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What It Feels Like to Be a Bomb

Deborah Baker

The Association of Small Bombs by [Karan Mahajan](#)
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I have a friend whose son was killed in a school shooting. A smallish school shooting. It took place seven years before Columbine got Americans used to the practice of not thinking about guns. To understand how it happened, my friend sought out surviving witnesses, the gun shop owner who sold the gun, the dean of the college where the shooting took place, and the shooter's devastated parents. He questioned them as if they were characters in a suspense story, each with a partial view of the events leading up to the fatal day and the unfolding of the spree itself. Certain details hung in the air – the bullet that killed his son first broke the toothbrush in his shirt pocket – but no detail, however arresting, could alter the trajectory that had left this man and his family in stunned derangement. Finally, he bought a gun just like the one the shooter used, a Chinese knock-off of an AK47. He kept it behind a ceiling panel in his office so that he could take it out to study, as if the narrative logic of chance and fate might be hidden in its triggering machinery. Grief is a specific kind of madness; terror is another. Both are story-driven.

If the mass shooting of random innocents is an American horror genre, perhaps the low-intensity bomb blast is the subcontinent's equivalent. Karan Mahajan's second novel, *The Association of Small Bombs*, opens on a scorching Delhi day in 1996 and ends several years after the attacks of 9/11. The period and setting are significant. In the early 1990s the sudden arrival in India of Western goods, mores and media created a blast radius of its own, perhaps nowhere more so than in India's capital city. Mahajan's novel is as much a chronicle of the cascading effects of the opening of India's economy and the global response to 9/11 as it is about a bomb explosion in a down-at-heel neighbourhood market.

Vikas Khurana is a 40-year-old filmmaker who, in anticipation of a televised cricket match, sends his sons, 11 and 13, to retrieve the family TV from the local repair shop. He presses their ever compliant friend Mansoor Ahmed, the only child of over-protective parents, who is also 11, to accompany his boys to Lajpat Nagar market. This is where they are when a car – a Maruti 800, packed with nails, ball-bearings, scrap metal and an improvised explosive device wired to a timer – comes apart 'in a dizzying flock of shards'. Mansoor survives the blast with

a seemingly minor injury; the Khurana brothers are killed instantly.

This is the transmogrifying weapon, and these the arresting details, the characters in need of a plot. There is no dark tease about what is going to happen because it already has, unless one act of terror is destined to beget another. Vikas and Deepa Khurana are the grieving parents, Mansoor Ahmed the anguished survivor. They are the 'Victims', ordinary individuals whose inner lives are made extravagant and unpredictable by a car bomb. There isn't any question of who is responsible because that, too, is established at the outset. The men who pay for, assemble and place the bomb in the market are the 'Terrorists'. That is, unless there are degrees of complicity. This is the sort of question on which the novel turns.

Even when handling the darkest material or picking through confounding emotional complexities, Mahajan maintains a light touch and a clarity of vision. Though his tone is sometimes hard to read, his language rarely calls attention to itself. He is particularly adept at capturing the quicksilver shifts of mood that accompany states of high emotion. In the immediate wake of the blast, Vikas toggles between the unbearable present and the seemingly fungible past. He retraces his life and questions himself like a highly-strung prosecutor on where things went wrong. His head is crowded with intense reveries: 'The noises of the complex (the birds, the projecting hawkers, the grumbling servants, the hammering of new construction in the neighbour's plot), building symphonically around the central instrument of the crying woman: he wanted to fuck the house, to fuck every little particle he could see.' Eventually his focus narrows to the bomb itself. He wants to capture on camera the bomb's panoptical view of the moment of explosion, 'to film the moment itself, slow it down, open it up like a flower over time'.

Though Deepa, too, fingers her regrets, she is more practical in her grief. She anticipates the court case and the cleansing prospect of vengeance. She works the family's political connections – something that allows Mahajan to open up the novel and report on the civic rituals that follow a bomb blast. The police round up a handful of luckless Kashmiris. Only one, Malik, has any knowledge of the bombing, but even after ten days of torture he refuses to talk. The other Kashmiris are also tortured but, as they are innocent, the police come up empty-handed. The court proceedings are perpetually postponed. Even a face to face meeting with Malik gives Deepa no satisfaction. Having fully expected to die of grief she instead becomes pregnant. While her husband remains transfixed, waiting for the moment when a redemptive story will snap into focus, she is stranded between the past and the future. Mahajan shows immense perspicacity in his handling of Deepa, and of the other women in the novel.

Vikas's worship of the greats of European cinema, the socially conscious documentaries he likes, his subscription to *Outlook* magazine and the secular pride he takes in his friendship with Mansoor's Muslim parents – all these once marked his station in a comfortably static urban universe. But his Delhi of pukka colonies and sleepy tree-lined avenues has been

overtaken by one of traffic free-for-alls and the constant shattering noise of construction. To his embittered eye every surface is furred with filth and grit: 'The wind unfurled a serpent's tongue of dust through the colony, pushing the organic detritus a few feet, little bits of shattered leaf getting stuck in blisters of tar.' Against this furiously globalising backdrop, Indian domestic brands – Odomos, Saffola, Godrej, Amul – pepper the text as if to summon a time when status was a simple matter of family name and the right Delhi address. Vikas's broken Onida TV marks his exile from the new world of foreign electronics and, according to his grief-driven, self-absorbed logic, makes him complicit in the death of his sons. They are dead, his aria goes, because he is a failed filmmaker, or because he was too cowardly to leave the family manse and try his luck in Bombay, or because the IT boss across the street has a swimming pool, a satellite dish and a Mercedes with tinted windows. It takes a bold writer to send up the father of two children murdered by terrorists. Mahajan does it with disconcerting style.

Even Shaukat 'Shockie' Guru, the mercurial, 26-year-old Kashmiri bomb maker, is aspirational. He has taken up exercise. When he isn't threatening to quit and return to Kashmir or whining about leadership, he envisions himself as a Kashmiri Ramzi Yousef, the rock star of bomb makers, responsible for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Islam has nothing to do with Shockie's motives. To him, living in exile in Nepal, even the cause of Kashmir has become abstract. He aspires instead to a high-tech, brand-name glory. He wants to bomb the Indian parliament, or a five-star Oberoi or one of those swanky many-escalated malls. In such ambitions Mahajan accommodates future Shockies, real events, and the ways that localised insurgencies the world over morphed into something flashier and more attention-seeking: Islamic terror.

Shockie is disgusted when the pitiful death toll at Lajpat Nagar is exaggerated by the leadership of the Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Force so they can shake down Pakistan's ISI for more money, siphoning off what they can to build themselves larger houses and, in an inevitable irony, send their children abroad to be educated. The scenes among the conspirators are captured with self-assurance. Shockie's conversations with the slight, eccentric and newly pacifist Malik, who is suffering from the after-effects of having been tortured by the Indian army, take brilliantly confounding turns. The novel shifts unsettlingly between broad satire and closely observed detail, taking in the quotidian and cold-blooded details that go into planning a bomb blast. Shockie may be a pudgy delivery man in someone else's racket, Malik may be an ineffectual and incoherent ideologue, but Mahajan gives them both unexpected dimensions.

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When Mansoor Ahmed stumbles away from the bodies of his friends, the lurking dangers his parents long warned him of come at him from every direction, as if Delhi itself were on a timer. He 'saw it all and felt afraid, as if the city had recognised his guilt on the way home and

would find a way to destroy him'. Five years later, still haunted, he travels to America to study programming in California. Panic attacks have left him introspective, reclusive, absorbed by the calming intricacies of coding. Yet after the 9/11 attacks, America becomes another danger zone. Back in Delhi, Mansoor falls in with Peace for All, a group of young idealists intent on freeing from jail the languishing Kashmiris, still uncharged after six years. At their centre is the charismatic Ayub, who quickly takes Mansoor under his wing.

When Mahajan drops dark hints from some distant future where Mansoor looks back regretfully on these days, one might reasonably ask whether the script hasn't already been written for this technologically sophisticated, sexually repressed and socially alienated Muslim, newly returned from the West. Has the tragicomedy we thought we were reading given way to a clumsy psychological suspense thriller? Ayub is a self-taught fantasist from a poor provincial backwater who was galvanised by the massacres of Muslims in Gujarat. But reading about the harassment of innocent American Muslims and the horror unfolding in Iraq forces him to connect the local dots – Kashmir, Gujarat – with global attacks on Muslims. If Mansoor manages to elude radicalisation, it seems a cheap shot to set him up in the first place. This is my one quibble with the novel. Nonetheless, Mansoor's friendship with Ayub, mirroring the one between Malik and Shockie, becomes the fulcrum on which the rest of the novel turns.

In a rather precious irony, Mahajan has the polished activists of Peace for All lament the fact that India has become a lapdog of the West, a 'capitalist stooge of America', even as they credit their 'consciousness' to an American liberal arts education. Mahajan himself seems to be shadowboxing with this consciousness and the assumptions about terror that accompany it. For a Western reader, distant bomb blasts provide an opportunity to tot up all the reasons we are safer where we are, test our assumptions about Islamic terror and perhaps indulge in a smug form of rubbernecking. Mahajan has several strategies to avoid pandering to this sort of prurience. He is brusquely matter of fact in his portrayal of violence. The boys' deaths are not accompanied by violins; the methods of torture are conveyed second-hand. More tellingly Mahajan doesn't gloss the names of Delhi's residential enclaves or the many acronyms – IIC, POTA, FICCI, RSS, GK, INA, PCO – scattered throughout like cryptic signage. India's black laws, its occupation of Kashmir, the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the Gujarat riots and Narendra Modi are referred to casually, as if to say to those readers not up to the minute on recent South Asian history: deal with it.

Mahajan isn't always consistent here. Describing a tranquil scene between Shockie and Malik, he writes: 'They held hands like lovers, though there was nothing sexual about this.' With this qualification, he betrays an awareness of just those readers he has refused to make things easy for, the sort most likely to read sex into everything. This is a measure of Mahajan's hypersensitivity to the air his characters breathe but also, I imagine, the residue of an underlying anxiety about what it means to strip your motherland naked for the West's delectation. Among the lamentable aspects of Indian civil society exposed by Mahajan is the

ubiquity of police torture, the media's brazen hawking of violence, a scandalous judicial process, and the government's inability to address not only historical wrongs but also simple matters, like providing swift redress to terror victims. Mahajan allows himself to expose all this because, I think, he wants to engage with the particulars of a bomb blast in India as well as the West's Manichean framing of terror-with-a-capital-T.

Which brings me back to school shootings. Like a small bomb, such shootings reveal more about American civil society than most are prepared to acknowledge, much less write a black comedy about. At one point Vikas asks himself: how would a sharp bourgeois melodrama directed by his favourite auteur, Ingmar Bergman, hold up against a bomb? To put this question another way, what sort of literature can come of a tragedy not of a character's own making? Or, as dead-eyed journalists repeatedly ask Ayub, what's the story? The reason Vikas is unable to divine the narrative logic of what happened is because there isn't one. Though an act of violence is like a floodlight on certain Indian realities, Vikas, Deepa and Mansoor are not enlarged by what they see, but diminished. Their secular ideals are lost, their family ties strained to breaking point. Like the terrorists, they are now outcasts, victims of the evil eye, undone first by terror, then by paranoia, irrational obsessions, rages and rioting hormones. They are crippled with pain then cured, swept from disbelief to belief, exaltation to apocalyptic despair and back again.

'This is what it felt like to be a bomb,' Vikas thinks when one invades his dreams. 'You were coiled up, majestic with blackness, unaware that the universe outside you existed, and then a wire snapped and ripped open your eyelids all the way around and you had a vision of the world that was 360 degrees, and everything in your purview was doomed by seeing.' Whatever form it takes, a random act of terror casts a blinding and revelatory glare. In *The Association of Small Bombs*, there is no relief from that, no deliverance. The closer the novel gets to answering the question – does one act of terror beget another? – the more frantic its pace becomes. In the end the Lajpat Nagar bomb, like the plot of a novel, is at the beck and call of the writer who conjured it. Except that instead of dooming his characters all at once, Mahajan picks them off with abrupt indifference, like a lone shooter, one by one.

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