Ernest Hemingway’s ‘War is Reflected Vividly in Madrid’ (25 April 1937)

Madrid, April 24. The window of the hotel is open and, as you lie in bed, you hear the firing in the front line seventeen blocks away. There is a rifle fire all night long. The rifles go ‘tacrong, carong, craang, tacrong’, and then a machine-gun opens up. It has a bigger calibre and is much louder – ‘rong, cararong, rong, rong’.

Then there is the incoming boom of a trench mortar shell and a burst of machine-gun fire. You lie and listen to it, and it is a great thing to be in a bed with your feet stretched out gradually warming the cold foot of the bed and not out there in University City or Carabanchel. A man is singing hard-voiced in the street below, and three drunks are arguing when you fall asleep.

Awakened by a Shell

In the morning, before your call comes from the desk, the roaring burst of a high explosive shell wakes you. You go to the window and look out to see a man, his head down, his coat collar up, sprinting desperately across the paved square. There is the acrid smell of high explosive you hoped you’d never smell again.

In a bathrobe and bedroom slippers, you hurry down the marble stairs and almost into a middle-aged woman, wounded in the abdomen, who is being helped into the hotel entrance by two men in blue workmen’s smocks.

On the comer, twenty yards away, is a heap of rubble, smashed cement, and thrown up dirt, a single dead man, his torn clothes dusty, and a great hole in the sidewalk from which the gas from a broken main is rising, looking like a heat mirage in the cold morning air.

‘How many dead?’ you ask a policeman.

‘Only one,’ he says. ‘It went through the sidewalk and burst below. If it had burst on the solid stone of the road there might have been fifty.’

A policeman covers the body; they send for someone to repair the gas main, and you go in to breakfast. A charwoman, her eyes red, is scrubbing the blood off the marble floor of the corridor. The dead man wasn’t you nor anyone you know, and everyone is very hungry in the morning after a cold night and a long day the day before up at the Guadalajara front.