

# DARK HORIZONS

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DAN SMITH



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# 1

I had never before witnessed the exact moment at which life passes from the body; the instant it becomes nothing. With only twenty-five years behind me, I had collected just a few experiences of death, which I kept hidden in a place I rarely visited. A neatly dressed body lying in the velvety folds of fabric in the confines of a carefully chosen box. The wax-like effect of once living skin now tended by the mortician's expert hands. I had stared down at the sunken features of a mother I had loved and cared for; empty now, reduced to a motionless collection of skin and wasted bone. Mourners dressed in black. Sombre faces, hands shaken, drinks taken. These were my experiences of death. I had participated in the act of farewell, but I had never seen *that* moment. The exact moment at which life evaporates.

But I saw it that day. Sprawled on my stomach, with my head turned to one side, pressed to the hot tarmac, I watched life disappear. I saw it vanish as if it had never existed, leaving nothing but the ruined shell it once inhabited.

For a while before I opened my eyes, I was content to be where I was. The sun warm on my back, the air quiet around me. My head was filled with a pleasant, bleary feeling, as if I were just waking from a long, deep sleep. But the silence was punctuated by the first stunned groan, and as consciousness clawed its way back into my mind, I became more aware of the sounds around me.

A child crying. A man moaning, or perhaps it was a woman,

it was hard to tell. Both, maybe. More than one person. More than two. Then the world popped into focus and I heard many people. Many voices. Shouting, crying, screaming. The sound of twisted metal settling into place.

I opened my eyes, alarmed that I could see nothing more than a blur of light around the periphery of what I should be looking at. My whole body was numb. A wave of nausea swept over me and I retched. Disorientated and muddled, I was shamed as my stomach heaved and I vomited so publicly.

Blinking hard, I tried to move but was unable to do more than shuffle a few inches before another wave of nausea came over me. I closed my eyes tight and fought the feeling, pushing it back down.

When I opened them again, the world came to me in a bright flash of light and colour. The first thing I saw was the bubbles of tarmac, which had bloated and popped under the intense heat of the sun. A smell of oil and petrol crept into my nostrils and clawed into my lungs, making me retch again, forcing me to fight it. I wriggled my fingers, moved my hands, brought my arms up towards my face. I planted my palms on the road, trying to push myself up, but the effort was too great, so I let my head fall back onto the warm tarmac and shifted my eyes to take in the scene around me.

I'd been lucky, that much was clear. I had survived, but others had not been so fortunate. An old woman was facing me, her mouth opening and closing, her voice producing little more than a weak, breathy moaning. Blood ran from her nose and formed tributaries as it slid into the wrinkles around her lips and chin. Her eyes were wide, her hand outstretched towards me as if she knew she was dying but refused to relinquish her life without the touch of another human being. To me, she was an unfamiliar face in an unfamiliar land. Her skin was different from mine, her eyes were not shaped like my own, and our culture was not shared. Yet there are some things that we all have in common. No one truly wants to die alone.

I watched her for a moment, keeping my eyes on hers,

summoning my strength, then I manoeuvred my right arm up and reached across to take her hand. But she was too far away. There was a space of an inch or so between the tips of our fingers, and yet we continued to stretch towards each other, desperate for that last moment of human contact.

I began to pull myself towards her, dragging my weight along the tarmac so that I could take her hand. I struggled to close the gap between us, seeing that she was unable to move. The weight of the bus pinning her to the road was far too great.

Around us, the sounds of suffering grew. The ringing in my ears and the fuzziness in my head was dissipating, and my eyes didn't hurt so much any more. I tried not to listen to the creaking metal, the screaming, the crying, the moaning. I tried to ignore the smell of oil and petrol and blood that saturated the thick, hot air. I tried not to notice the other people around me. The dead, the dying and the dismembered. I tried only to concentrate on the old woman, her mouth opening and closing like a fish left to die in the sun, her final ounce of strength channelled into the act of stretching her fingers towards mine. I pulled myself closer and grasped her hand, squeezing it so that I felt the bones rubbing together beneath her thin, leathery skin. Old life and new life.

She squeezed my hand in return, closed her eyes in relief, then opened them again and looked at me.

And *that* was the moment. A life-changing moment. The moment when her deep brown eyes emptied in front of me as if her body were a vessel and her life were a liquid that had been poured from her. Her eyes died. One moment they were alive and a person lived behind them. A woman with memories, a place in the world, a purpose. And the next she was just lifeless skin and bone and flesh. In an instant she had changed from something of incredible value to something of no importance at all.

I was still holding the old woman's hand when I forced myself to look around once more.

The bus in which I'd been travelling was lying on its side, its rusted orange and green markings looking up at the cloudless azure sky. Its nose was crumpled, the windscreen shattered into crushed ice spread across the soft tarmac. Skewed at an angle in the dirt at the side of the road was another large vehicle, this one a truck. The cab had come away from the flat-bed.

Seeing the rotting monstrosities like this reminded me of the moment they had collided. I'd been sitting at the front of the bus, in the 'death seat' as I have since heard it called. After waiting almost four hours in the terminal in Medan, and after two failed attempts to board other buses, I had followed the crowd onto this ill-fated vehicle, only to find myself pushed down into the backless seat beside the driver, my face only inches from the windscreen.

I'd heard that bus travel in Indonesia was a game of Russian roulette, but I hadn't expected to find myself in such a position on my first day in the country – in an overcrowded bus, surrounded by a foreign language, baskets of chickens, screaming babies, sitting beside a driver for whom life was a race. For an hour I'd tuned out the whining, high-pitched eastern singing that blasted from the internal speakers. I'd persuaded myself not to care that some travellers were actually *outside* the bus, clinging to the sills around the windows and the roof-rack. I'd ignored the open door beside me and I'd tried not to think about what would happen if the bus were to come to a sudden and terrifying stop. But I was certain that of all the passengers in the bus, I would be the first to die.

As it happened, though, I was wrong. Our collision was not head on, as I'd expected it to be. Travelling with my eyes half open, I'd assumed that when the impact came, as it surely would, it would be at the moment when our driver made one of his reckless overtaking attempts – at high speed round a blind corner, giving only a toot of his horn to indicate he was on his way. I was wrong. Our contact came, in fact, at a fork in the road, and the oncoming Mitsubishi truck hit us at the front

side, knocking me from my seat, propelling me through the open door before the bus twisted, slid, turned and toppled.

The people who had been clinging to the near side of the bus were crushed immediately, leaving a ragged red stain across the potholed grey tarmac as the vehicle slid to its final resting place.

I could see the tide left by the runaway bus. It was a gruesome wake of crushed bodies, dismembered limbs, blood drying in the sun.

I lingered over the sight for longer than I wanted to, unable to take my eyes from it. I wanted nothing more than to rub it from my mind, to reach inside my head and disinfect such a view, but I was compelled to look. I'd never seen such a thing before. I imagined that it was how it might look if a bomb had exploded. Bodies separated from limbs. A head. An arm. A leg protruding from beneath the overturned bus. A man whose lower body was so crushed that he had split, burst like a wet balloon, and his viscera had spilled onto the road. The flies had already begun to feast on the shiny mass of grey and red that had emptied from him.

I turned away and looked back at the old woman, then I forced my arms to move, pushed myself up onto my elbows, brought my legs around and dragged myself into a sitting position.

My head swam as I scanned around me. Chickens running in the road. People strewn all about. Thirty, thirty-five bodies that I could see. Many of them dead. One or two people were dragging survivors away from the wreck. Others were wandering in a dazed stupor as they searched for relatives.

At the side of the road, a few onlookers, unable or unwilling to help.

People's belongings, too, were scattered around the wreckage. A suitcase burst open, clothes distributed across the tarmac. A shoe. A basket full of chickens, intact. A soft-drinks crate containing only glass and the last fizz of what had been contained within. My backpack, bright blue, spotted with blood. It held everything I'd brought with me except my passport and the

money, which I kept hidden beneath my shirt in a thin canvas belt.

I stared at my backpack, trying to focus on it. It had made it all the way here from England. From a small camping shop on a steep street in Newcastle. I'd bought it on a wet Thursday afternoon, the sun already set, the streetlights on and blurred behind the rain. A cold, wet, ordinary afternoon marked by the purchase of a bright blue rucksack that was to be my travelling companion for the months to come.

Only now it was lying on a bloodied road under an intense sun in an alien world.

A motorbike passed me, its engine chugging as it made its way around the wreckage. The rider weaved in and out of the people, the body parts, scanning, witnessing, then picking up speed and heading back onto the open road. Somebody had somewhere to go and a crash wasn't going to stop them from getting there. They'd seen it before and they would see it again.

I tried to get to my feet, but once more the nausea surged over me and I waited for it to subside before I began shuffling towards my backpack. My one symbol of home. The only thing I had that made me who I was. I kept my eyes on it, focusing on nothing other than the bright blue canvas.

On my hands and knees, I made my way past the old woman, not looking down at her as I struggled forwards, keeping my eyes only on the bag, until I was distracted by a young boy who came into my peripheral vision, making me turn my head to follow the movement. The boy, maybe twelve years old, had come from the side of the road where a small gathering of people had grouped to stare, none of them making any effort to come to my assistance. He stepped over a piece of debris that lay between me and my goal, then headed for my backpack. He stopped beside it, glancing across at me before bending at the waist and picking it up. He felt its weight, and then used both hands to swing it round and drape it over his back. He hunched under its load as he began to move away. I tried to call out to him. He was taking my bag. Perhaps he was moving it to

a safer location; perhaps he was helping to clear the road. Or perhaps he was just stealing my belongings. Whatever he was doing, I called out, but my tongue was lazy and my mouth was dry. My confused mind rebelled against me, refusing to send the right messages to any part of my body. I was unable to stand and now I was unable to speak. The only sound I heard myself utter was a fumbled one, as if my tongue had grown too large for my mouth.

The boy stopped and stared at me, the way I mouthed my words, the way I held out one hand in protest. He watched me for a moment, then came towards me. He had seen sense. He realised I was trying to tell him the rucksack was mine.

I lowered my arm, fell back onto my knees and waited for the boy to come closer. When he reached me, he placed the backpack on the ground and squatted beside me. He waved a hand in front of my face and I tried to smile, nodding like an idiot. The boy looked around, glancing up at the people who'd gathered to survey the mayhem, then at the mayhem itself. When his eyes came back to mine, he reached down and took my hand. He lifted my arm, slipped my watch from my wrist and put it round his own. He smiled at me before standing again and slinging my backpack over his shoulder.

I stared, helpless, as the boy disappeared among the spectators.

I slumped, my shoulders sagging under the weight of my head, and I felt a mesh of darkness creeping across my mind. There was pain behind my eyes, which reached up and spread its fingers around the top of my brain, squeezing in rhythmic pulses, tightening its grip. I felt woozy again, the sounds of the crash fading in and out. I struggled to a sitting position, leaned back against whatever was there to support me. My vision began to swim and I closed my eyes, wanting to stay right there, curl up and go to sleep. I wanted to enjoy the warmth of the sun, to find a comfortable spot to lie in.

I felt a tugging at my feet and opened my eyes enough to allow a little light to needle in. Everything seemed brighter

than it ought to be, the glare from the sun forcing its way into my eyes, shaded only by the figure crouched at my feet, tugging my shoes from me.

Then a voice, shouting in a language I didn't understand. Nasal, foreign, not sounding like words at all, but more like a staccato attack of consonants and vowels being fired from a rifle. The tugging at my feet stopped, my shoes slipped away, and the shadowy figure disappeared from view, replaced by another image, this one looming close to me, running a hand over my head.

An angel. An earth-bound angel, or a heaven-bound one, I wasn't sure, but an angel nonetheless. She took my head on her lap and she lifted a bottle to my lips. I drank the warm, sour water, grateful for the liquid on my parched and raw throat. I complied with her every touch when she moved me onto my side, brought my legs up and turned my head. I let her manipulate me and move me, and then my mind slipped away into the abyss as she ran her hand across my forehead and spoke in her soothing tone. Then, darkness.