hell theyre blowing up buses now you okay.* I text him back, tell him I’m fine.

“Texts seem to be working,” I announce. Everyone grabs their mobiles and starts texting. I do one message, send it to everyone I can find on my phone who lives in London: *I’m fine. Are you okay? Jessica.* Even people I haven’t seen for years, even people I don’t particularly like get the message. One by one the replies come back. I don’t hear from everyone I’ve sent the message, but I do hear from everyone I actually give a shit about. They’re all

fine. Some of them were near the blast from the bus, but none of them injured. Those anywhere near the stricken tube stations are shaken up. Nobody's asking why this is happening. We all know. We've all been waiting.

The police are telling everyone to stay where they are and under no circumstances try to get into London unless it's a flat out emergency. All buses in central London have stopped. We stare at the TV. And there is the image of a number 30 bus, its roof blown off. Not a tourist bus, as reported, but a bus I have on occasion actually taken. "Jesus," I say, "what the hell's it doing in Tavistock Square?" That's not the bus's normal route. No one answers me. No one knows.

A few minutes later Chris looks around and says, "I can't believe in the middle of all this no one has said, 'I'll put the kettle on.'" We all laugh. Ah, yes. The great British panacea. Your family wiped out in a tornado? Your house burned down? You fell off a forty storey building? A rabid bat ate your cat? I'll put the kettle on. Throughout the Blitz, which they're already talking about on TV (idiots, this isn't the Blitz, it's not a declared war, it really isn't the Blitz), throughout time immemorial it seems, the answer to everything is simple. Have a cuppa. Chris goes off to put the kettle on.

Time passes. Someone switches the television from BBC to Sky. All sorts of claims are being made. "Oh my God, why aren't they reporting this on the BBC?" asks the young woman who arrived last.

"Because," says Chris, grabbing the remote control and switching back to the Beeb, "Sky doesn't care what crazy rumour they report and the BBC likes to at least try to get its fact straight."

Blair turns up at Gleneagles and says the word: terrorism – like anyone had been in any doubt.

The police have a press conference. Not five bombs on the tube as originally reported, but three: one on a Circle line train between Liverpool Street and Aldgate, one on a Circle line train at Edgware Road and the third on a train between Russell Square and King's Cross. The confusion arose because passengers were making their way from either ends of the trains, some coming out one station, some out the other.

God, how awful must that have been for them making their way through those underground tunnels? We've already seen some of the walking wounded coming out, bleeding profusely, and images are starting to appear of those on stretchers. One

man looks as if his entire chest had been blown off. How could he possibly still be alive? What in the name of anything anyone holds sacred is this supposed to achieve?

I look around the office at all the people staring at the TV. I don't know most of them. I know Chris by name, and the chief executive, Michael, and the campaigns director Jill. She's still up in Scotland.

And then I am suddenly angry. All these people who've worked so hard on the Make Poverty History campaign, all these dedicated people who've worked with so many others to raise the issue to the fever pitch it hit on the pitch in Edinburgh the previous night, all this effort put into publicly shaming the G8 leaders into doing something, all the effort environmental groups have put into forcing climate change up the agenda, to embarrassing that bastard Bush to admit that maybe there was a problem, all the optimistic work all these optimistic people have done and these fuckwits, these unspeakable, working class-slaughtering cunts have just handed those leaders an excuse to do nothing. On a bloody platter. I feel as if I'm going to explode. Not the most apposite choice of verbs, but it's how I feel. I don't think I've ever used the word before in my life, but I say it now, most emphatically, "Cocksuckers!"

Everyone turns to look at me. Some shocked. Some simply bemused at this middle-aged woman saying cocksuckers. I'm embarrassed. I feel it's not my place to be so angry when none of them are saying what I'm thinking, none of them are bemoaning the possibility of so much hard work being destroyed. I've flitted around the periphery, they've been at it for months, years. "I'm sorry," I say. They probably think I'm apologising for swearing, but I'm not. I'm saying I'm sorry for all the hard work that could be wasted.

Chris is the only one who gets it. "Don't worry," he says. "There are still a couple of days to go. Today's about something else."

He actually puts his arm around me to comfort me and now I'm more embarrassed than I could ever possibly imagine because *he* is comforting *me*. I shouldn't even be there, I suddenly feel. I'm intruding. A thought strikes me and I look around. "Where are the others?" I ask. Chris looks puzzled. "The other people who were supposed to be coming for the press call." All the models and starlets and boy band members I thought would be the draw. Where were they?

Chris snorts with laughter. "Oh, they all wanted drivers. They never made it across London." Everyone else laughs, too, and I realise what a low opinion some of them have of their celebs. It

would never occur to me to ask a charity to cough up for a driver. Chris sees what I'm thinking and nods. "What are they like, eh?" Everyone laughs again and I don't feel as embarrassed, but I still feel as if I am intruding.

"Does anyone have any idea how the hell to get from here to Stoke Newington on foot?" I ask.

The most direct route would take me past Liverpool Street station. For a lot of reasons I don't want to go that way. Part of me wants to see what's going on for myself, but another part can't face it. If I don't see it, if it's just something on TV, it's not real. And then there's the basic stay out of the way thing. The emergency services are working flat out. The last thing they need are gawpers. So I take a different route. It's so strange that there are no buses. Hardly any traffic at all. Not surprising, I suppose, half of central London is probably blocked off.

But there are a lot of people walking and they're not meandering, dazed and confused. They're walking purposefully, just like I am. So, you shut down public transport, did you? Well, to hell with you. I'll walk. Don't fuck with me and don't fuck with my town

Well, thank God I gave up wearing heels years ago for anything except special occasions. My shoes are sensible and I make it back to the back streets of Stoke Newington with no blisters on feet that only feel moderately on fire. The sun came out while I was walking and now I'm hot. A shower sounds good, but at home there is only the television and my own company. I need a drink. Instead of turning up my road I keep walking to my local. It's four o'clock in the afternoon and the place is packed.

"Bombs must be good for business," I say to Dave, the landlord.

"Yep," he replies, grinning. "I'm thinking of ordering more for tomorrow."

The regulars at the bar groan. I repeat Charlie's text message. "Well, at least now we know what the up side is of living nowhere near a tube station."

"Now that's just being cynical," says Dave.

"So, now I know how long it takes to walk from London Bridge to Stoke Newington," I tell them.

"How long?" asks Phil. Ah, poor Phil. A fat, fifty-something social worker with the people skills of a dung heap (not that he smells of

anything other than too much aftershave). When I was working at the pub he bought me a pint every time he came in, until I had to explain that was all he was buying. He's never bought me a drink unless someone shames him into buying a round.

"An hour and a half," I say.

"I could walk it in an hour," he tells me. In his dreams I think, as a couple of the other regulars laugh at the idea of Phil walking further than from the bar to the gents and back.

And so it begins, all the chat you'd expect under the circumstances. How did you hear what was happening? Is everyone you know okay? Well, we've all been waiting for it for a long time and, frankly, we all thought it would be a lot worse.

There's Greg, the portly security guard who does one week on, one off and pretty well lives in the pub the weeks he's not working. He's fine as long as he stays on the lager, but as soon as he starts ordering the Johnny Walker Black, it is, as he's so fond of saying, all downhill.

There's Ralph, the yuppie estate agent with the Italian wife who always seems to be in Italy.

There's Keith, the burly builder who apparently used to do some boxing and who, I suspect, took one punch too many. I have a feeling that in his day Keith was a bit of a lady killer, but that day is long gone. At the best of times I can barely understand a word he says. After a few pints, I don't even try.

There's Willy, the dodgy but sometimes amusing Scot who always has lots of dosh, considering he's been on the dole for about three decades.

I'm not saying a word against any of them, as much as they may resemble Norm and the other sad sacks from *Cheers*, because, hey, there's also me. No, I'm not in there every day, but I'm in there often enough to be considered one of the gang, so what does that make me?

I knock my pint back fairly quickly, order another pint and some bangers and mash. Somehow my timing's off to get involved in rounds, which is just as well, because I forgot (I wonder why) to stop at a cash machine on my way home. Just as Dave hands me my pint, the one person I'd been hoping would be there turns up. Like me, not someone who drinks in there every single day, Alec is a cut above the rest. He's a retired fire fighter who's still quite active with his union. When I worked late afternoon/early evening shifts at the pub, Alec's conversation was the only thing that kept me sane on the days he did come in. I figure if anyone is going to

know what the hell is going on, it's Alec.

I offer to buy him a pint, but when he sees me counting out coins (I did actually have enough), he says, "No, you're all right. I've just come in for the one." I ask what he knows and it turns out he doesn't know anything more than anyone else, other than the fact that he's relieved his son, also a fire fighter, is off work with a cracked rib. His son, apparently, is less pleased not to be in the thick of it.

Dave's got the television on, showing the news, although you can't hear anything above the roar of conversation. Alec suddenly tells Dave to turn the volume up and he does. Ken Livingstone, still in Singapore with the Olympics bid team, is speaking.

The pub goes quiet as the mayor of London says: "I want to say one thing to the world today. This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and powerful. It was not aimed at Presidents or Prime Ministers. It was aimed at ordinary, working-class Londoners, black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old. It was an indiscriminate attempt to slaughter, irrespective of any considerations for age, for class, for religion. That isn't an ideology, it isn't even a perverted faith – it is just an indiscriminate attempt at mass murder and we know what the objective is. They seek to divide Londoners. They seek to turn Londoners against each other."

All around the pub, people are nodding their heads in agreement. No one is talking. We're all listening to Ken as he says: "Finally, I wish to speak directly to those who came to London today to take life. I know that you personally do not fear giving up your own life in order to take others – that is why you are so dangerous. But I know you fear that you may fail in your long-term objective to destroy our free society and I can show you why you will fail. In the days that follow, even after your cowardly attack, you will see people from the rest of Britain, people from around the world arriving in London to become Londoners, to fulfil their dreams and achieve their potential. They choose to come to London, as so many have come before because they come to be free, they come to live the life they choose, they come to be able to be themselves. They flee you because you tell them how they should live. They don't want that and nothing you do, however many of us you kill, will stop that flight to our city where freedom is strong and where people can live in harmony with one another. Whatever you do, however many you kill, you will fail."

When he finishes speaking, people actually applaud.

“Blimey,” says Alec. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

I’ve forgiven Livingstone (temporarily) for the bendy buses. He’s spot on. This was a pointless and hideous attack on the working people of London.

Saturday, July 9th:

Two days after the blasts and the irony has only just hit me: the book I was reading on my way to the charity’s office Thursday morning was *War of the Worlds*.

I spent most of the day yesterday in front of the telly watching the same footage over and over again on BBC news. We now know the bombers (scratch that and call them what they were: the killers) did not fly in from Saudi Arabia or Yemen or Pakistan to wreak their carnage. They were home grown. This, of course, somehow makes it so much worse. Still, despite the footage, despite all the conversations I’ve had with friends, it doesn’t seem real.

When it becomes apparent that getting from Stoke Newington to Hammersmith for Mark’s dinner party just isn’t going to happen what with so many tube lines still shut down, I decide I am going to have to go into town today, go to King’s Cross, try to catch a glimpse of the decapitated bus still sitting in Tavistock Square, something, anything to make it feel real.

I get a bus down to King’s Cross and watch as people are allowed past a barrier to place flowers by the station. Every person leaving a tribute is filmed by dozens of camera crews. Further down the street I find the wall where people are pasting flyers. Have You Seen...? Smiling photos of men and women who are almost certainly amongst the body parts yet to be removed from the carnage a hundred feet below ground. As I stand there a young man arrives with an armful of flyers and a role of parcel tape. As he struggles to rip the tape the vultures descend, cameras capturing this moment of hope and sorrow. When he’s taped his flyer to the wall they surround him, eager to record his anguish for the six o’clock news. And I’m a vulture, too, pulling out my mobile phone to capture the cameras capturing his grief.

An American radio reporter asks me if I know the man. I say no, I’ve just come down to make it feel real. That was good enough for him. He immediately wants to interview me. I agree and he asks me how I heard the news. So I tell him about my journey into town that morning, the evacuation of Angel station that took no one by

surprise given how awful the Northern line is on a daily basis, my phone call to say I'd be late for the meeting as I had to get a bus, being told there was something up at Liverpool Street station. He asks me if I don't think the posters of the missing aren't somehow not English, are somehow more American. So I tell him the blindingly obvious, that people whose loved ones are missing are hopeless and helpless and desperate, that they need to feel as if they're doing *something*. Everyone remembers 9/11. Everyone remembers the Have You Seen...? flyers going up. It's familiar. It's something to do. He thanks me, asks my name. I tell him. No one in Cleveland or wherever he's from will have any idea who I am. At this particular moment I'm not sure I have any idea who I am.

I leave King's Cross heading for Tavistock Square. Just before Euston there is a blocked off side street. No surprise there. But coming from up that side street there is music and that is a surprise. So I cross the road, go to investigate. It is, remarkably, the annual Camden Festival of Life, a multicultural street party with food and children's rides and bandstands and families of every conceivable ethnicity out enjoying the music and the sunshine. It is London, alive and kicking up its heels.

Just down the road from King's Cross where the world's press are herded waiting to capture the first film of body parts coming up from the hell down below, there is a Festival of Life going on without a camera crew in sight. I look around for a street sign and eventually find one: Chalton Street, NW1. I ring Tilly, who still writes features for the *Observer*, tell her what's going on, describe the scene to her. She tells me she will ring the news desk, try to get them to at least send a photographer down. I invest £5 in a much needed ten minute massage being offered by one of the street stalls. While the knot that's been in my neck for at least five years is pummelled away, I can't stop thinking about how annoyed I am by all the ghouls up the road. A Sunday paper photographer is not enough. This needs to be on television. After the massage I scan through the phone book on my mobile to see if I have any numbers for anyone at the Beeb. Yes. I find a number for a producer at *Newsnight Review* and ring her. Once again I describe the scene. I rant a bit, but in a positive way. Get someone down here, I tell her. She sounds interested and promises to call the news editor straight away.

I hope one or both of them follows it up, because this is where the real story is in London this sunny Saturday afternoon. People getting on with life.