

MEMORY

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WHISPERS

Twenty years after Tiananmen Square, a journalist
puts her experiences under the microscope

Elizabeth Pisani

In April 1989, frustrated students from Beijing's elite universities began squatting in Tiananmen Square. They had gathered there to mourn the death of former Communist Party Chairman Hu Yaobang, who had been pushed aside by the gerontocracy because of his enthusiasm for political reform. What started as wreath-laying and vague speech-making quickly swelled into open protest against the hard-faced premier, Li Peng. In mid-May, the students ratcheted up the drama with mass hunger strikes. Reinforcements streamed in from the provinces and a rash of tents erupted across the symbolic heart of the Chinese state.

From the centre of the chaos rose the Monument of the People's Heroes, its terraces occupied by student leaders and foreign journalists. Those on the north side of the monument looked into the steely eyes of Chairman Mao Zedong, whose portrait surveyed the Square from the Gate of Heavenly Peace, which bisects the city's main thoroughfare, Chang'an jie, the Avenue of Eternal Peace. In front of the Great Hall of the People on the western side of the Square was a



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Students protesting during the hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, May 1989

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makeshift medical centre for overzealous hunger strikers. On the other side, in front of the Museum of Chinese History, students from Hong Kong had set up a temporary canteen for non-strikers. It was grubby, haphazard, completely out of keeping with the intimidating majesty of the surrounding architecture, and it was a lot of fun. Students were escaping their overcrowded dorms, ignoring their time-serving lecturers, taking control of their lives and their country's future. They expressed themselves raucously through loudspeakers and sound systems that multiplied as the different groups grew more confident and began to squabble and fragment – those from Beijing elbowing each other around the monument, provincial students setting up headquarters in buses parked around the Square. They argued with one another as well as with a worker-run broadcast station and the government mouthpiece whose speakers were louder and clearer. It was a cacophony of democracy. But by the beginning of June, the law-and-order rhetoric pouring out of the government's loudspeakers was growing ever more uncompromising; patience was fraying and the city was growing sticky with tension.

I was a young reporter working for the Reuters news agency in Jakarta at the time. But as the protests dragged the small Beijing team deeper into exhaustion, the agency pulled in every Mandarin speaker they had. My degree in Chinese classics and history left me struggling for useful vocabulary, but it did at least provide some perspective. This was a Big Story on the daily news wires, but it was a Big Story in the sweep of Chinese history, too. I was ecstatic when I was sent first to cover the demonstrations in the southern city of Canton, then, at the end of May, to join the team in what we still called Peking. Realistic about my hubristic side and unimpressed by it, my editor sent me off with just one instruction: 'Remember, Elizabeth, a dead journalist is not a good journalist.'

So it was that Graham Earnshaw, then Reuters correspondent in Tokyo, and I spent the night of June 3–4 together in Tiananmen Square. In the letter of recommendation he wrote when I left Reuters,

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he said: 'On a more personal note, I'll never forget the night we spent together in Beijing.' And yet Graham and I remember it very differently. I discovered this about three years ago, when, scratching around on the Internet, I came across 'Graham Earnshaw's Memoirs', including an account of the events in Tiananmen Square that he had written in 2001. His narration was rich with the historical context and analysis you would expect of someone who has dedicated much of his life to decoding China, and full of the sharply observed detail of the talented journalist. And yet he had written me out of history, called into question the years of my dinner-party retellings of the events and undermined my faith in my own memory. I recall being in the Square when the tanks rolled in at dawn on June 4 to crush the demonstrations. In Graham's memory, I wasn't there.

I sulked for a couple of hours and then put it out of my mind. But now, with the twentieth anniversary of those events drawing near, I feel compelled to re-examine my memories. Ignoring decades of work by tens of thousands of neuroscientists, psychologists and philosophers, I thought I would run a very unscientific experiment, writing down as honestly as I can what I remember now about that night – the Late Record. Then I'll rummage around in my parents' basement in the hope of finding an account I wrote in 1989 – the Early Record. Then I'll trawl the Internet, hoping that Graham's memoirs, last seen three years ago, are still there – the Other Record. I'll lay the three memory outlines over each other like sheets of tracing paper to build up a map of that night. I'm interested most of all in the differences. Which facts and emotions did I lose? Have I found any new memories in the last two decades? Where, and why, are my memories different from those of my colleagues?

THE LATE RECORD, JANUARY 2009

Digging around in my memory, here's what I find: images that seem episodic, some in colour and pin-sharp, others in fuzzy black and white; scenes that don't flow naturally, edited together in my mind.

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Memories of June 3 begin some time in the early afternoon, when the sun grew hot and the Square was hung about with a stench that smeared itself on the back of the throat and stuck there. I was hungry. Well-funded American television stations had organized relays of beer and sandwiches for their crews on the front line but Reuters didn't stretch to deliveries. As big-boned South Africans swapped stories from war zones, downed the beer and swung their TV cameras about, I watched students stubbing out cigarettes and collapsing into a groaning heap in anticipation of the lens. Occasionally I translated their groans and suffering: 'I was beaten by a soldier who was crazed on drugs' – this from a broken boy who not five minutes before had been energetically triumphant in a card game. But I still hadn't been offered a sandwich.

The competing broadcasts were relentless. Many described a stand-off between troops and indignant citizens on the outskirts of the city, some raked over rumours of army insurrections and imminent assault. But in the fetid afternoon air there didn't seem much to be afraid of. Or rather, I don't remember being afraid. I passed my time interviewing student leaders.

'What is it you're really fighting for?'

'Democracy.'

'Okay, but what do you mean by democracy?'

'Freedom.'

'And how would you characterize freedom?'

'Democracy.'

Perhaps the subtleties of the argument were hidden by the thick regional accents: many of the Beijing-based students had drifted back to campus to sit their exams. Democracy and/or freedom are all very well, but one found that, beneath their idealism, many of the kids at the top universities understood that job qualifications were a better bet.

Reuters had an antediluvian mobile phone, nicknamed 'the brick', but the network was unreliable and the battery life brief. I'd been hoarding coins since my arrival in China, and that afternoon I scoped out the payphones around the Square, just in case. I was also looking

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for a modicum of privacy. Those war-bitten cameramen thought they'd seen it all, but none of them had ever had to change a Tampax in a revolution. Odd that my memories of that afternoon are so physical – the hunger, the bodily functions, the exhaustion. I was longing to lie down: I had that dry-behind-the-eyeballs feeling of the extremely sleep-deprived, as if a bare light bulb had been left on in my head and I couldn't switch it off. But I must have had an hour or two's sleep that morning, because I remember worrying, when I woke up, that my dreams of gunfire, beatings and troop movements would merge with my memory and creep into my reporting.

Then there's a blank; the image comes into focus again at nightfall. It is of a Reuters photographer hanging on a ladder in front of a public building – was it the history museum? – aiming his camera at angry crowds who were hurling stones and insults at blank-faced soldiers. A commander came out of the building and yelled at the crowds, yelled at the great blond photographer on his ladder. I yelled at him too. A dead photographer is not a good photographer. As the hysteria mounted, so did the volume on the warring loudspeakers. The government ordered everyone home. The students reported that troops were storming the barricades that the people of Beijing had erected at the main entry points to the city centre. Tanks were on the move and bullets were flying. Troop reinforcements were arriving at the railway station, they said.

I got on my bike and headed east along Chang'an jie towards the station. Beijing is a city that was designed to make people feel small in the face of the Emperor, its broad avenues marching straight ahead before lines of glowering public buildings. The avenue that led to the train station, just south of Jianguo Men (the Gate of National Sovereignty), was carpeted with soldiers, country boys with ringworm showing through their crew cuts, sitting on the ground in silence, waiting for something to happen.

Troops in the heart of Beijing. This was news, as far as I knew. I looked for a phone. Then somehow I was looking out at the soldiers from an empty Korean restaurant. I was attended by heavily painted

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working girls who let me use the phone, solved my personal hygiene dilemma and wouldn't let me go until I was fortified by noodles and kimchi.

I cycled back the way I had come but the Avenue of Eternal Peace had turned into what seemed like a war zone, invaded by heavy green tanks rumbling westwards towards the Square. I dashed into the Jianguo Hotel and called the Reuters bureau again.

'Tanks headed for the Square.'

A pause. 'Are you sure they're tanks?'

'Of course I'm sure, big green things, heavy, metal.'

'Not APCs?'

What's an APC? I thought. I usually report on badminton tournaments and the Jakarta stock market, goddamit.

A sigh. 'Wheels or treads?'

I ran out – wheels – ran back, redialled.

'That would be an armoured personnel carrier then. Do try to be accurate, Elizabeth.'

I returned to the Square. At the monument I found a clutch of journalists, including Graham, whose Chinese was far better than mine. I was glad to see him there. We looked out over the Square. Most of the canvas tents had been abandoned, most of the students who were still around were gathered up on the monument. The broadcasts continued: news of troop movements around the city, inspirational addresses from Hou Dejian, a Taiwanese pop star who was trying to revive the students' flagging spirits by squatting in the Square himself, taking on the hunger strike that the masses had already abandoned.

Suddenly, loud bangs and dotted arcs of fire rained into the Square: tracer bullets, designed to illuminate the target for heavier artillery and/or to scare the enemy. I remember thinking, God, those are beautiful, and Oh shit, this is for real, almost as one thought. The hardbitten camera crews picked up their tripods and left with as much bravado as they could muster: 'Got to protect the equipment.' Graham and I looked at each other. We weren't hotshot correspondents flown in from Jo'burg or Beirut or New York to cover yet another more or less interchangeable

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conflict. We were here because we'd studied Chinese history. Now we had a chance to witness it and we weren't going to give it up.

The last time we managed to get through to the office on the brick, our colleagues sounded nervous. A dead journalist is not a good journalist, but an editor who allows journalists to die is more or less a dead editor. The desk told us that we should leave, because our colleague, Andy Roche, was on the other side of the Square, 'phoning in all the same stuff'. I learned later that they told Andy he should leave because we were the other side of the Square, 'phoning in all the same stuff'. Shortly after that call Andy was arrested by thugs from military intelligence, badly beaten and dumped in a suburb. Perhaps the thugs knew what was about to happen and wanted to minimize witnesses. Perhaps Andy was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Unaware of this, Graham and I remained stubborn. And we remained in the Square.

June 3 melted into June 4, but still it was dark. Tiananmen Square covers a hundred acres. From the monument, it was hard for us to see what was going on under Chairman Mao's nose at the north end, where the Avenue of Eternal Peace passes the portrait of Mao. But at a certain point – when, I have no idea – we became aware that troops were massing up there. We made our way across to the east of the Square, in front of the history museum. Graham was limping – I didn't know whether from an injury or a childhood illness. Time passed and he broke out his stores: a can of Pepsi and a mint Aero bar, generously shared with me. Green chocolate. I inhaled it at the time. I've never been able to stomach it since.

At dawn, one of the student broadcast stations crackled back into life. It was Hou Dejian, the Taiwanese pop star. He'd taken it upon himself to go and negotiate with the general in charge of the troops at the north of the Square and he reported that they'd done a deal. The army would give the students until seven a.m. to clear out of the Square. After that, tanks would roll in and crush everything and everyone they found there.

'Since it's a democracy movement, we should take a vote,' the

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singer yelled. 'Should we stay or should we go?' From where I stood it sounded like a dead heat, but Hou, self-appointed arbiter of democracy, declared that the 'Go's' had it and said that the military had asked everyone to leave by the south-east corner of the Square. The motley group of students who had stuck out the confusion, the fear, the hunger, the stench – a few hundred, I'd say – hauled themselves wearily to their feet and started to head for safety.

It was an extraordinary moment, and a great story – the only time in history I could think of when a challenge to central authority in China had been dismissed without violence. And, of course, our phone was dead. Because I'd mapped out the public phones and because I was quicker on my feet, we decided that I should run and file the story, while Graham witnessed the rest of the withdrawal. I ran past the front of the museum and dived into an alleyway just off the Square, but the payphone cord had been cut. I couldn't find my bike, so I took someone else's and set off northwards, sticking to the east side of the Square and heading for Chang'an jie. One part of my brain was writing the lead to the biggest story of my career so far: 'Taiwanese pop star negotiates peaceful end to student demonstrations'. And, with another part of my brain: 'Those are APCs rolling towards me, not tanks. Do try to be accurate, Elizabeth.' It was about five in the morning.

There were two other civilians on foot ahead of me going in the same direction. It wasn't until the second one crumpled before my eyes, a blow-up doll deflated by a bullet from a figure who'd popped out of a hatch in the APC closest to us, that my brain put the two parts of the picture together and realized that they didn't match. I turned tail and pedalled furiously back down the side of the Square to Graham. I still have the image in my mind of a kid in a white coat, a medical student, who was scooping a fallen body up on to the flatbed of a transport tricycle. I seem to remember a white hatchback with a red cross on it and the incongruous words: GIFT FROM THE PEOPLE OF ITALY. I saw a tank, definitely a tank, roll over a pack of bicycles, and found myself worrying that mine might be in the mangle. I worried,

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too, about Graham, who couldn't run very fast, who needed somewhere safe to wait out the chaos.

He was still where I'd left him, on the side of the Square close to the history museum. We set off together down another side alley, this time to the south-east. More dead payphones. Much chaos. A family had opened the gates to a compound and they let Graham in, grudgingly.

I had to file the story, but I also had my editor sitting on my shoulder whispering 'dead is not good'. Although I hadn't used it yet, I knew Reuters had a room on the fourth floor of the nearby Peking Hotel for journalists to rest in on breaks between reporting. That would be safe and my colleague James Kynge, who had been reporting for several days straight and had been given the room for the night, might have a phone that worked. But the hotel was the other side of Chang'an jie, and the Avenue of Eternal Peace was less peaceful than ever, with wave after wave of tanks progressing westwards down it towards the north of the Square. In my memory, I dashed across the line of fire in order to file the story. Though perhaps that came with the retelling. Perhaps, actually, I slunk through one of the many urine-puddled underpasses where, in quieter times, moon-faced Uighur boys shook down backpackers for dollars. I simply can't be sure.

Now, another clear, polished bit. When I got to the Peking Hotel I found the front door barred, a line of soldiers standing wide-legged behind the locked glass. No one was getting in or out.

Then came the memory of a long, lazy summer in my backpacking years. An American spy whom I had met on a train platform in the furthest reaches of western China had lent me a room in the Peking Hotel; an unutterable luxury compared with the fleapits of my travels. On another train platform, further east in Xi'an, I'd met a pretty American boy. We shared a bunk on the train to Beijing where he was shoe-horned into an overcrowded student dorm. When the spy was called away, it seemed a shame not to have the pretty boy share my luxurious quarters. On the other hand, I didn't want to abuse the spy's hospitality by being indiscreet. So it was that I learned about the side entrances to the Peking Hotel, the ones used by the delivery boys and

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engineers. Now, with tanks rolling along the avenue behind me, I felt my way back to one of those service doors and was in.

I went straight for the bank of payphones on the ground floor. All dead. I headed for the Reuters room, but when the lift doors opened on the fourth floor, they opened on to a construction site. I must have looked absolutely devastated because someone else in the lift, from his haircut and dress an overseas Chinese, asked if he could help. 'A phone. I need a phone.'

He took me to a room on one of the highest floors and knocked an 'it's only me' rat-tat-tat code. The door opened, but there was nobody there. Then I looked down. The room was crowded, but everyone was snaking around on the floor on their bellies, fearful that a stray bullet might make it up seven floors, through the concrete balcony and double-glazed window and into the room.

My stomach wobbled as I picked up the phone. Miraculously, it was working. I called the Reuters bureau and my words tripped over one another in the rush to be heard. After a sentence, 'Hold on.' Click, the newsflash hit the world: CHINESE TROOPS ENTER SQUARE, FIRE ON STUDENTS.

'Go.'

More racing, stumbling, tripping.

'Hold on.'

Tap, tap, tap, click. That was the newsbreak, the one-sentence lead. I drew breath. 'Go.'

I told of the pop star, the negotiation, the promise, the betrayal. Paragraph by paragraph my fractured account was woven together by my colleague Bob Basler, hitting the news wires in flawless prose.

When I ran dry, 'Good. Are you okay?' I gave news of Graham and was told to join James in the Reuters room. It was indeed on the fourth floor of the Peking Hotel but in the old block; I had gone to the new, high-rise tower by mistake. As I left, the Hong Kong journalists were off their bellies and fighting for the phone, so that they could phone in their own 'eyewitness accounts' to their editors.

What else do I remember from that time? Crawling around the

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rooftop of the Peking Hotel with James later that day and the next, trying for a bird's-eye view of the Square (we could see the final barricade, but no one could see into the Square itself). Phoning in every microscopic troop movement, until the desk cracked with boredom and pleaded with us to stop. Watching the citizens of Beijing surge forward on to the barricades, taunting the teenage soldiers and calling them names until they, too, cracked. They would leap up from their seated ranks and charge towards the barricades, firing the occasional shot, mowing down the odd enraged citizen. Then they would turn and saunter back to their spot. On one occasion, a soldier wheeled around a second time, casually picking off a figure who had rushed forward to claim a fallen body. For some reason this upset me more than anything else I saw.

I can visualize the image of a naked body strung up by the neck, hanging from a burnt-out tank in broad daylight. The tank is facing west, the body hanging from its south side, Mao's portrait to the north. Flies buzzing. A smell. But can I have seen that, heard it, smelled it? Not before June 4, surely, because I wasn't aware of any deaths before then. And not after, because we couldn't get near enough the Square to have a fix on Mao's portrait.

I remember, a day or two later, walking north-east across Beijing to get back to the office in San Li Tun, an area that was then dominated by diplomats and has now been overrun by thumping music bars. Even before I'd left, my colleagues had gone into boy mode, stacking up on soft drinks and chocolate. I was pretty sure they'd be in need of something healthier and stopped at the market. I bought heaps of strawberries, apricots and lettuce. When I got to the office I gave these to the cleaning ladies to wash. There was a sharp intake of breath. The cleaning ladies worked for the Chinese intelligence services; they weren't expected to do any actual cleaning. But having been asked, they had to play their roles.

When I sat down to read the wires, I saw that we had just filed a story about the city being strangled into starvation because no food could reach the markets. Later, when the Reuters staff magazine asked for a

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photo of me in action reporting the crisis, the only shot I could find was one of me holding plates of strawberries and apricots. What a hero!

THE EARLY RECORD V. THE LATE RECORD (WITH INTERVENTIONS FROM THE OTHER RECORD)

My basement excavations have led me to a folder containing thirteen yellowing handwritten pages, titled 'A Summer's Morning in Beijing'. It's an account that I wrote in 1989, perhaps because I feared exactly the sort of forgetting that is with me now. I can't remember when I wrote it; some time after the twenty-four-hour window in which most experiences get written from our short- to our long-term memories, certainly, but no more than a few weeks after the 'unforgettable night'. And on the Web, I've found Graham's account. Having committed the Late Record to paper, sitting down to read my early account and Graham's makes me feel slightly sick, as if I'm about to exhume a dead body.

The Early Record, written in 1989, agrees with the Late Record in recounting exhaustion, hunger, Tampax, mint Aero and the dinner provided by Korean hookers. All the physical stuff, strongly felt but tied very loosely to specific times or places. Encouragingly, the Early Record also agrees with Graham's account on virtually everything that we witnessed together until, with no explanation, he pushes the button on me and makes me evaporate:

I stayed. I moved at some point over to the kerb on the side of the Square, under the trees. The students remaining had grouped themselves around the Monument. Elizabeth left and went back to the Peking Hotel to get word of what was happening on the Square through to Reuters office and the world...

Graham airbrushes out any possibility that I could have travelled up towards the troops, watched them roll towards me, witnessed a civilian shot just a few metres in front of me, because he has me gone long before dawn. With the loss of my place in the Square that morning

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I also lose an important part of my sense of self, someone who, just once, witnessed history.

From the Early Record, I can now see that over the last twenty years, I've run a couple of days together. I wasn't even in the Square on the afternoon of June 3, the time I remember spending scoping out payphones, translating student soap operas for the cameramen, feeling nauseous in the thickening smell of a warm afternoon. Those things must have happened the day before, because I spent that afternoon in the Reuters office, trying to make myself useful and waiting for my shift in the Square, which didn't start until close to dusk.

That's when the accounts start to agree again, around the time things are getting ugly and the photographer is setting himself up on his ladder. It wasn't at the history museum that the students began to hurl stones, but at the back of the Great Hall of the People, which lies on the other side of the Square. The Early Record describes the attack on the hall in some detail. Though I have climbed a tree for a better view, the photographer on the ladder doesn't appear. Here's what I wrote:

Workers are lobbing rocks, smashing those fancy streetlamps inside the compound, ripping up the railings and using them to smash up paving stones for ammo... Occasionally, a lobby of stones will come back the other way... At one stage [the workers] force the gate open but stop on the threshold, as if suddenly aware that they are at the Point of No Return. They politely close the gates again, and continue to hurl stones.

The ugliness was, it seems, localized. In the vastness of the Square I go on to find friendly exchanges between soldiers, citizens and students, swaps of cigarettes and water, orchestrated singing of patriotic songs by all and sundry. Things are relaxed enough for me to go off with another reporter, United Press International's Jonathan Landay, to find food.

Miserably unsuccessful, but we kill a couple of cold beers and talk about the hopelessness of keeping a marriage/relationship intact in this absurd business.

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I did cycle towards the train station, as I now remember, and I did find soldiers with guns. But the scene was less tense than I now recall. At the time I found them ‘sitting on the road. Some are smoking, some are lying down in the laps of others...’

I describe people handing their kids up to sit on soldiers’ laps, citizens exchanging cigarettes for a look at their semi-automatic weapons. I do duck into a Korean girlie bar to use the phone, calling in a report of heavily armed troops in central Beijing, but even as I do I talk of the ‘general friendliness of the scene’.

Two decades of polishing the story of my night of terror in Beijing has worn away the relaxed moments, the cold beers and suburban gossip, the companionable stand-off that persisted until close to midnight. Is that because aggression makes for a better story, and makes me a braver witness, a more dedicated journalist? Or has my memory been remade in the image of history’s judgement? Have I rubbed out all the bits that don’t fit with the narrative that we seem collectively to have agreed on: a nakedly aggressive military machinery bent on crushing democratic aspirations at any price?

I’m relieved that, although some details differ, on the major points of history all three accounts agree: the camera crews left early ‘to protect the equipment’ and when the remaining journalists decided to leave once the troops started massing, Graham and I stayed. And though Graham then sends me away, his own account also contains the peace deal brokered by the pop star, the vote, the exodus. My Early and Late Records agree on my journey northwards across the Square in search of a phone, although I was apparently on foot and not on a bike. They agree on the troops coming down the Square towards me, on the two other civilians stumbling towards the troops ahead of me:

The one furthest in front (about 10 metres from me) gets set upon by foot soldiers who have these big rubber whip things. The top to the nearest APC pops open, a couple of shots dance around the three of us and the second chap, about 5 metres in front of me, goes down. I turn tail. By the time I am level with the history museum the med students are loading limp bodies on to makeshift stretchers

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and into ambulances. For the 15 minutes that I am around after this, the stream of bodies, stretchers, ambulances is more or less constant. At a distance of even a metre it is hard to tell an unconscious body from a corpse, and I cannot swear before my heart that several dozen people died on the Square. I can and did save my only tears for the inevitable moment when official television announced: 'not a single person died in Tiananmen Square'.

Memory is abstract, personal, unknowable. It can encompass the random and the inexplicable, just as dream sequences can. But once memories are written down, or otherwise committed to the record, they assume a life of their own. They become less malleable and must assume a more coherent shape. We take fragments of memory and weave them together into patterns as best we can. We darn or embroider any holes with threads of things that happened in our readings, in our conversations with others who really were there, in our dreams. Those then become part of the fabric of our storytelling, so that soon enough it is impossible to say what was remembered and what was embroidered. They become our memories, in the way that the soldier's blackened body hanging from a tank has become part of my memory. Here's what Graham says about that incident:

The Reuters photographers had some extraordinary pictures, including stuff shot by a totally crazy American cowboy who gloried in the named of Rambo – a tall, lanky guy with bleached blond hair who took the most insane risks... His most memorable photo for me was of a PLA soldier hanging from a bus at the Xidan intersection on Changan Avenue to the west of Tiananmen Square. The soldier's body was burnt to a crisp. It was disgusting, and it was decided not to send it to subscribers.

I'm now convinced I saw the photo, not the reality, but at least my memory about a blond photographer up a ladder making a target of himself now makes sense.

We need stories to impose order on events and emotions that would otherwise seem disjointed. When I'd called the Reuters bureau close to

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midnight and remarked on the 'general friendliness of the scene', Bob Basler had replied, 'Well it's not so friendly where Guy is [Guy Dinmore was Reuters Bureau Chief in Beijing]. They're killing people in the west of town.' There were hundreds of foreign journalists in Beijing that night, and tens of thousands of citizens on the streets. Many witnessed some form of shooting, saw bodies fall, watched blood pools spreading. Most of the journalists were also sleep-deprived, thirsty, frightened, needing to pee or eat; many were confused by a cacophony of orders, exhortations, pleadings in a language they didn't speak. And each one of us could only observe a tiny corner of a story that would be one of the biggest of our lives. In those circumstances, to say 'I've no idea what's going on' just won't do.

Foreigners with a special interest in China know that 'the Tiananmen massacre' acts as a convenient shorthand for a much messier and certainly very bloody reality that affected the whole of Beijing. But for many other people outside China, the narrative has been rewritten around that single geographical point. For many people in China, of course, there's no narrative at all. The events of that night have been wiped from the record entirely. So much so that three editors on a provincial newspaper were sacked in 2007 because a young clerk, clueless about what had happened eighteen years before, allowed a tribute to the victims of '4/6' to slip into the classified ads column.

Journalism, it is said, is the first draft of history. But this first draft is edited before it even hits the page, or the airwaves, by individual journalists who weave facts into a story that will engage the reader. It then gets edited over time into the dominant narrative. Details that seemed important to a reporter in the moment – friendly troops, babies on laps – get drowned by larger events and eventually disappear.

But whether or not we are honest about it, the knowledge that our journalism shapes our personal narratives affects what we report at least as much as the hunger, fear, exhaustion and hubris that occupy large parts of our minds in a war zone. While we pretend to ourselves that we are neutral observers, simply recording events as we see them, we all want to be at the centre of the stories we tell.

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I have never doubted that I left the Square with Graham. When I found my 1989 account of events, here is what it said:

I explained that we needed a phone, and a kid volunteered to take me on his bike. We thought it best, at that point, to leave the Square together and so followed this kid... around into that alley with the restaurant that was never open when I was hungry... Finally, the kid offered us the bike. 'Just take it.' Graham looked agitated as I tried to swing my crotch over a crossbar that would have been a better fit for my armpit. Wobbled, crashed, tried again, wobbled again, but this time in the direction of the Beijing Fandian [Peking Hotel].

This was of no conceivable historical importance. In the second draft of history this little description would certainly be on the editor's spike. So why did I feel the need to record it in such detail, two decades ago, and why do I seize on it now? Because my presence in Tiananmen Square when the troops started moving across it is fundamental to my identity. It's of no importance to Graham, of course. His memory doesn't have to hold on to my wobbling away on a bike. I hold on to Graham in my memory perhaps because it allows me to play the hero. In the Late Record I made sure he was taken by a family into a compound, that he was safe, before going off to file the story. In fact, I left Graham standing in an alleyway. In any case, he was demonstrably in no need of help from me, but my imagined act of altruism has been much rehearsed in subsequent retellings.

Neither the Early Record nor the Late Record finds me afraid. This is surprising because at the time, I was apparently contemplating death. I don't remember these thoughts now, but in 1989 I recorded them in the purple prose of the twenty-four-year-old:

The air is light with the intoxicating fumes of impending martyrdom. I think these kids, like me, are protected by the arrogance of youth from contemplating anything so dusty as death... Better to have someone else weeping for the life we might have led than to have to do it ourselves after decades of smudged dreams.

ELIZABETH PISANI

Just now, when I came to write the Late Record, I couldn't actually recall the thumping in the chest and clenching of the genitals that say: I'm scared. And yet I'm aware that fear hangs heavy over dinner-table retellings. Confessing that I was afraid makes me seem at once braver (I hung in there despite my fear) and more human (I'm not ashamed to admit my vulnerability, even in a world where everyone drinks testosterone for breakfast). Saying I was terrified makes for a better story. It also makes me a liar.

I am the sum of my experiences, but does that mean the events and emotions that I lived through, or the sum of my experiences as I now remember them, grow muscular, honed and polished with years of retelling? Can I claim as my own the feelings, images, thoughts that I have sucked back in from the collective memory? Do I become a different person as my memory changes, or do I change my memories because I am becoming a different person?

Like Graham, I will never forget the night we spent in Beijing. But I'm resigned to the fact that the landscapes of memory shift constantly. We can overlay as many records as we like, but we'll never tell the same story twice. ■