

Clarissa Ward FINE

Clarissa Ward: [00:00:00] There was this massive blast. And as we were sort of running in the sort of most protected area of the bureau, there was a second blast. And then the third blast came. And I remember it so clearly in my mind, two thoughts, number one, I really might die. This could be it. And number two, what am I doing here?

Ramita Navai: From *Aurra Studios*. This is **The Line of Fire** with me Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talked to fellow journalists about covering war and the life changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**. [00:01:00]

I'm very excited about my guest today. She's the multi award-winning, multilingual, Chief International Correspondent for *CNN* - by the way, we're talking nine Emmys and six languages - Clarissa Ward. Clarissa made her mark by doggedly covering the Syrian war, returning to the country over a dozen times, often undercover.

And in 2016, she addressed a UN security council meeting on the situation in Aleppo. Clarissa, welcome.

Clarissa Ward: Thank you so much for having me.

Ramita Navai: Clarissa, we actually met years ago through mutual friends and in the meantime you have become a megastar, [**Clarissa laughs**] but what hasn't changed is that you are still as generous and gracious with colleagues as you have always been.

Which [00:02:00] I would like to say is very rare among journalists.

Clarissa Ward: Oh, thank you. I think it's really important.

Ramita Navai: Well, that's always struck me about you, actually, Clarissa. How did you get into journalism and why journalism?

Clarissa Ward: So I had no idea that I wanted to be a journalist. I was studying comparative literature at Yale.

I actually thought I wanted to be an actress, which I sort of cringe when I remember that. But that's the truth.

Ramita Navai: Didn't we all darling? Didn't we all?

[Both laugh]

Clarissa Ward: And then my senior year, I was doing Russian classes and 9/11 happened and it just sort of turned my world upside down. I think for the first time ever, it really made me stop and think about what was going on in the world. I felt a sense of shame that I'd been so self-absorbed and immersed in this frivolity of self-exploration. And I had this strong sense of a calling or a vocation that I was somehow meant to [00:03:00] try to help be a communicator or a translator between worlds.

And, of course, I was very fuzzy on the details. I didn't really understand what that meant. I knew that I wanted to go to the tip of the spear, wherever that was, and try to understand the people on the other side of it better and try to improve our understanding in the West. And that's how it's started.

It was just - My whole life changed in a moment.

Ramita Navai: And were you drawn to conflict in particular?

Clarissa Ward: I was and for no understandable reason. It just seemed to me that as this thing was playing out, you know, Afghanistan was the place I wanted to go, then Iraq was the place I wanted to go. I always wanted to go to the hardest to get to places and talk to people that I had been told are the enemy, that I had been told are evil, that I had been told you can't talk to.

And that only made me want to engage more and understand [00:04:00] more and have a better sense of perspective on what was really happening.

Ramita Navai: Tell me about the first conflict you covered.

Clarissa Ward: So the first conflict I covered was Iraq.

Ramita Navai explainer: American and British troops invaded Iraq in March 2003, accusing President Saddam Hussein of having weapons of mass destruction - a claim that turned out to be untrue. In just three weeks the regime

was toppled and Iraq's major cities were captured. But terrible planning and an apparent ignorance of Iraqi society meant the invasion was an unmitigated disaster. It gave birth to a violent insurgency and triggered a civil war leaving nearly half a million people dead.

Clarissa Ward: I was 25 years old. I had absolutely no business in a war zone. I had no idea what I was doing, but you know, all of us have to start somewhere. And I was so thrilled, everything about it.

I was petrified, of course, but I was so excited. I felt like I was in a movie and I got off the aeroplane and they're, you know, giant American soldiers with like huge machine guns. And I was putting on a bulletproof vest and, you know, driving in an armoured vehicle and security guards, you know, talking in like, you know, Lima Charlie to Alpha Romeo talk on the radio.

It just felt like next level thrilling. And every pore of my body was absorbing new stimulus and new [00:05:00] information and learning and learning. It was unbelievably exciting. Of course, you know, you quickly get a sense of the fact that, like, actually war is not always exciting and often horrifying. But in the beginning, it was just thrill.

Ramita Navai: Yeah, and that's really honest because it is undeniably exciting the first few times you do it, isn't it?

Clarissa Ward: Oh, absolutely.

Ramita Navai: I don't believe anyone who says otherwise and that's in a way that's why we are drawn to it. There is that bit of us that likes adventure and it's hard to say isn't it.

Because it is war. It's ugly and these are people's lives and you learn pretty fast that this isn't exciting and glamorous.

Clarissa Ward: Yeah. But no, you're so right. I remember talking to my friend, Austin Tice who, in 2012, actually disappeared in Syria. He was captured by the regime. But we were having this conversation about why do you do this?

And I was all, you know, oh, it's the voice for the voiceless, which is part [00:06:00] of it, okay? But he was much more honest and he was like, I do this because I'd rather eat garbage than go to an office [**Clarissa laughs**] every day

and sit. And you know what? That is part of it. There is a sense that is a life less ordinary.

And for many of us, I think the idea of having a more conventional job it's just too boring. It's I don't have the discipline for it, whatever it might be. There is an element that the unusualness of it is a part of the attraction.

Ramita Navai: How long did it take for you to see the reality of it?

Clarissa Ward: So the first trip I did, I was there for six weeks.

I don't think I really saw the reality of it at all. It was very exciting. I went out with the military. I was learning so much, as I said. And then I went back three months later in October and it was during Ramadan and we had just had the call for Iftar, the Macra prayer. And just as [00:07:00], you know, the Azzam was finishing, there was this massive blast. We were staying in a hotel called the Palestine hotel, which was a very well known, huge edifice, like right in central Baghdad. And I knew immediately, you heard blasts all the time, but this was much closer. The windows smashed. And then as we were sort of running to gather in the middle, in the sort of most protected area of the bureau, there was a second blast.

Again, huge blast, doors were kind of coming off their hinges and our security guy was telling us you need to collect your run bags. You know, you always have to have your run bag in your room with your passport, some money, your phone, something to eat. And I remember one of my colleagues couldn't find her shoes and she was like, "I can't find my shoe."

Like everyone was in a daze and kind of in shock. And it was this petrifying moment because you knew after [00:08:00] the second blast that this wasn't just, oh, we were quite close, that this was some kind of a coordinated attack and most likely on our position.

And then the third blast came, which we soon learned was a massive cement mixer truck full of explosives.

So it was a blast unlike - honestly to this day, I've never been in an explosion like that before. Parts of - like there was smoke in the room and like, you know, crumbling bits from the ceiling and every piece of glass broke, the doors flew off their handles. People were kind of, very luckily, just cuts and bruises. But that

was a moment where I for the first time, and I remember it so clearly in my mind, it was two thoughts: number one, I really might die. Like this is actually, this could be it. [00:09:00] This could be death. And number two, what am I doing here? How is it possible that me Clarissa Ward from the US, the UK is going to die here. Like this makes zero sense. I don't belong here. I don't belong here.

But then what happened almost as quickly afterwards is that it was quiet for 10 minutes. We left the safe room. We had been standing in this safe room. We start sweeping up a bit. We realize that the attack is over. We, you know, do lots of live shots. Then we stay up late drinking whiskey and like reliving it.

And when you relive it and you tell it there's this kind of veil between you and the actual visceral experience of it. So that suddenly it becomes, again, like something that was sort of - you're excited about it. Not excited in the sense of being glad, but there's this thrill [00:10:00] of having survived and that naked, acrid, bitter, bile of fear that you experienced in the moment, there's now a veil between you and that. And that's how you get hooked I think in this industry. Because you have the epiphany in the moment: I could die and I don't belong here, this is insanity. But then it passes because you survive. And surviving is thrilling. And that is something that I think all of us have to be really mindful of at least and spend a lot of time thinking about what that means and why we do this.

Ramita Navai: Do you think it is an addiction?

Clarissa Ward: I would say for me it's not the danger part that is an addiction but it is definitely the adventure part is a little bit addictive, yes. And I know you're not really supposed to admit that but honestly I think it's part of it.

Ramita Navai: For me too.

Clarissa Ward: And I think the other part that's kind of addictive is, like, I love, you know, my worst nightmare, I mean I can do it, is like standing at a cocktail party and making small talk with people. First of all, I get, like, really sore feet and it just bugs me, I want to sit down. But secondly, I want to get under the skin of people and that's what excites me. And [00:12:00] in war zones, a lot of the kind of trappings of just every day are just gone, they just don't exist, no one cares, no one's got time for them.

And so it is more raw and it does feel more authentic and you do have these extraordinary moments of insight into people's lives or sharing with them in some pretty profound moments. And that is also I think kind of addictive because it feels so much more important and so much more real than when you come back to London or you're in New York and, you know, you're talking about COVID and the weather and it's like, oh, I mean, it's just so different.

Ramita Navai: You mentioned your friend Austin Tice who is still missing. Can you tell me about your friendship with him and what happened?

Clarissa Ward: So my friendship with Austin is really interesting because it's a friendship that I think speaks volumes about this work. We never met in person. But we began messaging each other nonstop because we were both obsessed with Syria. But there's a funny thing sometimes with your [00:15:00] direct colleagues, it's harder to be vulnerable and it's harder to be emotional and it's harder to say I'm struggling with this or that or, you know, be really frank with them about your feelings. But with Austin I could because it was safe because he cared about Syria the way I did, he felt emotionally engaged the way I did, but he wasn't a competitor or a colleague, you know, he's a print journalist, a freelancer, a law school student, former military, Marines captain who had done tours in Afghanistan and Iraq and had a great sense of humour. And he's very funny and very smart. And so we just were obsessively emailing each other, like 15, 20 times a day. And what I started to notice with Austin was that he was taking risks that I would never take. And in the beginning, I chalked that up to the fact that he used to be in the military and so he has much more experience and he knows what he's doing.

[00:16:00] But then I also understood that because he'd been inside for a couple of months. It's very easy...

Ramita Navai: Inside Syria?

Clarissa Ward: Inside Syria. He had been inside Syria, I was in Turkey. Then I was in Syria for a week. Then I was in Turkey again. Then I was actually on vacation. But I would never spend more than a week or two in Syria at a time because A. It's so dangerous. But B. And you may have found this as well, if you start to spend a long time in a place, you become desensitized to the risk.

Ramita Navai: Yes.

Clarissa Ward: And you're willing to take more and more and more risks. Initially you'd be like, I never do that. It's like the analogy of the frog that is being boiled slowly. If you dip the frog's toe in hot water, it's going to be like Ah! and hop out. But if you slowly heat the water while the frog's in it, it will ultimately boil.

So with Austin, I had the sense that he had been in there too long and he was taking too many risks and then we were supposed to meet up in Lebanon. I kept trying to encourage him to leave [00:17:00] and take a break and he was going to meet his girlfriend at the time in Lebanon.

And I flew to Beirut to meet a up with him and do some stories there. And he never came.

He never came. And that was another moment, honestly, on par with that Iraq moment where I understood like - again, like in my mind, Austin had become a character in a movie who was able to dodge bombs and knew how to navigate this terrain because he was a former Marine.

And again, it was a reality check of like, this is war. No one's invincible. You have to be cautious. You have to be mindful. Like you have to be humble. You have to be really, really humble. And that was, you know, nine and a half years ago.

Ramita Navai: And how did that affect you?

Clarissa Ward: At the time, [00:18:00] honestly, it affected me more than almost any other experience I've had in a warzone. Because, first of all, I was so excited to meet him. So it was that feeling of waiting for someone and planning all the things you're going to do. We're going to go here. We're going to have drinks. I'm going to take him and his girlfriend to this great restaurant. Because I had lived in Beirut and I knew the city really well. So first of all, there's just the shock of like, is he coming tomorrow? No. And then you're looking at your phone. Well, maybe he got stuck for a day and he'll be, you know? And then two days go by and then three days and then four days. And then I...

Ramita Navai: So you'd arranged to meet and that's how you found out that he?

Clarissa Ward: Yes, I had to go and pick his girlfriend up from the airport. And I just remember her like sobbing in my arms.

And then every day we're like combing through all these photographs of piles of corpses, you know, the aftermath of regime massacres looking at the arms, did it have Austin's tattoo? [00:19:00] Making phone calls, Skypes, all night with his girlfriend and also my colleague who's a print reporter, Nancy Yusuf, who had been working with him.

And it was just horrifying. I stopped eating. I could barely function. Then three weeks later, a video came out of him. They did this bizarre video that was designed to look like a jihadist video, but pretty obviously wasn't, but still left you with that chilling horror of seeing someone who you really care about begging for their life, which is just about the worst thing that you can see.

Ramita Navai: Did that change you, Clarissa? Did that change the way you approached work, change your perspective on this industry and this job?

Clarissa Ward: I think it did in two ways. I mean, [00:20:00] that was sort of the beginning of a deepening obsession with Syria, which ultimately manifested itself in a pretty profound depression.

So, my answer, my way of dealing with that was to go back again, which I did, like three weeks later I went to Aleppo. And to keep trying to go back and...

Ramita Navai: Which was incredibly risky.

Clarissa Ward: It was very risky. And it was also with hindsight probably not the best. I was very fragile and I think I was unwilling to confront that. So I just kept pushing myself harder.

And it was compounded by not just my concern and sadness about Austin, but then through Austin going missing, I became friends with Jim Foley because Jim Foley was a friend of Austin's and then Jim Foley was kidnapped, you know, and then my friend Pete [00:21:00] Kassig from Beirut was kidnapped, and then they were execut[ed].

And so you're just having these moments of like, how is this my life? How is this my life? Like, how did this like spoiled kid, like, you know, who went to all the best private schools end up deeply embroiled in a conflict far away from anything I had grown up with. With friends who are being kidnapped and killed and murdered.

Ramita Navai explainer: James Foley was the first American journalist to be killed by ISIS. He was kidnapped in 2012 and held hostage for nearly two years, during which time President Obama ordered a rescue attempt. The mission failed as Foley and other hostages he was being held with had been moved. Only weeks later, ISIS released a video of Foley being beheaded. Peter Kassig, who Clarissa also mentions, was a 26-year-old American aid worker from Indianapolis, who was delivering food and aid to refugees when he too was kidnapped and later beheaded by ISIS.

Clarissa Ward: I mean you just have a sense that you have gone so far from anything you had prepared for mentally or could have imagined for yourself that you really do have to try at a certain point, or this is the way I did it, to just stop. Just stop what [00:22:00] you're doing for a minute and try to process some of this stuff. Because this was like three, four years of not processing it.

I had never even seen a therapist at this stage, which is, like, nuts. I mean, the stuff we were dealing with was very, very intense and, you know, a lot of grief and a lot of guilt for not being able to solve the Syrian crisis and help the Syrian people. So I did. I basically stopped going to Syria for a while.

Ramita Navai: And what was it then that caused you to stop?

Clarissa Ward: I think it was because my life was falling apart a little bit at home. I was finding it very difficult to be present with my husband. You know, just like lying in bed and just like crying all the time.

And I was eating but I was so consumed with stress that I was like a twiglet. And I remember there's a doctor at CBS where I used to work called Dr. John LaPook, who's a lovely man, and he said, you know, "Clarissa, I'm really concerned by how thin you are." And I said, I don't understand because [00:25:00] I'm eating.

He was like, sometimes your body can go into this like an anorexia mode even if you are eating. Where you are just so stressed that you're just not absorbing the nutrients literally and not taking care of yourself basically.

Ramita Navai: Was it post-traumatic stress? What was it do you think?

Clarissa Ward: I don't know if it was post-traumatic stress.

I mean, I don't think it was, I think it was depression on the back of just like way too much stress. I think it was massive burnout at not being able to sustain that level of emotional and physical engagement with a tragedy that was breaking me on a personal level. But even just the idea of Syria, I just struggled with so much. That this horrendous massacre was taking place and there's nothing anyone could do about it. But ultimately, I think it was my family and my husband being like, okay, you really need to talk to someone and try to deal with this or else it's going to consume you.

Ramita Navai: And was that therapy?

Clarissa Ward: Yeah. Yeah, it was therapy and I went with a wonderful therapist called Mark Brayne who has worked with a lot of journalists and he does EMDR, which is about, you know, sort of like going back to like triggering moments and trying to...

Ramita Navai: So that's rapid eye movement therapy isn't it?

Clarissa Ward: Yeah, sort of, yeah, exactly. And I just think in general that it's a good thing to, like, be more aware of what's happening, not just on the surface up here, but on multiple levels. Like, why am I still doing this? Why am I drawn to this? When I feel that yearning to go back to Syria, what's it really? Is it really about Syria? Or is it about also all sorts of stuff that I haven't really unpacked yet? And so I found it very helpful.

Ramita Navai: You mentioned that when you were going through this, it obviously made [00:27:00] your home life harder. How do you deal with that? That we go from these situations of kind of where everything's heightened, everything's really intense, high adrenaline, and then we come back home and nobody's talking about this far away war and these terrible things we've seen and these killings. And how do you reconcile yourself with that?

Clarissa Ward: Yeah, it's funny you should mention that because I have such a strong memory of being in my family's home in Provence where my parents live in the south of France. And I had just come out of Aleppo and everyone was like sitting by the pool and my husband was there and like some of my best friends and everyone's drinking rosé and like relaxing and it's beautiful weather. And someone was like, "Oh, tell us about Syria."

And I literally felt like this, like, [**Clarissa pretends to be sick**]. I almost retched because I was like I'm never going to speak about Syria in this context

because Syria is sacred and I can't share. I love you all, but I can't really be fully present in this moment with you. Because I'm consumed with guilt. First of all, like people are being, you know, bombarded in Aleppo and stuck under a pile of rubble and I'm sitting here drinking rosé by a swimming pool, just because I randomly have this passport which means that I get to like check in and out. I mean, how do you make sense of that? It's really, really hard. I think it takes years to make sense of, like, the randomness of privilege. And how do you reconcile navigating shuttling between two different worlds and ultimately you have to.

If you want to keep doing this job for a long time, you have to say I choose to embrace joy, I choose to embrace love, I choose to embrace laughter, I choose to embrace [00:29:00] friendship, I choose to embrace rosé. Whatever it is that does it for you. I choose to allow myself that. Because this self-flagellation that is a very natural instinct when you leave a war zone doesn't help anyone. It doesn't help you. And it means ultimately that you're not filling the tank. And if you don't fill the tank, you can't go back and do it all over again. So you have to just make a conscious decision, I don't know why the world is like this, I accept that it's totally random and totally unfair and it's very important that I feel that and I'm conscious of that every day, but I'm also not going to beat myself up. I'm going to, like, choose to embrace these privileges that I have.

Ramita Navai: Yeah and I totally understand, Clarissa, that guilt of feeling like you have to serve up a horror as an anecdote when people ask you and you feel nothing but, yeah, just utter sadness and disappointment. And there are great stories there, but you feel kind of dirty.

Clarissa Ward: Yeah, it feels cheap. It feels cheap. And there will be spaces occasionally where I'll be sitting with a friend and they'll be like, I really want you to tell me about this.

And then I will. But if it's ever in a kind of like, oh, well, so how was that? I'm like, I can't. This can't be a casual conversation.

Ramita Navai: I hope this isn't making you feel cheap, Clarissa.

[Both laugh]

Clarissa Ward: No. This is the opposite. Because this is like, you know, this is...

Ramita Navai: Sometimes I like to feel cheap, Clarissa.

[Clarissa laughs]

I'll be honest with you. But not now, not with you.

Clarissa Ward: No, no. This is, you know, I think these conversations are really important and people often say, you know, "Oh, you're so open and weren't you nervous?" Of course you're nervous, but I'll be damned if I'm going to try to sugar-coat this whole thing and pretend like it doesn't make an impact or take a toll.

And I always say this to young reporters. I'm like, I don't care how brave you are, how strong you are, at some point check comes. It will come for you. And you have to know that going into this.

Ramita Navai: Yes.

Clarissa Ward: Being a woman, for me, has been an advantage in many ways doing this work for a number of reasons. First of all and most importantly, in very conservative societies in Syria and Afghanistan, I have access to 50% of the population that my male colleagues don't. Which, like, thank you very much I think it's important to hear these voices and have that be part of the stories that we tell about war.

But secondly, and I'd be curious if you found this too, I think as women we often are perceived as being less threatening. And so I can sort of pretend to sleep in the back of a car and drive through a checkpoint. I can put a head scarf on and no one's going to even look twice at me. It's that gift of being underestimated. And even in places that are more tense I think I'm sometimes viewed as a curiosity rather than, again, a direct threat.

Ramita Navai: A hundred percent. Not being taken seriously is a great advantage in our work.

[Both laugh]

Yeah. It's served me very well

Clarissa Ward: In my interactions with some of these sort of macho Russian men, they're very patronizing on account of you being a woman. I remember when I interviewed the foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and at the end of the interview he looked at me and he was like, "You know, you sounded quite pathetic."

[Both laugh]

And I was like - of course, later on you have like 7,000 great comebacks - but in the moment I was just like **[Clarissa makes dumbfounded sound]** "Did Sergei Lavrov just call me pathetic?" You know?

[Ramita is still laughing]

So yeah. But again, you know, there are times where I've been willing to play along with that because fine I can play that game too and I can get what I need to get out of it too.

Ramita Navai: Have you ever felt sexually threatened doing your job?

Clarissa Ward: Only once and nothing actually happened. But we were taken by pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine. We were blindfolded and put on a bus and driven to a place like an hour and a half away or an hour away. And then we were separated and brought into this, like, I guess it was a garage. I didn't know what it was at the time because I was blindfolded. And I'll never forget this, they started to empty our pockets and this guy was sort of touching my ass a bit while he was taking things out of my pockets and I could feel his breath sort of on my neck.

Ramita Navai: Urgh.

Clarissa Ward: And then I had this moment because initially I'd been like, okay, we've been kidnapped or we've been taken or detained - It was only for one day but, you know, I didn't know that at the time - but I thought it's okay, this is not ISIS. They're not going to execute us or anything like that. But then when I was having this moment where this guy is like taking all my stuff out of my pockets, I had this sudden realization. Oh, but there is always this risk.

And then he did something that was - it's a small thing, but it's so intimate - he took my earrings off. And like, you know, to take someone's earrings off you

really have to be very close to them and you're touching the back of their ear and, you know, and he did it in a way that was like...

Ramita Navai: Something only a lover would do.

Clarissa Ward: Yeah. That was what was so - it was very creepy. And I was like, oh my gosh, this is bad and I could be sexually assaulted. And then luckily nothing happened and it turned out there were more of us in the room, in the garage, than we had known. Because they had just separated us and they weren't letting us speak and we were blindfolded.

But it was a very sobering moment of like don't ever get cocky. Don't get cocky. What might be a certain kind of threat in one situation, in another situation it's a totally different kind of threat.

Ramita Navai: You wrote about an incident in your brilliant book *The Education of a Journalist* about being in the back of a car with

[Clarissa laughs]

[Muammar] Gaddafi's son.

Clarissa Ward: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: Do you feel comfortable?

Clarissa Ward: Who's now running for president [of Libya].

Ramita Navai: Yes.

[Clarissa laughs]

Ramita Navai: Do you feel comfortable telling me about that?

Clarissa Ward: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, that was a surreal situation more than anything else. I went to a dinner at a very wealthy Russian-American's house and there were eight of us at this dinner and Saif Gaddafi was one of them. And initially I was so excited because as a journalist you're like what an amazing opportunity.

And I tried to engage him. He didn't really talk to me at all at the dinner. There were three of us women at the table he completely ignored us. He was three hours late and he was very drunk and he was obnoxious honestly, and just sort of held court talking about this and that. And then afterwards, we were all going to go to this very famous at the time nightclub in Moscow.

Which it sounds like a weird thing to do but actually in Moscow, like, nightclubs were very much part of life at that time. So we get into the back of the host's car and literally he turns to me, he doesn't even say, "Oh, you know, I didn't get to chat to you much at dinner but, like, you know, you seem like a nice..."
Nothing.

He turns to me and he just goes, "Baby." And like puts his hands on my face and tries to stick his tongue in my mouth. And I was like, at the beginning I was laughing because I was like, are you insane? Like, don't be an idiot. I'm a journalist. Like, what are you doing? Ha ha. Then he just kept on and on and on.

And it didn't bother me in the sense of like it wasn't difficult to fend off. He was very drunk. So I wasn't worried about my safety or anything like that. I just was so struck by the arrogance. The arrogance that you assume that some woman who you haven't even talked to is going to automatically want to have your tongue in her mouth because you're Saif Gaddafi. And I ended up like cursing him out in Arabic as he wasn't hearing me in English. And then of course he was like, "Oh, I love you." You know, because he found that like adorable or whatever.

[Ramita laughs]

It's like, I'm not trying to be adorable. It was one of those moments where I did feel a little bit sort of repulsed, honestly.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. I mean, we're, we're laughing about it but you know that's one thing that is in the back of my mind when I work and I think male colleagues don't have to worry about it. Of course men can get raped but I know quite a few women who do our job who have been raped. And that is one of the things that does worry me and scare me and is kind of in the background.

Clarissa, you've talked about the moment early in your career when you got a shock and you thought you were going to die, there's another moment where you faced death in your career. Can you talk me through that and tell me what happened?

Clarissa Ward: The times where I have felt closest to death with the exception of Iraq have all been in Syria and there's been a few.

There's been one in Aleppo under constant bombardment, shelling, barrel bombs, fighter jets, where, you know, by the end I was like, trembling.

Ramita Navai explainer: The battle for Aleppo raged for four years, from 2012 to 2016 and is one of the longest sieges in recent history. Syrian President Bashar al Assad's army besieged opposition forces and with the help of the Russian air force barrel bombed rebel-held areas. Over 30,000 people were killed.

Ramita Navai: So tell me about that trip. What was the start of your day like? How had you got in?

Clarissa Ward: Well, I'll tell you how it started from the night. First of all, it was right after Austin had disappeared. So I was already not in a great place. But it was my first chance to do a story for *60 minutes*, which was hugely thrilling and exciting for me.

This is, you know, *60 minutes* is like the news magazine show in the US.

Ramita Navai: Big deal.

Clarissa Ward: We got into this suburb of Aleppo called Hraytan at about eight o'clock at night and already the shelling was heavy. Heavy shelling, not too far away.

Ramita Navai: What does that feel like?

Clarissa Ward: Oh. It's...

Ramita Navai: You can hear it? You can?

Clarissa Ward: Yeah. For me, shelling is like almost more of a psychological tactic than anything else. Because it's not very accurate for the most part but mentally it is so debilitating because you cannot relax for even a moment and it can go on for hours and hours. As it did that night.

And I was in this room with this woman who was like rocking back and forth in the foetal position on the ground and kind of crying.

Ramita Navai: Who was the woman?

Clarissa Ward: She was a Syrian woman who was part of the family that we were staying with in the safe house.

And they were reciting sort of surahs from the Quran, like for strength. And then they asked me, you know, we're reciting Surah Yaseen for strength, like, "What do you do in the west or, you know, in Christianity?" So I ended up singing the hymn Jerusalem to them, which was the most surreal moment probably.

Ramita Navai: If I had done that everyone would have fled, fled towards the shelling.

[Clarissa laughs]

Clarissa Ward: Despite the shelling.

Ramita Navai: Yeah.

Clarissa Ward: It was actually this kind of beautiful moment though because it did help me. I understood very, very instinctively then the power of prayer and the power of faith in those situations. Because I was so debilitated, like these women, by this sickening dread in my stomach every time a shell would hit and every time you'd be starting to calm down another one would hit. And singing drew Jerusalem really with these women together in this little room it did make you feel not that you were able to defy death, but that you could make peace with it somehow even if it came. And I think now discussing it with you, I sort of realized what I learned from that experience and what has been a very use tool for me since is not to think that I'll never get hurt or I'll never get killed, but to try to make peace at least with the idea of death, you know what I mean?

And which is not to say I'm okay with dying. Of course I'm not. But in those situations where I understand that is not helpful to me to let my imagination run wild and whip myself into a frenzy without all the information and really even understanding just how significant the threat is. I try to get to a space mentally where I am calmer about the idea of death.

Ramita Navai: Clarissa, I'm so struck by this image of this Syrian woman reciting from the Quran and you singing Jerusalem. There's something so intense and emotional about it. Did you cry? I mean, I cry just listening to Jerusalem which is completely ridiculous but being in that situation and hearing shelling. What an intense connection to have with this human.

Clarissa Ward: Yeah, it was an extraordinary moment and it was definitely, you know, I'm not a great singer but I can carry a tune and sing loudly. And as I was singing I could really feel the power of the song, of the words, and, you know, I had goosebumps in that moment definitely. And these women kind of watching and all of us like very deeply immersed in this scene. But also the bizarreness of it, the surrealness. And when I left the room later, my producer, who was a man so he couldn't come into the room, said, "What were you auditioning for American Idol over there?"

[Clarissa laughs]

Because in the men's room, they could all hear me like singing this hymn at the top of my lungs. They were like, what's happened to...

Ramita Navai: I love this.

[Clarissa laughs]

Clarissa Ward: ...the American reporter's lost her mind. She's singing hymns.

Ramita Navai: Did that help with the fear?

Clarissa Ward: It did. It really did. It really did because there is strength in that sense of sisterhood.

And there was a sense as well in the singing of defiance that was emboldening and did make you feel stronger. It's not permanent. It doesn't last long. But for a moment I felt brave.

Ramita Navai: And how did you feel in the morning?

Clarissa Ward: I felt sick with fear again. Because the planes were starting and the planes, again, you don't know where they're going to land. You know you'd

be unlucky if the payload landed on you but it's that not knowing that is so haunting.

And I remember looking over and making eye contact with my driver. We were all kind of lying in sleeping bags in this big room. And he just kind of shrugged like “Only God knows,” you know? And again, there is peace in that kind of surrendering it. I don't know. I have no control. So there's no point in letting myself get into a frenzy over this.

You know, the point where you get into a frenzy should be beforehand making sure you've mitigated every risk, you've dotted every I, you've crossed every T and that you're being as cautious and thorough as sensible as possible. But once you're in the moment getting carried away with your fear is debilitating and you have to, at a certain point, you have to be willing to surrender it and just let go of it and accept that you can't control everything.

Ramita Navai: What did it teach you about yourself?

Clarissa Ward: I think it taught me that like acceptance and letting go, perversely and seemingly counterintuitively, is deeply empowering.

And actually gives you real strength.

Ramita Navai: Clarissa, I'm going to ask you the one question I ask all my guests and that's; if there was one piece of wisdom that you have learnt, that you can impart to our listeners, from having faced death, from having been in these situations, what would it be?

Clarissa Ward: I mean, I'm not sure it's so much about facing death per se but it's about facing war. The thing that I really try to stress to people is that like, I feel like you really have to be willing to listen to other people. And there's such a backlash against listening in our culture. It's considered weakness. It's considered like you're leaving your values at the door. You're giving someone a platform. You're doing this. You're doing that. No, you're not. You're listening.

And it's a profound thing to do to really listen to someone as opposed to just waiting for them to finish speaking so that you can say what you want to say in your next point. And the conversations that you will have, like this one, are so much more organic when it's like really people sitting down and like actually listening to each other and having a shared experience.

In terms of like conflict and death, I think that sometimes we're so cavalier about the impact of words and the effect of words and the sort of insidious of this constant dehumanization of the other that we often are just like unconscious of even in our everyday language. And I talk about this primarily as an American, because I see what's happening in the US. And I see this slippery slope that I have seen over and over again in war zones. And nobody knows they're really on the slippery slope yet because you never believe it will happen to you until it does. And so that's like, when anyone asked me about what wisdom I would impart, it's always about having the humility to listen to other people and not just assume that you're better than them and that they don't have values and that their lives don't matter.

Ramita Navai: And I think they're wise words of warning of what we're all headed to actually.

Clarissa Ward: Yeah. I mean, I really, really hope not, but sometimes it feels that way.

Ramita Navai: Clarissa, I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed this conversation. Thank you so much for being so open and honest.

Clarissa Ward: I'm like, oh my God, I'm really spilling my guts here.

[Ramita laughs]

This is great. I normally have to pay 75 pounds an hour.

[Ramita laughs]

Ramita Navai: For more extraordinary stories from Clarissa's life I recommend reading her moving, honest, and intimate memoir *On All Fronts: The Education of a Journalist*. There's a link in the show notes. You can also listen to her fascinating CNN podcast series *Tug of War* about democratic movements around the world.

You can find Clarissa on Twitter (@clarissaward) and Instagram (@clarissawardcnn).

Thank you for listening to this episode of **The Line of Fire**.

If you'd like to follow me, my Twitter handle is @RamitaNavai.

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Until next time.

The Line of Fire is a podcast from *Aurra Studios*. It was presented by me, Ramita Navai. And edited and produced by Chris Scott. Our Executive Producers are Matt Raz and Richard Osman.