# *'I see my wife coming off the field of battle, all smiles'*

by Tim Dowling

The rain is coming down at a profound slant and I am kneeling in the cold mud behind a stack of tyres. I can't see anything through my spattered goggles, but I can hear the bullets whistling over my head and knifing into the mud around me. I am pinned down in a crossfire. This is a nightmare, I think. But isn't a nightmare. It's my son's birthday party.

In accordance with his wishes, we have come to a paintballing centre, in woods somewhere near the M25, along with seven 12-year-old boys, eight signed liability waivers, a coach-load of Chinese tourists and two large men who, according to my wife, fought together in Kosovo.

"I overhead them talking about it," she says while adjusting her ammunition belt.

"You mean they didn't get enough of this in Kosovo?" I say. I've had enough of this before they've even given us the guns.

Most of the boys have been paintballing before, and during the car journey to the centre they chatted animatedly about how much it hurts to be shot. By the time we arrive, my wife is pale with apprehension and I have gone quiet.

We had hoped to fight as a team, perhaps against a hungover hen party, but the entire afternoon session is split down the middle, odds versus evens, according to the number the organisers have scrawled on your hand. My wife and I are on opposing sides, with four 12-year-olds, half a coach-load of Chinese tourists and a Kosovan apiece.

This group proves to be more than a little trigger-happy. It is difficult to hear the repeated shouted warnings about not firing your weapon in the loading area, because so many people are firing their weapons in the loading area. They're shooting at the ground, chatting, laughing, shooting in the air. It's like a Helmand Province wedding.

We're led into the woods and given a red flag. Somewhere in the trees is the opposing team's green flag. I debate strategy with two of my son's friends, but when the shooting starts we ditch our plan in favour of getting behind a big log and staying there. At some point the guy holding our flag is cut down in a hail of paint. I reach for the flag and the world goes yellow. I've been hit in the goggles.

As I enter the cordoned off holding pen, where the other dead people are chatting and discharging their weapons in breach of an oft-repeated instruction, I see my wife coming off the field of battle, all smiles.

"It's great, isn't it?" she yells. "I shot you!"

Over the course of the afternoon, the children and my wife get chirpier while I repeatedly experience the ambiguity in situational awareness commonly known as The Fog Of War. I exit every round early without shooting anyone. It's not that I don't want to shoot anyone – after the first half-hour, I want to shoot everyone. I take a bullet in the arse while reloading, and find out exactly how much it hurts: a lot.

Finally, with the rain coming down at a profound slant and darkness closing in, I kneel in the mud behind a wall of tyres and prepare for a last stand, my gun full of the extra ammo that I bought off someone between rounds.

I peer above my makeshift parapet, scanning the horizon for enemy movement. The world instantly goes yellow again. I raise my hand in the prescribed manner to show that I am hit, and someone shoots me in the hand. I stand up, and someone else shoots me in the leg.

I walk slowly to the holding pen, imagining an ideal world where no one has a gun except me.