

The street at the end of the lane appeared empty except for the occasional person running past. She heard chants and shouts but where was the demonstration?

A bullhorn crackled. "...commands all persons ... to disperse...guilty of an offence..." A swelling chorus of "boos" and catcalls drowned out the loudspeaker. Glass shattered.

Freyja's hands shook. She reached the end of the alley and stepped into the street. On her left three lines of army reserves in full combat gear, rifles in battle ready position. On her right a line of protestors, regular men and women like herself, holding banners and placards. They were separated by twenty yards of pavement, light years in ideology, and her.

Freyja turned to run back up the lane but stopped. How would Robert Capa react? What would James Nachtwey do? Elbows tight to her body to minimize the camera shake, she photographed the line of troops. She caught a soldier staggering, hit on the shoulder by a brick. She turned toward the demonstrators and focused on WORKERS HAVE RIGHTS – GOVERNMENT HAS RESPONSIBILITIES, a long banner held up by several people in the front line. From behind them bottles and rocks flew toward the line of soldiers. She cringed at what sounded like shotgun blasts and saw cylinders trailing lines of white smoke arc toward the demonstrators, exploding before they hit ground.

*"Tear gas!"*

Shouts, screams, the banner fell, the crowd retreated, Freyja along with them. A hint of the noxious fumes wafted toward her and immediately her nose and eyes burned and watered, her throat itched. But the troops were downwind of the brisk breeze and the gas blew back towards them. Their front line faltered and fell back as the gagging, blinding cloud enveloped them.

The demonstrators regrouped and advanced. Freyja wiped the tears and mucous with her sleeve and regained her position at the front on the extreme left of the marchers. Part of her couldn't believe this was happening, here, in her city. Another part of her couldn't believe her luck.

The advancing surge jostled and swept her along. She needed a vantage point. A cluster of newspaper boxes anchored to a lamp standard split the human tide. She hoisted herself into a sitting position on the end box, swung her legs under her and stood up. With an arm wrapped around the lamppost she steadied herself and the camera. She aimed to where the line of government troops had been, now invisible in the fog of gas. The wind blew, the toxic mist partially dissipated and the second echelon appeared, rifles at their shoulders in firing position.

Freyja pressed the shutter button and held it down. The camera began capturing images every three and a half seconds.

An innocuous sound like firecrackers popping stopped the action like the pausing of a video, freezing a frame, sound and motion. A loud ping and a hot sting near her hairline started the action again. The front line of advancing demonstrators crumbled and within seconds the human wave washed back upon itself.

Screams mixed with commands, people collided, fell, crawled, disappeared beneath the sea of arms and legs. Freyja watched transfixed as a woman limped towards her clutching a protest sign for support. She slumped against the newspaper box.

Bodies lay abandoned on the pavement. Two lumpish forms, knees drawn up under their chins, lay in death as in birth. Charred holes ruined the orange safety vest worn by

another man, his arms and legs splayed like a starfish. Moments before the hood of a parka had protected another victim from the cold. Now it clung sodden to the side of his head as he pivoted on hands and knees, a windup toy missing a wheel.

A woman, her back to Freyja, sat on the wet pavement and rocked back and forth cradling someone in her lap. Freyja wanted that shot. She climbed down off the newspaper boxes and stepped into a puddle of blood. Dead eyes of the female propped against the metal boxes stared at her. Freyja studied death in the viewfinder – blue lips, white face, vacant eyes. A strange sense of detachment came over her, as if the camera lens separated and protected her from this terrible reality. She backed away shooting all the while, then calmly turned her camera toward the retreating protestors. Moving to the center of the street she photographed people carrying their bleeding friends into doorways, on their knees praying, on their feet hurling stones.

Mouths open, feet running, windows breaking, all silent. The same presence that paused the action now muted the sound. The air smelled like nail polish remover.

The woman looked up as Freyja approached. Focus and shoot anguish. “My daughter. Help my daughter.” The audio was back. “She’s bleeding.” Focus and shoot bewilderment. “You’ll be okay, Heather.” The mother stroked the young woman’s hair. “We were going shopping after this.” Focus and shoot disbelief.

First aid attendants moved forward from the crowd and knelt beside the victims. They need help, Freyja thought. I should be helping. Instead she turned towards the soldiers and began photographing young reserves, some standing at the ready, others walking around aimlessly, talking among themselves looking for someone to take charge. Focus and shoot fear. Focus and shoot confusion.

A commanding officer came into view, pointed and two reserves ran towards her. Focus and shoot anger. Freyja turned and began to run.