



A THIN LINE

Paula Slier questions whether the bravery displayed by war correspondents is courage or craziness – or perhaps a bit of both

WHEN WAS THE LAST

time you were truly afraid? Not just “Oh, you startled me” afraid, but knee-knocking, heart-thumping, breath-gasping terrified?

For me, it was while lying in the grass in a small eastern Ukrainian town called Ilovaïsk. Minutes earlier, I’d been following my cameraman through a field, a few steps behind pro-Russian fighters who’d explained that they were conducting a “simple mop-up operation against the Ukrainian army”. Well, that simple mop-up operation nearly got us all killed.

Heavy clashes between the two sides the day before had seen Ukrainian troops retreating from the area – “cleared” was the term translated to me. So instead of focusing on our surroundings, my cameraman and I were debating who should walk in front of whom – blissfully unaware of the ambush we were casually sauntering into.

Suddenly a whistling sound brushed past my ears. Instinct took over and I dropped to the ground. By now my breathing was coming in raw, throbbing gulps as the space around me closed in. The fighters were shouting and firing chaotically into the air and as I kept my head down in the grass, bullets flew overhead. It would be a pity to die like this, I thought – so far from home in a godforsaken Ukrainian village, the name of which I couldn’t pronounce, in a war that didn’t really make sense. A cameraman filming a reality TV show about journalists crawled up beside me and in typical Hollywood drama style, asked: “How are you feeling?” What?! How the hell was I supposed to be feeling as I lay flat in the grass like some third-rate actor in a bad cops and robbers movie who was about to be eliminated?

Fate is a strange thing. It sneaks up behind you and smacks you in the face when you’re least expecting it. I’m a firm believer that when it’s your time, it’s your time. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have the courage to go to the places I do. But as I’ve gotten older and the wrinkles have starting setting in, so too has the realisation

that standing in the line of exploding rockets may be tempting fate just a little too far.

During the last Israel-Gaza conflict, rockets were indeed exploding around me and while the journalist inside me was jumping up and down in glee, my other, saner side was screaming to get the hell out of there.

Next thing, the cameraman who until that point had been facing me and filming as I spoke live into the camera, turned and fled. Something was clearly up, but what kind of war correspondent would I be if I panicked and followed suit? I guessed – correctly as it turned out – that a Qassam rocket had landed a few hundred metres behind us. As the soil spattered everywhere, I chatted on about how dangerous the situation was. I was lucky I wasn’t killed. Later that evening, my News Editor phoned to congratulate me on how brave I’d been, when suddenly in mid sentence, he said: “Oh, you’re South African!” This apparently explained everything.

I once heard of an Indian journalist who was forced to his knees at gunpoint by masked fighters at a checkpoint. At the last moment they let him go. He scrambled over to his terrified cameraman who’d been watching events unfold from a short distance away.

“Tell me you got that on camera!” the exuberant reporter yelled. He was furious to discover that the answer was no.

Now there are two conclusions you could draw here: either it wasn’t his time, or we journalists are a very strange bunch of people. I’ll leave you to decide. 🌈

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As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo’burg-born Paula Slier has had her fair share of hair-raising adventures. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track.

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