

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING:
THE FIGURE OF THE “OTHER” IN THE 9/11 NOVEL
AND
TRANSLATIE: EEN ROMAN AAN DE BIJLMERRAMP

Lenore Bell

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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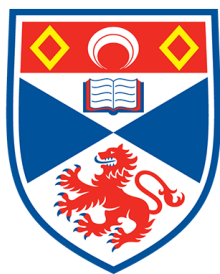
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Lenore Bell



University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of
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I, LB, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,828 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Abstract

One central question unites the critical and creative halves of this project: how should fiction respond to a sudden crisis? Through this thesis, I was able to explore the potential pitfalls authors need to avoid in tackling historic subject matter. This critical half of this thesis examines the treatment of race in fiction depicting the September 11 attacks. The writers mentioned in this thesis—including Jonathan Safran-Foer, John Updike, Jay McInerney, Don DeLillo—are considered to be left-of-center thinkers. However, their 9/11-related work aims to restore a classical notion of American hegemony. Chapter I: An American Breed discusses the protagonists of these novels, and how they represent ideas of upper class American whiteness. Chapter II: Fighting the Need to be Normal is about the portrayal of terrorists and terrorist bodies. Chapter III: You Want to Dance, I Want to Watch is about the treatment of African American characters. The final chapter, Chapter IV: White Crayons is about lower class and ethnically marked white characters.

The creative half of the thesis is *Translatie*, a novella. It is written from the perspectives of two different characters, Jacob and Mia. Jacob is a 17-year-old Surinamese rent boy who is being sexually abused by his upstairs neighbor. Mia is a sex-show worker in her early 30s. The novel traces their lives in the week leading up to the 1992 Bijlmer Air Disaster. After the disaster, they go missing, and their friends and relatives are left to track them down.

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This would not have been possible without the support of my parents, Leon and Paula Bell, and my "elderly" brother, Martin Bell. I could not have done any of this without you.

"Suddenly summoned to witness something great and horrendous, we keep fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness." John Updike, from *Tuesday, and After*

Introduction:
Fiction's First Responders

The Gut Instinct

On September 11, 2001, New York City was in the midst of two separate but equally unexpected bloodbaths. The first was the carnage wrought by the attacks on the World Trade Center, housed in the Twin Towers. But the second bloodbath came from an unlikely source: a catastrophic influx of blood donations. After the second plane hit the North tower, hundreds of New Yorkers lined up at hospitals to donate blood. There was tacit optimism in the gesture, the assumption that there would be enough survivors in need of blood. However, blood banks were not prepared for the sudden rush of unrequited donations. Blood is extremely expensive and time-consuming to process and store. It also has a short shelf life, 42 days, and is costly to discard. The never-ending stream of donations made it harder to guarantee that the incoming units were of a transfusable quality. Thousands of gallons went to waste, along with millions of dollars. Unfortunately, politicians took advantage of blood donation's patriotic cache, and made the situation even worse:

Wire services ran an unintentionally ludicrous photo of Yasir Arafat donating blood in Gaza for the victims in Washington and New York[...]The naïveté reached the highest levels of government. Around 11 p.m. on September 11, as an exhausted staff of the Washington-area Red Cross slumped around a meeting table, a call came in from the office of the president of the United States: Would they be so kind as to conduct a high-visibility Executive Office blood drive the next morning? Dutifully they did, on little sleep and for no practical purpose. Two days later, well after it became clear the donor spigot simply had to be turned off, they got a call from the U.S. Congress to run a blood drive among senators and representatives—and to present each member with a videotape of him or her

giving blood to show constituents. Not a single unit from these collections went to the victims of 9/11.¹

The spike in blood donations proceeded to spread through the rest of America, causing nationwide chaos. The portion of the general population in need of transfusions suffered tremendously. The September 11 glut of discarded blood created a slump in donations, setting the entire blood banking system back for over a year.

The initial wave of donors was attempting to address the scale of the attacks, but their perceptions of the victims' needs were incorrect. For many donors, there was also a self-congratulatory motivation behind their actions. The initial hasty gesture of goodwill became a grotesque, cynical farce, exposing avaricious forces attempting to capitalize on a complex tragedy. The production of the first round of fictional depictions of the attacks underwent a parallel process. The novelists became, in this way, First Responders in the form of fiction.

The 9/11 attacks had a unique way of provoking a range of well-intentioned gestures that maintained the illusion of security, rather than actual security. The Transportation Security Administration's airport pat-downs have been compared to the equally futile "duck and cover" drills of the Cold War era.² New York City launched an anti-terror campaign entitled "If You See Something, Say Something", encouraging citizens to report any suspicious behavior at all. My thesis is named after this vague brief, because I believe that the writers of the early 9/11 novels took this instruction to

¹D. Starr. "Bad Blood: The 9/11 Blood Donation Disaster." *The New Republic*, 29 July, 2002.

² E. Tyler-May. 2003. "The Aftermath of September 11 at home." in M.L. Duziak (ed.) *September 11 in History: A watershed moment?*, pp. 35-54. Durham: Duke University Press.

heart. They saw something, and they were compelled to say something. But, like the gallons of unusable donations, these writers left behind fiction which gestures at addressing the complexities of September 11, and does more to air the old American demons of xenophobia and racism. The insistence on writing these novels from a position of prejudice and fear shuts down access to potentially valuable avenues of conversation.

The Rush to First World Complacency

The novels examined most closely in this thesis will be *The Good Life* (2005) by Jay McInerney, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo, and *Terrorist* (2007) by John Updike. The authors of these 9/11 novels are associated with one of the “bluest” cities, New York, in one of the most reliably “blue” states. Yet beneath the liberal veneer, these writers insist on a restoration of an older, idealized view of America, even at the cost of stigmatizing citizens. Rather than questioning the existing political climate, these novels document the anxieties of the American public and mourn the loss of First World complacency. First World complacency is a term used by Judith Butler in her book of essays *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. According to Butler, the US must get past its complacency by “[understanding] ourselves as global actors...we will need to emerge from the narrative perspective of US unilateralism and, as it were, its defensive structures, to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others.” (Butler 2006: 7). Like all insidious privileges, its value lies in

invisibility: a lack of anxiety about national safety and stability, a lack of empathy and understanding about the rest of the world's problems. As Pankaj Mishra puts it:

Recent fictions set in New York by Deborah Eisenberg and Claire Messud swarm with well-off and politically liberal Americans, who have been gliding "through their lives on the assumption that the sheer fact of their existence has in some way made the world a better place". These comforting self-images could no longer be maintained after 9/11, especially after the Bush administration decided to remake reality through American firepower, provoking anger and hostility even among people previously indifferent to America.³

This First World complacency rests on the assumption that a lack of *conscious* ill-will towards the outside world was all one needed to be a good citizen. But rather than leaving the bubble of oblivion and engaging with difficult questions, there was a mass retreat into nationalism. As Etienne Balibar notes:

There is always a 'good' and a 'bad' nationalism. There is the one which aims to construct a state or a community and the one which tends to subjugate, to destroy; the one which refers to right and the one which refers to might; the one which tolerates other nationalisms and which may even argue in their defense and include them within a single historical perspective[...] And the one which radically excludes them from an imperialist and racist perspective...In short, the internal split within nationalism seems as essential — and as difficult to pin down — as the step between 'dying for one's fatherland' and 'killing for one's country'...(Balibar and Wallerstein 1991: 47)

Even when the authors reject open displays of jingoistic nationalism, they resort to the 'bad' nationalism. While none of the characters go out and purchase American flags or openly support military invasions, they express a closed, excluding definition of American identity. Together with the narration, this stance stifles the chance for the literature to grapple with the breadth of the attacks' impact.

Fear of Death Fueling First World complacency

³ P. Mishra. "The End of Innocence", *The Guardian*. 19 May 2007

The book *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* by Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon and Jeff Greenberg, describes how everyday lives of Americans were affected by a heightened sense of *mortality salience*, or a strong awareness of one's own death. After 9/11, mortality salience was high in the entire country, despite the fact that the average American is not likely to die in a terror attack. As Richard Jackson notes, a contradictory dual-edged rhetoric of “threat/reassurance” was deployed. As George Bush stated in a press conference on October 11, 2001: “I have urged our fellow Americans to go about their normal lives. But I also want to encourage them by telling them that our government is on full alert [...] We take every threat seriously[...] And so I would urge my fellow Americans, obviously, if they see something suspicious, abnormal, something that looks threatening, report it to local law enforcement.” (Jackson 2005: 101)

This falsely inflated threat created a period of elevated mortality salience on a national scale. This fear is not only useful for politicians of all sides to prey on, but creates a need for a simplified, if warped, narrative. Stereotypes of those who are designated inferior become comforting. Should the voice of “the other” be heard, it must come from its “place,” even when that place would usually not be welcome in mainstream society:

A young Black rocket scientist or stock broker would ordinarily be much more appealing than a pimp or a rapper to a mainstream White American because the scientist or stockbroker appears to have embraced mainstream American values and succeeded in the contexts of them, whereas the pimp and the rapper confirm all the traditional negative stereotypes that are typically associated with young black men. But, following the reminders of death, the need to validate their current version of reality— including the sense, for example, that Black men are future felons; Jews are cheap; gay men are great hairdressers-

may incline White Americans to prefer the Black pimp or rapper, who provides comforting confirmation of the existing worldview, and deplore the Black professional, who now appears grotesquely at odds with accepted cultural stereotypes. (Pyszczynski 2003: 78-79)

This study explains the rush to First World complacency that Butler noted. Postwar America is not only appealing because of its ostensibly safe atmosphere, but everyone returns to their “rightful” place, even if that place is negative. First World complacency is not a complete erasure of concerns, but a return to a comforting set of concerns. It becomes preferable for the “other” to occupy a negative place; it bolsters the positive image of the White All-American Self.

The Role of Fiction

Before the September 11 attacks, the vast majority of Americans had never heard of Al Qaeda, the Taliban or Osama bin Laden. After the attacks, the public rushed to educate itself, to catch up with what it had previously been oblivious to. As Slavoj Žižek observed: “In the days after September 11, the media reported that not only English translations of the Koran but also books about Islam and Arab culture in general become instant bestsellers: people wanted to know what Islam is [...]” (Žižek 2002: 33) While Žižek notes that this self-education was probably well-intentioned, it was also naive: “it remains a gesture of ideological mystification *par excellence*: probing into different cultural traditions is *not* the way to grasp the political dynamics which led to the September 11 attacks.” (2002: 34) This conflation of “the Other’s way of life” with an explanation of the terror attacks lies at the crux of continuing misreadings of the September 11 attacks. It also has fueled ongoing racism. Literature is assumed to be an

infallible tool to combat ignorance. But in a crisis as complex as September 11, both fiction and nonfiction have, at times, aided in perpetuating ignorance.

While nonfiction was used to explain the outside forces that led to the attacks, fiction writers felt a burden to turn inward and depict American turmoil. Pankaj Mishra lists a number of quotes from seemingly shell-shocked authors:

"Most novelists I know," Jay McInerney wrote in these [*The Guardian's*] pages, "went through a period of intense self-examination and self-loathing after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center." Ian McEwan claimed in a later interview to have found it "wearisome to confront invented characters". "I wanted to be told about the world. I wanted to be informed. I felt that we had gone through great changes and now was the time to just go back to school, as it were, and start to learn." "The so-called work in progress," Martin Amis confessed, "had been reduced, overnight, to a blue streak of pitiable babble. But then, too, a feeling of gangrenous futility had infected the whole corpus."

Upon reading these remarks, one cannot help but notice that the writers have not taken the passage of time into account. The "gangrenous futility" which paralyzed their fiction was not guaranteed to be permanent. But at the time, many prominent writers were quick to claim their obsolescence in the face of a complex and difficult reality. One reason to fear approaching the 9/11 novel was the political burden of the event. America and the rest of the Western World became sharply divided after the decisions to invade Iraq and Afghanistan. It became risky for public figures to openly take a side in such a profoundly polarizing debate. As Lawrence Jacobs, a political scientist at the University of Minnesota noted: "There's a real conformitarian spirit in America right now[...] it's flipped gradually into an expectation that you won't raise critical issues, that you'll fall in

line. It's the new 1950s."⁴ The authors of the first round of 9/11 novels were acutely aware that their depictions could strongly alienate their audience. Most of the reading public would have remembered exactly where they were "on that day." It becomes difficult to take creative license with such a global historical event, still relatively fresh in the readers' minds.

But another, more cynical explanation for these fearful remarks may be found in prestige-driven anxiety; many writers might have felt pressure to write the first "Great 9/11 Novel" and capitalize on the momentum. There was also an underlying assumption on the part of these writers that the reading public wanted a quickly produced depiction of 9/11 in the same way they wanted quickly produced facts and answers. After recovering from his initial "self-loathing" brought on by September 11, Jay McInerney felt compelled to directly address the 9/11 attacks in his next novel:

When I told Mailer that my new novel took place in the autumn of 2001 he shook his head skeptically. 'Wait 10 years,' he said. 'It will take that long for you to make sense of it.' But I couldn't wait that long. As a novelist who considers New York his proper subject, I didn't see how I could avoid confronting the most important and traumatic event in the history of the city, unless I wanted to write historical novels. I almost abandoned the book several times, and often wondered whether it wasn't foolish to create a fictional universe that encompassed the actual event — whether my invention wouldn't be overwhelmed and overshadowed by the actual catastrophe. At the very least, certain forms of irony and social satire in which I'd trafficked no longer seemed useful. I felt as if I was starting over and I wasn't sure I could.⁵

Unfortunately for McInerney and the other writers depicting September 11, many reviewers agreed with Norman Mailer's assessment. Mailer's advice was not just meant for McInerney, but any writer wishing to approach this subject. Nevertheless, a

⁴K. Diaz. "Cynicism is Out, Trust in Government Is In." *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. October 23, 2003.

⁵P. Gray. "Collateral Damage." *The New York Times*. 18 February 2006.

significant number of literary depictions emerged about less than a decade after the attacks. The first was Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* in 2005, followed by Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in 2006. Ken Kalfus also published *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, his 9/11 satire, in 2006. *Terrorist* by John Updike and *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo were published in 2007. *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill and Martin Amis' book of essays and stories *The Second Plane*, came out in 2008. When one looks at the timeline of publications, it is interesting to note the order of appearance. The first round of writers from 2005 to 2006 are established New York writers, but the 2007 writers are far more eminent in the field. Both 2008 writers are Europeans based in the United Kingdom. It illustrates how the pressure to publish in response to the crisis affected writers depending on their status and location. It is also worth noting that all of these writers are middle-class, heterosexual white men.⁶

Selective Historical Memory

Contextualizing September 11 as an act of war justifies bellicose reprisals and further the notion of American Exceptionalism. The definition of American Exceptionalism invoked here comes from Byron Shafer: "American Exceptionalism[...]is the notion that the United States was created differently—essentially on its own terms and within its own context." (Shafer 1991: v) It is this notion of exceptionalism that had led America to place itself as a moral and economic example to the world. Many immigrants living in America must pay lip service to this idea in order to show that they

⁶ Amy Waldman's novel, *The Submission*, was published in 2011, on the ten-year anniversary of the attacks. Waldman's plot centers around a blind submission for a large memorial at an unnamed site, which is clearly meant to be Ground Zero. The winning architect is chosen, and the judges are stunned and unnerved to learn that his first name is Mohammad.

really belong in the country. A potent example of this came when Ruslan Tsarni, the uncle of the Boston Marathon bombers, was asked how he felt about America: "I say I teach my children and that's what I feel myself: This is the ideal micro-world in the entire world. I respect this country."⁷ The characterization of "the ideal micro-world" Mr. Tsarni mentions carries echoes of John Winthrop's 1630 "City on a Hill" speech, which described the potential of the New World: "[...] the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us [...]"⁸

Despite the fact that terror attacks occur in many parts of the world, an attack on America, the "ideal micro-world", is read as a cue for war. Viewing America as a victim of a terror attack is not as satisfying to the Exceptional American psyche. Contextualizing the attacks as war implies that the state has been attacked by an equally powerful adversary, rather than a stateless organization. The attackers were simultaneously undermined and elevated: while their political motivations were dismissed, they were viewed as a force formidable enough to declare war on.

As Richard Jackson puts it: "[...] it is quite common for politicians to make use of historical analogies to try to explain current events [...] discursively, however, the use of these analogies actually constructs particular meanings and profoundly affects the way that they are subsequently understood. In addition, analogies are so powerful because

⁷ Transcript of Remarks by Ruslan Tsarni. April 19, 2013. [whatthefolly.com](http://www.whatthefolly.com/2013/04/19/transcript-remarks-by-ruslan-tsarni-uncle-of-the-two-boston-marathon-bombing-suspects-april-19-2013/).
<http://www.whatthefolly.com/2013/04/19/transcript-remarks-by-ruslan-tsarni-uncle-of-the-two-boston-marathon-bombing-suspects-april-19-2013/>.

⁸ F. Bremer. *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. p. 218.

they work to suppress relevant questions." (2005: 40) This is a powerful political device, and arguably a powerful literary device. This selection of 9/11 novels abounds with historical connections. Jonathan Safran Foer directly connects the September 11 attacks with the Allied bombing of Dresden. Jay McInerney draws parallels to the American Civil War. Don DeLillo explores the common motivations between the hijackers and radical European left-wing terror groups from the 1970s. The characters do not make the analogy, but the author in each of these cases has built the parallel narrative into the larger fabric of the story.

For all of the historical allusions involved, the novelists shy away from directly addressing the role of Al Qaeda, even in anger. That relevant strand of history is only vaguely alluded to, if at all referenced. The terror attacks come off as spontaneous happenings for "no reason." On the surface, the novels from this post- 9/11 period take shelter in the ostensibly apolitical domestic sphere. The authors rarely make direct references to the politics of that time. The protagonists themselves are portrayed as too stricken to develop political views; they are curiously apathetic about following the news to get to the truth of what they witnessed. As Trimarco and Depret note: "The placement of painful events outside of time is what some psychologists argue is a key symptom of traumatized individuals— but can a nation place an event outside "the chains of cause and effect which form its history?"⁹ But while the characters voice one sentiment, their actions and the tone of the narration display another. The narration betrays a strong urge to set the world back to "rights", to turn the clock back to a time before the towers

⁹ J. Trimarco and M.H. Depret, 'Wounded Nation, Broken Time' in D. Heller (ed.) *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. p 46.

fell. However, the period that they seem to reach for is a nonexistent ideal of what America used to be. The events of September 11 are placed outside of the chains of cause and effect into a more palatable, if less historically accurate, system.

In her essay “Echoes of the Cold War: The Aftermath of September 11 at home”, Elaine Tyler May notes that the September 11 attacks were simultaneously cast as unprecedented and linked to the Cold War:

It was the Cold War that echoed most loudly through the post-9/11 landscape. The weapons they used were not nuclear attacks—they were in fact remarkably low-tech instruments such as box cutters—the villains seemed to personify the characteristics of the Communist threat: foreigners who infiltrated the nation, studied our technology and used our own power against us. (May, cited in Dudziak 2003: 42)

One can argue that the first time Americans experienced widespread First World complacency was during the postwar period, at the onset of the Cold War. Both Great Wars had ended. It was the period with the highest rate of marriage. The white-American nuclear family was an efficient compacted unit, with the father at the helm and the mother staying at home to mind the children and housework. It was a socially conservative and economically prosperous period. Despite fears of nuclear war, optimism prevailed:

[The postwar couple] believed that affluence, consumer goods, satisfying sex, and children would strengthen their families, enabling them to steer clear of potential disruptions. In pursuing their quest for 'the good life', they adhered to traditional gender roles and prized marital stability; few of them ever divorced. They represent a segment of the predominantly Protestant white population who were relatively well educated and who generally lived comfortable middle-class lives. In other words, they were among those Americans who would be most likely to live out the postwar American dream. (May 1988:12)

The specific ethnic focus on white Protestants and marital stability also are staples of these novels. Couples that had previously drifted towards divorce end up reuniting after the male partner survives the rubble of the Twin Towers. This is the case in *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* by Ken Kalfus and *The Good Life* by Jay McInerney. *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill also features a couple driven apart after the attacks, but reunite by the end of the novel. With the exception of the couple at the center of Kalfus' satire, the previously unstable partners are reunited, with varying degrees of plausibility.

The 1950s postwar era's brand of First World complacency manifested strongly in the domestic sphere. If a citizen followed the respective gender roles, married, raised children and lived an affluent lifestyle, their life was deemed to be fulfilling. The threats to this "American Way of Life" were located not just in faraway countries, but from within. This was the time of the Red Scare, when tribunals led by Joseph McCarthy attempted to ferret out un-American elements within the country. America went through a repeat of this mentality in wake of 9/11. The motives of the terrorists could not be questioned, beyond their "innate evil." Americans who dared to question beyond this narrative were immediately branded as "unpatriotic." But the feared "un-American" was now racially defined. "The category of those who appear 'Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim' has been socially constructed, like all racial categories, and heterogenous—persons of many different races and religions were attacked as presumably appearing 'Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim.'" (Volpp, cited in Dudziak 2003: 153)

The terror attack sparked a national desire to return to an affluent postwar period, when prosperity and familial stability were secure. In order to facilitate a postwar revival, a war was needed. When the media armchair-diagnosed the American population with "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder", a country, which had not seen conflict on its soil in sixty years, was suddenly cast in military terms. An attack on three buildings (the Twin Towers, the Pentagon) was now treated as an attack on all Americans, wherever they were. Even a significant level of anti-terrorism security funds were distributed to states and cities which were unlikely to be known to terrorist organizations, let alone be targeted by them.

The American "Self"

The hastily produced novels depicting September 11 are worth studying for many reasons. They are artifacts of heightened mortality salience in an anxious age. The novels also expose a complex moment in American race relations. With the sudden introduction of a new and menacing "other", the American hierarchy of racial stereotypes was shaken in some unpredictable ways. The new antagonist, the radical Muslim, is stereotyped in a predictably Orientalist fashion. But the presence of this new antagonist had a range of unforeseen effects on the ways other racial and ethnic groups were portrayed.

Immediately after September 11, phrases such as "America's Lost Her Innocence" started appearing in the media. This phrase was reprised a decade later for the tenth anniversary. In a September 11, 2011 article for *The Washington Times*, Jeneba Ghatt writes:

Before 9/11, America was a nation that welcomed all, and was more or less a land of the free, in its truest sense. We came and went as we pleased, for the most part, virtually unchecked and unmonitored. Since then, the country has had to grow up pretty fast, put up some guards and barriers to protect its citizens and inhabitants, ushering a brand new era of terror.

Articles such as these reinforced the notion the America was a “free” and “innocent” society until it was struck by unexpected terrorism. But which “America” is being evoked with this phrase? In their article “Superior Intellect?: Sincere Fictions of the White Self,” Hernan Vera, Joe R. Feagin and Andrew Gordon discuss how the notion of white innocence is integral to upholding white privilege. In particular, they examine how these “scientific” publications of American intelligence quotients perpetuated and relied on these fictions:

The term “sincere fictions” can be extended by arguing that these fictions are constructed to conceal unwelcome aspects of past, present, or future actions by White individuals in a racialized society. These socially accepted fictions are sincere because the actors usually are genuine and honest in their adherence to these rationalizations and are either unaware of or have suppressed the alternative interpretations-psychological, sociological, and historical-of the events or people being fictionalized.¹⁰

The sincere fiction of White American innocence played a large role in the media construction of the innocent All American victim in the wake of the attacks. It was at once traditional and contradictory. The terrorists were attacking “all of us” out of envy for our tolerance and freedom, yet the most lauded victims were white and conservatively portrayed. The media portrayed a mythical golden age of a particularly white, innocent America which never existed. Many of the victims and families who were put forward for

¹⁰H, Vera, J. R. Feagin and A. Gordon. *Superior Intellect?: Sincere Fictions of the White Self*. The Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 64, No. 3, Myths and Realities: African Americans and the Measurement of Human Abilities (Summer, 1995), p. 297

public sympathy fit a stereotype, erasing the voices of not only a variety of other kinds of citizens, but also the experiences of the immigrants and foreign visitors to the towers. America had not lost innocence. It was creating a new narrative, even stronger than the last one.

As the Oriental is constructed in opposition to the Westerner, the "exoticized other" of the 9/11 novel stands in contrast to and bolsters the standing of the "All American." When I use the term All American, I mean it in a stricter sense than Edward Saïd's construct of the Westerner. This term refers to white Americans at the top of both the socioeconomic ladder and the intra-white ethnic ladder as it stands in the United States. This order usually places the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant at the top of the pecking order and the descendants of later waves of European immigrants lower down. As Richard Dyer notes in his book *White*, "The USA of course is a highly multiracial society, but the idea of being an 'American' has long sat uneasily with ideas of being any other color than white." (Dyer 1997: 149) "All American" as a colloquialism is used to invoke picturesque ideas of wholesome farm or suburban life. It is often used to describe an image of "pure" white Americans, associated with a Nordic ideal of blonde hair and blue eyes. The "exoticized other" in this case lives domestically, but is not "All American."

For the purpose of this thesis, I focus on the books by the "New York" writers, as well as Martin Amis' short story, 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta.' *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill certainly fits the criteria of a 9/11 novel, but was written by a European about a Dutchman's experience in New York. As a result, the family depicted is not the

“quintessentially American” family which needs to “hunker down” to survive. There are certain differences in the execution of the story which are worth examining in a later project. *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* by Ken Kalfus was a great help in illuminating certain tropes in the other novels through its own satire. It is, of all the books, most aware of the more self-absorbed reactions to September 11. For the sake of focusing the thesis, I analyze the books that are not satire.

The first chapter, *An American Breed*, discusses the protagonists of these novels, and how they represent ideas of upper- class American whiteness. I argue that these protagonists, whether they are coded as blank-raced or labeled as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants are, indeed, representative of the same demographic. This creation of a tacitly asserted everyman is also compounded by their upper middle-class backgrounds.

Chapter II: *Fighting the Need to be Normal* is about the portrayal of terrorists and terrorist bodies. In addition to being the culprits for the attacks, the figure of the terrorist proved too tempting for the authors to resist resorting to Orientalist stereotypes. The stereotype is so powerful that the terrorists across the novels come off as carbon copies of one another. However, there are additional references at work, including cinematic alien invasion narratives from the 1950s. While the terrorists are clearly drawn as antagonists, they are regarded with a level of grudging admiration.

Chapter III: *You Want to Dance, I Want to Watch* is about the treatment of African American characters. Often times, the “Us Against Them” discourse around 9/11 leaves out black people altogether, due to the exclusively white American definition of “Us.”

While the black characters are present, they operate more as a supporting cast for the white characters. They are lenses through which the white characters can reinforce and be reassured of their position of privilege.

The final chapter, Chapter IV: White Crayons is about lower class and ethnically marked white characters. The subtle maligning of this group came as a surprise. One would expect the broadness of white supremacy to be reinforced after 9/11, but it actually fragments in the 9/11 novel, leaving sharper lines of division between European-American ethnic groups. While first responders from Italian and Irish backgrounds are held up as heroes, they are simultaneously undermined through being portrayed as crass and slow-witted. The white everyman status is pointedly denied to them.

Chapter I An American Breed

As Judith Butler states in her collection of essays *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Americans had two options after the September 11 attacks: "[...] do we now seek to restore [First World complacency] as a way of healing from this wound? Or do we allow the challenge to First World complacency to stand and begin to build a different politics on its basis?" (2006: 7-8) When faced with the loss of complacency, many of the 9/11 related novels take the first option by perpetuating American "innocence," especially innocence in the form of "All American" whiteness.

The brand of upper-class whiteness shown in these novels is already in peril before the attacks even happen. Behind the wealthy facade, anomie stemming from affluence has already settled over the families. The husbands and wives are either divorced or on the verge of divorce. They are disconnected from their offspring, be they enigmatic children or sullen teenagers. Some characters directly blame their middle-class status for their unhappiness. Luke, a protagonist from *The Good Life*, realizes that his trophy wife Sasha has different priorities for raising their daughter. He regrets not taking a more active role. "Instead, he had spent most of his waking hours making a career that bankrolled a style of living that he did not, he suddenly realized, find amusing." (McInerney 2005: 27) This disillusionment with New York's materialism is a common thread throughout the novels.

In this chapter, I will examine the position of the upper class white protagonists in *The Good Life* by Jay McInerney, *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo and *Extremely Loud and*

Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer. A strong common thread between these novels is the privileging of the dominant white (largely male) voice and perspective. Despite the fact that New York is one of the most ethnically and economically diverse cities in America, most of these novels foreground white, middle class protagonists who live in rarefied enclaves. In these novels, 9/11 is the catalyst for contact with people of lower socio-economic backgrounds. The white protagonists experience contact with people of other ethnicities and classes as new, exotic, and, almost always destabilizing. The narrow choice of protagonists seen across these novels limits the potential for conversations about 9/11 which go beyond stereotypes and middle-class concerns.

The Good Life

Jay McInerney, best known for *Bright Lights, Big City*, is from an affluent part of Connecticut. He gained a reputation as one of the "Brat Pack", a group of hard-partying writers in 1980s New York.¹¹ The glamorous and wealthy personalities McInerney gravitates towards in real life are directly reflected in his fiction. *The Good Life* opens with a description of the days leading up to September 11. Luke and Sasha, the opulent uptown couple, and Corrine and Russell, the trendy downtown couple, mingle and carouse with their friends at parties, unaware of what is to come. Corrine and Russell host a dinner party for their friends from the world of publishing, but their friend "Salman [Rushdie]" has to cancel at the last minute. (McInerney 2005: 10). Luke and Sasha attend an expensive benefit gala at the Central Park Zoo.

¹¹ W. St. John. "His Morning After." *The New York Times*. 5 February 2006.

The central men in the novels, all in unstable marriages, do not conform to a rugged masculine standard. There was a prevailing perception in America that men had gone a bit soft with the comforts and relaxed attitudes of the time. In the news media, there was a lot of concern about the decline of "traditional" American masculinity as the reason why the country was caught so unaware by the attacks: "The post-9/11 commentaries were riddled with apprehensions that America was lacking in masculine fortitude, that the masses of weak-chinned Blackberry clutchers had left the nation open to attack and wouldn't have the cojones for the confrontations ahead." (Faludi 2007: 10)

In the opening pages of *The Good Life* by Jay McInerney, we are introduced to the newly metrosexual upper-class man. "Cooking was a new sphere of masculine competition; Russell and Washington and his chef friend Carlo had taken to comparing notes on butchers and cutlery the way they used to deconstruct stereo equipment, garage bands, and young novelists." (McInerney 2005: 9) When Russell says the name of the French dish he's making for the party, Corrine says, "Sometimes you can be such a fag. What's that in American?" (2005: 15) Before the attacks have begun the country has already been invaded by a distinctly un-American element: effete tastes.

Later in the novel, we meet Luke, who has taken the ostensibly emasculating step of retiring early. He tries to couch his retirement in more flattering terms: "He thought of himself as a ronin, a samurai without a master [...]" (2005: 25) Though Luke is not the perfect rugged man he presents a more suitable match for Corrine than fussy amateur-chef Russell. A few days after surviving the rubble at Ground Zero, we see Luke in his study: "He retreated to the library, the ghetto of his masculine prerogative

[...] the gun rack over the fireplace with his matched side-lock Purdy twenty-gauges and the samurai sword he had brought back from Tokyo. A collection of tombstones—Lucite slabs commemorating mergers and IPOs—occupied one corner of the leather topped partner's desk." (2005: 89) The weapons and "tombstones" are Luke's desperate attempts to assert that he is still in touch with his masculine "nature." The "tombstones", in a world more permissive of masculinity, would be trophy heads. He is also a weak father figure to his teenaged daughter Ashley, and realizes that he ceded too much of his role as a parent to his shallow, domineering wife, who is intent on turning their daughter into a fashionable socialite.

Out of all the 9/11 novelists, McInerney is the most quick to call out a character's social status. He will go through such lengths as to describe a character's race, accent, body type and home address in order to convey exactly how the reader is meant to think of them. Some of this information is inferred through dialogue between characters, but a startling amount of it comes from the narration. Unfortunately, much of this taxonomy leads to essentialization.

"You see before you one of those rare New Yorkers who doesn't have a shrink. Which probably proves I'm not a New Yorker at all— still an old-fashioned New England WASP." (2005: 168) This is one of the ways in which Corrine describes herself. She left her job as a stockbroker after giving birth to twin children, and has since been vaguely self-employed as a screenwriter and mommy-blogger. She seems adamant about leaving work to raise her children, but we rarely see her interact with them. Her unemployment causes tension between her and her husband Russell, who is an

established publisher. Despite her anxious nature, her lack of a shrink is mentioned here as a badge of honor, separating her from those self-indulgent, "real" New Yorkers in her class. Corrine is frequently portrayed as a more old-fashioned model of American femininity. McNerney takes pains to describe Corrine as self-deprecating and meek: "She had a horror of appearing pushy or mercenary, a legacy she blamed on her WASPy New England heritage —a worldview in which business and pleasure were strictly segregated. She knew that this was a quaint notion and thoroughly contradicted the very essence of social life in Manhattan." (2005:12) Once again, Corrine is too good and honest of an American to be a true New Yorker.

After September 11, Corrine volunteers at a soup kitchen near Ground Zero. There, she befriends Luke, and the still smoking remains of the World Trade Center form the backdrop for their affair. To Luke, Corrine is a fundamentally "good" woman: "[...] Corrine seemed unselfish and morally taut, which Luke had imagined, when he first met her, might protect him from being fatally attracted to her." (2005: 172) Her goodness to Luke is characterized as stemming from her puritan roots.

Yet her narrative contains some fundamental contradictions in character. As Corrine overhears her young son ask her father about the relative speeds of Porsches and Ferraris, she laments to herself: "This was one of the perils of raising your kids in New York, she thought, at least if you were trying to subsist on less than two hundred and fifty grand a year." (2005: 18) At this point in the book, one wonders if Corrine is meant to be a satire of an upper class mother. She is also susceptible to any form of male flattery, even from dubious sources. (2005: 68) But the narrative, and by extension

McInerney, take Corrine's "goodness", even innocence, very seriously. Part of that seriousness is gained by her lauded WASP heritage. When Corrine is in thrall to the wealth and vanity that she is meant to be above, it confuses the characterization and betrays McInerney's own ambivalence to the trappings of that class.

The other major female character in the novel is Luke's wife, Sasha. She is also wealthy and unemployed, but reads as a satirical figure. She is a socialite who spends a lot of her time (and Luke's money) at benefit parties for various causes. Like Luke, she also came from the American South. After giving birth to her one child she never went back to work. Unlike Corrine, she is comfortable about her lack of an occupation, and wants Luke to come out of retirement and go back to work in finance. She is meant to be a stark foil to Corrine, in the sense that she is a scheming, cold mother who is completely taken in by the materialistic side of her adopted city. The women strongly conform to their regional stereotypes: the puritan schoolmarm juxtaposed with Scarlett O'Hara. The polarity of their regionalized personality traits is reminiscent of Alexis de Tocqueville's characterization of New Englanders and Southerners from the 1830s:

The American of the Northern States is surrounded by no slaves in his childhood; he is even unattended by free servants, and is usually obliged to provide for his own wants. No sooner does he enter the world than the idea of necessity assails him on every side: he soon learns to know exactly the natural limit of his authority; he never expects to subdue those who withstand him[...] He therefore becomes patient, reflecting, tolerant, slow to act, and persevering in his designs.

In the Southern States the more immediate wants of life are always supplied; the inhabitants of those parts are not busied in the material cares of life, which are always provided for by others; and their imagination is diverted to more captivating and less definite objects. The American of the South is fond of grandeur, luxury, and renown, of gayety,

of pleasure, and above all of idleness; nothing obliges him to exert himself in order to subsist; and as he has no necessary occupations, he gives way to indolence, and does not even attempt what would be useful.”¹²

Sasha, however moneyed and white, is the wrong kind of WASP. Unlike Corrine’s strict, stark New England upbringing, Sasha comes from a decadent Southern line whose best days have passed. Yet Sasha becomes a foil on a deeper level; her characterization is more coherent than Corrine’s. Her lines are sharper and her actions match her character. While Sasha functions as a villain in a satire, Corrine can neither function as a satirical figure or an everywoman. Again, McInerney’s ambivalence about morality and wealth bleeds through and weakens Corrine.

In *The Good Life*, Corrine and Luke's volunteering site at Ground Zero is run by a hyper-masculine working-class man, Jerry. It is also a place frequented by police and National Guardsmen, the manliest working-class men of all. This is also a space where white feminine charms must be on display. The following passage is from Corrine's perspective:

Of course, she realized it was a kind of wartime intimacy [...] It was exhilarating, too, behind the barricades, flirting with the cops and the Guardsmen—that old frisson between men and women. “That's part of your job,” Jerry had told her. “I had a girl come up the other day and apologize that she was still wearing makeup from her job, like it was frivolous or something, and I told her, ‘Hell, smear it on. Put on that lipstick, babe.’ These guys need a little cheering up. Why the hell do you think we discourage male volunteers?” (McInerney 2005:156)

The term “wartime intimacy” immediately signals that we are in a different era. It is not good enough for the women at the site to provide food, but they are also there to act as sexualized morale boosters, cheerleaders for the largely masculine force at Ground

¹² de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America* -Volume 1 (p. 335). Kindle Edition.

Zero. Once it is contextualized as a battlefield, Ground Zero becomes a place where the gender binary is strongly enforced. The "old" frisson between men and women is a throwback to an earlier time, specifically the 1950s, and an attempt to establish a more traditional atmosphere.

McInerney's *The Good Life* also takes the reader to an unexpected location: the old American South. "Staggering up West Broadway, coated head to foot in dun ash, he looked like a statue commemorating some ancient victory, or, more likely, some noble defeat—a Confederate general perhaps." (2005: 73) This is the first time in *The Good Life* that the reader is met with an allusion to the American Civil War. This observation is key because it is Corrine's first sighting of Luke, who later becomes her love interest. At this point in the story she does not know that he's from the American South. However, it seems that she can already read his heritage through the dust on his body.

The narrator's characterization of the Confederate loss as a "noble defeat" stands out. This reading of the Civil War seems like a Southern revisionist version. Luke's Southern roots are mentioned frequently throughout the novel, especially in reference to his father's outspoken attitude against the Jim Crow Laws. When he was a child, another boy called Luke's father a "nigger-lover", Luke called the boy a Neanderthal and was punched in the face for his trouble. (2005: 113) McInerney is quick to maintain his characters' innocence in the face of the more sinister parts of their historical and regional contexts.

The South of *The Good Life* is the bucolic, simpler place that Luke had left for the jaded sophistication of New York. After his teenaged daughter is hospitalized for a drug

overdose, she runs away to her grandmother's farm in Tennessee. Ashley had previously expressed a desire to visit the Southern branch of the family. (2005: 84)

While catching up with his daughter and family, we see Luke becoming less ambivalent towards the darker parts of his hometown's history: "Returning for Christmas break [in his undergraduate years], he'd announced his disapproval of the monument to the Confederate dead in the town square, but as his convictions mellowed, he had come to regard it as an authentic expression of historic memory [...]" (2005: 293) It is telling that this change is due to a "mellowing" of underlying convictions, rather than maturation or a shift of perspective.

One of the more subtle but striking details of the Southern chapters is Luke's nephews' names. Luke's brother Matthew has two teenaged sons: Jackson and Davis. One cannot help but wonder if they are named after the Confederate leaders Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. Considering that their father, Matthew, is portrayed as quintessentially Southern and little else, it is a strong possibility. Earlier in the book, Luke had described his town as so southern that he had gone to school with a boy named "States' Rights." (2005:114) However, naming one's children Jackson and Davis is not that different. Yet it goes by without mention.

Upon their return to New York, Luke and his daughter Ashley bond over a live performance of "Dixie" at the exclusive 21 Club. They even stand and salute when the southern anthem is played. Sasha is mortified at this display. The authorial insistence on claiming a "noble Confederate defeat" and downplaying the problematic history recurs throughout the novel. It is difficult to tease out why McInerney has dropped such

strong Antebellum references in the middle of a book about the 9/11 attacks. The tainted elements of Southern history are referenced only to be whitewashed and embraced as "authentic."

McInerney's Southern chapters and references derive from what David Anderson refers to as "Lost Cause Nostalgia."¹³ After the Confederate loss in The American Civil War, white southerners were desperate for a narrative that would help them maintain their dignity in the face of defeat:

While Lost Cause nostalgia offered white southerners a way of responding to the shattering dislocation of four long years of war by restoring a sense of continuity with the past, it also enabled the construction of a narrative that allowed for political redemption and reconciliation with the North by downplaying secession and expunging slavery from discourses on war causation. (Anderson 2013: 52)

Once McInerney presents us with the notion of "noble defeat" in the context of a Confederate soldier, we know we are in the realm of the "Lost Cause." Through this rhetoric, the Confederate dead, Jackson and Davis, and even Dixie are put up on a pedestal, and become markers of a more wholesome place than big, bad North. There was the opportunity for McInerney to show that Luke and Ashley had left one complicated place for another, but here Tennessee is definitely meant to be a kinder, simpler foil to New York City. The heavily Antebellum-flavored South is a place where family healing can happen.

Luke's daughter Ashley seems to have taken away a strengthened level of Southern pride from the trip, as seen in the Dixie scene in the 21 Club. The history of

¹³ D. Anderson. 'Confederate Defeat and the Construction of Lost Cause Nostalgia' in S. McVeigh and N. Cooper (ed.) *Men After War*, (Oxford: Routledge) 2013. pp. 52-78

the performance of Dixie in America is a fraught one. It was often used in blackface shows, and many African-Americans view it as a relic of segregation, as offensive as the Confederate flag. The exclusion of Sasha, the Southern belle turned avaricious city slicker, is meant to be a positive moment. In addition to being a bad mother, Sasha symbolizes a betrayal of one set of Southern values whilst embodying a set of negative Southern stereotypes. In this scene, Luke and Ashley are shown scoring a win for authenticity, reproaching Sasha for losing touch with her roots. Thus, the bond between father and child is cemented through a song that carries heavy connotations of subjugation and slavery. The First World complacency is restored, but skipping back a few eras: the restoration is not to the blissful fantasy of a pre-September 11 world, or even the of 1950s, but of the Antebellum South. After coding one character as a “good Southerner”, McInerney takes this license to restore a far older version of First World complacency than expected, one which far pre-dates September 10th, 2001.

Falling Man

While *The Good Life* goes about restoring the status quo through elevating the narratives of patrician characters and a jarring Southern revival, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* perpetuates American hegemonic restoration in a more subtle way. DeLillo's background is different from Jay McInerney's: he comes from a working class Italian-American family in the Bronx. In McInerney's glamorous WASP world, DeLillo himself would be marked as an exotic other simply for being a native New Yorker. For his own part, DeLillo does not spell out such sharp ethnic distinctions between his characters. *Falling Man* doesn't openly adhere to the strong inter-white hierarchy that's so present

in McInerney's work. DeLillo is also less interested in flaunting his characters' wealth and name-dropping. However, he has similar anxieties about restoring New York to a previous state. He does not flaunt WASP credentials to express them, but he certainly does take advantage of whiteness as the frame for normality.

Keith Neudecker and Lianne Glenn have divorced, but after crawling from the rubble of the Twin Towers, Keith temporarily moves in with Lianne and their ten-year-old son, Justin. Like the white women in *The Good Life*, Lianne's employment is also difficult to discern. She is a freelance book editor, but does not work in an office and stays home to look after Justin. She's separated from Keith, but there is no mention of their current financial arrangements. Keith, until September 11, was employed with a law firm in the Twin Towers. Despite the fact that Keith spends the majority of the book with no news of employment after the attacks, his finances are never mentioned. This is a common thread throughout all of 9/11 novels, with the exception of Ken Kalfus' satire.¹⁴ The host of financial complications left in the wake of September 11 are not addressed.

Lianne's father's last name was Glenn (which could be from the British Isles), and her mother, Nina, has the last name Bartos, which is quite ambiguous in origin. Bartos could be Eastern-European, Greek or even German. The last name "Neudecker" signals that Keith's family is of German extraction, despite the fact that Keith's first name is distinctly Scottish. Either way, we are not dealing with an "ethnic white" family

¹⁴ In *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, the central couple are in the midst of an acrimonious divorce: "Now all the arguments fell away or were subsumed by a single point of disagreement: money." (Kalfus, 2006, 5)

(Irish, Italian, Eastern European), but a more "All American" one. Keith was not born in New York. Martin Ridnour, Nina's German art dealer boyfriend, finds this exotic:

This was an American, not a New Yorker, not one of the Manhattan elect, a group maintained by controlled propagation. [Martin] tried to gain a sense of [Keith's] feelings about politics and religion, the voice and manner of the heartland. All he learned was that Keith had once owned a pit bull. This, at least, seemed to mean something, a dog that was all skull and jaws, an American breed, developed originally to fight and kill. (DeLillo 2007: 44)

As in McInerney's *The Good Life*, there is an ethnic distinction drawn between New York and America.

While they are not of "the Manhattan elect," it is clear that the Neudeckers are financially well off. In one scene, Lianne is watching Justin sharpen the pencil collection in his room: "He had pencils from hotels in Zurich and Hong Kong. There were pencils fashioned from tree bark, rough and knotted. There were pencils from the design store of the Museum of Modern Art. He had Mirado Black Warriors. He had pencils from a Soho shop that were inscribed along the shaft with cryptic sayings from Tibet. It was awful in a way, all these fragments of status washing up in some little kid's room." (2007: 38) The pencils are not just fragments of status, but signs that the family has travelled abroad. Their high level of cultural capital is evidenced by their museum going and choice of shops. Lianne's guilt at these status symbols is, in itself, a luxury.

Falling Man is unique amongst the 9/11 novels because its historical parallel is drawn with other acts of terrorism, rather than full-scale war. In this instance German terrorism is invoked via Martin Ridnour aka Ernst Hechinger. (2007: 146). Martin is Nina's boyfriend. He is a European-based art dealer. Throughout the novel, Lianne, Nina's daughter, watches Nina and Martin argue extensively over the motives of the

terrorists. Nina takes the stance that they are motivated by panic and religion, while Martin insists that there must be some history and reasoning at work. Later, when Lianne and Nina discuss Martin, Nina reveals that Martin was a terrorist himself. He was part of Kommune 1 in the 1960s: "Demonstrating against the German state, the fascist state. That's how they saw it. First they threw eggs. Then they set off bombs. After that I'm not sure what he did. I think he was in Italy for a while, in the turmoil, when the Red Brigades were active. But I don't know." (2007: 146)

By invoking Kommune 1 and the Red Brigades, DeLillo is making some interesting choices in terms of historical detail. Kommune 1 was one of the first German political communes, and was the foundation for the more infamous Kommune 2 and Baader-Meinhof gang. Kommune 1 was known for both its playful provocations and its obsession with breaking down bourgeois conceits. Nina's statement that they first threw eggs and then set off bombs is loosely true, but Kommune 1 was more of a gateway group, a foundation for more impactful groups to come. Linking Martin to the chaos of the Red Brigades in Italy, however, indicates a sharp escalation of terrorist action.¹⁵ The Red Brigades used significantly more violent tactics than Kommune 1. They were also active for a longer period of time. It is unclear whether or not Martin was an active part of the Red Brigades, but Nina does say that he was in "the turmoil." Martin keeps a wanted poster in his home of nineteen leftist terrorists who are still wanted in Germany. (2007:147) Nina draws the obvious parallel between these nineteen and the nineteen hijackers responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

¹⁵ R. Meade. *The Red Brigades: the story of Italian Terrorism*. (New York: St.Martin's Press: 1990)

The connection, which DeLillo draws between European Leftist terror and Islamic terror, is a potentially illuminating choice. At first glance, the two groups seem like they're ideologically at odds, with Islamic terrorism representing strong religious conservatism and Leftist terrorism representing liberal anarchy. But they do share the belief in radical change through selectively staged violence, as well as a hatred for the corrupting decadence of Western capitalism.¹⁶ Through connecting the two camps via Ridnour, DeLillo challenges the popular notion that religion, particularly Islam, was responsible for the September 11 attacks. As Richard English argues:

As a comprehensive answer to terrorism [...] it is unlikely that an explanation from religion (especially from a religion perceived as divorced from rational calculation) will prove very effective. For many practitioners of terrorist violence have expressed no religious belief whatever [...] moreover, even where religion does seem to form a significant part of people's views, its importance can vary greatly, and it offers only a partial explanation of behavior. (English, 35)

Reminding the reader of the existence of various forms of terrorism is also a reminder of how flexible the term "terrorist" is. "Terrorism" is in the eye of the beholder; the beholder being whichever government seeks to label its enemies.

But DeLillo's attempt to expand the image of the terrorist does not go very far. "Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, [Lianne] thought and the thought chilled her, shamed her — one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white." (2007: 195) Despite admitting that the terrorist could be one of us, DeLillo's illustrations of Islamist terrorists in the German, Floridian and Hudson Corridor chapters are rendered

¹⁶ A major plot point of Pauline Melville's 2010 novel, *Eating Air*, hinges on an expedient alliance made between a 1970s Leftist British terrorist and younger Islamist terrorists. "Let me be quite candid," the older Leftist says. "I know I'm not one of you, but in my experience you Muslim guys are the only really radicalized force around." (436)

monomaniacally, where as Martin/Ernst is allowed to be a more rounded figure, complete with history and reason. For DeLillo, Martin's status as "one of us" effects his depictions, sharpening the divide between "us" and "them." Martin's presence confirms that secular terrorism can be complex, but it can be eventually domesticated and respectable. The Islamist terrorists are one-dimensional and inscrutable.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, the September 11 story runs parallel with flashbacks of the bombing of Dresden, connecting an act of terrorism with an act of war. Oskar, the child narrator of the story, has lost his father in the Twin Towers during the 9/11 attacks. Oskar's name and precocious state are allusions to Oskar Matzerath, the protagonist of *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass. While Grass' Oskar takes the reader on a journey through Germany before, after and during the Second World War, Safran Foer's Oskar explores post 9/11 New York City. While part of Safran Foer's story takes place in Dresden, Grass' Oskar is from the city of Danzig, which will later become Gdansk, Poland.¹⁷

On a positive note, *Extremely Loud* features an upper middle-class white woman who is gainfully employed. Oskar's mother is a lawyer. But strangely enough, we never learn Oskar's mother's name. We learn the name of her new boyfriend, Ron. We learn that her late husband, Thomas Schell, ran the family jewelry business. But at no time

¹⁷ Safran Foer received some negative criticism for invoking Grass, on the grounds that drawing such a connection was between his novel and *The Tin Drum* was hubris. In her article "An Extremely Loud Tin Drum: A Comparative Study of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*", Sien Uytterschout provides an in-depth comparison of the two Oskars.

does Oskar mention his mother's name. For such a detail-oriented narrator, this is a glaring omission. Her interactions with Oskar revolve entirely around Oskar's missing father; we never see her in a role as an independent person or single parent. She is only defined by her motherhood and marital status; her relationship to Oskar and his father are the only things worth knowing about her. The family's financial circumstances after the loss of the father are not discussed or even referenced.

Oskar can be initially engaging to the reader, but his densely trivia-laden tone can prove quite daunting. He is something between a child prodigy and a child genius, and socially maladjusted. The book is primarily narrated from his perspective and is littered with games, puns, and winks at the reader. Throughout the novel Oskar "invents" strange and poignant devices, such as a reservoir to collect tears from people's pillows to gauge the sadness of a city (2006: 38). He describes sadness as "heavy boots." He writes letters to decidedly adult celebrities, including Stephen Hawking and Ringo Starr. He is constructed to be charming and that charm often lapses into cloying sweetness.

Despite Oskar's narrative buoyancy, there is a dark side to his personality. He often uses his precocity to manipulative ends. For example, he makes jewelry for his mother, shaping beads into a Morse code transcription of his father's last voicemail message from the Twin Towers. (2006: 35) He is consumed with the fear that his mother will somehow forget his father, ignoring her obvious signs of remaining grief. Forcing her to wear the words of her dead husband is a method of controlling her. He is

deliberately cold to his mother's new boyfriend, which serves to deepen her sense of guilt.

Oskar casually mentions giving himself bruises at night, a sign that he is experiencing deeper trauma. He is too socially maladroit to make more than a handful of friends. At nine years old, a lack of sexual knowledge is expected, but he lags behind his peers. For example, he still refers to his cat, Buckminster, as his "pussy", to the snickering delight of his classmates. (2006: 190) He is paranoid about using New York's trains and bridges in his journey, because they are "obvious targets." (2006: 194) Oskar expresses other telling fears as well:

Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants, and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings and turbans. (2006: 36)

Oskar's babble has a distinctively middle class tone. The Schells are intellectual, liberal Americans, the type of Americans who listen to National Public Radio and go to farmers' markets. Oskar often repeats the fact that he is not allowed to watch TV. He also frequently reminds us that he is an atheist. Both are signals that he comes from a more "progressive" background than most. Occasionally he'll hand his business card to people he meets. The card is a rambling list of occupations and identities, including: "jewelry designer...amateur entomologist, francophile, vegan, origamist, pacifist, amateur astrologer..." (2007: 99) Some of the more academic titles (amateur entomologist and astrologer) are the boastings of a self-styled clever child. But the

mention of vegan and pacifist act as intellectual middle-class markers, as is constant mention of his atheism, placing him squarely in the “godless, Western, and white” camp of Martin Ridnour. Oskar’s class position is more in line with Russell and Corrine’s status in *The Good Life*. As Corrine says, they are part of the “culturati.” (McInerney 2005: 18) They have a comfortable level of financial capital, and a high level of cultural capital. Oskar is definitely one of those characters referenced by Pankaj Mishra, the type of character who assumes his political beliefs automatically make the world a better place.

But there are jarring moments of racial apathy from Oskar: “[...] like I was one of the Mexican guys who mows the lawn” (Safran Foer 2006: 8) and “[...] if you squinted your eyes like a Chinese person” (2006: 10). The reader is meant not to take this seriously, due to Oskar’s youth. But Oskar’s attitude towards women surpasses boyish sexism to the point of repelling the reader. This is exposed nearly every time he meets a female character: “‘You’re incredibly beautiful,’ I told her, because she was fat, so I thought it would be an especially nice compliment, and also make her like me again, even though I was sexist.” (2006: 44) He often compliments women in this way. When he meets men he assesses them solely on their personality and actions, not what he assumes they’ll want to hear based on their gender. His gender bias also manifests in his behavior towards his nameless mother. To him, she is merely an inadequate substitute for his father. Oskar spends much of the novel being angry with her specifically for not “adding to the reservoir of tears” (2006: 52) about his father. Women,

for Oskar, are not completely human. They are locked into their role as caregivers or trophies.

Oskar seems at once aware of his white male privilege, even as a child, but also trapped by it. Before he sets out on his quest, Oskar makes himself some rules:

My other rules were that I wouldn't be sexist again, or racist, or ageist, or homophobic, or overtly wimpy, or discriminatory to handicapped people or mental retards, and that also I wouldn't lie unless I absolutely had to, which I did a lot. (2006: 87)

What makes this passage unsettling is the flippancy with which Oskar can rattle off this list. He lacks the empathy to realize that his actions affect other people. He obviously knows that "mental retards" is a term of abuse but uses it in a way that undermines his supposed endeavor. The mere fact that he must make this list to fortify himself to meet any potential "others" is an assertion of Oskar's privilege. At times like these, Oskar comes across as a grown man attempting to gleefully get away with being provocative under the guise of childish ignorance and innocence. In this way, Safran Foer is appropriating the voice of "the child" for his own purposes, rather than exploring a child's reaction to 9/11.

We get some more insight from a scene when Oskar is further along in his journey through the phonebook, and meets Ada Black. Ada is from a much higher class than Oskar's family, in a corresponding position as Luke and Sasha from *The Good Life*. She is a wealthy white woman in an opulent apartment, served by an African-American maid. Oskar goes over the top in complimenting the maid in a very unsettling manner, exposing his intense discomfort around a working-class woman of color. From what we know of Oskar, he is trying to compensate for the power imbalance between

them. However, he only ends up highlighting the existence of that gulf even further. Ada Black scolds him:

"I was just trying to be nice." [says Oskar.] "You might have tried too hard." [says Ada.] "How can you try too hard to be nice?" "You were being condescending." "What's that?" "You were talking to her like she was a child." "No, I wasn't." "There's no shame in being a maid. She does a serious job and I pay her well." "I was just trying to be nice." (2006: 150)

It is important to note that this exchange takes place after Oskar questions Ada about how wealthy she is, and asks how she can feel comfortable being so rich when there are so many homeless people in New York. Oskar comes from a financially comfortable family and doesn't recognize that he is in no position to judge Ada. He also refuses to sit on her sofa, because it is leather and he does not "believe in leather." (2006: 149) It is refreshing that another character calls Oskar out for his behavior. It is a sign that the author has knowingly crafted a problematic character. But one wonders why this boy in this particular story must be like this for the entirety of the novel.

The author's intentions for Oskar's reception are not quite clear. After receiving some high-profile negative reviews for *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Safran Foer was smarting from the criticism. During a recorded reading during the tour for the paperback release, he quipped, in the middle of reading one of Oskar's lines: "You know, in certain reviews of this book, it was pointed out in a derogatory way that Oskar's an annoying character. As if that weren't intentional." ¹⁸

¹⁸ Authorsonthelive.com. AOT #38: Jonathan Safran Foer Podcasts *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. 7 September 2006. <http://authorsonthelive.com/aot-38-jonathan-safran-foer-podcasts-extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close/>. Accessed on 8 October 2013.

But Oskar is not only a critique of a cynical society tangled in its own attempts to be politically correct. He is also meant to be a symbol of childlike, earnest questioning. This is partially due to Safran Foer's own color-play in the novel: Oskar only wears white clothing, and his quest leads him to all of the New Yorkers with the surname Black. Oskar insists on wearing white clothing, but never explains why. One can only assume that the author is invoking white as a traditional sign of purity and innocence. But in Oskar's case, the nature of that innocence is not firmly in Safran Foer's grip. One of the reasons for Oskar's disquieting presence could be that he is meant to stand for so many ideas at once. He is the 9/11 orphan, the savant, the detective, the spoiled brat and the angel of the story all at once. Children are mercurial by nature, but Safran Foer stretches Oskar to the point where he does not read as one coherent character. Like Corrine in *The Good Life*, Oskar's innocence is stated rather than demonstrated.

There is little direct reference to the Second World War in the chapters leading up to the bombing of Dresden. Right before the firebombing begins, Anna tells Thomas that she's pregnant. He is overjoyed and unaware that he is about to lose her. The couple becomes separated during the bombings, and he goes to look for her in the aftermath. There is some description of the horrifically killed and maimed people he sees along the way. But strikingly, most of the aftermath's description is devoted to Thomas performing mercy killings at the Dresden Zoo. The zookeepers' eyes had been burnt closed, and he shoves a gun into Thomas' hands and tells him to first, "find the carnivores," then, "shoot everything." (2006: 213) The reader then gets a long description of the animals Thomas has to shoot, including elephants, apes, bears,

zebras, and giraffes. At one point Thomas approaches an ape he's already wounded and screams, somewhat melodramatically, "What do you want from me?" (2006: 213) before shooting it again. This narrative choice shies away from addressing the human cost of the bombing.

By uniting the streets and monuments of Dresden with the Twin Towers, Safran Foer bestows the Twin Towers with an even further monumental status. Through the connection with Dresden, Safran Foer imbues the buildings with an innocent quality. Dresden was not only remembered for its irreplaceable beauty and history, but is also infamous for being the "innocent" German city, wrongly bombed to the ground by the Allies.¹⁹ This association further inflates the World Trade Center's aura of innocence. Despite the fact that both the Dresden Bombing and September 11 attacks are infamous for the loss of civilians, the sites stood for different sets of values, and were targeted for different reasons. Dresden was a cultural focal point and a residential area. The Twin Towers were architecturally curious office buildings, targeted because they were icons of Western wealth and capitalism.

Furthermore, the attackers and conditions surrounding the attacks could not be more dissimilar. The Dresden bombing came at the very end of the World War II, when German citizens were increasingly disillusioned with the Third Reich's promises of victory. At this point, Germany had been repeatedly bombed by the Allies, and the residents of Dresden were clinging to the hope that the city's cultural capital would have kept them safe. Millions of people were already dead. The September 11 attacks, on the

¹⁹ P. Addison and J. A. Crang, *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden 1945*. (London: Pimlico, 2006.)

other hand, came as a complete surprise to the American public. They were not part of a larger war, but a spectacular announcement of Al-Qaeda's presence and intentions to the world. The Dresden attack was a superfluous attempt to demoralize the already diminished German civilian population, whereas the September 11 attacks were strikes against sites of power, which were meant to shock.

Tellingly, Safran Foer's account of the Dresden bombings names neither the British nor the Allies as perpetrators. In reference to September 11, Oskar makes references to being afraid of men with turbans as well as to Mohammad Atta by name. Yet Thomas makes no reference to Britain or the Allied forces. Bitterness towards the Allied bombers would make sense, considering that they were responsible for the death of Thomas' girlfriend and unborn child. It would also add a complex layer to Thomas' politics. However, Thomas is too innocent to have any politics.

One of the more uncomfortable historical connections in the book occurs when Oskar plays an interview tape about Hiroshima to his classmates for "Show & Tell." (2006: 187-189) The tape is an extremely graphic account of a woman searching for her daughter after the bomb was dropped, and finding her dying body covered in maggots. The students in Oskar's class are extremely disturbed by this, but he obviously uses the moment as a jumping-off point to discuss how radiation travels and can be tracked by shadows. In a way, this vignette could be read as a satire. It deftly exposes Oskar's combination of trauma and disconnection from his peers. As Michel Faber sees it in his criticism for *The Guardian*:

Tomoyasu's real-life account of her daughter's death is incomparably more powerful, in my opinion, than anything Foer concocts, and yet, in the

context of the novel, it is used to audaciously comic effect, highlighting the way historical enormities always end up jostling for space with mundane concerns. Thus a painfully serious topic is given a whimsical spin in order to make a painfully serious point: Foer's whole enterprise in a nutshell."²⁰

Faber's is a strong and valid reading of that scene. However, invoking Hiroshima in connection with 9/11 has occurred in a more sinister register:

The World War II meta-narrative can also be seen in the designation of the site of the Twin Towers collapse as 'ground-zero', a highly charged and condensed appellation first used to describe the point of detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima [...] it is singularly ironic that America's greatest crime against humanity is discursively remade as a crime against America [...] at 'ground zero' the memory of Hiroshima is obliterated and replaced by the memory of 9/11. (Jackson 2005: 43)

In light of this loaded rhetorical connection between Hiroshima and the 9/11 attacks, Safran Foer's choice of using Hiroshima as a platform for humor comes across as gauche. Once again, America's crimes are brushed over in the narrative, and, worse still, used to convey American grief.

Terrorist

John Updike's novel *Terrorist*, takes place in a fictitious downtrodden New Jersey city called New Prospect. The protagonist, Jack Levy, is a jaded Jewish high school guidance counselor who must dissuade one of his students, Ahmad Mulloy, from bombing the Holland Tunnel. Beth Levy, Jack's wife, is an interesting figure in the novel. She is one of only two WASPs in the story, the other one being her sister, Hermione. They come from a working-class Pennsylvanian Lutheran family. Jack and Beth have been married for over thirty years, and have one adult son. During their time together, Beth has ballooned to over two hundred pounds. Jack stays with her, but is no

²⁰ M. Faber. "A Tower of Babble." *The Guardian*. 4 June 2005.

longer attracted to her and is irritated by her presence. He finds her "oppressively fat" (Updike 2007: 37).

The appearance of a fat WASP is an aberration in light of Updike's abundant use of overweight African-American background characters. It is also noteworthy that the only overweight WASP in the 9/11 novels is the only WASP coming from a working-class background. But there are two different types of fat at play, and the difference is racialized. Black fat in *Terrorist* is rendered as jolly and voluptuous. Updike attributes a sassy sort of ignorance to it, as if those who bear it are not aware that it could be bad for their health. For Beth, white fat removes her from being sexually desirable to her husband. She is fully aware of the problems her fat has caused her, including the strain it puts on her marriage. Her mobility and health are impaired because of her weight. Beth's white fat comes across as static and cumbersome, with its roots in laziness and malaise. As Thomas Jones notes in his review of *Terrorist* for the *London Review of Books*:

The character with the heaviest symbolic burden is Beth, the Overweight Protestant, whose people have been in America almost as long as it has been America. In many ways – addicted to consuming, living in fear of terrorism, but incapable of doing anything about either of them[...]she is America. Certainly, Jack's feelings towards her, a paradoxical combination of irritation, disgust and affection, are pretty much identical to his feelings towards America. He wonders if she had 'once been as thin' as the young women 'in the beer and Coke commercials', a way of wondering if America was ever coextensive with its myth of itself: the unsurprising answer, to both questions, is no.²¹

²¹ T. Jones, "Mr Down-by-the-Levee", *London Review of Books*, 7 September 2006.

Beth's sister, Hermione Fogel, is not overweight. Instead, she has a lean and bony frame, maintained by self-denial. She is the undersecretary for the Secretary of Homeland Security, whom Jack describes as "a born-again right wing stooge with some Kraut name like Haffenreffer [...]" (Updike 2007: 32) Clearly, this is meant to be a reference to Donald Rumsfeld. Hermione is described as "virginal" despite being in her sixties. (2007:45) Unlike her sister Beth, she fully conforms with the WASP stereotype. She is the fastidious spinster underling to a powerful but unpopular Republican politician. Hermione idolizes Haffenreffer and, in her own puritanically repressed way, has amorous feelings for him. While it is initially refreshing to see a woman in a political position, Updike characterizes that position as a result of festering obsessions rather than an active choice. Her role is even jokingly referred to as the "Undersecretary of Women's Purses", in reference to the protocol she'd developed for bag searches. She has no family of her own, but appears to be married to her job of keeping America safe.

Of the other WASP characters in the 9/11 novels, Hermione bears the strongest resemblance to Corrine from Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*. When Corrine was a teenager, she developed an eating disorder that later compromised her ability to bear children. Her children had to be conceived from surrogate eggs donated by her sister. In the case of both Corrine and Hermione, the stereotypically white self-denial in the form of withholding food has rendered them childless, albeit in different ways. Yet this denial is still conveyed as a virtue through the narration. Corrine is presented as a good woman, and Hermione is instrumental in foiling the terror attack at the end of the novel.

Beth and Hermione grew up in a hard-working Pennsylvanian Lutheran family, “always stodgily accepting whatever their unions and the Democrats and *The Saturday Evening Post* dished out [...]” (2007: 123) The sisters represent an old-fashioned German working-class, formerly regarded as the backbone of America. The Fogel sisters come from a very different place than the wealthier New York WASP women featured in the other 9/11 novels. They are past their prime and come from a humbler background. Beth and Hermione, as the only “All Americans” in Updike’s novel, symbolize the opposite but equally dismal extremes in which America can go. Beth represents the abundant promise turned to fat complacency by passively consumed liberal ideals. Hermione represents the conservative, self-abnegating war hawk. Both are portrayed as failures of femininity: Beth through her obscuring fat, Hermione through her sterile leanness.

Conclusion

In an interview for *The New York Times Book Review*, Safran Foer says something telling:

“Both the Holocaust and 9/11 were events that demanded retellings,” Foer said when asked about his preoccupation with seminal tragedies. “The accepted versions didn’t make sense for me. I always write out of a need to read something, rather than a need to write something. With 9/11, in particular, I needed to read something that wasn’t politicized or commercialized, something with no message, something human.”²²

²² D. Solomon. “The Rescue Artist”. *The New York Times*. February 25, 2005.

One can argue that claiming a creative work is capable of being "something with no message, something human" is a naively contradictory notion. Safran Foer feels as though he is filling some sort of void in the literature by presenting a more "human" story without an agenda. Yet there is an agenda being conveyed through the active "depoliticization" of the story. His attempts to align characters with what he views as "the right kind of politics" has a certain sanitizing quality, but it is definitely not depoliticizing. The insistence on universality is a political choice. Safran Foer's earnest attempt at "something human" brings to mind a quote from Richard Dyer: "There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that— they can only speak for their race." (Dyer 1997: 2) In light of this quote, Oskar and his grandfather both are blank-raced everymen whose "innocence" is meant to be taken as a given.

John Updike's critique of Jonathan Safran Foer's Schell family as "deracinated" takes on more weight in light of his own writing. In Updike's *Terrorist*, everyone is racialized at the expense of individuality. While Safran Foer eschews conscious acknowledgments of racial difference, Updike openly allows racial stereotypes to steer his characters.

These novels show the enduring tacit belief that White Anglo Saxon Protestant is still the American Protagonist. The "American Breed" is not often openly raced, but an accepted stand-in for the everyman. While this is not a new development in literature or culture, a situation such as the 9/11 attacks reveals the inflexibility behind the assumptions about who is allowed to speak for the "good" in America. The authors did

not explore narrative possibilities of those who were financially ruined and politically shaken by the attacks. It also exposes how the vast majority of Americans who do not fit the wealthy white male mold, are, despite their numbers, falling into the 9/11 authors' blind spots.

Chapter II

Fighting the Need to be Normal

The novelist who approaches the September 11 attacks has the potential to cover very rich ground through the figure of the terrorist. As with Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the villain has the potential to become the most engrossing, complex character in the piece.²³ But in the September 11 narratives, the antagonist, the purely "evil" terrorist, was given a flat rendering by the American government and media for the purposes of simplicity. For American writers, the reading public had been cast in the roles of both "good guy" and "victim" by the Bush Administration's rhetoric. Judith Butler discusses the limited narrative options for Americans attempting to explain the terrorists' motives for the attacks:

We can narrate, for instance, what Mohammed Atta's family life was like, whether he was teased for looking like a girl, where he congregated in Hamburg, and what led, psychologically, to the moment in which he piloted a plane into the World Trade Center. Or what was bin Laden's break from his family, and why was he so angry? That kind of story is interesting to a degree, because it suggests that there is a personal pathology at work. (Butler 2006: 5)

Personal pathology, in this case, is the closed loop of an individual's psyche, separate from the wider political context. The terrorists' own mental quirks and personal histories are offered as the sole motivations for their attacks. Personal pathology, however, becomes a trap for writers and the public. In the 9/11 novel, this pathology became a highly racialized replacement for character. Worse yet, pathology became an easy

²³ As Slavoj Žižek notes in *Violence* (2008), "Terrorists cannot but appear as something akin to Milton's Satan with his 'Evil, be thou my good': while they pursue what appear to us to be evil goals with evil means, the very form of their activity meets the highest standard of the good." (74)

replacement for politics. During a speech on November 29, 2001, President George W. Bush captured this substitution:

They [the terrorists] can't stand what America stands for. It must bother them to know we're such a free and wonderful place—a place where all religions flourish; a place where women are free; a place where children can be educated. It must grate on them greatly. (cited in Jackson 2005: 55)

The sentiment behind this statement locates the terrorist as personally or culturally motivated, rather than politically motivated. In other words, "[...] America was attacked for its virtues rather than its failings [...]" (Jackson 2005: 54) Like villains in a cartoon film, the terrorists stamp their feet angrily at the sight of Western "freedom," and rub their hands together whilst feverishly plotting mayhem.

Slavoj Žižek describes the First and Third World as separated by a "desert of the Real":

[...] the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generated the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction. In this paranoiac perspective, the terrorists are turned into an irrational abstract agency— abstract in the Hegelian sense of subtracted from the concrete socio-ideological network which gave birth to it. (Žižek 2002: 33)

The desert of the Real positions the terrorist as a profoundly confused individual; he covets what the West has to offer, while vowing to destroy it. This construction creates a perverse dynamic between the terrorist and the Western way of life; if the former cannot have the latter, then he must destroy it. It would be more truthful to state that the terrorist envied America's considerable physical comforts, including clean water, abundant food and reliable services including police forces. But that statement would lead to uncomfortable questions about the disparity of wealth between nations and

would, ultimately, garner sympathy for the terrorist. By labeling the terrorist as covetous of a set of ideals rather than a better reality, he is portrayed as impotent to rectify the situation at home and is, in turn, mindlessly destructive in his rage against America. Impotent rage is just one of the many tropes used to describe terrorists in both political rhetoric as well as in literature. This chapter will look at how the terrorist has been simplified.

Treating historical villains as both mentally and physically defective madmen is not new. There are still vivid contemporary legends about Hitler's problematic bowels and Mao's rotten teeth. These biologically based myths provide "reasons" for particular historical figures' antagonistic drives. In Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty's short story 'The Terrorist,' we see a prototypical sketch of a fictional terrorist, who is similarly built for destruction. It provides a valuable point of reference in relation to current depictions. The story was written in 1926, and depicts Louis Quigley, an Irish revolutionary terrorist who is about to bomb a theatre. From the beginning, Quigley is rendered as monomaniacal and isolated. Despite the warmth of the room, his ears are blue and he shivers with rage "in his thin overcoat." (O'Flaherty 1998:198) He sees himself as "an avenging God" (1998: 200) hurling down a thunderbolt. He prepares to utter his prophecy as he throws the bomb, which "would go forth to all the world as a clarion call." (1998:199) He views his targets as "Drones! Drones soured on their own luxury!" (1998:199) In a telling passage, Quigley leers down at two tipsy courtesans entering the theatre. He watches them anticipating "exulting joy, the slaughter of drones; society has laid before him the most gross yet exquisite manifestation of its lordly vice so that his act

might go forth..." (1998:199) But for Quigley, the "foulest iniquity" is the sight of vacant-eyed young men sitting in the expensive seats: "[...] young humanity drained of its intelligence, an insult to the divinity of man; the headless clowns sitting on the throne of wealth to sign the edicts of ghoulish fiends that trample the starving millions." (1998:199)

Despite preceding contemporary depictions of terrorists by nearly eighty years, O'Flaherty's 'The Terrorist' shares many of their defining characteristics. Quigley's physical alienation from the rest of the crowd is symbolized by his shivers in the heated room. He reduces his potential victims to hedonistic "drones." O'Flaherty, however, is also unflattering in his presentation of Quigley's targets. They are the degenerate upper classes. Both perpetrator and victims are painted in an unsympathetic light. While the terrorist is not the cure for a sick society, he serves as a reminder that the society is still sick. This ambivalence about the "point" of terrorists reemerges in modern depictions.

Quigley's isolation and obsession are signs of a religious madman. He's no jihadist, but he does see himself in a religious role as an avenging prophet.²⁴ He rails against his victims on the basis of a moral ideology. They are too soured for saving, so they must be destroyed. It is clear that Quigley is doing this to send a message to a larger intended audience, "the world", but no specific politics, or plans for concrete change are mentioned. The misogynistic viewpoint, usually associated with fundamentalist Islam, is present in this story. While Quigley views the courtesans as the embodiment of the society he wants to destroy, they, in fact, have the least amount of

²⁴ In Pauline Melville's *Eating Air* (2010), former terrorist Hector Rossi muses "Terrorists are avenging angels... self-appointed, of course." (Melville, 42)

power. He has more pity for the "youth drained of its intelligence" than the women. His desire to destroy the courtesans more than anyone else reads as an attempt at purging sexual vice from society.

After September 11, there were many sexually derived explanations given for the terrorists' motives. The attack on the Twin Towers was widely viewed as symbolic castration. Two giant phallic symbols of American prosperity were destroyed. As Hélène Cixous wrote shortly after 9/11:

And yet what caused the seduction of the T.T., the fascination they exerted in the entire world? Sexual ambiguity. The representation at once obvious and hidden of the mystery of the Phallus. The towers embodied phallic power in all its ever disquieting complexity: there is nothing as fragile as the erection, properly or figuratively. The T.T. were the figure par excellence of triumphant, therefore threatened, power."²⁵

The loss of the towers was read as a threat to America's ego and potency. Cixous also suggests that this threat was inherent to the WTC's swaggering, sexual design. In the wake of September 11, there were fears that the citizens of New York would be disorientated to the point of promiscuity. The narration of sexual practices after the attacks iterated September 11 as a trauma of national sexual violation, proffering predictions as well as advice about "terror sex." With scant anecdotal evidence, American media predicted that the nine months after the attack would result in a baby boom, the result of indiscriminate sex amongst traumatized strangers. "Worried that the 'nation's sexual health could spiral,' [...] sex therapists discouraged 'maladaptive' behavior, that is sex outside of primary, intimate relationships, insinuating that [...] non-

²⁵Cixous, H. "The Towers: Les tours." *Signs*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Gender and Cultural Memory: Special Issue. Editors Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (Autumn 2002), p. 431. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

normative sexual scenarios were not helping or were disrupting the nation's healing process." (Puar 2007:41) Such predictions embellished the sense of mortality salience, by implying that the urge to reproduce had naturally arisen in response the mass loss of life.

But there is another layer to the "terror sex" prediction: acting out in a primarily sexual fashion is understood as a consequence of a sexual assault. It was as if the entire country had become a victim of a sex crime, and could act out accordingly. The 9/11 attacks were sometimes characterized blatantly as a sexual assault, if not a sexualized assault. The perpetrators of such an attack were, thus, cast as sexual deviants. More over, this was an important opportunity to cast sexual deviancy as "un-American."

It Came from the Planet Islam

While Louis Quigley is a forerunner to depictions of terrorists, the terrorists in the 9/11 novels are also heavily influenced by invasion narratives of films from the 1950s. The aliens in these films are often read as a symbol of the communist threat from the Soviet Union. The aliens, like the communists, were represented as enemies of freedom, bent on fashioning America, and by extension the world, into their own image. When one revisits these films in a post-9/11 context, it is easy to see how this characterization of aliens fits a stereotype of Islamic terrorism even more closely than it did the stereotype of Soviet Communist. Like aliens, the terrorists attack from the sky in spectacular fashion. They deliver a demand for sweeping change, and issue threats if Earth does not comply.

Strong parallels between the depictions of terrorists and aliens can be found in the popular 1951 film *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. The film opens with American Army personnel becoming aware, via radar, of a spaceship traveling rapidly over the land. This is followed by a montage of the news being reported around the world. We see shocked civilians in India, Russia, France, and then back in the American capitol, where the spaceship is beginning to descend. It glides menacingly over the White House, the Washington Monument, and other iconic DC monuments until it lands in a baseball diamond, a symbol of both America's sporting prowess and youthful innocence. Despite the scenes from other countries, the viewer is cued that this is an America-centric film, with America standing in for the rest of the world.

The alien, named Klattu, comes from a planet which is much like Earth, but far superior. The beings there live twice as long and live in peace. They have ceded their freedom over to a race of robot police who monitor their population for violence. Earth, the last violent planet, threatens the universe with its wanton use of atomic bombs. A decision has been made by the other planets that Earth must change its ways or be destroyed. Klattu dismisses the complex reasons for the Earth's problems as "petty squabbles": "I'm impatient with stupidity," he says to the emissary from the White House, "My people have learned to live without it."

Klattu expresses frustration with the Americans' inability to take his threats seriously: "Must I take drastic action in order to get a hearing? [...] Violent action, since that seems to be the only thing your people understand. Leveling New York City, perhaps? Or sinking the Rock of Gibraltar?" Even aliens from outer space are aware

that attacking New York City is an effective way to garner attention. Then Klattu, in order to prove a point about his power, neutralizes electricity across America for an hour. He is careful to keep hospitals and other essential places running, but he has, in effect, performed a terror attack.

In this narrative, the alien presents a threat of behavior modification on a massive scale, as well as an appealing fantasy of force which can potentially strong-arm humanity into peace. Beneath the derogatory explanations provided for the terrorist motives, lies a wish for a *deus ex machina* to come down and impose order. Like the Irish theater in O'Flaherty's story, America is a sick society which holds some viable targets in need of eliminating. Jack Levy, the protagonist of *Terrorist*, sums up this view in the most concentratedly jaded way:

As Jack Levy sees it, America is paved solid with fat and tar, a coast-to-coast tarbaby where we're all stuck. Even our vaunted freedom is nothing much to be proud of, with the Commies out of the running; it just makes it easier for the terrorists to move about, renting airplanes and vans and setting up websites [...] The ringleader [of the World Trade Center Attacks] had a German degree in city planning; he should have redesigned New Prospect. (Updike 2007: 27)

In this passage, the terrorist is positioned as the superior city planner, a master of order. When culturally oriented in such a fashion, the alien/terrorist becomes a moralizing avenger. Jack expresses the desire to give up "our vaunted freedom" to escape the disappointments of the American Dream. When taken this way, terrorists present a tempting fantasy of a simpler world. The danger of this cultural orientation is that it shifts the focus disproportionately on what the West views as its flaws (which, in the end, are merely the price of "freedom"). The political motivations of the terrorists are completely ignored.

Falling Man and *The Final Days of Muhammad Atta*

The terrorist as cultural avenger is embedded in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Three chapters are interspersed throughout the novel: "On Marienstrasse", "In Nokomis", and "In the Hudson Corridor". These chapters are told from the perspective of Hammad, who will go on to fly a plane straight into the North Tower. In comparison to the rest of *Falling Man*, these chapters are narrated in a more formal register of English, which distances the reader from the character. Hammad is not directly based on any of the original nineteen hijackers, but he is led by Mohamed Atta, who was one of the ringleaders of the 9/11 attacks. Atta goes by the name Amir, but DeLillo takes pains to convey his original identity: "Amir spoke in his face. His full name was Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir el-Sayed Atta." (DeLillo 2007: 80) Mohamed Atta was the most notable hijacker for his role as the ringleader, and the only hijacker to become a household name. Contemporary readers will automatically know that this character is based on a real person.

In light of his choice to insert the very real Amir, also known as Mohamed Atta, DeLillo's choice to construct the fictive Hammad is worth examining. Despite having over a dozen historical figures to choose from, DeLillo creates a narrator from scratch. On the one hand, an author is free to make up whatever details he wants about this character; he is not constrained by historical facts. But Hammad's particularly loose construction reads as a generic stand-in for any of the other hijackers. Hammad is little more than a cipher and a fictive witness to a character based on a historical figure.

The chapter begins with an Iraqi man telling Hammad about his experience as an Iraqi soldier in the Shatt al Arab. The man talks about the horror of shooting young Iranian boys sent into the frontline as martyrs to the cause. This anecdote appears to be an attempt at politicization on the part of the author, but despite the power of the man's story and its relevance to his own situation, Hammad is distracted: "[...] he kept thinking that another woman would come by on a bike, someone to look at, hair wet, legs pumping." (2007: 78) He is easily distracted from the traumatic story by a hint of sex. There are a few political references in the chapters, but none are made by Hammad: they are all made at him by other characters. It is as if DeLillo can only get into the mind of the terrorist if his motives lie in personal madness or turmoil, not politics.

Hammad does not have a strong idea of what he's doing in the conspiracy. When his fellow fundamentalists blame "the Jews" for the shabbiness of their building, Hammad isn't sure whether this is "funny, true, or stupid." (2007: 79) He goes along with two other men in his cohort to beat up a man, but he does not know who this man is or why they're beating him. His best assumption is because the man does not have a beard like his attackers. Throughout the chapters, Hammad acts as little more than brainless muscle: "He does not know the name of the German security in any language." (2007: 81) For someone who is entrenched in a suicidal terrorist cell, he is clueless and bewildered by his present circumstances. Not only does it weaken Hammad's motivation for the reader, but it also makes one wonder how a highly organized body such as Al-Qaeda could have enlisted him. He appears to be more of a patsy than a collaborator in the plot. His narrative does not give the reader any insight

into the political motives of a terrorist. It seems to highlight what he does not know, rather than why he is there. Later, this ignorance runs alongside a slow-burning madness.

Hammad's bland bewilderment and madness serve to echo the confusion of the Western reader. Hammad is nothing but a fly on the wall that occasionally goes "to the toilet to jerk off." (2007: 80) That particular moment comes as a complete non sequitur from the narrator. It is there, perhaps, to reveal Hammad's personal weaknesses in comparison to his fellow jihadis or it is there to underline the "hypocrisy" of the attacks. Amir criticizes Hammad's lack of zeal: he has casual sex with a woman and is slow to prayer. Hammad grudgingly agrees with Amir: "He had to fight against the need to be normal. He had to struggle against himself, then against the injustice that haunted their lives." (2007: 83) But it is hard to see what is "normal" to Hammad. He's presented as a man without a past. The previous "injustice" seems more like an abstract idea rather than a truth. Some detail is given in one passage about their isolation: "This is what they talked about, being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies." (2007: 80) But the use of "other" is vague, suggesting overall paranoia rather than a specific target.

In all of these stories, the "need to be normal" bears a strong resemblance to the desire to conform to Western sexual norms. The source of the terrorist's "abnormality" is clear: it is Islam. Islam, both inscrutable and repressive, must be the source of sexual confusion, and that sexual confusion is the source of irrationally anti-Occidental rage.

As Jasir Puar, the author of *Terrorist Assemblages* observes:

Sexual deviancy is linked to the process of discerning, othering, and quarantining [terrorists'] bodies, but these racially and sexually perverse figures also labor in the service of disciplining and normalizing subjects worth of rehabilitation away from these bodies, in other words, signaling and enforcing mandatory forms of patriotism [...] even spy novelist John Le Carre's pronouncement in *The Nation* that Osama bin Laden's manner in his video was akin to 'narcissistic homoeroticism,' [...] can provide Americans with hope that 'his barely containable male vanity, his appetite for self-drama and his passion for the limelight[...]will be his downfall [...]' (Puar 2007: 38)

Le Carre's remark is a great example of how the queer discourse was refracted through the lens of September 11. In accusing bin Laden of self-eroticization, he turns the head of Al-Qaeda into the ultimate other: self-absorbed, foreign and deviantly queer. The Western viewers are reassured, by contrast, that they are civic-minded and heterosexual (or, if homosexual, at least assimilated enough to be viewed as socially sound). But the use of the terms "drama" and "vanity" are definite markers of the homophobic Western discourse. The opportunity for political critique is sacrificed for the chance to make an anti-gay theatre quip. Despite the many attempts to cast America as an accepting and sexually liberating space in contrast to "The Third World", the contempt for queer people lies right on the surface when queerness is invoked as a characteristic of Orientalist embodiments of evil.

The three chapters in *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo dedicated to the terrorists have strong sexually and mentally dysfunctional overtones: "One of the men had fought in Bosnia, another avoided contact with dogs and women." (DeLillo 2007: 80) As the time of the attack nears, Hammad stops bathing. While Amir is lecturing him on their duty to kill Americans, Hammad thinks: "You look at [Amir] and see a life too intense to last

another minute, maybe because he never fucked a woman.” (2007: 176) The Western authorial voice intrudes on the character's narration.

Martin Amis takes a similar route in his short story, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta.” It is told from Atta's perspective in the third person. Again, Atta is portrayed as an asexual robot: “Muhammad Atta decided that romantic and religious ardor came from contagious parts of the human being: the parts he didn't have.” (Amis 2008: 115) The components Atta lacks are those that separate humans from heartless automatons. Because of this, he lacks a personal life. Like DeLillo's "Amir", Amis' Atta chastises another hijacker for his weakness for women: “Perhaps you should have settled for your German nudist. Goodbye, Ziad.” (2008: 116)

In Amis' construction of Atta, he is more than an uptight, soulless virgin; he is plagued by bowel problems: “He had a feverish and unvarying ache, not only in his gut but in his lower back, his pelvic saddle and his scrotum.” (2008: 97) One must wonder if the “parts” referred to in the earlier passage are not missing, but just corrupted through his abstinence from sexual pleasure. Be they missing or corroded, his brokenness allows Atta to be drawn to Radical Islam in a dispassionate way: “Muhammad Atta was not religious; he was not even especially political. He had allied himself with the militants because Jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation.” (2008: 101)

As Mark Jancovich notes in his book *Rational Fears: American horror in the 1950s*:

The [cinematic] aliens themselves fall into two different categories. The first of these is the 'supreme intelligence' which is little more than a head in a glass

jar, and it is described as 'mankind developed to its ultimate intelligence.' Like the aliens in *War of the Worlds*, it is an intelligence which has advanced itself at the expense of its own physical body. The 'supreme intelligence' controls the second category of aliens, the 'synthetic humans' or 'mutants.' These are large, physical beings [...] They have no will of their own, and are described as merely 'slaves which exist to do [the supreme intelligence's] will.'" (1996: 57)

In DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Hammad is clearly the synthetic human to Amir's superior intelligence. We see very little of Hammad's volition and motive in his actions. In the meanwhile, Amir is operating at the expense of his physical body. Martin Amis takes this notion further still: his Atta is operating as a terrorist due to the corrosion of his physical body.

Terrorist

In *Terrorist* by John Updike, the reader finds a portrait of the terrorist as an American teenager. Seventeen-year-old Ahmad Mulloy is a twisted Quran savant. He is the offspring of an Irish-American mother and an absent Egyptian father. Despite the fact that he has spent his entire life in New Jersey and has never been overseas, Ahmad speaks with the syntax of a foreigner and has the values of a jaded old misogynist:

My father well knew that marrying an American citizen, however, trashy and immoral she was, would gain him American citizenship, and so it did, but not American know-how, nor the network of acquaintances that leads to American prosperity. Having despaired of ever earning more than a menial living by the time I was three, he decamped. Is that the correct word? I encountered it in an autobiographical memoir by the great American writer Henry Miller, which Miss Mackenzie assigned us in Advanced English. (Updike 2007:35)

Like DeLillo's Hammad and Amis' Atta, Updike's depiction of Ahmad's brand of normal is dubious. It is as though Ahmad was created in a vacuum of curt Islamic

references, quarantined from American society. His repeated thought of "devils...these devils seek to take away my God" (2007:3) is reminiscent of Louis Quigley's mantra of "Drones! Drones soured on their own luxury." (O'Flaherty 1999: 198) It is also worth noting that, like Klattu from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Ahmad is also a tall handsome outsider who speaks syntactically perfect English. The physical and linguistic perfection stand as an indictment against the inferior, liberal society Klattu and Ahmad wish to destroy.

Despite his conspicuous contempt for the American way of life and open allegiance to fundamentalist Islam, none of the other characters are alarmed about his behavior. None of the faculty members at his school notice his profound alienation. His own mother is blasé about his religious fervor. In fact, she wonders aloud whether his furtive, un-American teenage behavior is caused by latent homosexuality. (Of course, the reader knows that it is just Islam at work.) Any young isolated Muslim converts behaving in the way that Ahmad does in the novel would have been regarded with suspicion by everyone they came in contact with. The improbable level of obliviousness is enough to distract the reader from completely entering the novel.

It becomes clear that Ahmad's revulsion at certain facets of American life is a projection of John Updike's own anxieties. The scene of Ahmad's visit to a African-American church supports this reading. "The mosque was a domain of men; here, women in their spring shimmer, their expansive soft flesh, dominate." (2007:49) In this passage alone, the novel's recurring concerns about black matrilineal domination and obesity are alluded to. Although these thoughts are supposed to come from Ahmad's

head, they are both traditionally white American concerns. This tacit overlay of whiteness, perhaps, could explain why Ahmad can voice his opinions but remain unscathed and invisible, free to carry through a plan of attack until he is stopped at the last possible second. Other racial slippages occur throughout the novel. At one point, Joryleen, a black classmate of Ahmad's, refers to Ahmad's mother as a "freckle-faced mick." The use of such a specifically hierarchical white-ethnic slur coming from the mouth of a young African-American character draws attention to itself in a negative way. It seems to be the type of insult that would come from an older person, a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Again, the authorial voice has crossed a boundary and mistaken itself for the character's point of view.

Despite his desperate prayers and attempts to keep himself "pure" and asexual, Ahmad is drawn to Joryleen. She is one of the few people at his school who speaks to him. Like him, she is one of the rare promising students at their substandard high school. She invites him to her church in an effort to form a meaningful rapport with him. Joryleen's church is described as completely alien to Ahmad, as if he had never set foot in a Judeo-Christian country. "To worship a God known to have died— this very idea affects Ahmad like an elusive stench, a stoppage in the plumbing, a dead rodent in the walls [...]" (2007: 49) After graduation, Ahmad and Joryleen lose contact. Ahmad becomes a truck driver for a Lebanese-run furniture store and is quickly recruited to drive a truckload of explosives into the Holland Tunnel. His boss hires a prostitute to take Ahmad's virginity before the mission. That prostitute turns out to be Joryleen. She has been pimped out by her boyfriend, Tylenol. In a rather tawdrily detailed scene,

Joryleen tries to seduce Ahmad as part of her new job, but he resists, insisting that they talk instead. In the end they do not have sex. But Joryleen's fall from grace does confirm Ahmad's culturally conservative fears, and further establishes his role as an avenging angel, rather than a political actor.

Shaik Rashid, the imam who leads Ahmad towards self-destruction, is an even more disturbing figure than Ahmad. Shaik Rashid has been teaching Ahmad the Quran for seven years. Originally, his class had eight other children, but only Ahmad has remained. The reason for the class' dramatic reduction in size is not spelled out, but one can guess that it is due to Shaik Rashid's disconcerting nature. The imam is described as having "violet lips" (2007:101), "feminine grey eyes" (2007:102) and a "waxy, white face." (2007:102) His fingers "appear sinuously long." (2007:145) His unsettling physical presence is matched by his personality. He speaks in an old-fashioned, formal register that is a more rhetorically mature version of Ahmad's own stylized tone. The classes are conducted in a very tense atmosphere and he demands perfection from Ahmad. Occasionally, his lectures are punctuated by old-fashioned yet flirtatious phrases such as "Am I boring you, my pet?" and "What say you to that, as a comely young man?" (2007:105) His overall presentation makes the reader wonder if he is a pedophile.

Shaik Rashid has known Ahmad since he was a child, but he does not view the boy with the paternal or avuncular affection one would expect from such a relationship:

To [Shaik Rashid], Ahmad is an American. No amount of zeal or Qur'an studies can change his mother's race or his father's absence [...] [Shaik Rashid] does not offer himself as a father; there is in his regard of Ahmad something fraternal and sardonic, a splinter of hostility. (2007:145)

The type of pristine, unwelcoming Islam which Shaik Rashid espouses is out of Ahmad's reach by virtue of Ahmad's status as the mixed-race child of a single mother. The racial difference provides an impenetrable block to empathy. In the imam's cool and calculating gaze, Ahmad is best used as kindling in a terror attack.

Shaik Rashid's characterization is reminiscent of Fagin in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. He is a collector and groomer of youths for his own diabolical purposes. The Quran lessons provide a parallel to Fagin's pickpocketing classes for the waifs; both are prep courses for crime. The role of the caretaker is perverted. It was Shaik Rashid who convinced Ahmad to drop his college preparatory courses in favor of the vocational track. He tells him to become a truck driver instead, turning him into a pawn for the planned suicide bombing of the Holland Tunnel. The queerness of Fagin also recurs in Shaik Rashid: his pedophilic preference to surround himself with male youth and his disregard for females clearly marks him as aberrant. Also like Fagin, he is a racial stereotype. For Dickens, it was the constant repetition of Fagin's status as "The Jew" which marked him out to the contemporary reader as twisted. As Susan Meyer notes about Dickens' portrayal of Fagin:

Not only does Dickens pointedly and repeatedly term him "the Jew," but he emphasizes aspects of his character familiar from the antisemitic tradition, namely his miserliness, his greed, his exotic and strange appearance, his effeminacy, his obsequiousness, his cowardliness and the size of his nose.²⁶

While Dickens repeatedly refers to Fagin as "the Jew", Updike repeatedly refers to Shaik Rashid as "the imam." Fagin and Shaik Rashid are ethnically marked anti-

²⁶S. Meyer. 2005. *Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens's "Oliver Twist"*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p239.

fathers, preying when they are supposed to be protecting. Both are effeminate, camp exotics who cannot be trusted around young people. Because of 21st century mores, Updike is more subtle, but is as guilty of racism as Dickens. Shaik Rashid is a caricature of an evil imam preying on innocent youth. His is another example of the terrorist incensed by America's perceived and subjective cultural failings rather than its very real political conflicts. At no point does Shaik Rashid discuss politics with Ahmad. There is one rare political interjection made by Charlie Chebab, Ahmad's boss at the furniture store and Shaik Rashid's fellow jihadist groomer. Ahmad asks him about what the New Jersey-based financial backers for jihad believe in. Charlie replies:

[The financial backers] believe that something can be done. That the Muslim peasant in Mindanao need not starve, that the Bangladeshi child need not drown, that the Egyptian villager need not go blind with schistosomiasis, that the Palestinians need not be staffed by Israeli helicopters, that the faithful need not eat the sand and camel dung of the world while the Great Satan grows fat on sugar and pork and underpriced petroleum. (2007:198)

This is as close as the reader gets to hearing some political context behind the terror plot in the novel. But we find out later that Charlie Chebab was an undercover CIA agent all along. Ahmad later finds out that he was tortured and beheaded by the terrorist cell for his treachery. (2007: 290) The few words about the political motivations of the terrorists had come from an impostor.

In his book *Writing the War on Terrorism*, Richard Jackson argues that the discourse of the evil, mad terrorist is formed in contrast to the good, wholesome American. (Jackson 2005:76) The Bush Administration speeches espoused an innocent America which was so unrecognizable that it rubbed many Americans the wrong way.

(The film *Team America* is a great response and send-up to this rhetoric). A repetitive loop of formulaic statements emphasizing America's simple, generous nature took the place of facts explaining the chain of events which had brought the country into the situation it was in. But in the novels depicting 9/11, this discourse plays out in a more subtle way. The novels are not told from the perspective of patriotic saints from Middle America. The American protagonists of these novels are characterized as corrupted or broken city slickers who cannot maintain a healthy family life for their children. The characters blame their lack of direction on the false promise of fulfillment through material acquisition. They are financially comfortable, yet chronically disappointed by the perceived emptiness of their lives. They are often adulterous, or at least emotionally estranged from their wives. If anything, they are quickest to deflate the American Dream. But despite their disillusionment with the American Dream, there is no mention of the politics that shape the American Reality.

Jack Levy is a middle-aged Jewish guidance counselor at Ahmad's school. At times, Jack hates American decadence just as much as Ahmad does. Similar concerns and observations crop up in their narration, including the derelict streets of New Prospect and the tackiness of American popular culture. One striking feature in both Levy and Ahmad's narrative strands is the recurring motif of American fat. For these characters (and perhaps Updike himself), fat is a potent symbol of the soured American Dream, curdling at the edges. Levy's wife, Beth, is an obese White Anglo-Saxon Protestant who is too incapacitated to pick up the remote when it slips off the armchair: "[...] had most young females, even Beth, once been as thin as those in the beer and

Coke commercials? No doubt she had, but he could hardly remember— like trying to see the television screen as she waddles back and forth assembling dinner.” (2007: 23) Joryleen's Church, from Ahmad's perspective, is bursting with fat, including "the crackle of heavy rumps in wooden pews" and "massive women" in the choir. (2007:49, 52) For Jack and Ahmad, America has become bloated on its own culture, bloated beyond saving.

The main difference between them is that Jack is older and a lapsed Jew, while Ahmad is young and a fundamentalist Muslim. However, it's noted that "it took Jack Levy a lifetime to notice that people stink.” (2007: 28) Ahmad, on the other hand, is too one-dimensional to have such a discovery or trajectory. Ahmad's first line in the novel is "Devils...these devils seek to take away my God.” (2007: 3) His final line is "These devils... have taken away my God.” (2007: 310) He has undergone absolutely no growth or change during the story; the only difference is that he has been defeated. If Ahmad were to live to Jack Levy's age, he would not change. He is not built to change like normal human beings. He is trapped in his single-dimension of characterization.

Falling Man II

In *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo actually provides a detailed depiction of warring Western narratives about terrorists' motives. It occurs between Nina, Lianne's mother, and Martin Ridnour, Nina's longterm boyfriend from Germany. Since the 9/11 attacks, he and Nina have been arguing over the motivations of the terrorists. Nina initiates the argument:

"It's sheer panic. They attack out of panic.”

"This much, yes, it may be true, Because they think the world is a disease. This world, this society, ours. A disease that is spreading...one side has the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police and the prisons. The other side has a few men willing to die."

"God is great," she said.

"Forget God, these are matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness."

"It's not the history of western interference that pulls down these societies. It's their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world by choice, of necessity. They haven't advanced because they haven't wanted to or tried to."

"They use the language of religion, okay, but this is not what drives them."

"Panic, this is what drives them."

...Then Martin eased off, voice going soft again.

"All right, yes, it may be true." (DeLillo 2007: 46-47)

Nina is insistent that the terrorists are driven by a "choice" to live in a closed society which refuses to develop in the way that the Western world has. It is easy to lose the thread of emotions in DeLillo's densely layered prose, but this is a rather shocking sentiment. On the one hand, one must credit Nina for stating that people in the developing world have agency. They have their own history and are not completely at the mercy of the West. On the other hand, blaming the developing world as being too stubborn to change is shortsighted and overlooks a long and complex history of international relations. Later on in the novel Martin and Nina continue the argument.

Nina begins:

"You tell us to forget God."

That argument had been here all this time, in the air and on the skin, but the shift in tone was abrupt.

"You tell us this is history."

Nina looked at him, she stared hard at Martin, her voice marked by accusation.

"But we can't forget God. They invoke God constantly. This is their oldest source, their oldest word. Yes, there's something elsewhere but it's not history or economics. It's what men feel. It's the thing that happens among men, the blood that happens when an idea begins to travel, whatever's behind it, whatever blind

force or blunt force or violent need. How convenient it is to find a system of belief that justifies these feeling and these killings."

"But the system doesn't justify this. Islam renounces this," he said.

"If you call it God, then it's God, God is whatever God allows."

"Don't you realize how bizarre that is? Don't you see what you're denying? You're denying all human grievance against others, every force of history that places people in conflict."

"We're talking about these people, here and now. It's a misplaced grievance. It's a viral infection. A virus reproduces itself outside history."

He sat hunched and peering, leaning towards her now.

"First they kill you, then you try to understand them. Maybe, eventually, you'll learn their names. But they have to kill you first." (2007:112-113)

Without invoking any of the Bush Administration jargon, Nina conveys the propaganda.

The idea that this "misplaced grievance" is "outside of history" is quite extraordinary. But then, so is Martin's shift from the political to the personal. This passage underlines one of the tensions in defining and responding to a terror attack. Terror attacks differ from other forms of violence because they are meant to send a message to a larger intended audience. As Richard English notes in his book *Terrorism: how to respond*:

[...] there are intentionally psychological dimensions to terrorism: the communication of a political message to an audience beyond the directly targeted victims necessarily involves an enhancing effect through a species of psychological warfare. (English 2009: 30)

The attack on the Twin Towers was not meant to send a message to the people in the Twin Towers. It was sent to the country at large, but specifically the government.

The American government's insistence that "an attack on some is an attack on all" is an over-simplification that is meant to heighten fears about physical safety. The message should be "an attack on some is meant to send a message to some others in power." In Martin's frustration, he ends up unwittingly corroborating Nina's point of view that the attacks are about satisfying an immediate blood lust, rather than sending a message.

It is also interesting to note that DeLillo puts the alternative narrative into the mouth of the one European character, a non-American and outsider in the discussion. Later on, it is revealed that Martin, whose real name is Ernst Hechinger, was a leftist terrorist in the 1960s. The extent of Martin's involvement is not revealed, but it was enough for him to change his name. At first glance, his past is meant to explain his "sympathy" with the terrorists. Martin, of all people, should know that terrorist violence is a means to an end. Yet his slippages into emphasizing cultural explanations persist.

Martin/Ernst is worth comparing to Charlie Chebab, the undercover CIA agent in *Terrorist* by John Updike. Both characters are the only ones in their respective novels to actually mention political motivation behind terror attacks, but neither man is who he seems. Martin is a former terrorist disguised as an ordinary civilian, and Charlie is a CIA agent disguised as a terrorist, further disguised as an ordinary civilian. The politically based narrative can only come from a duplicitous character with a hidden agenda.²⁷

Despite Martin's concessions to Nina in *Falling Man*, their conversations remain the most complex and interesting part of the novel. Unfortunately, any hope for this alternative narrative is dashed by the chapters told from Hammad's one-dimensional point of view. DeLillo succeeds at creating a flawed yet complicated Leftist European terrorist. However, he can only create a monomaniacal Islamic terrorist. In the end,

²⁷ In *Eating Air* (2010), Pauline Melville follows a similar pattern. Mark Scobie, who was a radical leftist terrorist in the 1970s, has joined forces with modern Islamist terrorists. But the British government offers him immunity, which allows him to kidnap a banker but betray his Muslim co-conspirators. Mark later makes a rousing speech to his fellow terrorists, referencing the banking crisis, colonialism and the caliphate. (436-437) Of all the characters in the novel, this double agent invokes the most political intersections of terrorism.

Nina's viewpoint prevails. Even Martin, still making his argument, falls fully into the trap of the culturally- propelled terrorist construct:

But that's why you built the towers, isn't it? Weren't the towers built of fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is so obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You're saying, here it is, bring it down. (2007: 116)

Martin's characterization of the Twin Towers is reminiscent of Cixous'. Both regard the Twin Towers as fragile phallic fantasies begging for destruction. While trying to justify the terrorists' actions, he can only frame them as culturally motivated, on a mission to deliver the West's overdue comeuppance. Judith Butler warns against this mode of analysis:

No doubt there are forms of Left analysis that say simply that the United States has reaped what it has sown. Or they say that the United States has simply brought this state of events on itself. These are also closed explanations that assume that these actions originate from a single subject, that no other subjects exist, or, if they exist, their agency is subordinated to our own. In other words, political paranoia of this kind is just another articulation of US supremacy. Paranoia is fed by the fantasy of omnipotence[...] (Butler 2006: 9)

This depiction of Left Melancholy in the form of Martin Ridnour functions to give the Western protagonists the appearance of more depth than their Muslim antagonists. They concede to the viewpoint that America somehow "had it coming", that the country's material greed and low morals alone invited the attack. But this viewpoint is grounded in the illusion of the culturally motivated terrorist, rather than a politically motivated one. Through turning the terrorist into a monomaniacal avenging angel, the system of

political logic behind the attacks is suppressed. It also robs the story of a potentially dynamic and forceful character.

Conclusion

When comparing the terrorists across these novels from various authors, it appears that the same character is being invoked time and again. This character is a sexually deviant religious zealot without a political drive behind his actions. In the case of both depictions of Mohamed Atta, the deviance comes from a primly suppressed sexuality. Updike's Shaik Rashid is constructed along the same lines, but given a further deviant undertone of pedophilia. The cerebral ringleaders' underlings, Ahmad and Hammad, tend to struggle more with repressing their potentially "normal" sexuality. Hammad is meant to be a fly on the wall, an avatar through which the Western reader can gain insight into the terrorist mindset. Similarly, Ahmad's American connection is meant to put him in the reader's midst, but he is only American in name, and not in any other way.

The terrorist's fight against the "need to be normal" also bolsters the position of the "All American" as the standard bearer of normativity. In her essay "Non-Thinking and the Normative", Judith Butler points out the damage wrought by unquestioning reliance on binary normative frameworks:

In the first instance, a subject becomes only discrete through excluding other possible subject formations, a host of "not me's." In the second instance, a subject emerges through a process of abjection, jettisoning those dimensions of oneself which fail to conform to the discrete figures yielded by the norm of the human subject. The refuse of such a process includes various forms of spectrality and monstrosity, usually figured in relation to non-human animal life. (Butler 2009:141)

What Butler describes here is equivalent to the mechanism through which all the terrorists in the novels become, effectively, the same character. This character is a cipher, a symbol for everything the All American is not. This cipher is constructed from prescribed forms of spectrality and monstrosity, which remain in the wake of the formation of the American self. Liam O'Flaherty's terrorist, Louis Quigley, is early evidence of this narrative. Quigley, like his successors, is a perverse cure for a sick society. His political motivations are silenced in favor of his cultural ones. The 9/11 novels take this one-dimensional frame and compound it with both Islamophobia and indignant American Exceptionalism. One would hope that authors who write about terrorists would have felt freer to experiment with motivations and even different manifestations of "evil." Instead, these authors retained the safe tropes of monomania and sexual dysfunction. There is no effort to explore what would have compelled them to commit their crimes. This is due to a tacit certainty on the part of the author that only a lunatic would want to attack America.

Chapter III

You Want to Dance, I Want to Watch

After the 9/11 attacks, there were two notable trends which occurred in reference to the representation of African-Americans in the media. The first trend was the arrival of the new "dangerous" other in America: the Muslim. African-Americans were no longer the most feared minority in the country. The second was erasure. Black Americans were rarely consulted for their thoughts after the attacks. The media prioritized not only white voices, but a careful selection of "All American" white voices. As journalist Roland S. Martin noted:

As long as we continue to see mostly white faces, we will not be able to further the conversation and open up the floor to different viewpoints and perspectives on the terrible and senseless tragedy of September 11. Then again, I guess the lack of diverse voices shows that at least the American media has returned to normal.²⁸

While Muslims replaced African-Americans as the primary target of popular racist fear, images of strong, ubiquitous whiteness still needed to be maintained. One would expect that some of the stereotypes about black people would either be forgotten or reduced for the sake of American unity. But as one can see from Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon's study, racial stereotypes can become a point of reassurance:

Given that cultural world views serve to assuage concerns about death, and minorities contribute to the scheme of things as long as they conform to our conception of them in the context of the dominant culture, when mortality is made salient, perhaps people will actually like the in-house designated inferiors to the extent that they are 'in their place' and conform to the dominant culture's stereotypic conception of them. (2003: 78)

²⁸ R.S. Martin. 2004. "White Washed" in J. Malveaux and R. Green (ed.) *The Paradox of Loyalty: An African American Response to the War on Terrorism*, pp. 82. Chicago.

In addition to the new stereotypes about Islamic fundamentalism, negative images of blackness were reinforced to put “mainstream” America at ease in the face of death. American literature and film have a long history of stereotyping and essentializing African-Americans. African-Americans have frequently been depicted in relation to white people, rather than as independent characters. They are portrayed as either physically intimidating antagonists or comic sidekicks. In the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the extremely subservient portrayal was meant to show that, despite slaves' "inherent" inferiority, they should be allowed to live freely. Films as recent as *The Help* contribute to the idea that black people exist for the benefit of white people. Even in all-Black films, such as Tyler Perry's popular *Madea* series, they are rarely depicted as actors operating independent of racially stereotyped constraints. After the September 11 attacks, there was a surplus of white protagonists in need of help. These protagonists, much like their projected audience, were also in need of having their self-esteem restored. Authors were ready to create African-American characters to fill that role.

The Good Life: Washington Lee

The Good Life by Jay McInerney takes place in the more rarefied circles of Manhattan's upper classes. The only minority featured in this novel is Russell Calloway's old friend and coworker Washington Lee, a black Mandingo-figure who is a womanizer and relapsing alcoholic. It is telling that McInerney creates a character both marked by some black stereotypes and flagrantly flouting others. Washington is presented as being a member of two very different worlds. Even his speech is distinctly

marked with code-switching between Standard English and African-American Vernacular English: "[We might move to] Connecticut, actually. Range Rovers, golden retrievers, Barbour jackets. A Connecticut Negro on the clay court [...] Since the morning of the twelfth, the realtors be busy up there, baby." (2005: 128) His worlds are not meant to fit together smoothly. Something about his past contrasts with his current middle-class status. Yet unlike many of the other characters in *The Good Life*, we are not given any information about his upbringing or what class he is from. "Black" is meant to be enough to suffice as a history, and enough to explain that there is a conflict.

Corrine views him in these terms:

Corrine didn't go for black guys as a rule, but the glimmer in [Washington's] eye when he was hitting his stride [...] his way of playing on your fear of being an uncool white person but then letting you off the hook at the last minute, allowing you to laugh with him at them [...] She missed the bad old Washington, the one who wobbled to his feet as the dessert was served to quote swatches of poetry in a variety of languages before screwing one of the guests in the bathroom. (2005: 15)

There are many things to infer from this passage, including the "rule" about black guys.

Corrine feels she must view Washington in sexual terms and then reject him on those terms. Corrine's attraction to Washington relies on his power to make light of and superficially defuse the inherent racial tension of their interactions. Despite knowing each other for years, this racial tension is still present. It is hard to gauge, from Corrine's perspective, whether Washington is mocking or accommodating his white friends' insecurities. It appears to be a little bit of both. Either way: when he was a drunk, he was a larger than life figure of fun, the curiosity of the dinner party. She is disappointed with his sobriety and, in turn, his regained sense of respectability and stability.

In Washington, McInerney has created a perfect "token black friend" who increases Corrine and Russell's liberal credibility. He is wealthy and well read enough to be accepted as a somewhat "progressive portrayal" of a black person, but he is only there to bolster the white protagonists. McInerney cannot allow this to be a comfortable relationship. When Washington complains that the other girls at school are ostracizing his daughter, Tamara, Corrine frets to herself:

[Corrine was] afraid the whole racial issue was about to rear its head. She didn't want the fact that Tamara was the product of a black father and a white mother to be the real reason for her social banishment, even though she immediately suspected exactly this kind of injustice. (2005: 38)

Washington's friendship is a means for Corrine to absolve herself from any issues about her racism. In her eyes, he is, first and foremost, a racialized being, yet she flinches at the idea of even discussing a racial issue in his presence. Corrine will invite Washington to her parties and include him in her circle of friends. But in order to do so, she must avoid engaging with any facts in his life relating to his blackness, even going so far as refusing to vocalize sympathy for his child's problems. While McInerney goes through great lengths in the novel to paint Corrine as a kind, sweet person, she seems incapable of having a simple honest friendship with a black man.

Her husband, Russell, on the other hand, has a different set of sexualized hang-ups about Washington. He lives vicariously through Washington's complicated sex life: "In the old days, Russell had been fascinated by his friend's unselfconscious philandering [...] For years, he had counted on Washington to provide him with a sense of his own comparative virtue." (2005: 127-128) The friendship becomes a way for Russell to enjoy transgression while keeping his hands clean. Since McInerney created

such a promiscuous character in Washington, the moments for transgression are frequent. Russell even enables Washington's bad behavior through lying to Washington's wife and covering up his friend's renewed drinking problem. Like Corrine, he is disappointed when Washington had abruptly given up drinking before. When Washington relapses after the attacks, Russell resumes his role as the enabler: "Russell didn't want to be his best friend's keeper. At moments like these, he just wanted to be twenty-five again, when heedlessness and reckless abandon constituted an aesthetic program. Much as he knew Washington shouldn't be drinking at all, it was just so fucking *uncool* to be the one to say so." (2005: 130) Washington's "coolness" is frequently brought up as a quality which is unattainable for Russell. Since Washington's coolness is bound to his blackness, it is, essentially, Washington's blackness which prevents Russell from positively intervening.

This dynamic between Russell and Washington also brings to mind Jane Smiley's analysis of Huck and Jim's relationship in *Huckleberry Finn*:

Twain thinks that Huck's affection is a good enough reward for Jim [...] If Huck feels positive toward Jim, and loves him, and thinks of him as a man, then that's enough. He doesn't actually have to act in accordance with his feelings. White Americans always think racism is a feeling, and they reject it or they embrace it. To most Americans, it seems more honorable and nicer to reject it, so they do, but they almost invariably fail to understand that how they feel means very little to black Americans, who understand racism as a way of structuring American culture, American politics, and the American economy."²⁹

Similarly, Washington is an accessory for Russell, rather than an actual friend.

Washington's personal failings become a way for Russell to keep himself young, cool

Smiley, J. 1996. "Say it ain't so, Huck." *Harper's Magazine*. Volume 292, no. 1748. p65

and virile. Even when Washington's wife Veronica calls him later that night because Washington's gone missing, presumably on a bender, Russell reminisces about the bad old days: "For just a moment, in the dark, he could imagine himself transported back through the years to a brighter moment —for him, if not Veronica—when these calls were a regular feature of his life, when Washington had invoked his name as a dinner companion without warning him, or when he'd actually been at Washington's side, chasing through the night in their elusive quest for the heart of the city [...]" (2005: 132)

The fact that Russell can call Washington a friend is enough, and he sees nothing wrong with using him as a tool. Like Twain, McInerney lets the bare bones of the "friendship" do the talking.

The only redeeming quality in Washington, which Russell admires, embodies a more socially acceptable type of cool: it's Washington's devotion to his children. Unlike Russell, Washington is actually willing to leave New York City, an island of terrorist bait, women and alcohol, for the boring but family-friendly suburbs of Connecticut. Despite his relapse, Washington recognizes that "the party's over" much quicker than Russell does. Russell is still in a sort of limbo: he still wishes for the bad old days while grudgingly fulfilling his duties as a husband and father.

For all of Washington's moral relativism, for all his failings as a husband and his gleeful misanthropy, in fatherhood he had discovered his one true faith. His devotion to his kids was even acknowledged by his detractors, and was a source of wonder to Russell. Russell wanted to be swept up in that kind of rapture, to be the kind of man who would make any sacrifice for his children. (2005: 129)

While this is a positive quality, it is another distinctly "manly" quality which Russell himself lacks. Both of Washington's enviable qualities, his womanizing and his

fatherhood, mark him as the pinnacle of masculinity, in stark contrast to his less manly white friend.

In his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Donald Bogle discusses the rise of Huck Finn dynamics in the context of postwar American films of the 1940s. These films succeeded the Negro entertainment spectacles of the 1930 and 40s, but predated the “problem people” pictures of the later 1940s. This was the era of “New Negro” pictures. The rise of fascism in Europe forced Americans to realize that similar racist ideologies underpinned their own society. More sympathetic African-American characters began to appear in films, but they are not fully formed characters in their own right. Bogle explains what he terms “the huckfinn fixation”:

A good white man opposes the corruption and pretenses of the dominant white culture. In rejecting white society, he (like Huck Finn) takes up with an outcast. The other man (like Nigger Jim) is a trusty black who never competes with the white man and who serves as a reliable ego padder [...] The huckfinn fixation perhaps represents the white liberal American’s dream of lost innocence and freedom. To fit into society, one loses the ‘spirituality’ the Negro is believed to thrive on. Regardless of its real meaning, the fixation made its way into other 1940s films [the first being 1942’s *Casablanca*].” (Bogle 2001: 140-141)

The fact that Corrine immediately rules out being attracted to Washington instantly establishes that he is not a threat to Russell. If he was a threat to Russell’s marriage, he would not serve as a reliable ego padder at all. Corrine’s phrase “bad old Washington” also stands out. It is reminiscent of the American folk-figure of the “Bad Nigger”. As Hilton Als describes it in his book of essays, *The Women*:

A Negro Colloquialism, the “Bad Nigger”, is a title traditionally reserved for men, ascribed to those who command the respect of their peers in urban environments by defying authority: social, political, and domestic. Generally, the Bad Nigger

restricts his defiant nature to a “hood”— a controllable universe. He is verbally and physically fearless in his limited world [...] Bad Niggers are never less than correct in their dress or ideas, which are generally issued with an authority that is meant to be intimidating.” (Als 1996: 83-84)

Washington can be read as a Bad Nigger in the limited world of Lower Manhattan literati. He consciously performs his blackness for the controlled universe of his white friends, while keeping them on their toes about their own unease with his race. His intimidating authority, whether related to women or fatherhood, manifests as coolness. That is how he can get away with breaking certain societal rules with impunity. However, if he was incapable of quoting French poetry while drunk and was not an accomplished publisher, he would be exiled from the group. His overcompensating performance is what keeps him in his group of white friends.

Falling Man: Florence Givens

In *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, we meet another black character who exists solely for a white character's healing. *Falling Man's* protagonists, Keith and Lianne, are an affluent white couple who have separated. When Keith walks out of the rubble of Ground Zero, covered in ash, he takes a random briefcase with him. Keith moves back in with Lianne, settling back into a pattern of family life. Weeks later, he opens the briefcase and contacts its owner, a woman named Florence Givens. She is described as “a light-skinned black woman, his age or close, and gentle-seeming, and on the heavy side.” (DeLillo 2007: 52) Unlike most of the middle-class women in these novels, Florence actually has a career. Like Keith, she worked in a law firm in the towers. Florence and Keith worked in the same tower, and were just separated by one floor. They bond over their shared experience.

Florence speaks to Keith about her escape from the tower. While Florence finally is able to talk about the trauma, Keith is able to fit himself into that day and make some sense of it: "[...] it was important, somehow, in some indeterminate way, that he'd been carried in these crossing memories, brought down out of the tower and into this room." (2007: 57) Keith and Florence meet again at her apartment. Keith mentions that he is married, and Florence is obviously not completely pleased about this fact: "I don't care," she said, and it was the first time he had heard resentment in her voice." (2007: 89) Later on, they are listening to music. A song comes on which reminds Florence of "movie music in those old movies when the man and woman run through the heather." (2007: 92) Then the track changes: "He heard the music change to something that had a buzz and drive, voices in Portuguese rapping, singing, whistling, with guitars and drums behind them, manic saxophones." (2007: 92) After some small talk about Brazil, he says to Florence:

"Go ahead."

"What?"

"Dance."

"What?"

"Dance," he said, "You want to dance. I want to watch."

She stepped out of her shoes and began to dance...she danced in slow motion for a long time, no longer clapping, arms up and away from her body, nearly trancelike, and began to whirl in place, ever slower, facing him now, mouth open, eyes coming open.

Sitting there, watching, he began to crawl out of his clothes. (2007: 93)

Their first sexual interaction is initiated through this very loaded scene. The romance cannot be set to the traditional romantic film music; its only proper backdrop is the exotic Brazilian rap. Keith's command that Florence dance and he watch is eerily colonial; she becomes the performing object of his gaze and desire. The fact that he sees her as a

"light-skinned black woman" is also striking. The mixed-race woman and music from a mixed-race country provide an entrance for Keith. This is a classic example of the interracial dynamic bell hooks describes in her essay "Eating the Other"; a white person's notion that sexual congress with a racial other must happen in order to transcend a sheltered state. Yet this usage is not viewed as racist:

Unlike racist white men who historically violated the bodies of black women/ women of color to assert their position as colonizer/ conqueror, [they] see themselves as non-racists, who choose to transgress racial boundaries within the sexual realm not to dominate the Other, but rather so that they can be acted upon, so that they can be changed utterly [...] They do not see themselves as perpetuating racism. (hooks 1992: 24)

For Keith, he is trying to claim his own traumatic experience through someone who has a stronger capacity to express this experience than he does. The clue is in Florence's surname: she's meant to give. It is clear that he does not view her as an equal who suffered the same terrible ordeal he did; for Keith, Florence is a repository of experience which must be plundered. There is no sharing for him, only taking. But she also derives safety from the relationship. She tells him:

"You saved my life. Don't you know that?"

He sat back, looking at her.

"I saved your briefcase."

And waited for her to laugh.

"I can't explain it but you saved my life... You ask yourself why you took the briefcase out of the building. That's why. So you could bring it here. So we could get to know each other. That's why you took it and that's why you brought it here, to keep me alive."

He didn't believe this but he believed her. She felt it and meant it.

"You ask yourself what the story is that goes with the briefcase. I'm the story," she said. (2007: 109)

This is a very telling passage for many reasons. Keith's first reflex is to reject his role as savior, laughing it off. But Florence insists that there was a reason, a meaning behind their relationship. Suddenly the tables are turned, and it is Keith who exists for Florence. Her statement of "I am the story" could be read in multiple ways. It could be an expression of her staking a claim to the narrative. Keith is no longer the subject, but Florence is. It could, however, be that she is assuming the role of the "story" for Keith, identifying herself as a tool for putting his experience into perspective.

The next time we encounter Keith with Florence, the two are shopping for a new mattress for Florence. As Florence tests one of the mattresses, Keith thinks he sees two men saying something about Florence: "He didn't know what that man said but it didn't matter. It was clear from their stance and their vantage that Florence was the subject." (2007: 132) Keith then approaches one of the men, calls him a "fuckhead", and proceeds to punch him. "Because if anyone said a harsh word to Florence, or raised a hand to Florence, or insulted her in any way, Keith was ready to kill them." (2007: 133). The reader is left wondering about the context of the perceived insult, or even what Keith thinks it is. It could be a racist, sexist or any other kind of insult. There is also a strong possibility that nothing was said, and that Keith is imposing a situation for his own purposes. While Keith's outburst is ostensibly about defending Florence's honor, it provides an excuse for him to exercise some masculine posturing. It also is redolent of the huckfinn fixation Bogle describes; through standing up to other white people on a black person's behalf, Keith accesses a certain level of cool.

Keith and Florence's interactions involving music and violence are twinned with Lianne's encounter with her neighbor Elena, which simultaneously involves music, violence and an encounter with an amorphous "other." When Lianne confronts Elena about her loud foreign music, Lianne ends the argument by violently shoving Elena back into her apartment. But during the argument, Elena says something important: "It's music. You want to take it personally, what can I tell you?" (2007: 119) Both Keith and Lianne lash out in response to actions or circumstances that they opt to take personally after 9/11. Lianne lashes out because she perceives the music to be coming from the Middle East, and Keith lashes out because he believes that the stranger is speaking ill of Florence, his co-survivor in the towers. One can view their flare-ups as misguided patriotism or trauma on display, but both shows of physical violence are mediated through interacting with the racial other.

Later in the novel, it becomes clear that Keith's new relationship with Florence is not in line with his new, post-9/11 outlook on life: "[...] these meetings contradicted what he'd lately taken to be the truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls." (2007: 137) But he acknowledges that Florence herself is not someone "to be snatched at." (2007: 137) Keith briefly considers telling Lianne about Florence, but chooses not to. Keith then goes on to lead a peripatetic existence as a professional poker player, visiting Lianne and Justin every few months.

He used to think about Florence Givens every day. He still did, most days [...] He'd never called. He'd never thought of crossing the park to see her, talk a while, find out how she was doing. He'd thought of it in a remote way, like

landscape, like thinking of going back to the house where you grew up and walking along the back lanes and across the high meadow, the kind of thing you know you'll never do. (2007: 227)

This sudden distance that Keith places between himself and Florence is not only callous but also striking in the narrative. After all, Florence had said that Keith saved her life. Keith also gained a stronger grasp of his experience of the attacks through his relationship with Florence. Even though Keith mostly drifted out of Lianne's life, he still maintains contact with her. Florence, however, is completely dropped. Once Keith is able to have the authenticating manly experiences of having sex with a black woman and fighting on her behalf, contact with her becomes a chore that is incompatible with his life. Though Keith knows that he needs to heal and seeks healing through Florence, he does not realize that Florence, too, needs to heal. Once Florence turns the tables and tells Keith: "You saved my life," he is suddenly given a role, a responsibility that he demands from other people but is unwilling to reciprocate. Though he tells himself that seeing Florence does not fit with his new "serious and responsible" way of life, he escapes a serious responsibility by abandoning the only other 9/11 survivor he has met.

Florence's characterization and plot appears to be caught between the stereotypes of a Tragic Mulatto and a Mammy figure. Her life is a string of tragic hallmarks. Ten years before meeting Keith, Florence was married to an alcoholic engineering graduate who worked as a postman. He died after driving his car into a wall. His mother blamed Florence for his death. Years later she survives the 9/11 attacks and is isolated by the experience. The only survivor she meets is Keith, who abandons her after their affair. Florence's final tragedy does not stem from her

understanding of her race, but from Keith's reading of her race: "[...] when she laughed there was a flare in nature, an unfolding of something half-hidden and dazzling." (2007: 92)

The mattress shop scene strongly hints that their interracial relationship would face negative scrutiny from the outside. After all, it is the first and only time they are together in public. While the interaction with the men at the shop is plausible, the significance of that racial threat comes from an earlier time. Their racial difference dooms the relationship.

Keith's initial need to hear Florence's story of survival runs parallel to Lianne's involvement with a writing class for Alzheimer's disease patients in East Harlem. DeLillo makes clear through the location and characterization of the class' members that this is a diverse group of elderly ethnic minorities. "Omar H." speaks of prayer rooms and is afraid of writing about the 9/11 attacks. "Carmen G." embellishes her stories with Spanish. (2007: 30-31) At one point, Lianne has a discussion with Dr. Apter, the clinical psychiatrist who started the group. She mentions that she wants to increase the class' sessions to twice a week, rather than just once. But Dr. Apter tells her it would be a mistake:

"From this point, you understand, it's all about loss [...] You don't want them to feel like there's an urgency to write everything before it's too late [...]" He looked at her searchingly. "What I'm saying is simple. This is for them," he said.
 "What do you mean?"
 "It's theirs," he said. "Don't make it yours." (2007: 60)

Lianne is disturbed by this comment because there is truth in it. "It was possible that the group meant more to her than it did to the members." (2007: 61) Her father had committed suicide rather than endure his remaining years descending deeper into senile dementia. It is clear that her involvement with the group is a way for her to understand her father's motivations for killing himself. In both Keith and Lianne's instances, traumatic narrative mysteries in their past must be filled in with the help of people of color. Keith is seeking an authentic story of his experiences in the Twin Towers. Lianne is seeking an authentic narrative behind her father's suicide.

In his book *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan paraphrases philosopher Charles Taylor's definition of authenticity: "Authenticity [...] constitutes first and foremost an ethical imperative— an imperative, put in the simplest possible terms, to be true to oneself [...]" (Huggan 2001: 157) Both Keith and Lianne have had firsthand experiences of their traumas, but something stands in the way of their ability to process them. As Huggan notes, the desire for authenticity can "betray the opposite— the fear of loss or alienation, of being or having become somehow inauthentic." (2001:157) This is where the Neudeckers begin to rely on racial others in a familiar manner: "[...] authenticity [becomes] part of a wider exoticist representational mechanism through which images of [the other] are created, manipulated and controlled by the dominant culture [...] the invocation of Native spirituality for example, as a necessary antidote to a Western culture rendered inauthentic by its attachment to material excess." (2001: 158-159) Like the elderly minorities in the writing class, Florence is read as an authentic ethnic source. While the protagonists of *Falling Man*

are not seeking authenticity through exotic novelty, they are seeking authenticity from exotic voices. DeLillo takes advantage of an assumption of the "authentic other" in both of these cases. This authenticity is meant to clarify and validate the white experience. While the narrative questions Lianne's search, Keith's actions are left unquestioned.

Terrorist: Joryleen as Jezebel

In John Updike's *Terrorist*, black characters abound in the multicultural dystopia of New Prospect, New Jersey. They are a colorful, if monolithic and stereotypical, crowd:

East Main Street in the blocks around Tilden is a carnival of idleness, thronged by an onrolling mass of dark citizens in flashy clothes, a Mardi Gras parade of costumes lovingly assembled by those whose lawful domain extends scarcely an inch beyond their skins, and whose paltry assets are on view. Their joy amounts to defiance. Their cackling, whooping voices are loud with village fellowship, the luxuriant mutual attention, of those with little to do and nowhere to go. (Updike 2007: 13-14)

The neighborhood is given an atmosphere that is at once tribal and decadent. It is a "cackling" and "flashy" crowd. They are loud, uncouth black people with nothing but their own tacky clothing to their name. Not only is the black population shown as proof of the town's decline, they are also covertly implicated as a cause: "After the Civil War, a conspicuous gaudiness entered New Prospect with the erection of an elaborate City Hall, a sprawling, turreted aggregation, Moorish in feeling [...]" (2007: 14) One cannot help but wonder if the narrator is directly linking the impoverished gaudiness of the population with the emancipation of slaves.

Ahmad Mulloy's only friend in the book is an African-American girl named Joryleen Grant. She is one of the few people at his school who speaks to him. Like him,

she is one of the few promising students at their dangerous and substandard high school. But she is also presented in a highly sexualized way from early on in the novel:

There is an endearing self-confidence in how compactly her cocoa-brown roundnesses fill her clothes, which today are patched and sequined jeans, worn pale where she sits, a ribbed magenta shorty top both lower and higher than it should be[...] the tops of her breasts push up like great blisters in the scoop neck of the indecent top that at its other hem exposes the fat of her belly and the contour of her deep navel. (2007: 8-9)

Joryleen invites Ahmad to her church as a gesture of friendship, but he initially rebuffs her. His contempt for the church comes from his orthodox mentor, Shaikh Rashid:

The church's decorous glory days of pious white burghers in hierarchically assigned pews also belong to the past. Now African-American congregants bring their disheveled, shouting religion, their award-winning choir dissolving their brains in a rhythmical rapture as illusory as (Shaikh Rashid sardonically puts forward the analogy) the shuffling, mumbling trance of the Brazilian *candomblé*. It is here that Joryleen sings." (2007: 15)

For someone who claims to be entirely against the West, Ahmad affords more respect to the decorous white burghers than the disheveled, shouting African-American masses of New Prospect. Even Joryleen's boyfriend, Tylenol Jones, reads as a parody of an angry black youth. His name, Tylenol, was given to him when his mother saw a commercial for the painkiller shortly after his birth. He does two sports, football and gymnastics, and is quick to fight. When he gets into an argument with Ahmad, Ahmad literally "tries to talk the other's language." (2007: 15)

Updike also takes pains to articulate exactly what shade of black a given black person is. For example, Joryleen is described as cocoa-brown (2007: 8) and a page later as "darker than caramel but paler than chocolate" (2007: 9). Tylenol is described

as "the color of walnut furniture-stain while it's still sitting up wet on the wood." (2007: 15) While he characterizes other white and Middle-Eastern characters in the novel in similar ways, he relies most heavily on color descriptions for African-Americans, rather than facial features or any other distinguishing characteristics.

Updike's description of black people and their surroundings is reminiscent of Carl Van Vechten's sensationalist novel *Nigger Heaven*, which was published in 1926. Early on in Van Vechten's novel, there is a description of a nightclub:

On all sides of the swaying couple, bodies in picturesque costumes rocked, black bodies, brown bodies, high yellows, a kaleidoscope of color transfigured by the amber searchlight. Scarves of bottle green, cerise, amethyst, vermillion, lemon. The drummer in complete abandon tossed his sticks in the air while he shook his head like a wild animal." (Van Vechten 1926: 14)

Again, as in Updike, there is a fascination with the variety of skin color within the black population and the choice of colorful clothing. Once more, a jungle/primitive tone is evoked. There are nearly ninety years between *Nigger Heaven* and *Terrorist*, but Updike reverts to the same stereotype-laden tone.

The disdain for African-Americans also comes from Jack Levy. During a conversation with Ahmad's mother, Levy suggests that Ahmad has too much faith in his absent father: "You see that a lot in, in'—why did he keep putting his foot in it?—'black families, the kids idealizing the absent dad and directing all their anger at poor old Mom, who's knocking herself out to keep a roof over their heads.'" (Updike 2007: 89) The only sympathetic voice for black people comes from Charlie Chehab, Ahmad's boss at the furniture store: "There are problems [with America.] The [blacks] weren't given any rights, they had to fight for them. They were being lynched and not allowed to go to

restaurants, they even had separate drinking fountains, they had to go to Supreme Court to be considered human beings. In America, nothing is free, everything is a fight." (2007: 147) Though this is a sympathetic view, it still positions African-Americans as a problematic people.

Ahmad himself displays a fetish-level desire for black women. He realizes that he likes women who are the physical opposite of his white mother, and this desire is also bound up with his religious fervor:

[...] his taste, developed in his years at Central High, is for darker skins, cocoa and caramel and chocolate, and for the alluring mystery of those eyes whose blackness, opaque at first glance, deepens to the purple of plums or the glinting brown of syrup— what in the Qur'an figure as *large dark eyeballs, kept close in their pavilions*. The Book promises: *And theirs shall be dark-eyed houris, chaste as hidden pearls* [...] Ahmad regards his mother as a mistake his father made but that he never would. (2007: 170)

Once again, Updike consults his catalogue of paint sample synonyms for "brown" to describe African-Americans. But this is a significant passage on a number of levels. The black female body presents a form of rebellion for Ahmad, a way to amend a familial mistake and distance himself even further from his white American mother. But the possibility of having children with a black woman is not mentioned. More importantly, we see an iteration of the popular myth of the virgins promised to suicide bombers. Ahmad appears to justify his lust for black women because of their perceived resemblance to his heavenly reward. Perhaps his lust comes from his reading of scripture. Either way, black femininity is elided with the legendary prize for jihad.

Despite Ahmad's fear of Joryleen's church, he finds himself drawn in. He thinks of the church as a "sticky trap." (2007: 51) The preacher, or "Christian Imam" as Ahmad

refers to him, gives a sermon about having faith in the unknown power of God. This is not completely alien to Ahmad: "[The preacher] has been in his kafir way wrestling with devils, wrestling even with Ahmad's devils." (2007: 61) Since much of the sermon deals with Exodus, Ahmad cannot completely dismiss it. Still, he is very shaken from "witnessing these black unbelievers at worship of their non-God, their three-headed idol; it is like seeing sex among people, pink scenes glimpsed over the shoulder of boys misusing the computers at school." (2007: 62) He even refers to the congregation as "yelping devils." (2007: 66) Ahmad tries to pass his hatred off as theologically-based, but it is clearly racial hatred.

Another unnerving element is the family sharing his pew: a husband and wife with several small daughters. The pew is "bobbing and bristling with the corn-rowed, beribboned heads of little females." (2007: 50) In addition to the term "female", the girls are described in an animalistic fashion; as a "brood" (2007: 50) and "one of them looking up into Ahmad's face like a bug-eyed dog wondering if this human being is worth begging at." (2007: 59) They seem more like a litter of feral puppies than children. By the end of the service, the smallest girl has fallen asleep on Ahmad without him noticing: "The whole rest of the family, down the length of the pew, smiles at him, at her." (2007: 66) This should be a poignant moment except for the disturbing way in which the family has been characterized up to this point. After the service, Joryleen tells Ahmad that they are the Johnsons, a middle-class family, "black *boor-shwa-zee*" (2007: 67) who owns a chain of laundrettes. It appears that his first impression of them as wild and uncivilized was false.

Months after graduation, Ahmad becomes a truck driver for a Lebanese-run furniture store and is soon recruited to drive a truckload of explosives into the Holland Tunnel. His boss, Charlie, hires a prostitute to take Ahmad's virginity before his suicide mission. That prostitute turns out to be Joryleen. She has been pimped out by her boyfriend, Tylenol. Even though she insists that the prostitution is temporary, she knows that her situation is dire: "Without me, [Tylenol] doesn't have much. He'd be pathetic, and maybe I love him too much for him to know that. For a black man grown up poor in New Prospect, having a woman to peddle around is no disgrace— it's a way to prove your manhood." (2007: 223) Despite her self-awareness that this life choice will lead to a dead-end, she is resigned.

Her church did not give Joryleen the stability to keep her out of prostitution and drugs. If anything, its performative sensuality prepared her for it. In a rather tawdrily detailed scene, Joryleen tries to seduce Ahmad as part of her new job, but he resists, insisting that they talk instead. In the end they do not have sex. But Joryleen's fall from grace does confirm Ahmad's culturally conservative fears, and further establishes his role as an avenging angel. Joryleen, in both roles as high-school temptress and prostitute, presents a challenge to Ahmad. She becomes a potential roadblock to his purity, but also a potential gateway to proper manhood through sexual initiation. Again, "getting a bit of the other" is presented as a transformative experience.

As Ahmad attempts to drive the truck bomb through the Holland Tunnel, he is (improbably) intercepted by his guidance counselor, Jack Levy. As Levy attempts to talk Ahmad out of his mission, Ahmad notices two black children in the car in front of him:

Two children seated backward look up at him, hopeful for some entertainment. They are not neglectfully dressed but in the same carefully careless, ironically gaudy clothes that white children would be wearing on a family expedition. This Black family was doing well, until Ahmad waved them ahead of him in line. (2007: 299)

Throughout Jack's attempts to dissuade Ahmad from going through with his mission, Ahmad cannot help but notice the children watching him, waving and making faces. In the end, they are the ones who really change his mind about the bombing. The family drives away and the children do not wave goodbye: "He feels snubbed, after the sacrifice he made for them." (2007: 308)

Considering Ahmad's feeling towards black people in general up until this point, it is a surprise that the sacrifice was made for them. But it is important that these are marked as middle-class black children. The fact that they are dressed carefully, "like white children", and marked as middle-class is very crucial to Ahmad's decision not to blow up the tunnel. The novel begins with a bleak, stereotypical view of an African-American induced dystopia, and ends with a terrorist attack being thwarted by two small middle-class African-American children who effectively disarm their potential murderer with cuteness. Ahmad's earlier view on the children in church, seeing them as animalistic until learning that their family is "black bourgeois", is an indicator of how he arrived at this point. It seems that after his interaction with the Johnson children at the church, he learns how to read black people past skin color, and suss out their social class and, in turn, social value. Perhaps the trajectory of Ahmad's interaction with the black characters is meant to symbolize that America is not as putrid as Ahmad thought. Even black people, the most hopeless and morally degenerate people in the country,

can surprise you with their occasional flashes of respectability. Despite Joryleen's descent into depravity, there is still a chance for the middle-class children in the car.

Ahmad Mulloy as Tragic Mulatto Terrorist

Although Ahmad Mulloy is not African-American, his characterization is worth examining through the lens of the Tragic Mulatto trope from American film and literature. In the 1930s, American literary critic Sterling A. Brown was the first to consolidate a profile of the "Tragic Mulattoes" he had observed in fiction. The Tragic Mulatto originated as a popular narrative in abolitionist circles to highlight the absurdity of the "one-drop rule", which could condemn even the most white-appearing people to slavery. While this was meant to be a sympathetic portrayal, it was clear that the tragedy of the biracial character was inherent to their very existence, rather than society's disapproval. Brown outlines the criteria symptomatic of this narrative, as well as why it is problematic. (Sollors 1997: 223) Brown explains that reliance on the Tragic Mulatto narrative takes attention away from the plight of more statistically representative groups. The tragedy presented in these narratives was often a biological one, rather than a social one. As Brown puts it: "The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood comes his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood comes his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery." (1997: 224) This characterization of the tragic biracial character also casts aspersions on the American Melting Pot.

The source of the mulatto's tragedy stems from his "warring blood"; at a psychological level, he is fundamentally incapable of integrating both sides of his

divided heritage. Ahmad is raised by his single Irish-American mother. His Egyptian father abandoned the family when he was still young. By the time we meet Ahmad, he has picked a side. After he graduates, he plans to change his surname from Mulloy to Ashmawy, his father's last name. Despite the fact that he has no clear memories of his father and has never left America, he maintains an idealized vision of both his father and the Middle East. Not only is he disgusted by his American mother, but he later becomes intent on destroying America, possibly as a way of ridding himself of his own ambiguity. The potent half of his genetic makeup from his father's side trumps his upbringing.

Updike describes Ahmad's appearance with the same tone of racial taxonomy he uses for all the characters throughout the novel. Since Ahmad is the only biracial character, this description operates on a more dehumanizing, scientific level: "The complexion of the offspring of this mixed marriage could be described as dun, a lower-luster shade lighter than beige [...]" (Updike 2007: 13) Ahmad's appearance as a biracial person is frequently commented on in the narration. This particular description is reminiscent of the Tragic Mulatto narratives, especially in the phrase, "offspring of this mixed-marriage." Within the Tragic Mulatto trope, the biracial figure is doomed because of the boundary-crossing union of his parents. The tragedy has begun at his conception.

Part of Ahmad's tragedy is the rejection he faces from his adopted father figure, Shaik Rashid. "To him, Ahmad is American. No amount of zeal and Qu'ran studies can change his mother's race or his father's absence [...]" [Shaik Rashid] does not offer himself as a father; there is in his regard of Ahmad, something fraternal and sardonic, a

splinter of hostility.” (2007: 145) While Ahmad’s involvement with the imam’s mosque is meant as a way to embrace his father’s heritage and erase his mother’s legacy, Shaik Rashid reinforces Ahmad’s perception that he is inadequate. In this way, Ahmad is a victim of his “warring blood.”

When his attack is foiled at the end of *Terrorist*, Ahmad has not changed. The powers that be are onto the cell and their plot. He is doomed to prison or even Guantanamo Bay. But his stubborn, insurgent blood will not allow him to change. Updike’s choice to use a biracial character for this story is questionable. One could argue that he was trying to tell the story of a “homegrown terrorist”, but Ahmad is so disconnected from America that the complexity does not exist for him. Perhaps Updike was trying to head off accusations of racism by making the character half white. Unfortunately, this unleashes a different set of preexisting stereotypes, and renders the character flat.

Conclusion:

In regard to African-American characters, these novels struggle with portraying interracial friendships without fetish and respectability politics. The black people in these novels are, inevitably, constructed as the black friend who is a flattering reflective surface for the white protagonist. The authors have drawn from older interracial dynamics reminiscent of postwar cinema.

The white protagonists of *The Good Life* are more concerned with maintaining coolness-by-proxy rather than the health of their friend, Washington. Instead of painting this dynamic as folly, Jay McInerney’s narrative comfortably depicts this as an

understandable and benign trajectory for their relationship. In *Falling Man*, the brief post-traumatic romance between Florence and Keith is soured by unaddressed issues of a power imbalance which haunts the relationship from the beginning. Like the interracial dynamic in *The Good Life*, this relationship is lopsided, with the white friend actively deriving fulfillment from the black friend's addiction and dysfunction. *Falling Man* takes this one step further and dumps the black partner once she has sufficiently served her purpose. *Terrorist* uses its black characters in a different way; they are symbols of America at its worst. They are then gradually redeemed, only to be used to symbolize America at its solid, middle-class best. The characterization of a biracial character heavily relies on trope which was constructed to warn against the danger of miscegenation.

In a strange and telling coincidence, Ahmad and Joryleen's near-sexual encounter takes place in a mattress store. (In Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Keith beats up men in the name of Florence in a mattress store.) In an interview about *Terrorist*, John Updike says that the abundance of mattresses is placed there for comic effect.³⁰ However, the mattress scenes from *Falling Man* and *Terrorist* seem to be speaking to each other. The shop-scape of new mattresses can have many meanings. There are the obvious sexual and domestic connotations, but they also have an association with jumping to safety, perhaps from a burning building. It is striking that Florence Givens and Joryleen Grant are placed, with the male protagonists, in a room full of sexualized

³⁰ John Updike on KCRW's Bookworm podcasts. 14 September 2006. http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw060914john_updike_part_1.

safety nets. It is also striking that both women, with surnames suggesting supplication, are heavysset black women in sexualized situations.³¹

In all these novels, black characters are there to perform some sort of function rather than develop as characters. While these novels claim to show the effects of 9/11 on America, African-Americans are not fully integrated into that vision of America. They are simply colorful, performing scenery.

³¹ A strikingly similar situation occurs in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). The protagonist, Hans van den Broek, has an awkward sexual dalliance with a black-British woman named Danielle, who claims to remember him from London. They wander around the Chelsea Hotel for an evening, and then proceed to have both bemusing and degrading BDSM sex, involving Hans beating Danielle with his belt. (109-111) After this scene, Danielle disappears and it not mentioned again.

Chapter IV Off White Crayons

In *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, a mother and a grandmother discuss a young boy's use of paper in place of drawing in flesh tones:

[Nina referring to Justin doing his portrait in crayon]
 "Justin and I. We need to talk about skin color, flesh tones."
 "He likes white."
 "He's thinking very white. Like paper."
 "He uses bright colors for they eyes, the hair, maybe the mouth. Where we see flesh, he sees white."
 "He's thinking paper, not flesh. The work is a fact in itself. The subject of the portrait is the paper."
 [...]
 "Does he have a white crayon?"
 "He doesn't need a white crayon. He has white paper," she said.
 (DeLillo 2007: 113-114)

The line, "where we see flesh, he sees white" can be extended to describe one of the problems with modern fiction in multi-cultural America: the tacit assumption of a white subject unless otherwise stated. Justin takes the paper, the background, as equivalent to the flesh. If he were to draw a nonwhite person, he would need to mark them as different from the background. As Richard Dyer says in his book *White*: "[...] most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general [...] The media, politics, and education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for white while claiming— and sometimes sincerely aiming—to speak for humanity." (1997: 3) Justin's drawings demonstrate this assumed position.

When Nina asks if Justin has a white crayon, Lianne responds that there's no need, since he has white paper. But were he to use that white crayon, he would have the ability to portray variations in shade and texture, and acknowledge that differing

shades of white exist. This difference is strongly highlighted in the 9/11 novels, and it is linked to a negative value judgment. Certain European ethnic groups who had previously come under the umbrella of American whiteness now have their quality of whiteness questioned.

The American idealization of “pure” whiteness has insinuated itself through a variety of mechanisms, one of which is the privilege of invisibility. This invisibility is exercised through the “racing” of nonwhite actors. Once a character of another race is introduced, their race must be blatantly stated. They become labeled and inevitably essentialized, while the white characters slip under radar as blank-raced “everymen.” In this way, white characters are not judged by the color of their skin but with an openness not afforded to other characters. The assumption of universality which puts the All American at the forefront of society is a product of white privilege. As Steve Garner puts it in *Whiteness: An Introduction*:

[...] white is the framing position: a dominant and normative space against which difference is measured [...] because of the dominance of Western European thought and military and technological power over the last five centuries in its global projects of colonialism and neo-colonialism, whiteness has come to be *represented* as humanness, normality, and universality. (Garner 2007: 34)

He goes on to quote Richard Dyer: “whites are not a certain race: they are the human race.” (2007: 34)

In the first chapter, I discussed upper-class whiteness and the “All-American” white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant protagonist. Those novels, including *Falling Man*, choose to show post 9/11 New York from the perspective of wealthy white protagonists. These

characters are either labeled as privileged WASPs or left “unraced.” However, these novels also contain secondary white characters who do not fit the “All-American” mold. Since New York is a city of immigrants, the inclusion Italian, Irish, Eastern European, and other ethnically marked white characters is expected. Depicting this diversity is not a box-ticking exercise, but a reflection of reality. However, they often appear expressly for the purpose of providing essentialized local color. While specific ethnic heritage can be referred to simply by spelling it out or indicating towards it with a surname, the behavior of the characters in the 9/11 novels is dictated by the stereotypes of their respective racial backgrounds. The privilege of white invisibility is, quite curiously, withheld from them. They are marked with the subtle white crayon of racial demarcation, separating them from the All American everymen. As Nell Irvin Painter notes in her book *The History of White People* (2010), the 1940s vision of America was a similarly Nordic one:

Ominipresent Nordicism characterized Hollywood feature films of the period [...] Popular literature also mirrored the movies, even as the war effort stressed diversity. A 1945 study by Columbia’s Bureau of Applied Social Research found that stories published between 1937 and 1943 in magazines reaching twenty million readers featured 899 characters, of whom 90.8 percent were Anglo-Saxon. The rare non-Anglo-Saxons were stereotyped as menial workers, gangsters, crooked fight promoters, and thieving nightclub owners, while Anglo-Saxons in central roles were honest and admirable, their superiority taken for granted. This advertising seeping into every corner of American popular culture beamed out smiling Nordics: free, beautiful and desirable. (Irvin Painter 2010: 363)

A fear of the growing non-white population catalyzed the expansion of the “white” franchise to various European immigrant groups. The establishment of broad white supremacy was a way of setting aside previous differences in order to establish a

monolithic group identity. One would think that in the face of a terrorist attack, the impulse would be towards unity rather than reiterating old differences. But in the novels, the ethnic white characters have their race and class conflated, along with stereotypes about their given group's morality. As Irvin Painter comments: "To be American... had rapidly come to mean being 'middle-class' and therefore white, as in the facile equation of 'white with middle-class.' It was as though to be one was automatically to be the other. Such a conflation of race and class...led to the dwindling visibility of the working class." (Irvin Painter 2010: 370) Ethnically marked white characters in the 9/11 novels are often portrayed as "salt of the earth" types with good intentions, but are burdened by a lack of refinement which prevents upward social mobility. One wonders why the construct of whiteness fragments in these post-crisis novels. As Immanuel Wallerstein notes, racism is an incredibly flexible system that can change to fit any given situation:

[Racial groups] are always there and always ranked hierarchically, but they are not always exactly the same. Some groups can be mobile in the ranking system; some groups can disappear or combine with others; while still other break apart of new ones are born. But there are always some who are 'niggers.' If there are no Blacks or too few to play the role, one can invent 'White niggers.' (Wallerstein 1991: 34)

In light of Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon's study on the effects of mortality salience, one can see how a system such as white supremacy can collapse in response to chaos. The heightened fear of death required a multiplicity of new designated inferior others, even if those others had to come from within the dominant community. The system of racism widened to accommodate old-fashioned, more comforting forms of hate. As we have seen in the previous chapters, there were plenty of African-American characters to occupy a lower rung of the system, and they were constructed as

comforting entertainment to white protagonists. Terrorists were sexually dysfunctional avenging angels. But that was not enough. There had to be creation of “White niggers” in the form of ethnically marked whites. The “White niggers” Wallerstein refers to in this passage can be read as a reference to the treatment of the Irish, before they were classed as “White” in America. Their previous station in the racial hierarchy is subtly resurrected in the 9/11 novels.

In her essay “Irishness, Innocence, and American Identity Politics before and after September 11”, Diana Negra discusses how Irishness is viewed as a cozy anachronism of traditional life. It became a coded proxy for speaking about whiteness without explicit saying so. Negra describes an October 25, 2001 speech at a 9/11 benefit at Madison Square Garden. The speech was made by firefighter Michael Moran, who challenged Osama bin Laden to “kiss [his] royal Irish ass.” After his statements were broadcast, Moran became a folk hero. Negra notes that this embrace of Moran and working-class firemen was a stark change to the status quo:

The rhetoric of empowerment is striking when we consider that prior to September 11, the majority of representations of white male firefighters and police officers stressed a sense of anxiety about a perceived loss of status in a society that no longer values their brand of masculinity [...] In this light, the events of September 11 may be seen as something of a boon for a class of white male workers driven by a sense of lost ground [...] (Negra 2006: 362)

This elevation of the firemen’s status was quick, but problematic. The hero worship they received was lavished upon them in frequently backhanded way. Any sense of survivor’s guilt or trauma those remaining firemen had been merely considered part of their new picturesqueness, a pleasing counter-balance to their masculine strength. In an

article for *Tikkun*, Warren Spielberg discusses the objectification of the FDNY. He describes how firemen became symbols for the country:

Like the mythic hero, [the fireman] returned from the land of the dead, having saved others and the community from greater destruction. He stood for resilience, sacrifice, and continuity in the face of experienced vulnerability. In becoming a cultural hero, however, the New York firefighter also became a fetishistic object — an object used by others to make them feel better about themselves, often at the object's expense.³²

The firemen were frequently sexualized in the popular culture and held up as true examples of masculinity. In Ken Kalfus' satirical novel *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), one woman fantasizes about firemen after 9/11:

Joyce had always known that New York cops and firemen were more attractive than those employed by other municipalities: it was their sharp haircuts, their exotic ethnicities, their well-spokenness, their vivacity. But now they had taken on the graces of classical heroes, clear-eyed and broad-chested, manly and kind, applauded as they strolled down avenues and into delis, tragedy etched on their faces. (Kalfus 2006: 21)

In this passage, there is direct reference to their “exotic ethnicities” as central to their attraction. The use of the term “exotic” is telling because most of the firemen would have come from largely Irish-American or Italian-American backgrounds. While these men would not be perceived as exotic to a fellow New Yorker, they might be to someone from outside of the city or state. Yet even within New York City, this same narrative of exotification can occur. A *New York Times* article about a fireman's funeral opened like this:

³²Spielberg, W. ‘Trauma in 9/11's Wake: The Objectification of New York City Firefighters’, *Tikkun*, September 8, 2011. n. pag.

Leah Gray's sister looks at her these days and says, 'Never fall in love.' But there is something about a fireman that is irresistible. Ms. Gray's sister knows that. She married one. They are fit, down to earth, a little rough around the edges.

"My goodness, they can throw you over their shoulder," said Ms. Gray, who on the surface looked to be the luckiest woman in New York, as she was surrounded by 500 firemen. But no one was feeling lucky last week. It was a melancholy affair, a reception celebrating the memory of her brother-in-law, Dave Fontana, a fireman who disappeared in the catastrophic cascade of the World Trade Center.³³

This piece was written on October 21, 2001, when the momentum was already strong behind the FDNY hero worship. Even in the context of describing a funeral, the author of the piece cannot help but state the inherent manliness associated with the firefighters. There is an immediate blanket sexualization over the entire fire service. But it is definitely a very masculine type of sexualization. The mentions of their roughness and down to earth qualities also read as covert assertions of unambiguous heterosexuality, bolstered by their manly occupation. There is further discussion of the deceased fireman's sister in law:

Leah Gray possesses those qualities that firemen say they desire in a woman: a coltish streak, an ear for good conversation, a biting sense of humor. She is 5 feet 10 inches with green eyes and curly black hair. She is 135 pounds when she is at her dancing weight. She is a musician, an actress and single. She likes whiskey[...] [The firemen] need to tell her things. Emotional things. Practical things. Private things. Stupid things. Things men don't talk about. They talked to her about drinking and death and psychiatrists. These are confidences that the men do not share with one another. Instead, some go home late in the evening and lock the door and take out their rage on the bathroom wall[...] After a few drinks, they are able to say it. "Leah, you're a good woman."³⁴

³³ LeDuff, C. 'She Likes Firemen; They Return the Compliment.' *The New York Times*. 21 October 2001.

³⁴ Ibid.

The mention of green eyes, dancing weight, and whiskey reads as an oblique reference to Irish heritage. The firemen in this story are painted as being emotionally repressed heterosexual males, more likely to beat up furniture than articulate their pain. But their “newfound” sensitivity in the wake of September 11, highlighted in *The New York Times* article and Kalfus passage, adds to their sex appeal. This is meant to be a story about David Fontana’s funeral, but omits any mention of Fontana’s active involvement with the Staten Island art scene, or his amateur historical research about firemen who died in World War II.³⁵ Masculine sensitivity in firemen before September 11 is simply not sexy enough. His characterization is kept very simple and elided with the hundreds of firemen who are at the funeral.

The novels take this already problematic narrative of toughened masculinity and make it even less complimentary. The white men who don’t fit the “All-American mode” become like white crayons; they are portrayed as a distinctly inferior shade and texture from the dominant group. This chapter will mainly discuss working-class men in the 9/11 novels because, with a notable exception from John Updike, all of the working-class characters presented are male. This gender imbalance is already telling; femininity is implicitly incompatible with working-class virtues. However, as we see in Updike, working-class femininity is can express its vices.

The Good Life

³⁵ Project Mosaic - a pro-Tolerance Nonprofit Initiative | David Fontana’. 2014a. *Projectmosaic*. Accessed September 7. <http://www.projectmosaic.net/david-fontana.asp>. Accessed 6 February 2014.

The Good Life by Jay McInerney is told from the perspectives of two middle-class people who fall in love after the 9/11 attacks. When Corrine meets and befriends Luke, they begin volunteer at Ground Zero. At the site they encounter a cast of exotic others, including “Jerry, a hulking, bullet-headed carpenter who looked like Telly Savalas in *Kojak*.” (McInerney 2005: 93) The word “hulking” and the invocation of the famous Greek-American actor Telly Savalas implies to the reader that we are meeting one of those “ethnic” whites, someone who is a foreigner in the protagonists’ worlds. It turns out that Jerry, the organizer of this particular relief center, is running a dodgy operation:

“We just got this generator this morning [...] when I first got here, I had to unscrew the base plate of the lamppost to get a power outlet. That’s one of those things you did if you grew up in the city, and you don’t sound like you did, Luke. (McInerney 2005: 94)

In a later conversation, Jerry reveals that he was a bouncer who, in the course of his career, delivered drug money and perjured himself to cover up the brutal beating of a black man. He provides the site with strippers as volunteers (2005: 117). Jerry fits perfectly into the mold of the corrupted, volatile non-Nordic of 1940s films. When Corrine and Jerry go to the supermarket to pick up more food for the site, Jerry punches another customer for being impatient with him at the butcher’s counter. The man says something through his bloody nose that Corrine hears as “You bastard,” but that Jerry hears as “Jew bastard.”

“If I really was a Jew bastard,” Jerry said when they were back in the car, “I would have kicked his fucking anti-Semitic ass right out the door...”
Corrine shrugged. “I thought you were Italian?”
“My mother was Jewish.”
She wondered if the punk at the supermarket knew the faith passed matrilineally. (2005: 149)

This interaction confirms McInerney's initial sign-posting of Jerry as some admixture of "white ethnic." He is not only in a lower social station than Corrine and Luke, but he is morally dubious as well. Despite his good intentions, Jerry will always be a characterized as a brute who can only function through violence and aggression. One can tell that the soup kitchen is the socially acceptable stage for his self-righteous bluster. His need to open the relief center is just to channel his otherwise animal rage:

Corrine found Jerry's anger a tonic. Just beneath the surface of his altruistic pragmatism was an undercurrent of rage— not an inappropriate state of mind right now. She sensed that if he hadn't been able to throw himself into relief work, his energies might have turned violent. (2005: 99)

The anger which Jerry feels is something that Corrine can feel detached from; she, as a WASP, can acknowledge that it is not "inappropriate", but is above expressing that anger herself. Yet despite establishing emotional distance, she also benefits from invigorating quality of Jerry's anger. He is an exotic proxy, through whom she can get in touch with her baser instincts.

The exotic white others around Ground Zero include "Spinetti, a young policeman, dark and well-built— a body familiar with Nautilus and Stairmaster" (2005: 95) and Officer Davies, "a pink-skinned Brooklynite attached to Brooklyn South." (2005: 95) The minorities and white ethnic characters in the novel are characterized as physically powerful, volatile men who are not fully in control of their lives. It is also important that the working-class ethnic white characters are "authentic" native New Yorkers. Their families did not flee to the suburbs. The WASP upperclass protagonists

are all from different parts of the country, so their authenticity as New Yorkers is suspect.

At one point, a National Guardsman is complaining about his lack of a gun down by the site. ““You’ll have your gun soon enough,” his sergeant said, ‘when they send you overseas to fight the towelheads.’” (2005: 155) Aside from some moments in John Updike’s *Terrorist*, is the only novel to directly mention an anti-Arab slur. As in earlier exchanges between Corrine and Jerry, the anger can only come from a working-class character, who lacks the refinement to suppress his rage.

In contrast to these men at Ground Zero, Luke and Corrine come across as bewildered, but good-natured. Unlike the exotic others, their racial origins are not trumpeted from their first appearances in the novel. Their personality is established before their ethnicity (or “lack” thereof) is stated. Their refinement stands in stark contrast to the coarse characters around them. At one point, Corrine’s husband, Russell, is passing through some checkpoints in lower Manhattan and mentions the exclusive sushi restaurant, Nobu.

"What the hell is a Nobu?" [the policeman asked.]

"It's a restaurant." [said Russell.]

"Any good?"

"If you like raw fish."

The cop looked him over before handing back his documents.

"Once a year's plenty for me," he said, turning to his partner and winking. "On my wife's birthday."

[...] Russell was two blocks away before he registered the joke. (2005: 131)

The book is littered with interactions like this. One could read the scene as representative of upper-class alienation, but in the context of the novel it comes across

as reassuring alienation, separating the protagonists from proletarian vulgarity. Despite being thrust into a situation where the All American patrician must interact with a Bridge and Tunnel man, the former remains apart, clean of any influence from "those people." While the media claims that the soft businessman was going out of style in favor of the strong, blue-collar hero, there is an understanding that the sexy first responder was just a fleeting fashion. There is still the assumption that wealth and privilege would triumph once more.

Corrine is guiltily aware of the social disparities between herself and the policemen. She especially feels it when she introduces them to Luke: "She felt a strange pride in her new acquaintance [with Luke] with whom she felt a certain tribal sense of identity, affinities of background and education weren't supposed to matter anymore, at this leveling moment. But wanting Jerry and the cops and the ironworkers to like her or at least not dislike her or make her feel guilty of some sort of slumming, she wouldn't dream of bringing certain of her friends around, and for that matter, she didn't really feel like sharing the experience." (2005: 94)

This impulse to quarantine these friendships on the basis of class is itself a form of slumming. While Corrine pays lip service to this "leveling moment," those distinctions have not lost any of their value. One must also question her reluctance to "share the experience." The experience she refers to has nothing to do with helping at Ground Zero for the sake of helping. The experience in question seems to be her simple delight in mingling with the "common people" in order to bolster her own sense of coolness and self worth. Their class and ethnic differences brings authenticity to the proceedings. Her

wish to keep her new acquaintances from her wealthier friends points to an impulse to rarefy the encounter.

Eventually the two worlds mix. Out of pity, Corrine invites Jerry for Thanksgiving at her house. Her sister, Hilary, brings Dan O'Connor, the married policeman she met at the site and begins a relationship with: "[...] dark, muscular, Black Irish handsome, with heavy eyebrows and bright blue eyes [...] in his jeans, his black leather jacket over his white shirt, he could pass for a member of the Manhattan culture-producing class, although his vowels betrayed his origins across the river." (2005: 311) McNerney's use of term "Manhattan culture-producing class" links social class with creative validity. It also brings to mind *The New York Times* profile of Dave Fontana, the firefighter who died in the Twin Towers. While Dave Fontana was actually a member of a culture producing class, that facet of his life was overlooked to present a smoother, stereotyped narrative for the public. For McNerney, culture production is not possible "across the river" in the less moneyed New Jersey. It is only possible within rarefied Manhattan circles.

Both Dan and Jerry are markedly uncomfortable in Corrine and Russell's expensive Tribeca loft. Dan has an awkwardness that is "almost too painful to behold." (2005: 311) It is obvious that he regrets his rash decision to leave his wife for Hilary. Meanwhile, "Jerry was like the bear who came to dinner, hulking in shyly with a six-pack of Heineken, overdressed in a too tight suit and an old skinny tie from the eighties." (2005: 314) Again, the word "hulking" recurs to describe Jerry. He is also the first one to leave the gathering. This is the last we see of both men.

Falling Man

In *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, Lianne Glenn has a combative encounter with an anomalous white other sparked by music. “A woman named Elena lived in that apartment. Maybe Elena was Greek, she thought. But the music wasn’t Greek. She was hearing another set of traditions, Middle Eastern, North African, Bedouin songs perhaps or Sufi dances, music located in the Islamic tradition, and [Lianne] thought of knocking on the door and saying something.” (De Lillo 2007: 67) Like Jerry, Elena represents an ethnic mixture, threatening in its formlessness. Even Elena’s dog is an extension of this murky ethnic threat: “Elena had a dog named Marko [...] Marko, [Lianne] thought, with a *k*, whatever that is.” (2007: 119)

Elena’s whiteness and, by extension, her Americanness, is called into question by Lianne. She presents a disruption to Lianne with her music and by her unclassifiable nature. The meaning of the exotic music being played after the attacks is not something Lianne thinks much about, but immediately takes offense to. It leaves the reader to wonder: has this music been playing in the background all along, and is it only after September 11 that Lianne has started noticing? If Elena has started playing this music and it’s not to calm her own nerves as she claims, then is it somehow in support of the attackers? This last option, which Lianne seems to assume, is implausible. The version of Islam endorsed by the attackers is rather austere, and would not be in favor of music in any context. But in this case, the music becomes a reminder of another side of the world, where Muslim people may or may not live. It is a reminder of darker-skinned

people. It is an attack on Lianne's whiteness. Lianne knocks on the door and speaks to Elena in an abrupt and confrontational manner:

"The music. All the time, day and night. And loud."

Elena stared into her, radiating a lifetime of alertness to insult.

"Don't you know this?" [Lianne continued] "We hear it on the stairs, we hear it in our apartments. All the time, day and fucking night." (2007: 119)

When Elena says that she doesn't understand why Lianne is taking it personally, Lianne says:

"Of course it's personal. Anybody would take it personally. Under these circumstances. There are circumstances. You acknowledge this, don't you?"

"There are no circumstances. It's music," [Elena] said. "It gives me peace [...] you must be ultrasensitive, which I would never think from hearing the language you use."

"The whole city is ultrasensitive right now. Where have you been hiding?" [...] Lianne put her hands in the woman's face.

"It gives you peace," she said.

She twisted her open hand in Elena's face, under the left eye, and pushed her back into the entranceway.

"It gives you peace," she said.

Marko backed into the apartment, barking. Lianne mashed the hand into the eye and the woman took a swing at her, a blind right that caught the edge of the door. Lianne knew she was going crazy even as she turned and walked out, slamming the door behind her and hearing the dog bark over the sound of a solo lute from Turkey or Egypt or Kurdistan. (2007: 120)

Despite being unsure of Elena's background, Lianne conflates Elena and the current "circumstances" i.e. Muslim extremism. The attack on Elena is, arguably, racially motivated, despite Lianne's confusion as to what race Elena could be. All Lianne needs to know is that Elena is playing music which sound like it could be from the "offending" part of the world. Lianne's reference to "hiding" is accusatory as well. On the one hand, she could be accusing Elena of being oblivious to her surroundings. However, hiding

has a more sinister connotation: the search for Osama bin Laden had just begun, and there was a sense that terrorists could be “hidden” anywhere. Elena’s implied hiding is not because of fear, but out secrecy and collaboration.

As in Keith’s encounter with Florence, the exotic music provides a backdrop for the breaking of a physical barrier. It is only after the attacks that Lianne and Keith can hear the music of their neighbors. Keith appropriates the music as a tool of sexual domination, while Lianne lashes out and attempts to silence it. Lianne’s mocking echo “it gives you peace” could be read as an ironic reference to the fact that the music provokes Lianne to violence. It also refers to the fact the Lianne has not known anything like “peace” since September 11, and this feeds her paranoia. She says “we hear” the music on the stairs, but she is the only one complaining. In her argument with Elena, she manages to conflate her own voice with that of the building’s other tenants, and the rest of the “ultrasensitive” city. Through casting Elena’s actions as insensitive to the city, Lianne emphatically asserts her authority as a white everywoman. It is also striking that Lianne’s pushes Elena back into her own apartment. She’s literally putting the other “back in her place.”

Like Jerry in *The Good Life*, Elena is an intimidating ethnic admixture. But they are treated differently in their respective texts. Lianne is quickly embarrassed and regrets her actions. Jerry, however, remains as an outsider in Corrine’s world. The Thanksgiving dinner serves two purposes: to relieve some of Corrine’s class guilt while further cementing that difference.

Terrorist

At times, *Terrorist* by John Updike reads like a lamentation on the perceived decline of American whiteness. The town of New Prospect, New Jersey, is no longer the right shade of white: “Those who occupy the city now are brown, by and large, in its many shades. A remnant of fair-skinned but rarely Anglo-Saxon merchants finds some small profit in selling pizzas and chili and brightly packaged junk food and cigarettes and state-lottery tickets downtown [...] White faces downtown look furtive and dingy.”

(Updike 2007: 12) The “dingy” quality is clearly assigned to non-WASP faces, which are not white enough to be considered clean. The dinginess could also have been compounded by proximity to darker people.

Jack Levy, Ahmad Mulloy's guidance counsellor, spends much of the novel musing on his own Jewishness: “He was a Jew. Not a proud Jew, wrapped in an ancient covenant.” (2007:23) He considers himself secular and lapsed, and is not observant. But despite insisting on the shortening of his name from Jacob to Jack and his marriage to a Christian woman, certain loyalties still remain. At Ahmad's graduation from New Prospect High School, Jack watches Shaik Rashid give the Islamic benediction:

Levy studies the imam — a slight, impeccable man embodying a belief system that not many years ago managed the deaths of, among others, hundreds of commuters from northern New Jersey [...] When Levy thinks of embattled Israel and of Europe's pathetically few remaining synagogues, needing to be guarded by police day and night, his initial goodwill towards the Imam dissolves [...] Levy doesn't mind Father Corcoran's nasally nailing of the triple Lord's blessing on the lid of the long ceremony; Jews and Irish have been sharing America's cities for generations, and it was Jack's father's and grandfather's generation, not his, that had to endure the taunt of 'Christ-killer.' (2007: 112)

Despite his stated disdain for the Bush administration, Jack does not recognize that he is surpassing the hatred of their rhetoric. One imam has suddenly, in his eyes, become an ambassador for fundamentalists. (Even more unfortunate, this particular imam is organizing a terror attack, thus bearing out Jack's initially baseless prejudice.) The reason for the small number of synagogues in Europe is not due to an influx of Muslims, but due to the Holocaust. Jack's tolerance of the Christian priest's presence makes little sense, except as an assimilationist impulse foisted on him by Updike.

There are other slippages in the way he views himself. When Teresa Mulloy, Ahmad's mother, challenges his views about single moms, he has the following thought: "*Single moms*, he thinks. What a cutesy, sentimentalizing, semi-militant phrase. How tedious it makes conversation these days, every possible group except white males on the defensive, their dukes up." (2007: 89) Does Jack Levy consider himself to be another white male, burdened by privilege? He comes from a working-class Jewish family, and his grandfather was an immigrant. He is, however, married to WASP wife, whom he has now tired of.

Ahmad Mulloy, the eponymous character in *Terrorist*, is burdened with a liberal Irish-American mother. Teresa Mulloy is a nurse's aide and aspiring painter. Ahmad does not hesitate to refer to her as "trashy and immoral." (2007: 35) Ahmad is not simple a teenager being hard on his mother; throughout the book she rarely acts as a traditional, or effective, parent. Teresa met Ahmad's father, Omar, when he came to America as an exchange student from Egypt. Though he was a largely secular man, he would lean on Islam to justify his sexism. Teresa describes him thus: "A woman should

serve a man, not try to own him.' he'd say, as if he were quoting some Holy Writ. He'd made it up. What a pompous, chauvinistic horse's ass he was, really. But I was young and in love— in love with him being, you know, exotic, third world, put-upon, and my marrying him showing how liberal and liberated I was." (2007: 86) The "exotic" slur cuts both ways in this novel, as it is also applied to Teresa.

It is important to note that Teresa has red hair, freckles, and green eyes, all stereotypically Celtic features. In her essay "Does the Rug Match the Carpet?: Race, Gender and the Redheaded Woman", Amanda Third analyzes the image of the red-haired Irish woman in the American popular imagination: "The image of the female redhead represented a synthesis of woman (the colonial gendered other) and Irishness (the English colonial racial other). It is for this reason that she is constructed ambivalently in Anglo cultures, at once desirable and threatening [...] the feminine sexualized threat of the Irish racial other."³⁶ Much of Updike's characterization of Teresa, or Terry as she's called, is right along stereotypical "fiery redheaded" lines. : "[...] she was a Catholic-raised schoolgirl who didn't mind shacking up with a raghead, a Mussulman. She was a wild one, a rule-breaker. Terri-ble. A holy Terr-or." (Updike 2007:156)

Jack Levy has this view of her: "As laid-back as she wants to appear, this is a shaky woman, who married what her harp brothers and father would have called a

³⁶ Third, A. 'Does the rug match the carpet? Race, Gender, and the Redheaded Woman.' in Negra, D. (ed.) 2006. *The Irish In Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 222.

nigger. Not a mother who'd give firm guidance; she'd let the kid take charge...She may be one of those single women trying to get by on sheer brass, but she's also some kind of nurturer." (2007: 87-88) The use of the term "harp" is striking, especially considering that the story takes place in the early 2000s. The slur is dated and excessive. The characterization of her as brassy but nurturing is a backhanded compliment, conjuring up the popular conception of working-class tough love. Her Irish heritage is brought up constantly, accounting for aspects of her physical being and personality. She is described as having "imperfect Irish teeth" (2007: 86), being "Irish white" (2007: 116) and having an "Irish mouth." (2007: 165) Jack is aware of the class difference between them, too. He acknowledges that his mother would have thought of Terry as "*common*." (2007: 92)

But even Jack, who cheats on his wife with Terry, is judgmental of Terry's sexual past: "Jack thinks, *So another Jew has been here before me*. Who all else? Egyptians, Chinamen, God knows. A lot of these painters she knows are kids half her age. To them she'd be a mother who fucks. Maybe that's why her own kid is queer, if he is." (2007: 164-165) He is distinctively judgmental of the racial variety of men he believes she's been with. For Jack, variety implies quantity. However, Jack has his own taxonomized catalogue of lovers: "An Irish temper makes you appreciate Lutherans," (2007: 164) he thinks during an argument with Terry, mentally comparing her to his milquetoast wife.

Terry is too self-absorbed to notice that Ahmad is being groomed by the imam. "Ahmad often returns disturbed from one of their sessions [at the mosque]," (2007: 88) she admits to Jack, but she still does nothing. She is rarely at home to raise her son.

While she is positive about Ahmad's conversion to Islam, she is also very obtuse and glib when it comes to the particulars of his religion: "Darling, I love having a serious conversation, maybe you could convert me, except there are all those baggy hot clothes they make you wear, but now I'm truly getting late and must run." (2007: 241) She is an embarrassing presence in Ahmad's life, a reminder of the American heritage he must overcome to be a good Muslim. At one point in the novel, her son makes her wear a hijab to his high school graduation, covering up her red hair. When Jack Levy asks her why, she laughingly replies: "[Ahmad] wanted me to wear it. He said if there was one thing he wanted for his graduation it was his mother not looking like a whore." (2007: 116) She is completely oblivious to Ahmad's increasingly radicalization, even when it is directed towards her. In addition to being a stereotypically laissez-faire white parent, she is also more sexually loose and bohemian than Ahmad would like: "His mother seems to Ahmad to flaunt her poverty, her everyday failure to blend into the middle class, as if such a failure were intrinsic to the artistic life and the personal freedom so precious to infidel Americans." (2007: 141) Again, Terry's failure to enter the middle class sets her outside the lines of accepted whiteness. She's even flirtatious and boundary-crossing towards her own son: "Remember how you used to run everywhere in those little track shorts? I was so proud, you looked so sexy." (2007: 241)

Jack and Ahmad's racially based disgust with Terry's sexuality is reminiscent of fears of Irish-American female sexuality dating from the 1850s: "[...]newspapers with Irish-American Catholic readerships shared the concerns of [American] Protestant reformers that 'sin, debauchery, and crime' [had] destroyed all natural and truthful

perceptions of the role of “the white woman.” (Roediger 1991: 153) The perceived hypersexuality of Irish women came both from within and outside of the community.

While Jack contrasts Terry to the ideal of a sexual exclusivity “the white woman” should have, Ahmad contrasts her to his idealized vision of a proper Muslim mother:

When he rebukes her attire as improper and provocative, she mocks and teases him, as if he is flirting with her [...] From Ahmad’s standpoint she looked and acted younger than a mother should. In the countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East women withdrew into wrinkles and a proud shapelessness; an indecent confusion between a mother and a mate was not possible.”(2007: 169-170)

Ahmad’s hatred for America stems from his disgust with his mother. Terry represents an updated iteration of the unclean white working-class woman. Notably, she is only working-class woman in the 9/11 novels. She is not a man, so her physical prowess cannot be the source of a backhanded compliment about strength. She is not a wife, nor has she negated her femininity with obesity or self-denial. Beth and Hermione Fogel, the WASP women in the novel, have made those concessions. But Terry is as a loose Irish woman and a failing mother. Her bohemian sensibilities are meant to highlight a whimsical personality and show that she is trying to punch above her social class.

In a telling and probably subconscious narrative choice, Updike only illustrates Teresa Mulloy through her interactions with Ahmad and Jack. Even Beth and Hermione Fogel, the other women in the novel, have chapters from their own perspectives, separate from the gaze of the other male characters. But Terry is only seen through the eyes of those with whom she has complicated relationships with: her distant son and her married lover. She does not have a chance to stand on her own.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

As John Updike notes in his criticism of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* for the New Yorker:

[Oskar Schell's] family seems oddly deracinated; his paternal grandparents spoke German, but they are not Jewish, since they were moving about freely in Dresden at the time of the Allied incendiary raid of February, 1945, and, indeed, his grandmother's family was hiding a Jew. Nor do they give any evidence of being Christian, though Grandma is said to believe in God.³⁷

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, the intra-white racial politics are not as apparent in 21st century New York, but in 1940s Germany. Anna's father is a sheltering Simon Goldberg, a German-Jew, from the Nazis. But within the story, Goldberg is treated as window dressing for the love story between Anna and Thomas. The reader encounters Goldberg from Thomas' narration. He comes to Anna's house and her father introduces him to Simon. He is described as "a disheveled man whose curly hair sprang in every direction..." (Safran Foer 2006: 126) Anna's father also describes him as one of the greatest minds of their age. One would expect Thomas to have some reaction to Simon's presence, but we only get this: "I said hello, I didn't know who he was or why I was being introduced to him, I wanted to find Anna [...]" (2006: 126) At late this point in the war, Jews were being arrested and deported at an alarming rate. It is bizarre that Thomas would have no reaction at all. They make some small talk about Thomas wanting to be a sculptor, and then Anna's father and Goldberg continue their discussion. Thomas finds Anna and they have sex behind Anna's house. They can

³⁷ Updike, J. "Mixed Messages: Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close." *The New Yorker*. 14 March 2005.

overhear the conversation that is happening inside the house, but only Simon's words come through clearly. At one point Anna and Thomas can overhear Simon saying, "War! We go on killing each other to no purpose! It is war waged by humanity against humanity, and it will only end when there's no one left to fight!" (2006: 128)

This insistence on naming "humanity" rather than specific players reinforces the image that Anna and Thomas are just innocent young people who have fallen in love at the wrong time and place in history. Their opinions to the ongoing war and the crumbling country are not relevant. In fact, it is better that they have no opinions. "Good people" such as these needn't have opinions. It is obvious to the reader who Simon is and why he is in the house, but this glossed over in the narration. By virtue of being white Christians in Germany's white supremacist society, Thomas and Anna have benefitted from privilege. But Goldberg's unremarked presence is meant to exonerate and differentiate them from the "bad Germans", who remain invisible in the narrative. In this way, Safran Foer takes Dresden's popular characterization as the innocent victim of Allied bombing to a new extreme. It transforms into a bubble of exception.

Months later, before the assault on Dresden, Thomas receives a letter from Goldberg. It was from the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands:

Dear Thomas Schell, It was a pleasure meeting you, however briefly. For reasons that need not be explained, you made a strong impression on me. It is my great hope that our paths, however long and winding, will cross again. Until that day, I wish you the best in these difficult times. Yours most sincerely, Simon Goldberg. (2006: 215)

Thomas pockets the letter, and again, expresses no reaction.

The letter is unusual for many reasons. It comes from a man about to face certain death. He has chosen to take whatever precious time and resources that remain to send a letter to a stranger he has met in passing. This stranger, Thomas, barely even acknowledged his presence when they met. The reader is left wondering what could have struck Goldberg about Thomas. Was it the fact that he was oblivious to Simon's plight, or his love for Anna? Is it the fact that he wanted to be a sculptor? None of these things justify why Goldberg would have singled him out as a recipient of one of his final letters. It is also strange that a man on his way to a concentration camp would wish an insensitive Aryan "the best in these difficult times."

In this way letter becomes a talisman, meant to let the reader know that there is something inherently special about Thomas Schell. After the bombing, Thomas leaves Dresden for New York and becomes mute from the trauma of his life. He reunites with and marries Anna's unnamed younger sister. They live according to strange and arbitrary rules that dictate their movements and behaviors. When Anna's sister becomes pregnant, Thomas abandons her. The son they have, also named Thomas, dies in the 9/11 attacks. Perhaps Simon Goldberg was sensing Thomas' unlucky future.

But Simon's story is merely something Thomas reports. Sanitizing the encounter with Simon (to the point not even acknowledging his life is in danger) exercises a disconcerting level of white privilege. Perhaps it is meant to display how "color-blind" Thomas is by not even recognizing that the man is Jewish. It could also be there to show how fixated Thomas was on Anna that a fugitive Jew would escape his notice. But it comes at the expense of denying Simon's humanity.

Much later in the book, Thomas is wandering around New York City, and he thinks he sees Simon in a bookshop. (2006: 279) It probably is not Simon, but Thomas weeps and wishes it was Simon. At this point in the novel, Thomas has returned to his abandoned wife after many years. His weeping for Simon is explicable, but does not add anything to Simon's narrative. If anything, this only makes him come across as less human and more ethereal.

Safran-Foer's prioritization of Thomas' pain over Simon Goldberg's is reminiscent of the German theologians' immediate postwar writings. The pain of the white German citizenry was addressed before the significant losses suffered by German Jews were accounted for:

[...] Germans were quite capable of mourning, not for the victims of Nazi persecutions and of the concentration camps, but for the German refugees and expellees, for German prisoners-of-war, and for German civilians who had suffered from relentless Allied bombing raids.³⁸

It was not until the late 1960s that the theological narrative of German victimhood had begun to be criticized. In the same fashion, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* not only puts Thomas' pain and apparent "innocence" during wartime front and center, Simon Goldberg's words and actions all work to endorse Thomas. Not only is Thomas' supposedly sterling character instantly recognized by a Jew under the worst duress, but this Jew also happens to be the "greatest mind of the generation", which is meant to give his judgment even more weight.

³⁸ B. Krondorfer. "Theological Innocence and Family History in the Land of Perpetrators: German Theologies after the Shoah." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol 97. No. 1 (Jan., 2004) pp. 61-82.

The intra-white essentialization that takes place in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is not bound to American social class and stereotyping as it is in the other novels. While Simon Goldberg is not stereotyped along class lines, he is reduced to being a signifier of another character's significance. It is one thing for Thomas Schell to minimize Simon Goldberg's existence, but Safran Foer's narration further endorses this.

Conclusion

The drive to establish qualitative differences between the ethnically marked white characters and the "All American" protagonists could stem from a variety of impulses. It could stem from a sense of paranoia, as seen in Lianne and Elena's interaction in *Falling Man*. In *The Good Life*, the differences are meant firmly establish the upper-classes in the place of an innocent everyman. *Terrorist* reinforces the same set of stereotypes displayed in the *The Good Life*, in service of explaining an Irish-American female character's failure to raise her son as a good citizen. The working-class white woman has let the state down, both by having a child with a non-American, and by raising a would-be terrorist.

This treatment of working-class white characters exposes just how narrow the definition of "American" becomes in the wake of 9/11. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant whiteness, always presented as wealthy in this context, is specified as the "paper", or more accurately, the fabric of the nation. The presence of the white other is made to stand out as a mark and a detriment. These characters would be less offensive to the protagonists if they are contained and kept in their appropriate social stations. Jerry, Elena, and Terry have all stepped beyond their places: Jerry oversteps his place by

accepting Corrine's invitation to Thanksgiving, where his outsider position is amplified. Elena oversteps her place through playing music deemed "un-American." Terry not only transgresses racial boundaries, but she also fancies herself as an artist, a member of the "culture-producing class." Her sexual and artistic preoccupations stand in the way of raising a good American son. Compared to the white Anglo-Saxon characters, who maintain everyman status, working-class white characters of different ethnicities are depicted in a negative light. They are deviant second-fiddles, too off-kilter in their behavior to stand as the everyman.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close operates on a different level: the whiteness in question is European, rather than American. But the "othered" character, the fugitive Jewish intellectual, is reduced to a prop for a German protagonist. But Simon Goldberg has not stepped out of his social place in relation to white protagonist. On the contrary, he fits in a disturbingly neat supporting role at the expense of his humanity. He is reduced to a token of white innocence.

Conclusion:
Departure from Innocence

Jonathan Safran Foer was interviewed in *Mother Jones* in advance *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close's* release:

Mother Jones: Do you think readers will hold you to a higher standard because of the subject?

JSF: If they do, that's good, because books are held to too low a standard. People don't care enough. They don't get worked up enough. They don't get angry enough. They don't get passionate enough. I'd rather somebody hate what I do than be indifferent to it.³⁹

But then, after lackluster reviews from some eminent sources, including *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, Safran Foer became more defensive. During a recorded reading on a promotional tour for the paperback edition, Safran Foer was asked about writing about September 11. During his somewhat long and meandering answer, he said the following:

Why is it that so many people asked me is it too early to write about September 11? You know, did anybody ask Tom Brokaw when it was September 11 if it was too early to broadcast about September 11? Of course not. Were there risks when he broadcasted? Of course, he made so many mistakes. If you go back and look at the newspapers and televisions reels, it's actually shocking how wrong they were, how factually inaccurate. And when a journalist is factually inaccurate, then there really are ramifications...when a writer makes a mistake, as I said before, it doesn't lead us to war, yet we are so much more suspicious of writers than we are of journalists.⁴⁰

This contrast in responses is very telling. Safran Foer begins by welcoming, even encouraging, close scrutiny due to the 9/11-related content of his novel. Yet after the

³⁹J. Wolf Shenk. "Jonathan Safran Foer: Living to Tell the Tale." *Mother Jones*. May/June 2005 Issue.

⁴⁰ Authorsontourlive.com. AOT #38: Jonathan Safran Foer Podcasts Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. 7 September 2006. <http://authorsontourlive.com/aot-38-jonathan-safran-foer-podcasts-extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close/>. Accessed on 8 October 2013

book is criticized, Safran Foer significantly alters his position, and goes so far as to downplay the role of the novel in order to save face. He even states that, "no child has ever starved to death because of a bad novel."⁴¹ He dismisses the very criticism he'd previously invited.

His remarks are not just a symptom of a writer scorned by the press. They highlight the problems writers encounter when approaching the daunting subject of September 11. His hastily drawn parallel to journalism is revealing about the ambiguous role of fiction in the face of a contemporary crisis. When comparing himself to Tom Brokaw, Safran Foer claims that he was criticized for a lack of accuracy, and greeted with suspicion, while journalists were not scrutinized. The suspicion he refers to is possibly in reference to the fact that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* was one of the very first novels about September 11 to emerge, a position which made it look as though he was trying to capitalize on the 9/11 momentum.

But in both responses, Safran Foer is perpetuating a form of innocence. A definition of this type of innocence can be found in James Baldwin's essay "A Question of Identity." For Baldwin, innocence is the shielding of one's self "against reality, or experience or change and [succeeds] in placing beyond the reach of corruption values he prefers not to examine." (Baldwin 1988: 98) Butler's explanation of First World complacency compliments Baldwin's construct of innocence. For Butler, First World complacency comes from the denial that America is part of a larger world. This

⁴¹ Ibid.

complacent position is maintained through perpetuating innocence, which is how the unwilling participant can place the “tough questions” out of their reach.

In his essay, Baldwin discusses two extreme types of American students he meets in Paris. The first is the American who rejects France and clings an idealized vision of his homeland, “the virtues of which, if not less crude, have also become, abruptly, *simple and vital*.” (1988: 95) The second is the American who wholly embraces France, eschewing his American identity: “[...][his] world, it seems, has become the French world: he is unwilling to recognize any other [...] The most curious thing about the passion with which he embraces the Continent is that it seems to be nothing more or less than a means of safeguarding American simplicity [...] He refuses to see anything in Paris which can’t be seen through a golden haze.” (1988: 97-98):

It is easy, after all, and as meaningless, to embrace uncritically the cultural sterility of main street as it is to decry it. Both extremes avoid the question of whether or not main street is really sterile, avoid in fact— which is the principal convenience of extremes— any questions of about main street. (1988: 96)

Safran Foer’s assertion that he welcomes scrutiny and his backpedaling in the face of such scrutiny are similar products of innocence. His first invitation for critique rests on his claim that the public is too complacent to hold novels to a high standard. In his words, the bare fact that his book started a conversation vindicates his undertaking. When the reviews of his book come in, he is not only proven wrong, but finds himself on the wrong side of the critique. His second set of remarks completely shift the parameters as he tries to exculpate himself from the charge of producing a work which did not do justice to the events of September 11. Both extremes conveniently keep him

from questioning his work, in the same way that the students can avoid questioning America.

In his introduction to his book *A History of the World Since 9/11*, Dominic Streatfeild claims: “This is not an account of what happened on 9/11. This is an account of what happened next. It’s scarier.” (Streatfeild 2011: 11) This is the point which is ignored by the writers of the novels I have discussed. The attacks did not happen in the selective historical contexts that the authors tailor as explanatory backdrops. An unpredictable and terrifying context (which continues to unfold) was created. But the characters, like their authors, remain sealed off, in thrall to the single day. The facts of the day are neglected, in favor of restoring a mythical American Self.

In his article “Theological Innocence and Family History in the Land of Perpetrators: German Theologies after the Shoah”, Bjorn Krondorfer discusses how German theologians prioritized German Christians as victims of the Second World War over anyone else:

[Theologian] Johann Baptist Metz has repeatedly declared that a “political theology” that takes seriously the suffering of humanity must abandon a “(mis)understood idealistic theological position” and bid farewell to three types of innocence: “first, from its societal and political innocence”; second from its historical innocence”; third, “from its Eurocentrism,” that is, from its “alleged ethnic innocence.”⁴²

Metz argues that it is useless to have a theology without context. Unfortunately, Metz himself has some difficulties with departing from the trappings of innocence. Krondorfer goes on to analyze Metz’s and other contemporary German theologians’ writings,

⁴² B. Krondorfer. *Theological Innocence and Family History in the Land of Perpetrators: German Theologies after the Shoah*. The Harvard Theological Review, Vol 97. No. 1 (Jan, 2004) pp. 69.

showing how they avoid naming Germans as perpetrators. In all of their memoirs of the war, bombs and corpses tend to materialize from unmentioned sources for unexplained reasons. They do not go as far to paint themselves as the sole and total victims, but they invoke the language of anguish and suffering when speaking of their war-torn country. Krondorfer then argues that a fourth category of innocence must be added:

[...] I suggest we enlarge Metz' plea for a threefold departure from theological innocence and add a fourth category: the departure from the myth of innocence of one's family history. Doing theology in the land of perpetrators must resist a culture of forgetting as it is enacted in the social setting of German families. A conscious articulation of the myth of innocence of family history would move a theology after Auschwitz caught in postwar memories to a German post-Shoah theology that claims the memory of genocidal anti-Semitism as one's own. Thus expanded, such a theology does not necessarily assume a new authoritativeness but learns how to speak with a more authentic voice. It will gain a necessary corrective without having to undermine its concern for calling Christians to care for those who are suffering and victimized. (Krondorfer 2004:73)

The framework of identifying and overcoming innocence as articulated by Krondorfer and Metz is a helpful starting point for engaging with complex tragedies in a meaningful way. September 11's political and historical innocence were facilitated by the American government and media, through the minimizing of the terrorists' political motives. The ethnic innocence in American culture was already present, but augmented in the wake of September 11. There was a fresh bolstering of the innocent "All American" image, in tandem with the antagonistic image of the "Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim" terrorist. The 9/11 novels unquestioningly play into all these forms of innocence.

At first glance, it may seem that Krondorfer's fourth category may not be relevant to the American situation. The Germans of Metz's generation had perpetrators in their families. But for a fractured America which had experienced the attacks, largely through

the medium of television, we cannot forget our own initial petty gut reactions: the fresh suspicion towards brown people, the indiscriminate lust for blood, the jingoist gestures. American writers cannot give us an image of ourselves stripped of this ugliness, coated in innocent oblivion. After the September 11 attacks, America did not lose its innocence. If anything, Americans created a new narrative of innocence, even stronger and more insular than the previous one. The insistence on maintaining this innocence is a political decision, despite claims that it is apolitical. Resorting to default narratives is always a political choice.

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They had been playing this word game in the car for about two minutes now. The Englishman maneuvered around the slow afternoon shoppers. *Agressie, intuïtie, relatie...* this sounded like a game the man would play on the highway with his children, like spotting letters on license plates. Jacob couldn't tell whether he was being tested on his English or his Dutch.

"Television?" asked the Englishman.

"Televisie," said Jacob.

"Combination?"

"Combinatie."

"Asphyxiation?"

"...verstikking."

"What, not asphyxie? That one doesn't fit at all!" The Englishman laughed and tapped the steering wheel of his rented car. They turned down Ferdinand Bolstraat and drove around the busy Cuypmarkt. Jacob wrapped his jacket collar around his mouth and ducked his head. He didn't want anyone to ask him what he was doing in that car with that white guy. His sister had just got a job in a stand by the Cuypmarkt and started in a week. This was the last time he could work here.

He hoped that this one wasn't into some *verstikking* today. He remembered the man from January who wanted to be choked by his own necktie. It's very hard to do that to someone in a car and the results were embarrassing.

But the Englishman, (or at least he thought it was an Englishman), wasn't wearing a tie. Instead, he'd opted for a turtleneck, wool sweater and khakis. He was an

older man, looked to be in his fifties, and seemed perfectly calm behind the wheel. He didn't look like the choking type. They pulled into a narrow alley and the side of the car grazed some chained and rusted bicycles.

"What about destruction?" He raised a white eyebrow as he gently angled the vehicle.

"Afschaffing, I think." *Couldn't be right, but it definitely wasn't destructie.*

"Well, I guess I lost that bet." He laughed again and unbuckled his pants. Jacob was taken aback by his lack of underwear. "But I got the answer from a *real* Dutchman this time!"

So he was testing my Dutch, he thought as the man spat into the condom and slipped it on.

Jacob leaned over, closed his eyes, opened his mouth and stopped breathing. Then his mind went to the boring place: how many rides for the tram he had left on his card, what was for dinner that night, what his niece would want for Christmas.

But really, what did she want? And why hadn't she thanked him yet? Sandra was nearly five now, and every single year since she was two she would send him a crayoned Christmas card right after Boxing Day. It was usually a drawing of the gift on construction paper, with a big multicolor, "Dank U, Oom Jacob!" next to it. He kept all of these starting with the picture of the teddy bear through the picture of the finger paint set. For last year's gift, he had gone over-budget and over-time to find everything pink for her: pink LEGO with instructions for building a castle, a little pink and white Swatch

watch, and a pink teddy bear. It was damn near Christmastime again, and he hadn't heard from her.

He hoped Charles, his brother, hadn't been spoiling her with all of those new Japanese video games: Sega this, Nintendo that. She was old enough to want those things now, and he knew Charles and his wife could get them for her. If they could get her all of that, it seemed perfectly reasonable that they could give her a measly pack of crayons so that at least—

"Hey, easy!" English flinched. Jacob looked up, startled.

"Oh, sorry." He closed his eyes and started again.

He forced his mind into total boringness until they were done. The Englishman sighed, zipped up his pants, and then handed Jacob a graying fan of guilders.

"Amazing...fucking amazing. I wish you worked by the center of town, though."

Jacob counted carefully. It was 85, more than he had asked for. "Sometimes I do, just not today. Where's my hat?" He didn't even notice when it came off.

The man nodded towards the backseat, and Jacob reached around and grabbed his knit cap. English leaned his forehead against the steering wheel and smiled. "Can I see you again before I leave?"

"When do you leave?"

"I need to be at Schiphol tomorrow morning, 6 AM."

Jacob laughed and pocketed the money. "No, I don't think I can see you again."

"It's a pity." English's face brightened for a second. "Hotel Ibis? I'm staying here, maybe you could visit?"

“No, sorry.” Jacob never slept over. “Have a safe trip.”

English waved. “Cheers.”

Jacob leaped into the blue and white train, just making it before the doors snapped shut. He sat in the neon blue bucket seat and closed his eyes. He pulled his Walkman from his pocket and rummaged around in the other pockets for the new TLC cassette tape he had just bought that afternoon, but he couldn't find it. He was too tired to dig for it in his backpack. He hoped it hadn't fallen out in English's car.

He liked working with foreigners, especially ones who had never heard the word “lekker.” With the exception of today's English, most of them didn't say anything or want him to talk. When the men wanted to talk, it usually involved “lekker”, which made his skin crawl. The English didn't know lekker, the most overused word for “nice” in the Dutch language. He could use it for food or weather, but using it for bodies felt nasty. For him ice cream could be “lekker”, but cocks, if they had to be described at all, should be “leuk.”

Foreigners were also preferable because they didn't know a thing about Dutch football. Anyone who did swore he looked like a certain Feyenoord midfielder. He had been compared to many other compactly built black guys before, but this time there was something to it.

Some of the johns would ask him if he was related to number 15.

“No, but you can pretend if you want.” He'd always said. He wondered if he should start wearing the uniform.

It was already dark by the time he reached his end of the Kruitberg building. The children's park, a rusty joke his parents had never let him play in, was deserted. But the damp mossy lawn next to it was loosely patrolled by a handful of boys his age in black hoodies, baggy jeans and white Air Jordans. The Jordan-wearers kicked a football around. Their shoes were getting scuffed, but they washed them every night, so it didn't matter.

Jacob didn't want a pair of Air Jordans. Sneakers made him look too young in the wrong way. Besides, only drug dealers and criminals wore shoes that gripped their ankles like shackles. Looking at them made his toes curl with claustrophobia.

The muddy ball rolled out of the Jordans' orbit and in front of him. One Jordan called, "Eh, eh-" followed by a quick string of Papiamentu. The head Jordan shook his mane of dreads and said something Jacob could not understand.

Oh, fuck, Jacob thought. They'd assumed he was another Antillean, when he was actually from Suriname. It was understandable at that distance and in that darkness. But he was out of their uniform, and it had thrown them off. Now they were curious. He was four meters away; the ball was not a mistake or a friendly gesture. The ball was like a twig children use to poke at broken birds; they'd prod at him until they were bored.

As Jacob bent to pick the ball off the concrete, he could hear the money crinkle in his underpants. His heart lightly tapped his throat. He stood up, bounced the ball three times on his knee, and headed it into the hands of the dread-headed Jordan. The Jordan nodded in unsmiling approval, and the game continued. Jacob nodded back,

and as he walked away he heard murmurs of, “Mashá bon, man, echt goed.” Maybe they’d remember him the next time and let him alone.

The Kruitberg lobby smelled like a dirty mop. The mailboxes along the wall were overflowing with unopened bills. Jacob looked into the family box, stuffed with blue, pink and yellow envelopes, most with red “ATTENTIE!” stamps on them. Attentie, attention. He’d forgotten that one.

The elevator in his block was still broken, so he walked up the three flights in the graffiti smeared stairwell, his heart pounding. He couldn’t tell which messed with him the most: the fear of getting caught, mugged, or spending the evening with his family. He unlocked his door and slipped inside.

The warm smell of peanut soup and lamb filled the living room. The framed portraits of his family had light steam over the glass. The final picture of his mother before she died was a little off center, and he tapped it into place. The descending edge of her sari was now flush to the wallpaper seam under the frame. The television was off and the table was set. Everyone was home.

“It’s mostly black women’s hair products, like grease, relaxer, hair ties, those things.” His sister, Ramona, his fourteen year old sister, was standing in the kitchen over the stove.

“But why is it in the Cuypmarkt? It should be in the Zwarte Markt.” His father shrugged. “*Zwarte dames, zwarte markt.*”

“Black people use the Cuypmarkt, too. Hi, Jacob!” She looked up and smiled. She always smiled at him like she hadn’t seen him for days.

He waved and ran into his bedroom. He turned on the desk lamp, closed his blinds, and took out the money. He was never one for posters. That was more of a Charles and Ramona thing. His walls were nearly as bare as the day they came to Holland. There was an Ajax calendar above his bed, but that was it. His books were all shoved under his bed. Stacks of cassettes dominated the desk.

When he finished removing all of the guilders, he crouched down and moved a particular handful of books from under his bed. Behind those books lay the Big Box of Money. The Big Box of Money was originally a pretentious mahogany box for a bottle of rum someone had given his parents for Christmas. It was the size of his forearm and rectangular, with a thin leather latch on the square opening at the top. He had initially used the box for playing cards and weed, but when he started hooking a year and a half ago, it became a bank. It was stuffed with bills. They always flew out every time he opened it.

He knew that neatly folding the bills would save space, but he also knew that he would fall into the temptation to count. Until he had about three sequels to the Big Box, he would not let himself count.

After he crammed the money away, he wiggled his way out of his trousers and exhaled. They really were too tight. Maybe he was getting fat again. He pulled on a pair of navy sweats and went into the kitchen. Willem, his father, and Ramona, were nearly done making dinner. Jacob set the table. The phone rang, and he picked it up from the wall.

"Met Jacob."

"Hi. It's your brother."

Jacob stomach sank. "Oh, hi."

Speaking to Charles on the phone made Jacob's skin crawl. When his voice had dropped a few years before, it had fallen to a dismayingly similar bass level as his brother and they sounded the same. It felt like talking to into a pompous echo chamber.

"How's dad?" said the chamber.

"Good."

"Is he still taking his medication?"

"Well, there's no reason why he'd want to stop taking it." Jacob knew this was a show question. He probably just asked it so that he would look human for his wife. "OK, here's dad. Bye." He handed Willem the phone.

"*Met Willem?*" Willem feigned ignorance every time Charles was on the phone. "Oh, hello, son! No... no, that's fine. Well," his voice hardened, "you could come down here and see for yourself. OK. OK, love you, bye bye."

Jacob took the receiver from him and hung it back up. "That was quick."

"Such a jackass," muttered Willem, and that was the end of that.

"It's a shame we don't get along with them," Ramona had said to Jacob the other day. "I'd be the happiest gratis babysitter the world has ever known."

Jacob agreed. The worst thing about Charles estrangement was that they barely got to see Sandra.

"I just want to spend time with her before she grows up to be an asshole, you know?"

Jacob was a bit startled to hear Ramona swear, but he just nodded in agreement. She was calling it as she saw it.

Jacob sat down across from Ramona. "Learn anything new?"

"Not really. Not today, anyway." She was a worryingly pretty girl. Jacob was extremely grateful for the layer of baby fat that enveloped her body. He had enough problems as it was, he did not have the energy to chase boys away from her. But the layer was melting away and she had grown an inch over the summer. There was even talk of her straightening her short afro and swapping her glasses for contact lenses. These plans stressed him out.

But she was smart. Smarter than he was. She had scored high on her exams and made it into VWO, and was learning all kinds of things he didn't need at vocational school. One time, when he was at home with a football injury, she'd said to him, smiling:

"Now you're *really* like Hephaestus."

"What?"

"Hephaestus. Vulcan, god of the forge. He makes things out of iron just like you. And he's got a lame leg just like you." Then she told him about a sad Roman god with broken feet and beautiful, unfaithful wife.

"Does he make fences?" Jacob asked, trying to humor her. "Does he play football?"

"No."

“Then I don’t get it.” He did get it; he was just bitter that she knew more than him. As she walked away, silent and awkward, he kicked himself for being an ass. But he was getting better.

“Nazir was quiet today,” Willem muttered. “It was silent up there. Not a footstep.”

“Maybe he’s dead.” Ramona’s eyes widened.

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer person.”

Jacob had to force his appetite after Willem mentioned Nazir. Nazir was their direct upstairs neighbor, a notorious drug supplier. In his past life, he was a boxer. Somehow he’d started distributing heroin and MDMA to dealers by the kilo and owned a Rastafarian-themed coffee shop in Den Haag. Nazir had converted the apartment above into a heavily armed three-bedroom warehouse. He’d lived there for years.

Jacob usually saw him before school.

“Hey schaatje,” Nazir had said this morning, pulling Jacob into the apartment by the belt. “What’s wrong?”

Jacob unzipped his trousers. “I’m not doing so well on my course.”

Nazir had fondled Jacob’s ass through his briefs. “Want me to talk to your teachers?”

“No.”

“I was only kidding,” said Nazir, his gold front tooth glinting in the light. But Jacob had seen Nazir around his school, watching him play football through the chain link fence.

"I think someone just need's his cock sucked," Nazir smiled and pulled down Jacob's trousers.

This was Nazir's solution to most things. Your father lost his job? Your mother died? Your brother calls you a faggot? I know what will make you feel better...

Jacob knew that Nazir could either make him feel better or kill his whole family. Nazir had showed him how easy it was: he pointed the red light from the gun to his floor, right above where Jacob's father slept. All he had to do was pull the trigger.

Nazir only mentioned this once, but it had kept Jacob silent for nearly nine years now. Ten minutes for a few times a week in exchange for the rest of his father and sister's natural lives. It was like sending ten cents to Africa a day to keep a child alive. Like the commercials said, it was a small price to pay, all things considered. Just close your eyes, hold your nose and open your mouth. The first few times, he couldn't get the feeling off, the feeling where Nazir's beard had scratched him between his legs. But he was used to it. The money Nazir stuffed in his pockets helped.

But Nazir didn't know about the other money Jacob made.

Now, Jacob took a drink of his water. Despite not being hungry he'd overdone it on the lamb again, damn near cleaned his plate. Ramona was watching him.

"Maybe when they redo the buildings," Willem was saying, "they can get him out."

"Do you think they'll really do it?" Jacob asked. "They keep saying."

"I think they'll drive the dealers out with high prices." said Ramona, pouring herself more water.

“Or they’ll work even harder, sell more of their crap to the children.” Willem shrugged.

“Think they’ve got the work ethic?” Ramona smiled.

“No.” Willem snorted. “But you never can tell with these Moroccans.”

Mia woke up in the dark. She’d gone to bed at 4 AM, and was now waking up past 7 PM. She aimed for dark to dark hours. She hadn’t seen the sun in three days, and it thrilled her. It was like living in outer space. She switched on the blue paper lantern next to her mattress on the floor. She hadn’t opened the briefcase since yesterday, so she’d left in everything for tonight. Time for a shower and an omelet.

When she was ready, she carried her bicycle and briefcase down three flights of stairs. The stairway to her apartment looked like shit, all peeling green wallpaper and beige plaster crumbling in the cracks. But she loved living in the attic room. She got to sleep on top of the building like a queen. The roof was high and pointed with exposed rafters.

She put on her Walkman and cycled through every red light. Drivers didn’t like it but it helped wake her up. She turned on a side street at Raadhuisstraat, chained her bike with three thick padlocks, and walked across to 61b.

61b was originally a grand two-story extension to the rear of a canal house. Thijs Poppen, a Golden Age merchant, had created it as a storage space for carpets and other bric-a-brac from his travels to the East Indies. Then he got into financial trouble when the tulip market crashed, and he sold the space with everything in it. He sealed off

any connection between the house and the extension, and it operated on its own. The main house, 61 was a family house until the 1960s, when it became an office. 61b never had a consistent life. It had a series of short incarnations, including one as a kiln, as a smokehouse for fish, a stable for ponies, and as a brewery. All of these got shut down after neighbors complained about smoke, noise and stink. After a few vacant decades, it was now an after-hours sex club and theater.

Mia had been working at the club for years, but didn't know about the history until last week. Sebastiaan, the manager, had gotten into a little fight with owners of the main office building, who were trying to claim rights to the 61b.

"They just don't like what we do, that's all," he explained over tea and snacks, right before opening hours. "We don't even put up signs or anything. They just don't like what we do."

Mia didn't understand the problem. The club opened for business an hour after the office closed. A hawk faced older-woman shouldering a large purse was locking the main house door as Mia was opened the iron gate to the alleyway. Upon hearing the gate creak, the woman turned sharply towards Mia and glared.

Mia glared back. Not out of real malice, just a reflex. The woman locked up and left.

"Never play that song again," Sebastiaan was telling Merlijn, the DJ. "*Guilty feet have got no rhythm?*" No one wants to hear that in a place like this; use your brain."

“I didn’t know it was saying that,” Merlijn mumbled, his face and hands in a box of cassettes.

“Well, now you know.”

Still, Merlijn was an improvement over the last DJ, who was dumb enough to string fairy lights on the stripper poles. Said it was for Christmas.

Sebastiaan waved to Mia, and Mia suddenly felt tired, as if her glare at the woman had drained her. “You need to fix the light bulbs in the alley,” she said. “Can’t walk in here without feeling like you’re about to get raped.”

“Duly noted.” Sebastiaan nodded.

The club was a small theatre with a bar at the back of the seating area. Mia liked the nights when she bartended because she got to watch everyone else. She thought she’d get bored with it, but she never did. She used to work at a different theatre and that one actually did bore her. All the clients were tourists who came on a dare or by accident. She got bored of the British men who got too involved and the American boys who’d throw up in their seats. Sex tourists still came to 61b, but they knew exactly what they were getting into. It was one of the benefits of being harder to find.

Sebastiaan, a handsome lizard of a gay man with silver-flecked hair, kept the place in good order. He was Mia’s boss, but it was because of her that he had the job. They had met through some mutual friends years earlier. Sebastiaan had run some nightclubs before and was looking for something new.

The last manager, Anna, would neglect the dirty sheets and the unpaid bills. Funnily enough, it was Sebastiaan’s habit of opening mail that alerted them that

ownership of their building was being challenged by Thijs Poppen's descendants. They had only stopped sending threats a month ago, when Sebastiaan had hired a lawyer.

"Some bitch from next door glared at me," Mia said, taking off her coat.

Sebastiaan raised his brows. "Maybe because you're wearing a fishnet body stocking?"

"Yeah, well, that's my problem, isn't it?"

He laughed. "Oh, you need to meet Eric, by the way. He's new. He'll be working with you at some point."

"The fuck?"

"Eric. He'll be working with you at some point. Maybe next week. Don't know. He's in the break room. You can show him around."

"OK?"

Eric was young, dumb and English. He kept grinning at Mia as if he couldn't believe his luck. She could tell Sebastiaan picked him for his looks.

She took him to the dressing room and unpacked her briefcase. She usually didn't, but this was for his benefit: spiky leather everything, multiple pairs of lace underwear, silicone toys, shibari ropes. She stood back and watched him stare at the loot.

"Do you have this in England?" she asked.

"Well, Wales, actual-"

"Have you done this before?"

“No, but I’ve watched this kind of thing before. A lot.”

“So? That doesn’t mean anything. Just because I’ve been arrested three times doesn’t mean I’d make a great police officer.”

“What?”

“Joke. I’d make a wonderful police officer,” she deadpanned, twirling the handcuffs around her wrists. “Speaking of which, what were you planning on a wearing?”

“Wearing?”

“What, you thought you’d just go out there like this? That’s just stupid. Think of something we can do and get back to me.” She left the dressing room.

In the corner of the stage, Fleurtje and Frederick were rehearsing their act. She was upside-down with her legs in a split and a lit candle in her vagina while he pulled a magician’s scarf out of her ass. Eric watched from stage right, looking like he was about to cry.

Mia called to him from the bar, “We’re not copying them; can’t be repetitive.”

Jacob shook everything out on his desk. He alternated the milk chocolate bars with the crisp packets. Walkers, Cadburys, Walkers, Cadburys, Walkers. The English things were his favorite. But he’d start with the Tiger Nootjes and then finish with the Tiger Nootjes.

Start with something spicy, then move onto salty, then sweet. Caramel rice cakes dunked in sambal would be perfect, but he didn’t want to walk to the kitchen.

He ate his way in order, nonstop, balancing out the salt at the sugar, wiping each packet clean and licking his fingers before moving onto the next. His stomach groaned like a rusty door.

"Chain eating." That's what he called it to himself, in his head. He only did it when no one was looking.

All done. Time for sit-ups. He kicked his chair under his desk, lay across the floor, and laced his fingers behind his head. Just enough sit-ups to make it all come back up and send him running to the toilet. He needed fewer and fewer sit-ups each time. This time, it was only thirty.

One of his cousins, Gabrielle, had cried to him about how she was so tired of being the fattest girl at school that she had started making herself retch after meals.

"Oh, no," he'd said to her at the time. "You shouldn't do that, that's terrible."

But it's working, he'd thought at the time. *I ought to try that.*

He couldn't tell whether he wanted to be larger or smaller from day-to-day. Sometimes he wished he was big and powerful, just a ball of muscle not to be fucked with. Other days he just wanted to be as small as possible. As a result, his body was a compromise: he had an acidic knot of a gut poking out from sausage-link abs.

His eyes always went bloodshot when it came back up.

"Jacob?" Ramona was knocking at the bathroom door. "You OK, honey?"

He hated her sometimes, when she called him honey. He wasn't her son; he was her older brother.

“Can I get some privacy, please? I’m in the toilet.” It would sound better if Charles said it. Everything did.

He flushed, washed his hands, and of course she was standing in the corridor waiting for him.

“Are you OK?” she repeated. “Are you sick?” She was whispering even though they could both hear their father snoring from his bedroom. Her white sweater made her look like a little nurse.

“I’m fine. Stop listening to me when I’m in there, will you?” He pushed passed her to his bedroom and slammed the door. Willem’s snore hiccupped at the noise then went back to normal.

Jacob could see Ramona’s shadow in the crack between the floor and the door. “This isn’t the first time,” she hissed.

“That’s nice,” he said and put on his headphones.

There was a Norwegian party at the bar. There were all in red shirts with white and navy stripes.

“Too drunk to realize they all wore the same thing,” Sebastiaan had whispered to Mia, making her giggle.

The striptease acts went first. It was too early in the evening to throw a couples act at them. Olga was out getting cigarettes, and Mia waited in the windowless dressing room on the floor above the stage. The dirty beige radio in the corner piped in the sounds from downstairs.

“Well, I guess it would nice... if I could touch your body....”

That would be Fluertje, dressed as the sexy nun in fishnets. There was some cheering. She probably pulled off her veil, shook out her hair.

“But I guess I should think twice...before I give my heart away...”

Eric walked in with his hands in his pockets. “Guess that song got popular here, too, huh?”

“What are doing here? Shouldn’t you be watching?”

He looked like a kicked puppy. “I guess, but these are just the strippers.”

“So? Go out and watch what the crowd’s like. You won’t figure anything out back here, that’s for sure,” She tapped out a line of coke on the cloudy glass coffee table. “Go on, I’m busy.”

Eric slumped away. She knew he wouldn’t tell Sebastiaan about the coke. As she sniffed her line, she felt a certain fondness for him, like one has for a retarded younger brother.

“Say please, please, please don’t go away...”

There was louder cheering and goading from the stage. Fluertje had pointed to a “victim” to pull on stage. Now it was up to his friends to egg him on so that he’d actually go. He’d get a lap dance and a chance to lightly spank her with the rubber ruler in her garter.

But Mia’s “victim” would not nearly be as lucky. She laughed and wiped her nose.

“He looks like an idiot,” said Hugo, massaging Mia’s neck.

Olga was at the other end of the couch, punching her calves. “Why did Sebastiaan hire him? Just to fuck him?”

“But he could do so much better,” said Hugo.

Mia was in love with Hugo and Olga. Not just Hugo, and not just Olga, the both of them. She’d worked with both and slept with both, but only having one at a time made her long for the other. Hugo looked like he’d fallen off a Russian propaganda poster of Communist farmers. He was like a big blonde superhero. Olga was from some northern, near-Scandinavian country, but was tiny with long black hair and fox-like features. They’d met as teenagers at a youth holiday camp in the Black Forest and had been together ever since. Mia wished she’d had the money and the desire to go to that camp as a kid; she could’ve met them then.

They mostly worked as a pair. She desperately wanted to move in with them and wake up between them every morning, but they were already so happy with each other. They didn’t want a third cook in the kitchen. For them she was more like a house-cat, something only there to be cuddled. The cuddling calmed her.

Hugo scratched behind Mia’s ear. “At least be nice to him.”

“Don’t wanna,” Mia closed her eyes. “It’s difficult when someone’s that clueless. There’s no reason for him to be here anyway. I can do lesbo shows with you,” she flicked her leg to indicate to Olga, “or Fluertje. Straight stuff with you,” she nodded on Hugo’s lap, “or Frederick. We’re sorted already. Do we have money for this guy?”

“Maybe Sebastiaan doesn’t want you to be alone,” Olga traced a finger from Mia’s calf to her ankle. “You’re the only one who’s not in a couple.”

“I hope that’s not what he’s thinking.”

The only other spare in the drawer had been Clarissia, who had found a sugar daddy and moved to Limburg with him. That left Mia and now, Eric. But as a rule, common sense, really, Eric could never go out on stage alone. No one came to the club watch a man. He had to go with a girl.

“If you don’t work with him, he can’t work.” Olga murmured.

“That’s just not fair,” Hugo added.

Mia looked up into the underside of Hugo’s chin. He had a straight little scar near his Adam’s apple. Maybe he’d had some work done. Pity.

“See, this just puts me in a position that I don’t like,” she said to the scar. “I bet you Sebastiaan didn’t tell him my background shit.”

“Hmm,” Olga said. “Probably not.”

“I mean, he’ll figure it out.”

“We must leave you, darling, we need to get ready,” said Hugo or Olga, and the pairs of hips shifted beneath her, leaving her to lie nose-flat on the warm grey sofa.

“Nooo...” she moaned into the smoky cushions. “Don’t go.”

Jacob woke up to yelling outside of the window. He got out of bed and walked to his window. He slid the window open and crawled out to the balcony, peeking over its railing. Down by the snaky little canal in the courtyard, someone was getting punched in the stomach, yelping with each hit. He didn’t know who was doing the punching, or who was getting punched, but he recognized Rami from school, who was holding the man’s

arms back. Nazir calmly stood a few feet in front of the action, like he was watching a puppet show. Nazir said something and the punching stopped for a few seconds. Jacob recognized the man in Rami's hold as one of the Air Jordans on the soccer pitch. Then the punching man grabbed the Jordan by his arms and wrestled him towards the canal. The Jordan wrenched around in their grasp, but Rami and the man shoved him into the water, head first. They shoved him in until he was in up to his ankles. Then Rami yanked his sneakers off and they all ran away.

Jacob stared at the white stocking feet slip under water. He'd heard all the stories but he'd never seen Nazir in action. He'd never seen a man die before. He wanted to call the police; at least they could take the body away before Ramona and the other kids found it on their way to school.

But before Jacob could do anything, the Jordan's head emerged. He shook the water out of his dreads, paddled to the other side of the canal, hoisted himself out, and ran at a half-hobble, half-sprint into one of the buildings.

All of the British tourists would groan then grin through her Rule, Britannia scene. She did a pole dance to a medley, Beatles mostly, and then the lights would change and she'd do a bit of vibrator play to this classical piece Sebastiaan had picked out.

"It's Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity!" Someone once screamed over it in drunken triumph. "She's wanking to Holst!"

A simple chair dance to "In the Hall of the Sky King" worked for the Norwegians, who'd cheer when the music quickened and everything climaxed in strobe lights.

Mia liked being the hardcore watershed, the first thing after the playful stripteases were done, signaling that the night had changed.

She checked her pockets of the leather trench coat: dildo, suction cup. Perfect.

It took about a minute for the song to start properly, but it was better if she waited for the lyrics. "*What would we-what would we-what would we-what would we... do?*" crooned the voice from the speakers. Mia skipped out on stage straight into a split and applause. "*If they took our loooove away? Oh, oh, oh, oh...*"

She shimmied out of the trench coat and danced around the pole for a bit. But she was also browsing the audience out of the corner of her eye. The Norwegians were all properly sloshed, but there was a sort of shy one who kept smiling at her. That one. Yes.

There was a chair on stage for moments like this. She beckoned him, and his friends shoved him on, as she knew they would. He was red-haired and skinny, but much taller than she expected when he stood up. He jogged up to the stage and she sat him down on the chair.

The seat of the chair, carefully picked out by Sebastiaan and Mia while antiquing one Saturday on the Waterlooplein, had a slightly longer seat than most chairs. If you tried to sit in it properly, your knees couldn't bend and your feet would be off the ground. But for Mia's purposes, it was perfect.

She splayed the Norwegian's legs to each side of the seat. The extra length gave her enough room to comfortably park the dildo a few inches ahead of his crotch in full view of the audience.

Then they roared. They roared even louder when she undid the tiny buttons in her pants that turned them crotchless.

She put her hands on his shoulders. As she slid up and down the dildo, Mia watched the Norwegian's southward gaze and fixed smile. He was confused; it always confused them. This was a lap-dance with one prop too many. Seemed like a good idea at the time, but now he was feeling a bit restless and emasculated. Time to let him go.

After a brief but false shudder of pleasure, she dismounted and removed the obstacle in his way. She, along with everyone else, applauded him as he left the stage.

Mia knocked on Sebastiaan's office door.

"Come in."

Since the renovation, the office was a graveyard of tools and wood planks. Sebastiaan was sitting in the middle of it all at his desk, hole-punching some pink and yellow carbon sheets into a binder.

"Holy shit, you never told me we had one of those," Mia picked up a tool from the floor and held it to her hip.

"One of what? I don't even know what that is."

She held the blade of it to the leg of the metal desk and switched it on. Sparks spewed from all sides.

"Oh, God. Stop!" Sebastiaan waved his arms over his paperwork.

"You've never seen this before? I saw this in Paris once. You get a sexy angle-grinder girl wearing hardly anything but this thing and you turn off the lights and crank up the music and there she goes."

"What's the point?"

"Bastiaan. It's fireworks. Does it need a point?"

"Maybe not a point, but we'll need some insurance," She could see in his eyes that he hadn't shot it down completely. "Let me see that." She handed him the grinder and he turned it over in his hands. "Sure you can use this without singeing Eric?"

"Can I use it to chop off his head first?"

"You don't like him."

"He'll send us back the Empire of Anna." Invoking the previous manager was a favorite pastime at 61b.

"Well, that's a low blow," Sebastiaan frowned and put the grinder behind the desk. "The Empire of Anna had you on the verge of eviction. There was a reason you brought me in."

"OK, Eric's not that bad, but he's a fucking idiot."

"Sweetie, as long as he's clean, shows up on time, and fucks like a machine on demand, that's all you need. Hell, if he does that I might marry him."

"I don't want to have sex with him."

"Look, I can't piggy-back you onto Hugo and Olga all the time."

"I didn't ask for that." Her heart hit against her ribs.

"You did, though. In only so many ways." Sebastiaan looked at her with the side of his face. "Yes?"

"Did you even asked them about the three-way show yet?"

"Why haven't *you* asked them about a three-way show yet?"

"You're the manager." She'd been too scared to ask them herself. They already saw through her. Everyone did.

"I really don't want to see that three-way. You know why? Because this is not the right venue for that particular fantasy of yours. You think you want it to happen, but..." Sebastiaan shook his head. "No. Certain things shouldn't come to fruition like that. I don't know what's going on between the three of you, but don't make me the referee." She turned to leave. "Night, Sparky. We'll talk about the grinder, tomorrow, yeah?"

She had gone to school for acting until she fell in love with the buttons in the lightbox. Then she took a course in stage and light design. But that got covered in boring and died so she didn't do anything for a while. But she never stopped tinkering. She was on her way to pick up her dole check one day when she found a skipful of amazing things: fuses, cables, little conveyor belts. She took them home, making multiple trips of armloads of cables. She didn't even make a plan; she just dived in. She laughed when the sparks hit her forehead and kept going. Only when she shorted out the building's electricity did she realize that an electric bookcase had no purpose.

When Mia left the theatre, her bike was gone. It was the third one this year. She'd have to jack someone else's tomorrow; it was too late to get into all of that now. Time to take a tram home instead. She walked to the tram stop round the corner with Graceland blasting in her headphones. She'd snatched it from a cassette box when the DJ wasn't looking. Why was it there in the first place?

Anyway, she was fast-forwarding to "You Can Call Me Al", the only track she knew and liked, when she saw Sergei down the street.

"Sergei!" she called. She couldn't hear herself because of the music, but she guessed she was pretty loud because he jumped. He smiled and walked up to her. Sergei was a dealer of a friend of a friend.

"Sergei," Mia said again, shaking her headphones to her neck, "come'ere. Got anything?"

"No, I don't think so," he said.

"I'm good for it, I promise."

"Sometimes you are."

"Sergei, seriously. You're rolling in it now. I can tell," He was dressed pretty hip, but he was probably a rent boy on the side, too.

"I roll in it because I don't roll with you."

Smartass. "You're mean, baby."

She took the tram to Sarphatipark, and walked its eastern sidewalk. She shoved her hands into her pockets, looked down and smiled. She was farther from the

apartment than the next stop, but the park was the best part of the neighborhood, especially at night. A husky man wearing only a leather vest, chaps and a matching cap strode across the path in front of her on his way through the green gates. He tipped his hat to her as he walked past. She smiled. Two drunken teenagers made out on a bench and burrowed into each other's winter coats. She heard giggles and groans from the inside of the park.

It was much better in the summer, when people weren't deterred by the cold. But even now it was alive, like a little circus.

"Cocaine? Heroin, miss?" This circus even had its own concession stand. The pale man in the brown tracksuit had been walking in the opposite direction, and kept walking as he made his sales pitch. "Ecstasy? Vicodin?"

She shook her head and the man vanished as quickly as he came.

The flat looked like a hurricane had been through. A hurricane or a cracked-out burglar. But that's the way Mia preferred it. "If someone broke in, I'd rather not know," she used to tell Julia.

Fucking Julia. Fucking Julia broke up with her and moved out last week, said that she couldn't take living here. Stupid cunt bitch.

Anyway. The light was blinking on Julia's old answering machine. Mia pushed the button.

"Hello, Samia. This is your mother. I'm just calling to check on you,"

"Arrrggghhh...." Mia growled at the tape.

“Making sure that you’re doing fine. Call me when you get this. Goodbye.”

Mia bashed the erase button with her fist. Her mother wasn’t calling to make sure that she was fine, she was calling to make sure she was still under control. What she really wanted to know was if Mia was still taking her medication, which she wasn’t.

Mia had swallowed some pretty dumb things in her day, but lithium was the worst. It made everything dark. Just thinking about it made her shudder and turn on three more lamps in the room; that’s better. She picked up the pill bottle which was collecting dust on her window sill. The pills looked like little eggs carved from plaster. They wouldn’t let her work. If she went on them again, she’d blink and find herself collecting unemployment on the couch.

But her mother would know if she was off them or not; she could hear it in her voice. Maybe Mia could go back on for a little bit. Yeah, right. Time to change. So she pulled on a pair of some ex-boyfriend’s boxers and a grey sweatshirt. She jumped on the trampoline. The peak of the rafters was just high enough to accommodate a trampoline jump, even for a tall girl like her. The motion helped her think. From her jumps she could see the pile of gears and screws around the armchair. That was from when she was into clocks. She hadn’t been into clocks in ages. Maybe it was time to start again. Or get on that angle-grinder thing.

She jumped in front of the long open window, watching the trams and buses slither around the streets. The Finnish boys in the student house across the way were home, and waved to her. She waved back.

Now that she remembered it, the Finns had invited her to a party. It was nearly dawn, but they were still there, and waving a bottle of Stoli from across the way.

Jacob would have to try not to laugh at Nazir today. What a failure. Big man couldn't even drown a guy properly. He felt like buying the Jordan a drink, but the guy had probably fled the neighborhood.

When Jacob got to school he parked his bike near a tree. They weren't allowed to do that, but the bike stall was full again. For a school of Holland's future plumbers and welders, there was a shortage of simple metal structures, like bike stalls and door knobs. The men's toilets were also surprisingly prone to overflowing.

The halls were louder than the arrivals wing of an airport. It was the middle of the week, but everyone yelled like they hadn't seen each other in ages.

"Job! Job, come here!" Christophe yelled for Jacob while running at him.

"Conference!" Christophe liked calling conferences.

"What's up?"

"Heineken Music Hall on Sunday; there's a reggae huge party."

"OK."

"Stan, Mario, Ali, and Etienne are coming. And Katya and friends."

"OK."

Christophe gave him a meaningful look. "I said, and Katya and friends."

"Oh, right." Jacob had been thinking of money again. It wasn't an object to him anymore, what with the Big Box, but he needed to pretend it was. "How much?"

"I'll find out the price and get back to you at lunch, OK?"

"Sounds good, man."

Meneer Peek, the German teacher, shoved his way through the students to his classroom. He was an old tweedy shark who always acted like he had some place better to be.

When Jacob got to Peek's class, he was surprised to see Rami there, dressed up in a suit and tie. He looked uncomfortable, mostly because of the suit. He didn't look like the type to drown a man. Then again, Jacob didn't look like the type to suck a man off. He wondered what other dirty work Nazir'd put Rami up to.

"What are you looking at?" Rami said, catching Jacob's eye.

"Sorry, man, just fading." Jacob grinned, playing stoned. He'd started the trend of space cake breakfast around here last year. He'd stopped doing it himself, but was proud of the legacy.

Rami laughed. "Got any left?"

"Afraid not. Yo, you look like a businessman!"

"Yeah, I got some family stuff today. I get to skip out early."

"Lucky you."

"Yeah."

Meneer Peek barked some page numbers at them, then buried his head in a copy of Der Spiegel for the rest of the period. The girls in front of Jacob were sharing a Walkman and mouthing out the lyrics to "Save the Best For Last." The boy in the desk on the left was rolling a cigarette. Jacob flicked through textbook. Somewhere, across

town, Ramona was speaking fluent French, German and English. She was gaining on him and he couldn't let her.

He wanted to give himself some credit for her success. "Don't end up at a school like mine," he used to tell her. "They get girls like you pregnant at my school. It's scary."

This was a stretch. There were no girls at his school like Ramona. Didn't matter. She'd never have to find out. He'd visited to her school once for a family welcome night. His own school wasn't capable of welcome nights. Ramona's was one of those nice gymnasium-type schools, clean and full of those polite milky Dutch kids, like the ones who used to go to his school before it got too black for them. The gymnasium was the same one Charles had attended. All the teachers fondly remembered Charles, were thrilled to meet Ramona, and were bewildered by Jacob's existence.

About fifteen minutes in to class, Rami softly punched Jacob on the shoulder, waved goodbye, and slunk out of the room. Peek didn't even look up when the door creaked.

Jacob started thinking of his afternoon. He was itching to put some more money away. Parking lots, fitness center showers, train stations, nightclub loos. He was getting predictable but he was too afraid to try something new.

Couldn't concentrate on his school work for shit. His father always told him to stop daydreaming, but it's not "dreaming" if you're worrying.

Jacob couldn't remember what Charles was like back in Suriname. Charles was there, of course, he had always been there. But once they came to Amsterdam he'd

become inescapable. Maybe it was because they had to share a room. While he made Jacob his special project, Charles was ambivalent to Ramona. She was a girl. Her failings didn't matter as much as Jacob's.

Charles would wake Jacob up by boxing his ears. Despite being much taller than Jacob he'd deliberately put Jacob's clothes on the highest shelf in the closet. When Jacob was old enough for a bike of his own, Charles would secretly put holes in the tires so he could yell at Jacob for not knowing how to fix a flat.

"Let's play a game," Charles would say when Jacob was doing his math homework. "Every time you get one wrong, I hit you."

Charles was the first of the boys to lose his accent and he bit at Jacob's every "mistake."

"OK, here's what you do," Nazir had put the oversized gloves on Jacob's sticky little hands, "he's tall, but he's not smart. Your arm's long enough to get him right under the chin." The boxing was Nazir's idea. Funny how Nazir had noticed that Charles was beating the shit out of Jacob when no one else did. It was Nazir who had stepped in, from out of the blue like a superhero, when Jacob was sobbing in the staircase. It was Nazir who suggested the boxing lessons.

"But I'm only eight," Jacob had said despairingly. "He's almost sixteen."

"Even better," Nazir had said. "He won't see it coming."

That afternoon Nazir taught Jacob how to fight dirty, how to aim for the back of the knees. the underside of the jaw, all the soft, weak bits where size doesn't matter.

The next morning, while their mother's back was turned, Charles shoved Jacob. For the first time, Jacob was prepared for this. He spun around, catching himself before he fell, and punched Charles straight in the groin. Jacob was stunned at the feeling at the punch, hitting something thick, frightening and vulnerable all at once. Charles doubled over in shock.

"Kut flikker," he muttered, but maintained a wary distance ever since.

That afternoon, Jacob snuck up to Nazir's flat. "I did it! I hit him!"

Nazir had smiled. "Well done, little man. Time for a new game."

Jacob went out to the schoolyard where Christophe and the other Indonesian boys stood. They had made a 6 x 3' wall of speakers of all sizes and shapes. They had been working on it all week, and hooked it to the back of a bike to make it mobile. Jacob was impressed.

"Fuck this toilet pipe school," Christophe had once confided to Jacob. "When I'm done here I'm gonna be a sound man, like Dr. Dre."

The speaker wall had its name spray-painted on every surface: Bass Monster. Jacob could've sworn that was Christophe's DJ name, but no matter.

Christophe clapped an arm on Jacob's shoulder. "The masterpiece is complete."

Jacob laughed. "Oh, man, I can't wait." He didn't think it would work.

"You ready?"

"Yeah!" shouted everyone. "Fuck yeah!"

Christophe spread his arms. "Nothing but the bass, baby." He pushed play on the little cassette pouch welded to the front.

But it wasn't bass that came out. Just a long, low, metallic fart that broke into quicker, higher-pitched scratchings. It sounded like a bull getting tasered. The windowpanes overlooking the schoolyard rattled. Everyone outside covered their ears with their arms and swore. Christophe managed to jam the stop button with his elbow.

"It's just some feedback, that's all!" He yelled, a little too loudly.

Some of the little speakers had blown inside-out like foil balloons. The cassette slot was dribbling tape down its front. Then, all at once, they noticed that the windows of the school building had gone very dark.

"That's amazing! I never get the day off," Ramona said brightly, sweeping the floor. She didn't have to be asked.

"But I'm only getting a day off because my school has lousy circuits. At least your school is normal."

"Well, we did have a boiler break in the middle of the day once. But then they just made us wear our coats," She scraped the dust into the bin. "Got any plans for tomorrow?"

"Not yet," Jacob said, "You?"

"I've got a field trip tomorrow. Anne Frank Huis."

"Really? I can take you." It would be a great excuse to be in the centre of town and make some money. She had no idea, he thought, watching her empty the dustpan.

In a few years, when she was old enough, he could tell Ramona. He could tell her everything. She'd take him in her arms, call the police on his behalf, and whisk him away. He'd spend the rest of his days in the English countryside drinking tea and watching his sister read. That's what had to be done, but it was too soon.

Jacob made a point of taking his sister around town if she needed it. When Charles used to take him places, it meant making Jacob run alongside the bicycle.

"I'm so late." Ramona clutched Jacob's waist even tighter, which made it difficult to pedal.

"I'm doing the best that I can," he said, feeling the icy grey air curl down his throat.

"I know. Thank you." They turned right at the Westerkerk onto the Prinsengracht. They pulled up to the long line into the Anne Frank Huis snaking around the block, and Ramona spotted her class in the middle of it. "There they are!" She jumped off the back of the bike and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks! Bye."

He smiled as she scurried away to join them and locked his bike. They were in a very pretty neighborhood, with gabled houses facing the water. It was photographed for postcards all the time. He walked back towards the Westerkerk, where an old man sat by an easel, making blue and bone portraits of the tourists, mimicking Delft porcelain. There was a long line in front of him. Jacob turned the corner and found a large pink granite triangle with steps jutting into the black water. There were bouquets lying at the tip of the triangle near the water.

So this is the Homomonument... he thought to himself. He looked around. There certainly were a lot of homos around. They looked like the generous out of town sort that liked him. They were neatly bundled up in sweaters and coats, laying flowers, taking pictures, reading the plaque by the triangle. But they weren't the kind of homos who would give him work. At least not at this moment, not at this place. Maybe he'd see them on Warmoesstraat later, or in Vondelpark.

Then again, "Fondlepark" was turning into a washout. He was the only one who was there for business, not pleasure. Once he'd start negotiating a price, he'd get wiseass responses such as, "But I could get this for free!" and "You should be paying me instead." Fucking Dutch men and their rudeness. Maybe if he changed up the clothing situation a bit—

"Jacob!" He turned around to see his little sister running towards him over the cobblestones. "We're going to be here for two hours, and then we're free to go. Can you stick around in the center for a bit? Can we get lunch?"

"Yeah, of course," He nodded, "I'll meet you out front."

"OK. Bye!" She ran back to the line again.

Jacob hoped that she didn't notice what he was standing by. He wondered if she knew what it was. He peeked into his wallet. There wasn't a lot in there. He had two options: either take the train home and dip into the Big Box of Money, or just make the money here. He'd get shit for taking his bike on the train at this hour, and he was out of rides on his bus card. Making money in town looked like his best option. But first, he had an errand to run.

It always struck Jacob how many people had time to go to the free clinic in the middle of a workday. Did anyone here have a real job? They couldn't just all be other VMBO students with broken electrics at their schools. Everybody looked at least *thirty* or something. They had all come in alone with only their shoes to look at.

The waiting room's fluorescents were always half blown out. The blinds were shut. There was a rubber fern in every corner. Red numbers would pop up on the wall counter, like they were waiting at the butcher's.

The woman sitting across from Jacob had hard brassy curls spilling over the fur collar of her coat. She was looking through a huge red purse sitting on her folded legs. She pulled out a black Sony Discman. Jacob wasn't really into CDs, mostly because he couldn't afford them, but he couldn't help but be impressed. That model wasn't available in Holland yet. She must've bought it from Germany or something.

The woman pulled the coffee table of pamphlets ("Zo, Je Bent ZWANGER." "Ons HIV Programma") towards her and put the Discman down. Then she pulled out a finger length tool and started to unscrew the back lid.

Jacob looked around to see if anyone else had noticed her. They didn't. He couldn't believe his eyes. What the hell was she doing to such an expensive thing? Christophe would shit himself if he saw this. The disc player was dark blue with copper veins inside, like Tron. Jacob had dropped his cassette player once and its guts looked nothing like this. The woman pulled out one of the green panels, put it in her purse, and replaced it with a different green panel. She was moving quick as a surgeon. She

unscrewed and dumped the black lid into a bin, then replaced it with a clear one from her bag. The clear one had a thumbprint-sized hole in it. She put in a CD and put on her headphones. Then she started scratching the CD like a DJ would a record.

She had noticed Jacob watching and smiled at him. He didn't know whether to be impressed or jealous.

The skinny boy across from Mia at the clinic kept sneaking peanut M&Ms out of his pockets and shoving them into his mouth. He barely seemed to notice what he was doing; he just stared while she was toying with her Discman. When he finished the M&Ms he started on another bag in the other pocket without missing a beat.

Fucking teenagers can eat everything, she thought, where does it all go?

"413. 413?" They were calling her number. She got up and followed the nurse to the exam room.

"Samia," the nurse said, looking at the chart for her name, "How are you today?"

"Good."

"OK, you are completely in the clear. No sign of HIV/AIDS, no chlamydia, no herpes, no hepatitis..."

"No pregnancy!" Mia offered, laughing, "The ultimate STD, eh?"

"No, that would be the HIV/AIDS virus," the nurse said, missing the point completely. "Did you require pregnancy test today?"

"No, that's alright."

"Would you like some leaflets-" Mia just looked at her. "OK, just put an x in the box to say that you have received this information."

Jacob watched CD player lady leave through reception.

"414?" His turn.

He followed the nurse down the beige hallway. He dreaded this part. It seemed like he always got the interview room at the farthest end of the building. One of the doors he passed was being hastily shut by a nurse. He could hear a woman crying inside. Someone went by with a cartful of blood samples, which sloshed against the vial stoppers with every step. He reminded himself to start breathing, and was rewarded with a strong whiff of stale rubbing alcohol.

The nurse took him to a white room and they sat down. "Jacob," She said into her clipboard. "How are you today?"

"Good."

"I've seen you a lot around here lately. Five times in the past two months, I think."

He stopped breathing again. He didn't like being recognized. "OK."

"Is there something you would like to talk about?" The nurse folded her arms across her chest. She looked Hindustani, like his mother, but she was wearing a little golden cross. It annoyed him.

"No. I want my results."

"Jacob, it's not normal for us to see someone this often-"

"OK, then I don't have to come back." He felt like he was back in primary school.

"No, that's not what I'm saying. You can come back as often as you like. What I'm asking is..." She struggled to choose the words. "If there's any sort of support we can provide..."

You're too young to know what the fuck you're talking about, Jacob thought. She was older than him, but she clearly needed a few more years on her before taking this job. It was weird, thinking someone older than him was too young for something. Maybe he was growing up.

"This is the support," he said. "I come in, you give me my results."

"Yes, but-"

"I can't even hear anything you say because I'm waiting for my results."

"You're all clear."

"OK, thank you." He said it too fast. It sounded kind of gay.

"Do you know about safe sex?" she blurted. "Do you want condoms?"

"I have condoms," he said, getting up. "Bye."

It was sun-showering when Jacob left the clinic, and he had less than an hour before lunch with his sister. Rain poured from blinding lemon clouds, flooding the sidewalks and pounding into the copper canals. People stumbled for cover in all directions, stretching blue and red shopping bags over their heads like tarps. But Jacob slowly and solidly walked into the rain, with only a scowl to protect his eyes. It took him three fumbling minutes to unlock his bike from the lamppost. He couldn't see the holes or feel the right keys anymore. He finally got all four locks and pedaled across a stone sidewalk. A tram nearly hit him.

He found the nurse's theatrics repulsive. Why couldn't she just say, "No AIDS, calm down with the fucking" and send him on his way? Why did she make him sit for an eternity, wondering if he was going to die?

"Kut wijf," he muttered into the rain. *Fucking bitch.*

He peddled by a long shopping area, his mind racing. If people can buy a pregnancy test, piss on it, and figure out that there's a growing human body inside them, why not have that for STDs? He could just buy a few of those, and work things out in the privacy of his own home, rather than facing a stupid, judgmental nurse.

But he was dependent on having his blood drawn a few times a month. It like he'd developed sanguine bulimia. He loved to watch the blood flee from his arm into the vial at a panicked, furious drip. He had been tested more times than he could count and somewhere out there, there was enough blood to sustain another Jacob. The other Jacob could have the clean, tested, and hermetically-sealed blood. Jacob the First would cope with whatever came his way.

Time to find a new clinic. At least for a while.

There was a red light after the bridge. He pulled up near a car, yanked his Walkman from his pocket and put his headphones on. The driver of the car, a white haired man in a trench coat, was eying him in the usual manner.

Jesus, Jacob thought. Do I even look like a faggot during my off time? Maybe that's what she saw.

He turned on the Walkman and cranked it up until he was nearly deafened by 2 Live Crew: HEY. WE WANT SOME PUSSY.

He biked to Kerkstraat, his face full of orange sunlight and rain. Now it was time to work. Except for a stranded tourist, the street was empty. He locked up and walked towards the soggy bondage flag dangling over a café at the end of the block. He peered in at the darkened café window. It was full, but it was the wrong kind of full. He stared inside for a few more seconds; there was a chance that someone was looking at him. Then he slowly walked under an awning at the end of the street, lit a cigarette and waited.

He went through his jacket pocket. It was crammed with free condoms. He had snatched them from a cardboard box on the way out of the clinic. "Protect Your Amsterdammertje!" it said in marker. Someone had drawn a smiley face next to it. Then someone else had drawn a penis next to the smiley face.

"Fucking typical," he muttered to himself. Amsterdammertje. He wasn't crazy about the idea of his dick being characterized as a reddish brown bollard in the sidewalk. Amsterdammertjes were such ineffective things anyway, placed all over the city to protect pedestrians from cars that jumped the curb. Most of them were small enough for the cars to roll over.

He looked up and down the streets. The knee-high phallic nubs jutted from one side of the street. That side was the only side getting the sun and the rain, and they were dripping and glowing. He walked out from under the awning and wrapped his leg around one. A stocky white man in his forties walked out of the bar and furtively made eye contact. Magic.

"Hi." Jacob lightly straddled the Amsterdammertje and smoked.

“I have a car. How much?”

“Fifty.”

The man nodded and walked around the corner. He walked to a grey Buick, unlocked the backseat and slid inside. Jacob followed him in.

“You know, there aren’t too many of you black boys in this area,” the man said, handing over his money and unbuckling his pants. His accent sounded funny, like he was German.

“I’ve noticed,” said Jacob in German. The man looked startled. “Nederlands of Duits? You choose.”

“Uh...Duits? Deutsch.”

“Good. I can do that.” Jacob smiled and handed him the condom.

“Actually, I wanted to do you.”

“Oh! Sure. I can do that, too.” Jacob put the condom on and leaned back. These jobs were better. But it bothered him that he had stopped envisioning Katja, the most beautiful girl in his year at school. She didn’t have the effect on him that she used to. The idea of her sucking him off instead of a client went from a necessary catalyst to a distracting roadblock. Maybe he was turning into faggot on the job.

The German had finished and was leaning his head on Jacob’s knee. “That’s one nice big black cock you’ve got,” he murmured, the words tripping in his mouth.

Jacob, safely out of the man’s line of vision, rolled his eyes. He always got the race weirdos. “You treated it very nicely. It likes you.”

“I’ll give you sixty if you cum in my mouth.”

Jacob, to own his amusement and dismay, went instantly erect again. Maybe it was the words “cum in my mouth” in German. When did he learn that? Perhaps it was the promise of sixty guilders. His body made the decision too quickly. Time to pull it back; think of football, football and AIDS. AIDS and football. AIDS. OK. He was back in control.

“Well, I’m perfectly clean,” he said slowly, “But you should really think about—”

“I want it.” The man put another sixty guilders on his lap. “I think you do, too.”

Suddenly, it was happening. Everything was fast and wet. Jacob clutched the grey upholstery of the seat and moaned. He’d never moaned before. He worried that he sounded forced and cinematic, but he couldn’t help it. He also never did this without a condom before. Normally he felt like a finger of a dentist’s glove in a patient’s mouth, but this was very different. He felt the man’s lips and tongue, sucking and flickering rapidly over him. He involuntarily arched his hips up, thrusting into the German’s mouth. The man didn’t seem to mind and sucked even faster.

It was over. They were both out of breath and sat still for a full minute. Then the German popped a mint.

“Want one?” he offered.

Jacob accepted and let it sweetly numb the back of his tongue. He slowly pulled up his pants. “OK.”

“Thank you.”

“Later.” He put the money in his pocket and left the car. It had stopped raining and shining. It was only cloudy now.

He tried to keep from thinking as he walked to his bike. He put his Walkman headphones into his ears, but didn't push any buttons. His shaking fingers could barely unlock his bike. When he finally did, he pulled it off the rack and straddled over the damp seat without sitting on it. Not yet.

That was the best thing that's ever been done to me. The thoughts surged into his brain against his will. That was the best thing that's ever been done to me, and I'd like that to happen again. I don't care if it's a boy or a girl. I want it again.

"Fuck..." he said, and tinkered with the brake cable on his bike. The thoughts came, and the tears followed. "Fuck."

"Hello, Robert."

Jacob looked up sharply. Sergei was standing by the exit door. Sergei was about Jacob's age and size, but if it weren't for his dark hair, he could pass for an albino. Sergei and Jacob had first crossed paths two years before in a bathhouse. Like two girls wearing the identical dresses to the same party, they felt distaste for each other that could never be settled by a show of force. Jacob would sometimes recognize the same circuit of working guys, but Sergei was the most frequent pest. One always tried to undermine whatever the other lacked: Jacob's Dutch was more tolerable than Sergei's Polish-inflected English, but Sergei was a pale twink white boy. By all appearances they broke even, but that wasn't quite satisfactory.

"What is wrong, Robert?" asked Sergei. Neither one knew the other's real name.

Jacob smiled demurely. "You remembered my name, Sergei. That's sweet."

“Well, obviously, you’ve remembered mine.” Sergei wore tight ripped black jeans, and a camouflage hoodie.

“Sexy little sweatshirt you got there.” Jacob tried to mock him, but he was envious. He hadn’t gone shopping for new clothes in a while.

“Why, thank you. My boyfriend got it for me.” Sergei was a faggot on his off-time.

“Oh, you have a boyfriend now?”

“I do. He’s a sexy North African with a huge cock and he buys me anything I want.” Sergei yawned, puffing up his chest.

“So that’s why I haven’t seen you in a while. You’re kept. Like a dog. All taken care of. Good for you.”

Sergei leaned against a fire exit door. “Did that nice man in the car pay you?”

Jacob’s stomach shuddered. “You watched?”

“You were on public property. And on it for a long time. I was jealous; he looked like fun,” Sergei parted his lips, exposing a mildly decaying sneer. “I hope he paid you.”

“Of course he paid me.”

“Then why were you crying?”

“None of your business.” Jacob began to drag his bike backwards.

“Wait!” Sergei put his hand on the handlebars. “This guy I am seeing; he said he’ll pay even more if I find someone for a—a threebie. Are you in?”

“A what?” Jacob said.

“A threebie.”

“A freebie?”

“No, no!” Sergei emphatically shook his head and held up three pale fingers.

“Three!”

“Oh, *threesome*. No. No thanks.” Jacob coughed out a laugh. “No.” He spun his wheels a bit on the cobblestones, but quickly righted himself, hurried around the corner, and down the Prinsengracht. Time to meet the little sister for lunch.

It was about two in the afternoon when Mia heard a knock. She’d gotten back from the clinic, taken a shower and wasn’t expecting any visitors. She pulled on a sweatshirt and opened the door.

“Samia?” It was her mother, peering up at her through the little glasses that made her look like a tiny, veiled John Lennon.

“Mom?...Hello!” Mia pulled her into a hug, trying to smother her surprise. She felt her mother’s tiny frame fit just under her chin and fold against her. Osteoporosis was lightly settling over her bones, and Mia could see new silver streaks through her sheer black scarf. The sensation of being a spoiled jackass nearly choked her into tears.

“Are you alright? You look a little pale,” her mother said, generously using Dutch.

Of course I look pale. You always think I’m too fucking pale for you. “I’m fine,” Mia said as the chokehold loosened.

Rami, her cousin, stood right behind Itir, holding the wheel-less suitcase he had been tasked with carrying. He was about 17, and taller than when she last saw him. She wasn’t sure how related he was. Maryam, his mother, was a cousin of some kind, but Mia couldn’t remember through whom. He always addressed her mother as Nanna Itir,

even though she wasn't his grandmother. Mia had shared a joint with him outside someone's wedding reception in Zuid-Oost a few years back. He was an OK kid, just hard to place in the family. It was all very confusing, too much to sort through now.

"Um, if you could just wait for two seconds, I'll be right back!" Mia slammed the door in their faces with a smile and went on a frantic search for trousers.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..." she thought, opening a closet and finding an avalanche. Dirty and clean, used and unused were all mingled into one heap. It was more a storage facility around her sleeping body than a proper home. She wouldn't even know where to begin.

She spied a box of matches on the kitchen counter and briefly thought of lighting a fire. It would distract her mother and clean up the mess at the same time. But, shit. Might as well face the music.

"Sorry about that," Mia'd returned to the door in clean clothes and with a black scarf around her head. Her mother could see through the Islam drag, though, why even bother?

"We need to talk." Itir looked her dead in the eye. Even though she was a foot shorter than her daughter, she was still not to be messed with.

"Sure! Let's go for tea! Rami, can you wait here?" Mia shoved Rami into the flat. Itir had turned to look down the hallway, and Mia made a broom and dustpan gesture to Rami, followed by a supplicating gesture, palms together, *please please please*. He rolled his eyes and closed the door behind him.

Jacob's change was stuck in the vending machine. "Fuckers," he muttered, and kicked it where it had been kicked many times before.

A bunch of boys from the nearby table laughed, not at him but at the machine. "Yo, Blackistani" said Simon, the lion of the group, "give it one for me. Robbed my ass blind yesterday." His girlfriend nudged him to be still; she was in the process of cornrowing his hair.

Jacob smiled and kicked it again. Nothing happened. "Nope."

"We should knock it over, get all that money out of it," said one of Simon's lieutenants. He'd obviously been thinking about it a while.

"No, they're a step ahead of us," Simon pointed to the chain that kept the vending machine that kept it to the wall."

They all swore and laughed.

"What would you do with the money?" the lieutenant asked Simon.

"Buy me a gold chain, nigga! That's what it is."

Jewellery. Fucking sissy jewellery. Typical.

"What would you get, Blackistani?" asked Simon.

"New cleats. New house. Put a gym in my house."

Everyone nodded quietly. It was a good answer. Jacob always had good answers.

Mia and Itir walked to the Turkish café on the corner. The proprietor was Itir's age and always behaved as if he was respectfully in love with her.

"Mevrouw Fihri!" He waved from behind the bar, completely ignoring Mia. "It is so good to see you again!"

They chatted for a little and Mia picked a table. She felt like a little kid; she wasn't used to being ignored by men. After ordering, Itir sat across from Mia.

"So...welcome," Mia said.

"I'm not sure I am," Itir had a way of twisting the words right out of your mouth.

"Of course you are."

"You forgot I was coming."

Mia hadn't kept a consistent diary since she'd quit that escort service back in 1990. Not like she could present that fact to Itir in her defense. She didn't have much to hold up in her defense; if she had her shit together, she would have dyed her hair back from blonde to black, stocked up on nicotine patches, and called in sick for work. Oh, work.

"Well, not much you can do now," Itir said, as if reading her mind. "I'm already here."

"Yep."

"Are you working?"

"No." *Not while you're here.*

"That's a shame. How's the medication?"

"Don't like it."

"You don't have to like it," Itir frowned at a soap smudge in her glass and signaled to the waiter for a new one. "You just have to take it."

"It makes me feel like a robot."

"Like the one on the Jetsons who always cleaned things?"

Bitch, thought Mia.

"Rosie, I think her name was." Itir said. "You always liked that one."

"Mmm."

"So you're not on anything right now?"

"Not really." But cocaine did calm her down by a shitload. "It's complicated."

"Well, you are an adult. An unemployed adult who's sleeping past noon, but an adult nonethe--"

"Stop."

"You were fine on the medication, I don't know why you went off."

"Fuckssake, I just told you why."

Itir folded her hands. "I'm sorry."

A little late for that. Until the doctors had diagnosed Mia with bipolar, Itir's treatment program consisted of slaps across the face, shaming, and extended stays in Morocco. Hurting herself during housework was the best retaliation for Mia; burning her arms with an iron, washing the dishes in the hottest water till her hands would redden and burst. Anything to bide time until her mother would snatch whatever it was from her hands "for her own good." After some long stubborn years, Itir finally admitted to herself that Mia was doing it on purpose. A doctor was called in. Itir assumed the doctor was

simply going to tell Mia to stop being stupid and warn herself against infections. Instead, the doctor referred her to specialists, and the matter was taken from there.

Now, they sat in silence. Mia looked at the checkered tablecloth, the pastries on the table, back at the tablecloth and then to her mother. "How's Berlin?"

"Not bad. I saw your cousin."

"Which one?"

For the first time since she arrived, Itir smiled, "Oh, you know which one."

Itir launched into a huge story about Ayallah, who was younger than Mia but managed to become a bigger failure. It took her nearly ten years just to finish her Bachelor's degree, and she'd had two children in the process. All she did was go to parties and dance.

Mia had sussed from an early age that family gossip was the only thing that held this mother-daughter relationship together. They could talk for hours, so long as it was about other people. It was like they were fans of the same three-dimensional soap opera.

"She had the darkest rings under her eyes," Itir was saying, "Her clothes, if you can call them that, were all kinds of tight and baggy in strange places. I don't understand how that's so popular nowadays. She had two children and she's walking in the street, half-drunk at noon."

"Well, I don't think you mean drunk, you mean hungover." Mia liked playing devil's advocate.

“Drunk? Hungover? What’s the difference? Can her two children tell the difference?”

When they returned, Rami had exceeded her expectations. Not only had he picked up the trash from the floor, he’d put it outside the building for collection. The bathroom was mopped. Surfaces had been dusted. The windows were opened; she hadn’t cracked them in days. The dishes were washed. It even smelled like a different place. Later, she’d discover that he’d emptied the fridge of everything except bottled water and yogurt. It seems that everything else had been either expired or alcoholic.

He’d folded the trampoline and tucked it under some couches.

Mia walked him outside and slipped him all of last night’s tips, 120 fl in all.

“You’re the best maid ever!” she whispered.

He smiled. “Think of it as disposing of evidence.”

The punching bag wagged and blurred in front of Jacob's eyes. He tried to blink it still.

"That was good," said Nazir. "Your left's getting stronger." He clasped Jacob's shoulders and shook him with approval. Everything wobbled faster.

"Uh, huh."

"You should lie down."

Hours later Jacob woke up in the dark, sore in all the familiar places. When his eyes adjusted he realized that he wasn't at Nazir's anymore. He was in his own room, like he'd melted through the floor back to his own place. He hugged his bed. His mouth

felt horrible. He'd drooled all over his sheets and it smelled like an oozing sewer. He rolled over.

It was the second time Nazir had made him take a spiked drink. Lucozade with something in it. The first time Jacob thought he was just ill but now he knew it was whatever Nazir put in the drink. It made him feel like shit. He started to move his legs to get up but the pain flared up so he changed his mind.

He was still wearing his clothes and socks. There was money in his socks. He got up and went to the living room, where Willem and Ramona were sitting, ostensibly watching television even though it was on mute. They were obviously waiting for him.

"Well, well, well," Willem said. "Black boy drunk in the middle of the day."

"What?"

"You seemed to have had a good afternoon. Could barely walk when you came in here."

"Oh."

"Sit down." As if on cue, Ramona retreated to her room. Jacob took her seat.

"You've got something to say for yourself?"

"No." He knew he'd be better off pretending he'd done something wrong but he just wasn't in the mood for it.

"Jacob, if your mother was still alive she'd be trying to convince me not to belt the shit out of you. But I won't even bother. And you know why? I don't have the energy. And even if I had the energy, I don't have the discs in my back..."

The usual lecture. The one about his broken body, his widowed mind, how many sacrifices he made in this country for his children.

Oh, shut the fuck up, Jacob thought, with a bitter flashback to the little red dot right above their heads. *You don't know what sacrifice is. You just get to do your job.*

"...and even after all that, sometimes I just look at you, and I think, 'this boy doesn't care.' It's like you don't get it. You don't, do you? No effort, no gratitude, you're just in and out of the house doing God knows what. Look at you, it's like you're not even looking at me. It's like you're looking through me."

What does that even mean? Jacob's head started to feel heavy again. He fell out of the chair and onto the floor, skinning his elbow on the carpet. The last thing he heard was his father calling for his sister's help.

Breakfast for Itir and Mia was cheese on toast with tea.

"So, what do you usually do?" Itir asked, after wondering aloud why none of the flatware and utensils matched.

"What do you mean?"

"What is your day like when I'm not here? What do you do?"

"Not get arrested, I don't know." Mia cleared the table.

"I think we need to talk with your doctor."

"Keep thinking."

Mia started clanging the cups under water. She could smell a rage coming on. It smelled like rotting dead mice.

"There isn't much progress," Itir was saying, "not as far as I can see."

"As far as you can see, which, by the way, isn't very far," she muttered into the sink.

"You don't do anything! And if you are doing something, you probably don't want me to know, which means that it's bad."

"Well, what do you do with *your* day? Because I can't picture you doing anything but nag, nag, nag!" The mice were roasting under her nostrils. She stepped away from the sink. The last time she'd got this angry near her mother and a sink, she had hurled a glass. Itir had to go to Amsterdam Slotervaart Hospital for seven stitches above her eyebrow.

"Samia?" Itir said in her question voice.

"Yes." Mia put her hands back into the water.

"Where is Julia?"

"The fuck do you care, you didn't even like Julia. She left."

Itir was very quiet after that. Mia washed everything about ten times over just to keep her hands busy.

When her hands were wrinkled with water, she mumbled over her shoulder:

"Body's under the floorboards."

"What?"

"Julia's body's under the floorboards."

"Oh, my God," Itir's chair scratched the linoleum as she stood up.

"Haha, just kidding! How dumb do you think I am? Jesus."

When Jacob got home from shopping, he stopped in the lobby and fished out an envelope from his family's mailbox. *How bad is it?*

It was a 165 fl bill for something, plus a late fee. In other words, two blow and three hands jobs worth of bills. He could, easily, knock out some of his family's bills. But that would involve getting a bank account and a card and tracking down all the giro numbers of the creditors.

The flat was empty, for once. After Jacob's mother had died, Willem had been "adopted" by the Swinsons, an old Surinamer couple a few blocks away. He was probably there now. Probably complaining about what a shitty son he had. Jacob took the red and grey jar of whey protein powder out of his backpack and put it on the kitchen table. *Extreme Mass and Muscle Builder*. It was huge and expensive, but worth it. The lady at the health food store told him to put a scoop in a milkshake and drink it after every workout. If he did that, then he'd bulk up. Cristophe's brother swore by the stuff and he was basically a gorilla with excellent posture.

Jacob scooped out some powder, put in a glass and mixed it with milk. It didn't taste great, but he'd had worse. Maybe when the jar was empty, it could replace the Big Box of Money. Then again, it might not fit under the bed.

"Hey," Ramona walked into the kitchen. Damn.

" 'Sup?" said Jacob, wishing he could hide the powder from comment.

"You're a bodybuilder now?" she said, nodding at the jar. Her tone was neutral, weird. But she wasn't mocking him. He'd become so accustomed to her always being glad to see him. She just wasn't her usual happy puppy self.

"No, just trying to get more muscle," he said. She read through the ingredients on the side of the jar, moving her lips. "It's used by the pros."

She looked at the price sticker. "This was expensive."

"Yeah."

She tapped the sticker. "Don't throw this up in the toilet. Then it's just a waste."

"Shut up."

"Or mix it with whiskey or whatever the hell you had last time. Your tolerance is rubbish. Bye, Jacob," she said, same neutral voice. She went to the balcony and picked up her bike.

"Where are you going?" he said. She didn't say anything. He stood between her and the door. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Out where?"

"I don't know. The same place you go when you say you're going out. Move." She tried to walk around him but he moved to block her way. "Move!" He knew he was being an asshole but he didn't know why. It's not like he wanted to spend the afternoon keeping her here.

He could tell that she was getting irritated. Her grip on the bike frame started to slip. But then out of nowhere she rammed the gearbox against his shin and smeared grease all over his jeans.

"Ah, fuck!" He bent down to wipe it off and she slipped around him.

"Goodbye, Jacob."

Mia felt like she was in secondary school again. She had been an expert at sneaking around for over a decade. There had been the boyfriends whose windows she wriggled out of at night before she'd break into a run home. When the line of boyfriends became girlfriends, it was easier to hide them in plain sight, but even more dangerous if uncovered.

"So, we're just pretending, right?" Marjolein had whispered anxiously. They were having a sleepover in the upstairs bedroom. Itir was asleep across the hall. Itir didn't like Marjolein because she wasn't Moroccan, but she was relieved that Mia had stopped hanging around so many boys. Marjolein was a stupid, pretty redhead with great legs that were currently wrapped around Mia's waist. Her bare freckled arm was dangling dangerously out of the bed close to the chemistry set on the desk. "We're just practicing till we get real boyfriends?"

"Sure." Mia sharply pulled the arm away from the desk and nuzzled into the girl's nipple. "Just keep telling yourself."

Marjolein pulled away from her for a moment. "I'm serious. Do you think guys do this?"

Mia paused, her tongue half out of her smile. "God, I hope so. That would be so hot!"

It had been years since she'd snuck out of her own house, but she had to get to work somehow. Itir was asleep already, thank God for old-lady time, and Mia could still make it. She tiptoed down the stairs and out the door like a child and ran to the tram stop, her heart pounding.

When she got to work she looked behind her before closing the door. She was paranoid that her mother had followed her.

"Hello, stranger," Sebastiaan said. The bar was already full.

"*My mother!*" she whispered in a silly voice, even though Itir was nowhere in hearing distance. "She came to visit. Surprised me."

Sebaastian's brow shot up. "You have a mother?"

"You've met her before, idiot."

"We should go out for coffee again, all three of us."

"It's gonna be impossible to get to work with her hanging around. No, we shouldn't."

"Sure you can! Just lie back and think of Holland. By the way, Eric's here."

"Still?"

"You haven't starved him out of job yet," Sebastiaan said. He sounded impatient.

"Work something out with him. Fleurtje's on with him tonight."

"Fine," Mia said and walked to the changing room.

When she'd finished changing she went to the break room to see if there were biscuits left salvaging. Olga jumped on her into a piggyback. Mia's heart thumped.

"Where've you been?" The sequins on Olga's bikini were digging into Mia's spine. Hugo picked Mia up onto his shoulders and started doing lunges across the room, with both of them on his back. Olga giggled and clung on harder to Mia.

"Surprise visit... mother," Mia said.

"What?" said Hugo. He stopped in front of the mirrored wall and did squats, elegant as a ballet dancer. Mia avoided looking at her own face.

"My mother. Showed up and surprised me."

"That sucks!" Olga said. "Why? How long's she here?"

Hugo's hands slid up to Mia's knees to steady her. Olga's arms slid below her collarbone.

"I don't know. I don't know," Mia said.

The door opened. It was Sebastiaan, looking all the more annoyed for seeing their pyramid.

Mia went out to the back of the theater and watched Eric have sex with Fluertje in front of a dozen of his fellow Englishmen. She could tell they'd made up the routine in about two minutes; that's how long it took to perform. Not long enough. They'd done some kind of theme, some cowboy-jungle sketch that no one understood. Merlijn put on "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" song and looked very sheepish for doing so. Eric had

clearly written the moves on his arm in blue ballpoint pen and consulted them repeatedly. Good thing no one came to watch him. But Fluertje looked so bored. Mia felt sorry for her.

Sebastiaan sat down next to her. Clearly, he was too embarrassed to bring up partnering with Eric.

"So," he said, trying to change the topic in front of them. "What about father dearest? Have you seen him lately?"

"Such a dick," she said. "Knew him when I was little. But didn't see him for a while after they split up. I saw him again, once, but by that time I'd had at least two shitty boyfriends who he reminded me of." Mia could feel the red rising to the back of her neck, just thinking of him. If her mother was this annoying, she couldn't dream of how much her father would piss her off.

"Gross."

"Just typical Minerva frat boy. You know, with the hair all blonde and slicked back like a duck's ass? Super Nederlands." The bouncer had put one of the Englishmen in a half nelson and was escorting him out. The rest of his stag party ignored him, embarrassed. Sebastiaan and the bouncer nodded to each other.

"Give me the angle-grinder," she said. "And I'll work with him on Saturdays. Just Saturdays. But I want the grinder everyday."

"Stay out of the Hugo and Olga sandwich. Then I'll give you the organ grinder."

"Angle-grinder."

"Angle-grinder."

"Why does it bother you so much? The three of us."

"Because I've seen it go wrong." Sebastiaan said. "And I've been in ones that went wrong."

"So? Not everyone's the same."

"My mother always told me not to love a man more than he loves me."

Sebastiaan looked at her gravely. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You have a very accepting mother."

Ramona got up from the breakfast table without a word, leaving Jacob and his father. Willem cleared his throat.

"I don't know what kind of fight you and your sister had. But you need to work it out."

"I know."

"After I'm gone, she's all you have, and you're all she has."

"Well, Charles." Jacob said.

His father exhaled over the coffee, sending a pleasant burnt smell across the table. "Your brother.... is an independent soul. Too independent, maybe. But you two, you and your sister, have something special. You always did. She's always looked up to you and you always looked out for her."

Jacob knew what was coming next.

Willem took a quick but deep breath. "You know, I will never forget your face when we brought Ramona home from the hospital. Your brother was more worried

about your mother, but you knew she was fine. You just went straight for Ramona. Started talking to her. Introduced her to her dolls, all the family, every plant in the yard, the lizards in the trees. We'd never heard you talk so much! And you were her rock when we lost your mother, and she was the same for you. Do not let that relationship fall apart over stupid things. It's too special. Next thing you know, it's twenty years and neither one of you can remember what the fight was."

Heavy way to start the day. It made him desperate to throw up again.

"OK," said Jacob.

When Mia got to the theatre, someone was on stage being fucked by Eric. It was someone with a platinum blonde wig, silicone implants and wearing the sexy space woman costume. Mia's sexy space woman costume, complete with vibrating ray gun.

She went into the back office.

"Welcome to aggravation station," Sebastiaan said in English.

"Who the hell is she?"

"I had to hire," he shrugged. "Besides, she was on her way anyway."

"Where did you find her? A temp agency?"

"Actually, she's on loan from Munich. She'll be here for a week. Now the problem is paying her because the gilder and the mark are on very, very different—"

"Another German invasion to ruin my life. Great."

"No. No, no, she's not taking your job. You're still here. I'm just under less pressure. Although she's proving to be a very expensive...pressure relief." Sebastiaan

stared at the fax paper across his desk. "Tickets between here and Germany. So very, very expensive. *Christus*." He didn't look up, but gazed into the invoices as if they ran a mile deep.

"Um, can I work tonight?"

"Of course. Please do."

"Like..?"

"Uh, pole. Definitely could use some pole stuff. I know it's not your favorite, but it would be earnestly appreciated."

"Bastiaan?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you wearing a leather kilt?"

He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "I have a party to go to after work."

"OK." She left him to his paper.

"He's a really good guy," The German girl said to her in the dressing room. Her name was Aleksandra, and she was adjusting the red monokini from the devil costume. She was the same dimensions as Mia. Mia found her creepy. At least she promised to wash everything.

"Who, Eric?" Mia asked. Eric was across the hall flexing in front of a mirror, pulling the fat away from his faintly defined abs with both hands.

"No, Sebastiaan." Aleksandra fluffed her wig. "I go all over Europe to clubs, this is one of the better ones."

"Seriously?" Mia scratched where her fishnets chafed her. "Where do you go?"

"I've been London, Paris, Manchester. I've been Bratislava, I've been Geneva, Riga once, never again. I've almost been Moscow, but that got too crazy. I've been flown to a private show in Marrakech once. Just once, private show."

"Fucking hell. You've been to the land of half my people."

"Yeah? It was beautiful."

"How did you get to all these places?"

"Once you start traveling around, it just kind of falls into place, you know? I'm pretty aggressive about it you, you know? I started dancing at a shithole in Dusseldorf. You know Dusseldorf?"

"Unfortunately."

She laughed. "Yeah. But I met a guy there who told me about the private party circuit, then I got into the private club circuit. You just have to say yes to everything. I'm going to Gothenburg next week. They're putting me in awesome hotel. At least it's supposed to be awesome."

"Are you...on tour?"

"Pretty much. I never stop working. I'm thinking of getting an agent or something. Can barely keep track of everything, the way things are going now."

Mia coasted through her acts on autopilot. She was thinking. She hated envying people, comparing herself. But she couldn't stop. It was gave her that sick feeling again, like when the only other half-Moroccan girl in school made the honor roll in tandem with

Mia's own failing years. Suleika de Vos. That was her name. Fucking Suleika de Vos. She was getting that feeling again with Aleksandra.

Mia could barely make it to work on time and, were it not for Sebastiaan being brilliant, would have been fired years ago. No one else would have held onto her for so long with her record. She could barely trust herself to make her way overseas. For vacation it was fine, but she couldn't trust herself to work. Just not reliable enough. How long could she keep doing this job? Till she was masturbating with one hand, leaning on a Zimmerframe with the other? State pension wouldn't be nearly enough for later on. Her finances were in the gutter. She barely put anything away at the end of the month. Lord knew she made enough, but she never held onto it.

But back to Suleika de Vos, with her beautiful black leather notebook complete with the golden initials embossed on the front. SdV. What a little bitch. It didn't help that their first names started with the same letter. Samia and Suleika. It caused unnecessary confusion for the white kids.

Are you two sisters?

Fuck off. SdV is not SvdB. More pointedly, SvdB will never be SdV. Unfortunate.

Suleika was probably working for Shell or something now.

Mia got home a little past six in the morning. Her mother was sitting on the couch, just as she left her, with a cup of tea and a book.

Mia laughed, preparing for confrontation. "Well, I'm awake! You always tell me to wake up early."

"You're drunk?" For once, it was a question and not a statement.

"No." Mia put down her purse, took off her coat and curled on top of her bed.

"How are you?"

"Tired."

Itir bookmarked a page in her book. "I'm going to visit your cousins in Zuid-Oost tomorrow, well, today already, " she said. "You don't have to come."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

As she began to drift off to sleep, Mia said, "Do you ever wish I was Suleika de Vos instead?"

"Who's that?"

"Nevermind."

"Ah, yes, I remember her! Nice girl. I think she works for Philips now."

"Good."

"Samia," her mother said. "I think it's time we spoke to your father."

"Oh, God. Why?" Mia's eyes snapped awake.

"I'm worried about you."

"It's not that desperate yet. Calm down, woman."

"No, I don't want his *help*. But I want some information. I think he has some family with your condition."

"You mean my condition which prevents me from being perfect, like Suleika de Vos, that's what you mean?"

“I never said—” Itir was trying hard not to splutter out of Dutch, but slipped straight to Tarafit anyway. “You know what makes it all so hard? You want to it both ways. When you don’t work, you say it’s the illness, when I want to talk about the illness, you say I’m attacking your character. You cannot have it both ways. It’s not fair to me, and ultimately, it’s not fair to you. What do you want? Tell me. What do you want?”

“To sleep, thank you,” Mia said, closing her eyes.

Waking up made Mia feel like Harry Houdini underwater, in a sack wrapped with chains. It could take her an hour and a half after her digital watch alarm went off. She'd twist and fight the sheets, scrape through the sand in her eyes. Blink and dream about an airport. It took a half hour. Blink and dream, this time about a butcher’s shop.

But this morning Mia woke up with the dangerous, breathless feeling that she could do no wrong. Any decision she made in the next 36.5 hours would be the right decision. Her life could only advance. She felt it keenly in her fingertips. Each joint moved at the perfect angle.

It was 8:42 AM. She’s slept for less than three hours. The flat was silent and her mother was already out for her morning walk.

Fuck you, Mommy. Today was the day she would recover her manuscript from Julia’s house. The manuscript was her magnum opus from a productive weekend in September. Hundreds of pages in two notebooks wrapped in a belt. It was the apex of her creative work, an amalgamation of her life story and something like myth. She hadn’t seen it since Julia left.

Julia had to have kept the manuscript, misusing it was a receipt of Mia's madness. Even worse, Julia passing it off as written proof of her own genius. It could go either way. Bitch, bitch, bitch.

Bitch.

Worse and worse, it could fall into the hands of her father, who would then in turn take it as a receipt of her madness, and Itir would be further proven right.

Mia flowed out of bed, quick as ice water, and threw on clothes. There was no time for eating or bathing, there were things to be done.

Jacob waited for five o'clock in Oosterpark. There were new, white streetlights around the pond, which made the autumn grass look like it was in summer sunlight. Fortunately, whoever ordered the instillation did not realize that the heavy lights made the shadows even more obscure.

Jacob wondered if Sergei would be there. He peered around the bushes. "Sergei..." he called softly. "Where are you?"

Sergei slid hips first, around the trunk of the tree.

"What do you want?"

"So this is where you've been working. I guess that boyfriend of yours isn't paying you enough."

They didn't like each other, but they both desperately needed the banter.

“You are jealous,” Sergei did a sharp little chin-up on a low branch. “Cause I get to sleep in all day and at night my boyfriend takes me expensive disco clubs and we snort coke off of platinum trays. That’s what we’re doing tonight.”

“Sounds fun.” Jacob wrinkled his nose at the mention of coke. That shit hurt.

Sergei dropped from his branch and hissed, “He’s meeting me here soon. Go away.”

“Why? You’re afraid I’ll take him from you?” Jacob teased him.

“Fuck you. Just leave.” Sergei shooed him in such a limp-wristed way that Jacob couldn’t help but laugh. “Fuck off!”

Footsteps crunched over the grass. Jacob deliberately walked away in the slowest of slow motion walks, and Sergei’s arms flapped even faster. Then the footsteps stopped.

“de Vries?”

Jacob whipped around. He instantly recognized the shaved head, the big gray winter coat. It was Nazir.

Nazir stood next to Sergei. “What the fuck is this?”

“He’s just some stupid slut who’s always here,” Sergei said, pulling Nazir’s jacket sleeve. “Come on, let’s go.”

Nazir shook him off roughly, keeping his eyes on Jacob. “Get out, Sergei.” Sergei backed away. He looked between the two of them and ran off. Nazir stormed over to Jacob.

“Turn around,” Nazir shoved Jacob face forward into a nearby shrub of nettles, and forced his pants down to his knees.

Jacob clenched his eyes until shadows strobed in front of him. He heard a familiar plastic rip and the sound of rubber scrolling open. He tried to relax but it was too late. Nazir was huge. Unpleasantly and harshly huge. After what felt like ages, Jacob thought he was done. But Nazir was only getting started.

When it was finally over, Nazir pulled Jacob to his feet by his neck. “You think you can do this shit? You little whore?” It was more of a question than an insult. His face was pinched with angry disappointment. “You fucking asshole. Haven’t I given you enough? Answer me!” He slammed Jacob down into the bushes before he could say anything. He kicked Jacob’s ribs with his left Timberland boot, a yellow-brown battering ram that left him breathless.

“Spoiled you. Made you too fucking greedy.” When Nazir pulled his leg back, Jacob could see that he had spouted half-digested McDonalds onto the boot and the cuff. “You have no idea what you’ve done.”

Then he was gone. Jacob stayed on the ground with his eyes closed, letting the vomit trickle from the corner of his mouth. He heard trams ringing in the distance. A plane flew overhead.

Someone grabbed at his armpits and he jumped. It was Sergei, trying to lift him from the ground. Sergei was repeating something in Eastern-European, something quiet and constant.

Mia was overheating. The roots of her hair had gone dark and damp with sweat. Despite the ladders, her legs steamed beneath her nylons. She had spent the morning trawling the antiquarian bookshops across the city to see if Julia had sold the manuscript along. It was valuable, after all. The booksellers were playing dumb, she was sure of it. Time to go to the source. She walked up to Julia's house and buzzed the button next to the name "Schouten."

"Yes?" The voice said through the intercom. The familiarity of it startled Mia.

"It's me." Mia wiped a viscous palm against the door.

There was a pause. "Why?"

"We need to talk. Let me in."

There was a scuffle of static. "I'll be down in a second. Hold on."

Mia shifted from one stiletto to another. Julia was taking too long to come downstairs. Mia couldn't tell whether she was feeling hot or cold. This was taking forever. She snapped her calves up to her hamstrings, alternating legs. Julia finally appeared, barefoot in jeans and a t-shirt.

"What do you want? Christ, you look like a heron on speed. Stop jumping around."

"Huh? Anyway, I need to talk to you. You have my manuscript, and I want it back."

"The fuck are you on about? What manuscript?" Julia crossed her arms. "Are you high again?" A cat came out of the house and sniffed Mia's feet.

"I'm completely clean. Now give me my manuscript."

"I gave everything of yours to Sebastiaan and he gave it to you, remember? I put all your stuff in the suitcase."

But Mia got distracted by Julia's hair. "You got shredded wheat candy on your head."

"Oh, my God. You're off your medication, aren't you?" Julia rubbed her temples and shut her eyes. "Please go home. Just go home, take a shower, and lie down."

"Why won't you let me in?"

"My therapist says that would be a bad idea. Just go home, Mia. Please."

A hot stream of cold sweat (how does that happen?) ran down Mia's neck. "Your therapist just wants to sleep with you and is doing so by way of making me look ridiculous in order to elevate him or herself in your eyes. Fuck 'em. Let me in."

Mia shoved Julia into the hallway, kicking the cat like a football in the process. Mia ran down the corridor and up the stairs, found the most Julia-looking door and entered a very Julia-looking apartment.

Everything was neat and clean. It hardly looked lived in, which was the way Julia liked things. Still, there was a mystery to solve. Mia crawled under the Ikea dining table, making sure nothing had been stashed under the tabletop. She pulled up the beige area rug, upsetting and shattering the glass coffee table which stood on it. Nothing. The room was running out of air. There was nothing here, not even dust. But her palms were pouring sweat and leaving prints everywhere.

A heavy hand fell on her shoulder. "Ma'am? Ma'am? Come with me, please."

They sat on the edge of the canal in silence. Jacob had slowly been massaging the dirt out of his hair for the past ten minutes. They were both staring into space, an invisible plane of interest over the water.

"He's been doing me since I was eight." Jacob broke the silence.

"Eight years old?"

"Yeah. Lives right above my flat."

They both kept their eyes firmly in space.

Then Sergei spoke, "You'd think he'd been done with you by now. Let you go."

"That's what I thought, but no."

"Was he mad because he wasn't getting a cut?"

"He just thought I was his."

"You got any money?" Sergei asked.

"Not with me."

"Here, I got 60." He took it out of his wallet and gave it to Jacob. "I don't you how far you can go, but you'll go somewhere."

"Thank you, Sergei."

"It's Sasha."

"What?"

Sergei looked a little sheepish. "My name's Sasha."

"Oh, OK. Isn't that a girl's name?"

"Not where I'm from. Is your name Robert?"

"No, it's Jacob."

"Ah." Sergei, now Sasha nodded at Jacob. "Good to know."

"I need to go home and get something. Then I get the hell out of there."

"OK. Do you know where you're going?"

Jacob hesitated, not wanting to get too close. "Yeah, I think so."

The officer had cuffed Mia and led her down the stairs in full view of Julia's neighbors. They all were standing outside of their doors for some reason. Weird. Anyway, Julia was all red-eyed and the only one looking away. The cop muttered something to her about a restraining order application and she nodded.

Now Mia sat in the back of the cop car.

"Have you taken any substances?" he asked.

"No."

"Should you have taken any substances?"

"...perhaps."

He nodded. "Sounds about right."

Despite the situation, she liked this cop. He was a tall black guy with a trace of an Antillean accent. Reminded her of an old flat mate. He wrote down her address and phone number and then started driving to the station.

Mia stared out of the window at a passing plane. She'd probably have to stay overnight this time. She could call Hugo and Olga when she got there, maybe they could post her bail. She knew it was wrong to look at this as an adventure but she couldn't help it. She listened to the radio crackle through the thick glass in front of her.

But about ten minutes later, the cop changed direction and stopped in front of her house. He got out, opened her door and took off the cuffs.

"It's your lucky day." He didn't look happy. His face was furrowed with stress.

"What?"

"Look, I've got all your relevant details, so someone from the precinct will call you."

"Uh, OK," She stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Just stay away from her place, right? I've got bigger things to deal with tonight. She's filing a restraining order and I strongly suggest you respect it."

"What happened?"

"We don't know yet." He got back into the car and drove off.

She watched him round the corner. She rubbed her wrists, wondering what could have happened. Probably an Ajax riot; there was a game tonight. Brilliant timing. She fumbled for her keys and went back into her apartment.

October 4, 1992
 Amsterdam, Netherlands
 El Al, Flight 1862
 Boeing B-747-258F
 4X-AXG

Shortly after taking off from Schiphol Airport, while climbing through 6,500 feet, the No. 3 engine separated with its pylon from the aircraft and damaged the leading edge of the right wing. The No. 3 engine separated in such a way that the No. 4 engine and pylon also separated from the wing. During an attempted return to the airport, the aircraft crashed into an eleven story building in the Bijlmermeer residential district. The design and certification of the B-747 pylon was found to be inadequate to provide the required level of safety. The system to ensure structural integrity by inspection failed. The separation of the No. 3 engine was initiated by fatigue (corrosion) in the inboard midspar fuse pin. This led to loss of the No. 4 engine and pylon and damage to several systems which ultimately led to loss of control of the aircraft.

El Al 1862: El Al one eight six two, Mayday! Mayday! We have an emergency.
 FIRST CONTROLLER: El Al one eight six two, roger. Break, KLM 237, turn left heading 090.
 FIRST CONTROLLER: One eight six two, do you wish to return to Schiphol?
 El Al 1862: Affirmative, Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!
 FIRST CONTROLLER: Turn right heading two six zero, field eh... behind you, eh.... in your -to the west, ehdistance one eight miles.
 El Al 1862: Roger, we have fire on engine number three, we have fire on engine number three.
 FIRST CONTROLLER: El Al one eight six two, continue descent one thousand five hundred feet...one thousand five hundred.
 El Al 1862: Fifteen hundred, and we have a controlling problem.
 FIRST CONTROLLER: You have a controlling problem as well, roger.
 El Al 1862: [In the background, in Hebrew] -Raise all the flaps, all the flaps raise.
 El Al 1862: [In the background] -Ohhhhh!
 El Al 1862: [In the background, in Hebrew] -Lower the gear.
 El Al 1862: Going down...eh...one eight six two, going down, going down, copied going down.
 SECOND CONTROLLER: [In Dutch] -It has happened.
 FIRST CONTROLLER: One eight six two, your heading...
 SECOND CONTROLLER: [In Dutch] Forget it Henk, (controller's name), he crashed.
 FIRST CONTROLLER: [In Dutch] -Do you see it?
 SECOND CONTROLLER: [In Dutch] -I see one big fire above the city.

Sasha hopped the tram from Flevopark. It was 13:30, and the party, which had begun at 16:30 the day before, was beginning to wind down. He punched his strip-card, like any dutiful illegal immigrant trying not get caught without papers, and lay across the back row of seats in the tram. He closed his eyes to the hard grey sunlight. His legs were throbbing, in sync with the music that was probably still playing. The soles of his sneakers were nearly worn smooth. It had been a good night; Jos, Kurt and Christophe were there. Sasha wanked Sam in the bathroom for 40, which he then blew away on booze. Kurt must've done something with Sam, too, because he suddenly had money around 3:00.

The blood roared through Sasha's ears, chiding him for being out too long. Tonight he'd have to go to Dirty Dick's in the center of town, but he was running out of money. He rifled through his pockets. He had been too drunk to sell anything last night, so today he was left with f15.50. If he sold everything, he'd have enough to cover his corner of the floor in that flat. But he needed more to party.

The controlleur came to check tickets. Sasha removed his from one of his many inside pockets, careful not to let the vials clink together. He got out at his stop, and walked the half mile home, through the vacant weedy lot.

The door to his block of flats was rusting around the doorknob. He opened it with his sleeve to avoid tetanus. Sasha clutched the elevator rails on both sides as it carried him up to the second floor. Short trip, but it was enough to get him motion sick. The flickering bulb in the lift made it worse. He felt around his vest: coke, heroin, speed, ecstasy but he was out of paracetamol. The elevator stopped and he opened the door to

the corridor. The corridor was lit by the single window at one end of the hall. There was a bulb next to every door but they had burned out a long time ago. Sasha jiggled a false ID card over the lock, the one that identified him as a twenty-seven year old Belgian truck driver. It usually did the trick. The lock clicked and he was in.

The curtains were drawn and TV static was the only light on the cheap plaster walls. The fast-food wrappers were piling around the sink again, and dirty clothes were strewn all over the couch and carpeted floor. The clothes weren't just "dirty" laundry; they were caked in visible layers of dust and dirt. The wearers peeled them off to escape. The inhabitants of the clothes had gone to binge and beg somewhere else for the weekend.

Sasha took his jacket off but couldn't bring himself to drop it. The floor was filthy. He hadn't been home in days. He was the only one who cleaned around here. It wasn't because he liked being neat, it just gave his hands something to do when he was tweaked on speed. The others did heroin, so they were pretty useless at cleaning. He was the only one with the energy.

But not this morning. Or this afternoon? Shit, it was almost night again. He needed some rest. He went to the bedroom, stepped over the sleeping bags and opened the window under the shut blinds. He crawled out of his pants and into his red sleeping bag. He needed to wash it again; it was starting to smell. But once he got used to the scent of his own sweat, he'd be able to sleep for the next hour. He folded the vest into a pillow and lay on his back, half-dreaming of money, half-dreaming of Jacob. He swiftly stroked himself, grateful that the flat was empty.

What would it have been like if Jacob had said yes to the threesome with Nazir? It could have been really... really. No, it would have been bad. Nazir and Jacob were both too good looking; they'd forget Sasha was there. Besides, unlike Sasha, Jacob wasn't balding. Sasha nervously rubbed the crown of his head; it was getting thin back there. Maybe he needed to sleep more; then his hair would stop falling out. He turned over.

Sasha had a funny dream that he was at the sports club, of all places, and this man in black was etching a big bright tattoo on his arm. It looked really good; it was all red and blue and black, but he wasn't exactly sure what—

"Sergei."

Sasha jerked out of sleep, but slid back in until he was slapped. He struggled to open his eyes. He could just make out Nazir squatting beside his sleeping bag.

"Ah..." Sasha dug some sand from his eye. He hadn't been sleeping that long, but it was a lot darker now, so much so that Nazir had turned on the light. They hadn't spoken since the Jacob problem a while back.

"Where's the shit?" Nazir looked at him as if he was holding vomit at the back of his throat. "Learn to lock your door." He yanked the vest from under Sasha's head and shook it out over the sleeping bag. All the baggies and vials fell out.

"Not much action last night." Sasha winced, waiting for another blow.

"Whatever. Just need to get everything that's left and figure out the next move."

Nazir scraped the drugs into black backpack and zipped it up. This was weird; Nazir

was never caught dead with a bag. He looked like he hadn't shaved that morning, either.

"Why?"

"Well, the warehouse is gone, right?" Nazir said, as if Sasha should know why.

"What? I didn't do anything."

"Huh? No, it's gone in the plane crash."

"What?"

"The big Israeli plane; some Jews burnt my house down. Fucking typical." Nazir panted a stagey laugh. "Don't you watch the news or anything? Jesus, you fucking druggie," Nazir said, ruffling Sasha's hair with a heavy hand. He glanced at the top of his naked wrist. "It's late, I have to go."

Sasha didn't get the plane joke. "When do I get my shit back?"

"Never," Nazir opened his wallet and threw a few bills at Sasha's head. "Take these. And this," he threw his half-stamped strip-card at him. "Oh, fuck it, just take the rest, I need new everything now anyway." He spiked the wallet off Sasha's bare ass.

"Why?"

"I'll be busy. I don't need this shit." Nazir got up and put on his jacket. "You won't see me again after this, so don't try to find me. The credit cards are cancelled."

But Sasha was busy probing through the wallet. "Baby, don't take your drugs away from me," he murmured as he rummaged for cash.

Nazir chuckled. "Nothing else we can do, my hands are tied right now. Don't try to find me, OK, Sergei?" He left.

Sasha frowned into the bills. His severance package. It was Nazir's loss, though, because Sasha was really good at selling what Nazir had deemed "faggot drugs": MDMA, poppers, speed, cocaine. Sasha wondered why they didn't just mash them up into one a faggot drug mix, a flikkerse kruiden. They could put it in jars, and print up cute little labels.

For now, he was torn; he needed to get up and hustle at Dirty Dick's, but he was so disgustingly tired. One of his shoulders was knotted and cramped, and his legs spasmed dully when he moved them. It was only Monday, anyway; he could spend the night in. He now had fl 45.50 to his name. He tried not to think about it.

A mound of sleeping bags in the corner suddenly heaved and lurched. A woman slid halfway out of one of the bags' openings, writhing and chattering her teeth. Her naked, green-veined torso was drenched in sweat and her long dark blue hair was matted against her brow. She rocked on the floor for a bit, her spine hinging sharply as she banged her head on her knees, until she got tired and slid back into her bag.

"Karen," said Sasha, "I didn't know you were home."

Sebastiaan lay on his belly, with his hand through the slot between the stage and floor. He felt dust, he felt splinters, a few spiders, something like a dehydrated dead mouse, and...ah, paper. He pulled his hand back, flicking the dust off half a dozen bills.

"Tientjes en geeltjes en zonnies, oh my..." he muttered to himself.

Merlijn came in, later than Sebastiaan would have liked, with his crateful of cassettes. "Meer biljetten van de biljetjes?" he said, pouring himself a beer at the bar. More bills from the ass cheeks?

Sebastiaan rolled his eyes. Merlijn made this joke every single time.

"It's fl 225 this time. That's just what got lost under the stage."

"And you spent all that time building that tip trough."

The tip trough was supposed to keep men from flinging money under the performer's feet. It was a brass gutter lining the edge of the stage, deep enough to catch coins and bills. It did a good job, but didn't solve the problem of "surprise money" coming out of the woodworks every time there were repairs. So many repairs had to be done.

The little stage was full of hatches and gears and jack-in-the-box effects. Thin leather straps pulled things from the ceiling. It was more of a curiosity cabinet than a stage. Last year, Sebastiaan had stupidly let the performers talk him into installing a little hose at the top so that they could do something like that scene in Flashdance. That ended in mold. No more of that. The carpenter, a discreet and petite Belgian, had not been amused.

Every night Sebastiaan stayed until 5 AM, disinfecting and airing every inch of the theater. He'd run the air purifier for about two hours while he did some admin. The cleaners could do the bathroom and the bar, but he didn't trust them to properly do the stage. As he stood, waiting for tonight's performance, he ran a small hand vacuum over his black jeans, getting out the obvious dust.

"Some lady left another CV," Merlijn pointed to a paper on the bar.

"Where's it from?"

"Moulin Rouge. Across the street."

"Chuck it out." Performers from other clubs would try to jump ship to his club, but they'd bring their habits with them. It never worked out. There were, however, some personnel changes he wanted to make.

A few minutes later, Karen emerged from the toilet. She was still wrapped to her bare shoulders in her sleeping bag. Her eyes wobbled a bit under her scruffy blue bangs, but she looked a lot better than before.

"So, as I was saying," she continued the conversation in her head, "I'm off junk for good this time."

"Since when?" Sasha held her dry, shaky hands under the kitchen faucet.

"Since the plane," Karen vibrated against the cold water. "Oy, get me an orange juice."

Sasha opened the refrigerator. It was usually empty, but Karen had filled the door shelves with liter bottles of fresh-squeezed orange juice, thick with clouds of pulp swarming at the bottom.

"Wow, Karen," Sasha pulled a bottle from a neatly ordered row. "Where did you buy this?"

“Dunno. Threw away the labels, did I?” Karen took the bottle from Sasha and shuffled over to the couch. Even with the sleeping bag, her feet didn’t quite touch the floor. She peeled at the orange plastic cap with her stubby, gray nails. “I do that, I don’t like the labels. But if I drink the whole lot, the acid will clean the toxins from my insides, the water will carry it all out, all while the pulp sustains me,” Karen kicked her heels against the couch. “I’ve got some weed to help me with the shakes.”

“That is very good.” Sasha watched Karen’s throat throb as she pounded down the orange juice. She’d met Oskar, his flat mate, at a rave in Utrecht, and became Oskar’s Girlfriend from England until they broke up, and then she became Karen. She still slept with Oskar because she didn’t have anywhere else to go. Sergei liked keeping her company because of the way she talked. It was like listening to the BBC. Not the reporters on the BBC, of course, but like the random street people the reporters interviewed after a burglary or mine closing.

“So who was that from earlier? The man who emptied your jacket? He looked well scary.”

“That was my boss,” Sasha lit a cigarette. “I think I am fired.”

“But wasn’t that the bloke who was your boss and your boyfriend?” Karen licked the neck of the empty bottle.

“That was a long time ago.” Last week.

“So it was his house that got planed, he said?” Her green irises widened around the fixed, pin-prick pupils. “I knew it. It touches everybody, everything.”

“What?”

“His house. It got hit by the plane.” Karen shuffled up to the television and changed the channel, turning the sticky black dial. The static cleared and an image of smoking debris filled up the screen.

Sasha cursed in Polish, “The fuck happened?”

“Sash-gei, you didn’t know?” Karen laughed as she hopped backwards to the couch. “I’ve spent the past twelve-hours enduring the most harrowing ride on the porcelain bus known to man and even I knew about this! A couple days ago, mate! Get on board.”

“But what the fuck is it?”

“I can explain, Ser-sha. A plane flew out of Schiphol, fucked up, and landed on your boss-friend’s house, and now everything’s turned to ash.”

Sasha looked at the mountains of smoking white ash on the screen and the firemen wading through it. “Oh, my god. That’s all of our shit.”

“What?”

“Some of it, it has to be. How come it’s all so white?” Sasha started to laugh.

“They blew up the warehouse! That is crazy!”

Karen gasped. “You’re right! That just a load of burnt-out junk. And people, of course.”

“Serious?”

“Yeah, they say, like, 200 people died or so, like ‘tray-handert-overlaiden’, it said. Like a crematorium in there.”

“Can you understand what they are saying now?”

Sasha and Karen listened to the announcer for a few seconds until Karen gave up. “No, I can’t. I’m too English. I can only catch a word here and there.”

They watched the helicopter shots turn into ground shots and then turn into studio shots. “How did Nazir survive that?” Sasha pulled his knees into his chest, and smoked out of the side of his mouth. “All that fire...”

“Because he’s pure evil.” Karen said into the bottle, making her voice hollow. “Easy to survive a thing like that after tumbling out the devil’s cunt headfirst.”

Sasha loved Karen. “But he could have died.”

“And you’ve naught to sell, bet you’re a bit broke now.” The footage from the night before came on, showing the buildings blazing in the dark. “For all we know, this whole thing could have been deliberate.”

“That’s insane.”

“Well,” Karen raised her shoulders cryptically and dropped them back into the sleeping bag. “Who can say for sure? I bet the government knew there was valuable shit in there, so they schemed to blow the place down.”

Sasha watched a man in a suit stand at a podium to speak over a dozen microphones. The man’s hair was a greasy silver slick above his long face, and the shirt under the suit was wrinkled. Lights from flashbulbs pooled on the lenses of his thick

glasses. Sasha didn't understand what he was saying, but there were a lot of stops and "eh..." littered in his speech. He looked too harried to be the evil mastermind of Karen's theory.

"I bet he did it," Karen chewed the lip of the bottle.

"Or the plane was carrying stuff," Sasha bounced off the couch, propelled by his idea. "The plane, it was carrying heroin and coke and shit and they knew the cops would catch them on the other side." He paced around, gesturing with his cigarette like a TV detective; he liked it. "So they crashed the plane into Kruitberg before they'd get caught, so they die as good people, not as criminals. Then they cover up for their bosses, too. It's the only thing to do. Right?" Sasha spread his arms for emphasis.

Karen sucked on her bottle thoughtfully. "But who's 'they'?"

"Who's 'they'? Why you ask me? I don't know Dutch. They...they are the people who fly the plane."

"OK, but they were coming from Amsterdam to Tel Aviv, in Israel."

"Really?"

"'Fan Shipple nar Ben-Gurion.' That's what they said."

"So they were leaving? Well, maybe the cops in Israel were going to stop them. They are all religious. I bet they really hate drugs."

Hugo and Olga had been inherited from the previous roster. The more Sebastiaan saw of them, the less their presence made sense. Hugo was huge, hulking,

the worst kind of man to have in a sex show. Bodybuilders depressed other men. He was too smug. And Olga's face was starting to look drawn and smooth in the wrong places. Early plastic surgery or a weird face, he couldn't tell. Maybe he just didn't like their fucking attitude and was projecting it onto their faces. Fucking Eastern European Rich kids. Thank God they were a rare species. Worldly and gaudy all at once.

"Have you seen Mia?" he asked them over pre-show coffee. Everyone sat around in sweatsuits and robes so they wouldn't stain their costumes. The women wore their eye makeup, but hadn't put on lipstick yet.

Olga shook her head. "No, why?"

"She wasn't here yesterday," Sebastiaan said.

"Oh," said Olga.

"Shit," said Hugo.

"Yeah, well." Sebastiaan bit into his sandwich.

"Have you called her?" said Hugo.

"Of course. No answer."

Eric, the new performer, had noticed. "Does she do this a lot?"

"Sometimes. But not recently. Not for a very long time."

Mia and Eric were supposed to rehearse but Mia had obviously hated him at first sight. She was being completely unprofessional and it was starting to piss Sebastiaan off. Hugo and Olga had been rubbing off on her, in more ways than one.

"She's been missing since that plane crash, hasn't she?" Eric said.

"Oh, yeah." Fluertje said. "That is odd."

A weird chill ran up Sebastiaan's back. "But she doesn't live anywhere near... I mean, it's a stretch."

"Yeah," Fluertje absent-mindedly spread some butter on bread. "But we don't know." Hugo and Olga gave each other a quick look, then went back to their food.

Hugo and Olga tested the hell out of Sebastiaan. They were rich. Actually rich.

"No, way," Mia had said when Sebastiaan told her. "I mean, they're not broke, but they aren't rich."

"When they're not here, they're in Spain. And Hugo's father gave them a cabin on a Danish island that they can use. They don't even cycle here; they take taxis everyday."

"So?"

"They're just exhibitionists."

"So am I," Mia had said. "We all are."

"Yes, but that's different."

He couldn't quite say why it was different. Maybe it was because Mia was crazy, or because Frederick was in massive debt or because Fluertje had such a thoroughly depraved childhood. The two-headed beast of Hugo and Olga just seemed to be there for some sort of thrill.

The hospital assigned Ramona a lady. She wasn't a nurse or a doctor or a nun, just a lady with a badge. Ramona usually read everything in front of her, on people, on buildings but she didn't have her energy back. She could just about read a brown

pantsuit, an Afro aggressively brushed Farah Fawcett-wards and a trace of plum lipstick on the teeth. This lady sat in a chair near the bed with a clipboard, murmuring reassurances. Ramona could only guess the lady was an in-house mother-filter, the woman who had to be there to tell kids important things. Softening the doctor's words.

"I've spoken to Dr. Dekker," the lady had said. "The left leg below the shin is lost, but the knee could be saved."

"OK," Ramona had nodded, wondering, *Whose leg?*

"You'll be in here for a long time, at least a month. The wound needs to heal before we fit a prosthesis."

Now, in the orange street light of early evening, Ramona looked down at her foreshortened leg. She knew she was supposed to mourn, but was too fascinated to cry. Tomorrow, she would ask for a mirror. Stick it at the end of the stump to see the stitching. It was too sore and scabby to touch. The bottom of her thigh was swollen. Maybe it was desperate to grow another lower leg.

The shin and calf had gone with dad. Sheered off by the plane, with the bedrooms, with the kitchen.

How could she cook with him if she couldn't stand up? Then the crying began. This was what she was afraid of. Daddy was gone. Daddy, who hung up her best schoolwork in the living room, not caring how awkward it made her feel next to her brothers. She used to take him to free outdoor classical music concerts, and he'd fall asleep in the middle, but enthusiastically praise the virtuosity all the way home. She remembered him doing his dad dance when she got into VWO. The next day, he had

come back at dinnertime with university prospectii he had hand-collected from what seemed to be the entire Randstad: Leiden, Rotterdam, Delft, The Hague. When she had protested at the extravagance spent on train fare, he shook his head. It was too important, he had said. Too important.

Ramona had kept those course catalogues on her desk, and realized that they were gone now, too. She sobbed out and sat up to breathe. She pulled the pillow in front of her and screamed into it, rocking back and forth. She'd trade the leg for her father any day but somehow she lost both. Now she lay in the hospital bed, awaiting and dreading the next few days.

Jacob hadn't been there. He'd left before anything happened. She hoped.

Back in his office, Sebastiaan organized the tax receipts into a binder, taping the invoices to white A4 paper in chronological order. Costumes, dry cleaning, utilities, all drove the glamour of sex. He taped in the tickets to the sex toy convention he'd been to the month before. Nothing had come of it, but he could at least claim some of the money back from taxes.

He was contemplating finally giving up his control-freak ways and placing an advertisement for a club hostess. Someone else needed to greet the punters, check their coats and confiscate their cameras, all with a smile. Mia tried this out briefly, with Mia results. He took over for her in the interim, the interim turned into three years. He needed someone solely for this purpose. But hiring at Raadhuisstraat was very difficult.

He'd had an easier time retaining croupiers at that underground St. Petersburg casino. That was a long time ago.

Eric knocked at his door and opened it at the same time. "Can I come in?"

"Might as well. What can I do for you, young man?"

"Well, uh," Eric came in looking like a shrunken boy in his large grey sweatsuit. He anxiously slapped a copy of the Volkskrant on his thigh. "I don't want to cause any trouble."

"Then close the door, please?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry." He snapped the door behind him and sat in the chair in front of Sebastiaan's desk. "OK, I might be completely out of line with this..."

"All right?" Fucking British. Charming accents, but needed too much coaxing to get to the point.

"But you know how I can't quite read Dutch yet. And I don't really know the culture or how common names are..." He held the open paper to Sebastiaan and pointed to a line. "I was practicing reading this morning and I couldn't help but notice...is this her?"

Sebastiaan pulled his reading glasses down from his forehead and looked. *Samia Fihri van der Berg*. He scanned up and down the list. It was of missing people from the plane crash. *Itir Fihri*.

"That's her," Sebastiaan said, trying to ignore the cold flash of fear in his gut, "I think. I'm not sure."

"It might explain why she's been gone." Eric cleared his throat and left. But Sebastiaan barely noticed.

He had been ignoring the Bijlmer since the story broke. It was too sad to really get into. Even when it was first in flames, he had just changed the channel out of helpless disgust. There was nothing he could do. Now it came back, roaring at him for attention.

Sebastiaan went through the rest of the night on auto-pilot. Missing and Dead, so not all dead. She didn't even live in that place. There were some relatives in the neighborhood, but she'd never visited them. Hardly knew them at all.

That night there was an awkward gap in the show where Mia should have been, so he threw some dancers into that slot. He hated having to do so. The dancers weren't very good, but they could bide the time until the sex came on. He cleaned up, left at 5 in the morning and cycled straight to Mia's flat.

Sebastiaan tapped on the landlady's window. She was quite old and tended to be up in the early hours. He hadn't been to the flat since the spring, but she recognized him.

"Come in, come in. I haven't seen your friend in ages."

"Neither have I," he said, stamping his feet on the welcome mat in the hallway.

"But she's on the Bijlmer list."

The old lady clutched at her neck. "Oh, no."

"I just came to check in, mevrouw. It's still early."

"Of course."

She was kind enough to let him in.

Mia wasn't there. The room was completely trashed, even worse so than usual. Glass was broken. Paper was torn. She had been angry. The stale perfume was getting to his head, so he stepped over the balls of clothing and smashed bottles, to open a window.

She had loads of lamps crammed into the space. Her mail was scattered over all the surfaces, in various states of openness. There were pay stubs that he'd sent her and tons of bills, urgency stamped in red ink. There were at least four different names across the envelopes: Mia van der Berg or Samia Fihri or Mia Fihri or Samia van der Berg. It was kind of clever. But she couldn't keep ahead forever.

One of the envelopes lying on the floor was addressed to Samia van der Berg was from the police. Sebastiaan picked it up and ripped it open at the top. It appeared to be a restraining order issued by one Julia Schouten against Mia.

Shit, he thought. Julia again?

Sebastiaan read the date of the incident "October 4, 18:30." He fished the sweaty newspaper clipping from his jacket and checked it. The plane crash was 18:36. She couldn't have been there. He sank to his knees, pushed the papers into his face and sobbed.

But then he felt something stick to his kneecaps, little spikes going right into the bones. He checked: His trouser leg was studded with tiny silvery gears and dowels. He bent down to the ground and saw that they were all over the carpet, gleaming through

the fuzzy pilling. He pressed his fingertip to a little gear so that it would stick. He held it close to his eyes.

It must have been for a little watch. But the desk in the corner only had bigger pieces and tools. Three different kinds of angle-grinder sat under the trampoline.

"Still?" He had to laugh. She hadn't let this angle-grinder go. They were all stuffed into the same power-strip, so he unplugged them. The last thing anyone needed was another fire.

He saw a passport on the kitchen table. German? He opened it and was surprised to see a younger version of Mia's mother looking back at him. He didn't know her mother was German these days.

He flipped through the stamped pages: Berlin, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Paris, Casablanca, London, New York, Tokyo.

Underneath the passport was an open envelope addressed to some strasse in Germany. It had a plane ticket from Schiphol to Mohammed V. The plane took off an hour ago, today.

Sebastiaan cleared the refrigerator of all the old food and took out the trash. He did some of the washing up, and had to restrain himself from doing the laundry. He turned off the lights and closed up.

The landlady was waiting for him downstairs. "Any sign of her?"

"I think," he said, "she might have just gone off for a bit."

The landlady nodded. "If you see her again," she asked, "can you tell her she's a little overdue? She's been so good about it recently, I'd hate to see it all go downhill again."

Sebastiaan had been an arbitrator in many of Mia's rent wars over the years.

"How much does she owe you?"

"450 fl."

Sebastiaan got out his checkbook."

"Meneer, it's really not necessary at this point—"

"No, I've got this." He wrote her a check and handed it to her. "That's the beauty of being the boss."

Drugs were amazing. The painkillers made Ramona empathize with why people did drugs. She used to believe that drug users were just lazy skivers, suckers for cheap escapism. She knew better now. Because when the drugs wore down, all the bad rose up. Jacob and Charles both had their stoner phases, though Jacob's never really ended. Where was Jacob?

She hadn't seen him yet, but she had, unfortunately, received a visit from Charles. When she woke up in the hospital, she saw him sitting next to her bed. He was staring at the part of her blanket where her leg should have been. He looked like he had been crying. Her first instinct, upon seeing him, was to pretend to be asleep again. But her body was bored of that, so she dumbly stared at him until he realized she was awake.

He lunged over to her, the buttons of his jacket clinking on the metal rail of her bed. He flung his arms around her. "Daddy's gone, baby." He cried into her ear.

"Daddy's gone. But Thank God you're alive!"

Ramona peered over his shoulder and noticed, his wife, Rose, standing in by the door. Her hands were clasped in prayer underneath her chin. She was staring at the same point on Ramona's blanket, murmuring, "Praise Him, we have a survivor, praise Him." But by the look on her face, it seemed like she was trying to remind herself to do so despite the odds. "Praise Him. Praise Jesus."

"Where's Sandra?" Ramona asked.

"She's with Rose's sister," Charles pulled back and sat down. "Couldn't bring her here, could I? You've gone and lost a leg, she's not ready for that." And with that, he was back to his usual self. His Charles Self. *His Carolingian Self*, Ramona thought. She remember learning that term in history class: Carolingian, pertaining to the Empire of Charles. The tyranny of Charles.

"It's a miracle," Rose piped up, trying to convince herself.

"Yes, but I'm worried about the cycling," Charles murmured. "We'll have to drive her everywhere."

"I can walk," Ramona said. "I will walk."

"Of course you will," Rose said. "By the grace of God, you will walk again!"

"Well, I mean, there's grace of God and then there's prosthetics," Charles said.

"This is probably just a case of prosthetics. But I doubt that fake legs and bicycles mix."

"I'm a bit tired now," Ramona squeezed the edge of the sheets, twisting them in her sweaty palms. "Can you leave now, please?"

"Of course, darling," Rose walked over and hugged her. "You need your rest."

The stump had been flaring up through the entire visit, but she didn't want to show it. Now that they were gone, she instinctively reached down to her left calf. Her hand moved too quickly, expecting contact with a leg but only finding empty sheets. She screamed in surprise. They warned her about this, and she had heard of it before, once, on television, but she didn't know it would be this bad.

She waited till it calmed down, and then she reached for the crutches. She pivoted on her right leg, atrophied with its survivor's guilt, and then leaned on the crutch, learning to trust the metal and plastic to support her.

That's my girl, she could hear her father say in her head. She cried again, and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. She crutch-crawled her way around the hospital corridors, with a bathrobe over her gown. She wasn't going to be driven anywhere, if should could help it.

Sasha and Karen stood the line at the Sport Center. They had been standing in a light drizzle for about two hours. Almost everyone else on the line was black or South Asian. Karen was pretending not to notice this. One of the camera crews approached them and the reporter asked Sasha something about "je situatie."

"Nie języka, nie języka," Sasha said and pushed his hand over the camera lens.

"We're looking for our friend," Karen said, and repeated it in Dutch, "We zoeken voor ons vriend." But the guard had already waved them in.

Sasha looked over Karen's pom pom hat into the sports space. It was bleach bright and mustard colored all at once. The smell of stale laundry and en-masse cuisine hit his nostrils. The walls were lined with information tables, all of which had lengthy queues. Cots were lined up in all directions. Most were taken. A worker in a navy jacket was stripping one bed and collapsing it, but another worker walked in dragging two behind him. Everyone looked tired.

"Right, what's our man Jacob look like?" Karen asked.

"I... I don't know," Sasha said, trying not to stare down every young black man under the hard lights.

"Have they got a PA system?"

"What?"

"A voiceover," Karen pointed to a dusty brown speaker sagging from the ceiling. "Maybe they can page him, like at the airport."

"No," Sasha said, "They won't do that. It's too busy."

They wandered through the expanse of cots.

"I'm not trying to be funny," Karen said, "but this kind of reminds me of the Red Light District."

Sasha looked at her.

"I'm serious," she said. "Like how one street is all black women, the next street is Chinese, and the one after that is Eastern Europe. Everyone just divides themselves up."

So racial." She shuddered at the word racial. "You'd think people would unite in a crisis, no matter what."

"It makes sense," Sasha said. He was thinking about Grigory, who he had taken all those planes, trains and silent van rides with. All for Holland. "You stick with your own. It makes sense. I'd do that."

"Seems racist though."

"Trust me, you English do it all the time." He had told Karen about the vacationing British men he'd serviced before he'd left home. "Sometimes it's racist, but it's mostly convenient."

She shrugged and craned her neck around the corner to another room, heaped with clothes.

"Look," she pulled on Sasha's arm, "They got a charity shop in that room. That's useful," she looked around, "Christ, where's the loo?"

As Karen looked for a place to relieve her bladder and shoot up, Sasha explored. One of the rooms had a row of temporary telephones, a few of which were already out of order. Another room looked like some sort of depository for toddlers, who all seemed delighted to see each other. He looked kept looking for Jacob. Maybe he had family somewhere else in Amsterdam. Sasha walked back to the telephone room and scanned the faces in the queues. Jacob could have been to that room and called someone to drive him away.

"Have you see the loos?" Karen whispered to him. She was back, and wiping her hands on her leggings. "They're amazing. Showers and everything!"

Sebastiaan cycled up to the address printed on the restraining order. It was about a mile west of Samia's flat. He rung the bell labelled Schouten. A tall young woman with glasses and a mousey brown helmet of hair opened the door. She was wearing a long grey sweater and jeans. She looked nearly ten years younger since he'd last seen her.

"Julia."

"You! Come in, come in!" She led him up a dark, uninviting staircase covered in blackish green wallpaper. Old bicycles were suspended from the high ceiling with pulleys and rusty hooks. Sebastiaan cringed at the moldering cobwebs. Julia had moved out of Mia's not that long ago. This did not look promising.

But entering her room, on the second floor, was like entering a Swedish show flat. The walls were a bright, blue-tinged white. Pale pink lilies were in a vase on the coffee table. There was a wall of French windows leading onto a balcony. It all smelled of fresh air and even fresher laundry.

"Do you want any coffee? Tea?"

"Um, coffee, please."

"Have a seat." She gestured to a leather armchair. As she busied herself in the small kitchen around the corner, Sebastiaan took stock of the room.

"You've got a nice place here," he said, admiring the bookcase. Julia had mostly math textbooks and nonfiction about politics, the occasional popular paperback. There was a defiant neatness to the apartment which he knew would have driven Mia crazy. The balcony had a nice view over a busy corner of intersecting tram tracks.

But he did notice one odd thing. The fat dappled cat, snoozing under the mantle on the dark wood floor, had both back legs in a cast. A cone hid its face.

"What happened to him?" Sebastiaan said as Julia came in with the coffee.

"Uh, your Mia happened." She avoided his eyes as she set the tray down on the coffee table.

"What?"

Julia sat down across from him and looked at the cat. "She came in here looking for some old diary. Managed to give Lola a pretty strong kick in the course of it. I don't think she meant to, but you know how she gets."

"Holy shit. I'm sorry." As one of Mia's few friends, Sebastiaan felt embarrassed and responsible on her behalf.

"Well, at least Lola's insured."

"Jezus Christus..." he muttered. "When was this?"

"Like, five days ago or so. She was arrested."

"I know. I found the restraining order at her place." Sebastiaan pulled the paper out his jacket and passed it to Julia. She read it quickly, occasionally letting loose her sharp, silent laugh at one detail or another.

"Looks about right."

"Well, that explains that. But she hasn't been to work for a while. I'm assuming the cat damage was when she was having a moment?"

"Definitely a moment."

Julia used to call Sebastiaan for help with Mia's moments. Usually it was the tail end of the rampage, right before the come-down. He'd bike over to their place and feel useless until Mia passed out a few hours later from drunken exhaustion. Then they could put her back to bed. They were always on the edge of calling an ambulance.

"I'm finally happy and you want me to see a doctor?" she'd shriek.

"But you're not happy, you're manic." Julia would say. "You haven't slept in days."

"You don't own me!"

"Actually, I kind of do," Sebastiaan had said once, jokingly. She gave him such a silent face-full of hatred that he feared for his life. Julia always looked so apologetic for those moments, even though he had known Mia for longer.

"So when did they arrest her? What time?" He asked.

"Around half past six."

"OK, because there's something weird going on," Sebastiaan took out the newspaper, which by now was a bit smeared. "Mia's on the list from the Bijlmer."

Julia looked at him and put down her coffee. Then she threw her head back and cackled like a cartoon witch.

Sebastiaan wasn't expecting this. "You OK?" Her laugh knocked him back and he could see straight to her fillings. Even the cat turned its Victrola head to catch what was going on.

Julia nodded through the howling till tears came to her eyes. "Oh, shit. Shit, I'm sorry." She wiped her eyes with her fingers. "Ah, that was not an appropriate reaction."

No, no it wasn't. It's just that, it's like, of course she'd get herself on the list. Of fucking course."

"I know." There was something unlacing in Julia which he had never seen before. She was starting to sound a bit like Mia.

"I mean, really? Really, bitch? Do you have to be at the center of every drama? Look, I know she's your friend and I'm really sorry, but wow... This is the same asshole who had to throw herself into that whole Berlin Wall thing. It's like she can't help herself."

"I remember that," Sebastiaan nodded. He had repressed the Berlin Wall incident, Mia's lone seven-hour drive towards history in the making. Everyone had told her not to do it, but she went anyway and got herself so lost that by the time she'd arrived, she'd lost interest. It took her a long time to recover from that.

"Listen, after those cops left," Julia said, "I turned on the TV while I cleaned up, and the coverage was already on. Then I noticed she'd incapacitated my cat and I had to run to the emergency vet. So she was nowhere near that place," Julia was jabbing her index finger in the air, "Nowhere near. It's not possible."

He looked at Julia. "God, I wish you'd meet someone nice."

Julia laughed, folding her arms. "I'm not meeting anyone anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm done. Done with everyone."

"That's a bit overboard, don't you think?"

"Let's just say that Mia made me appreciate the silent agreeability of being on my own."

"I'm so sorry." Sebastiaan drank his coffee in a few scalding gulps. It was time for him to leave before it got too awkward.

"Well, look at us. A couple of spinsters." Julia laughed again.

"We have our reasons."

"Yes. Different reasons," she nodded. She got up and handed him something boxy from the top of the bookshelf. "Before you go, take this."

Sebastiaan took it from her. It was two battered blue notebooks wrapped in a belt. "What is this?"

"I think that's what she came here for. She kept going on about a manuscript, so it took me a while to realize it was this. It was sitting right here the whole time. No need to knock over everything."

"Thank you. I'll return it to her."

"Doesn't matter. Just get it out of here so she's got no excuse to come back."

Ramona and Gerrit watched *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* on Ramona's TV. The TV was small and tucked into a corner of the ceiling. Gerrit had to lie back awkwardly in the visitor's chair to see it. On today's episode, someone was in the hospital.

Gerrit pointed at the screen. "Look at him, wearing scrubs in the street. That would never happen!" It offended his profession, but he seemed to love watching it.

"Spoils the point, doesn't it?" Ramona said.

Ever since Gerrit started taking care of her, she saw less of the Lady. He kind of took over. They had met in the hospital library, when Ramona was frowning over a poor Dutch translation of Jane Eyre.

"Can't they just give us the English version?" Ramona had asked him. His eyes lit up.

Gerrit was a student nurse who had been brought in on the night of "*de ramp*" due the anticipated tsunami of patients. But now it looked like the hundreds of wounded they were expecting had evaporated into ash. The experts from Lockerbie said so, that they had all turned to ash. But the extra staff had been left to linger around the hospital corridors, making themselves look busy. Gerrit had taken it upon himself to use his student library card and take out any books Ramona wanted. Her nightstand roster included Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, and the Bluest Eye. All English. And The Little Prince, which was in French.

"Are there any good books about prosthetics?" she asked him.

"Hmm..." He furrowed his brow.

"Aside from Treasure Island?"

It took him a moment to understand the pirate/peg-leg joke but when he did it made him laugh and laugh. She loved when he laughed. He was twenty-two years old with rivet-deep dimples. Who wouldn't want to make him laugh?

"I'll see what's around," he'd promised.

Now they watched the soap opera, shaking their heads. The leading male, still in his scrubs, ran into a bar and proceeded to fight another man.

"No!" They both groaned and laughed at the same time. "You're making it worse!"

Since meeting Gerrit, Ramona had begun seriously considering medical school. She knew it was for the wrong reasons. He wouldn't be there by the time she got there. She was only fourteen. He'd have graduated by then, moved on, probably forgotten about her.

I need to stop pinning my plans to people, Ramona thought, sneaking a peek at Gerrit's stubbly blonde jawline as he laughed at the bar brawl. But then she thought of her father and her leg flashed with pain.

"Are you OK?" Gerrit turned around.

"It's the phantom pain. Speaking of which," she smiled, "can you get me Phantom of the Opera out of the library?"

He laughed again, "Phantom Pain of the Opera? Yes."

"In La French?"

"In La French."

Gerrit wheeled Ramona down the hall.

"My mother would love you. She spent some time in Suriname. That was years ago."

The thought of ever meeting his mother made her smile.

"I think you'd like my brother."

"You have a brother?" He turned a corner.

"Yeah, Jacob."

"Really? Cool. What's he up to?"

She couldn't answer. Then she couldn't breathe and blacked out. When she woke up again, Gerrit and the Lady were sitting over her bed, looking worried.

"I'm fine," Ramona said, quickly wiping the caked drool from her face.

"No, just rest," the Lady said.

"I'm really, sorry, Ramona. I'm so sorry." Gerrit was pale and nervous. "I didn't even think."

"It's fine. I'm fine. He's fine, I just don't know where he is."

The Lady and Gerrit looked at each other, and Gerrit left.

"Ramona, Jacob's been recorded as missing for the past week."

"But he wasn't even at home when it happened."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Ramona said. "He wasn't in the building."

"Are you sure that happened? Are you sure this isn't a story you're just telling yourself to feel better?"

Ramona's leg started hurting so hard it made it difficult to object. "I don't know."

"Honey, we don't know if he wasn't in the building. Do you know where he might have gone? Any friends? Other family? Maybe your other brother's place?"

"No." But she wasn't sure anymore.

"Charles came last week, I spoke to him. He hasn't seen Jacob," The Lady looked at her in a pitying way. "Jacob is still on the missing list."

"They don't really like each other, Charles and Jacob. It's not like Charles would be the first one Jacob would run to."

"Ramona, your family is gone. The home is gone. Where else would he go to?"

Being a spinster did leave one with a lot of time. And money to insure one's cat. But Sebastiaan wasn't home enough to keep a cat alive. He lay in bed, looking around his room. After leaving Julia's he felt slightly ashamed of its shabbiness, but when he remembered Mia's he could take pride in its tidiness. Unlike the ladies, he didn't have high ceilings; his fingertips grazed the cardboard tiles when he stretched. The flat was on the dark side of the building, only lighting up in the late afternoon. It was his and Maurice's "us against the world" flat. He was overdue for a move. He'd promised himself to be out by 1990. New decade, new start. But it looked like he'd be here at least until the new millennium.

He went to the kitchen table and wrote an ad for a new hostess. He briefly thought of writing another one up for a new performer, but the idea shamed and scared him. He could not give up on Mia that quickly. For now, he needed to focus on finding a hostess:

WANTED:

A hostess for an adult entertainment club. Duties include meeting, greeting, and if need be, ejecting customers. Friendly manner and pleasing appearance necessary.

Experience preferred.

He added his details and looked it over. It sounded prissy as hell, but it did the job.

That night, Ramona had a bad dream. She'd been having bad dreams this whole time but this one was the worst. Jacob was there, wearing a doctor's coat, frowning at her leg. She kept trying to wake up to hug him, but she couldn't move.

If a missing leg could hurt so much, how much did a missing person hurt? A missing father, a missing brother? As she lay awake that night, she wondered if the shooting pain in her leg was going through their missing bodies.

The last time she'd seen Jacob, she'd given him silent treatment. He had come into the flat, gone to his room and ran out again. She remembered sitting at the kitchen table, reading a magazine, making a point of ignoring him. She was growing tired of being worried about him, like when he used to throw up late at night.

The first couple times she'd heard it, she thought he was sick and not telling anybody. She'd even thought it was the beginning of cancer, like her mother had. Now she figured it had to be because of drinking. Just secret, sad drinking alone in his room. The last time she'd seen him, furtively in and out of the flat, she'd assumed he was off to

do more secret sad drinking somewhere else. So she froze him out. He didn't even get to see her smile before he died.

The first respondents to the ad for a hostess were not encouraging. A few of them hadn't really read the ad.

"So there's sex? On the stage? Like, real sex?"

One looked like a hostess, blonde and pert, and even smelled like a hostess with her heavy perfume, but had never worked anywhere else before.

"How old are you, Samantha?"

"I'm turning 18 in two weeks!"

No.

Then this black kid showed up. He looked even younger than the girl.

"I'm sorry," said Sebastiaan, "I really need a woman for this job."

"But I have experience of this industry," he said, with a sad smile.

"How old are you?"

The kid just shyly smiled and excused himself. He must have been desperate for any work, poor guy.

The next one he interviewed, Marie, was a small red-haired woman with furtive eyes and long brown bruises on her neck. He wanted to hug her and take her in, like a puppy in the rain. These are not qualities which one values in a hostess.

"I just need the independence, you know?" she said. Her small voice nearly drowned under her thick country accent.

In the end, he had a long talk with her and offered to drive her and her infant son to a women's shelter.

"No, no, I don't want to be trouble."

"Look at it this way: if I lay awake tonight wishing I drove you instead of letting you walk away, then you've caused me trouble. Let's go."

It was already 10 at night by the time he'd waved goodbye to Marie and the boy as he drove away from the shelter. By the time he came back to Raadhuisstraat, the show was already underway. He went to his office, locked the door, put his head on his desk and let himself cry. This was not what he had expected from today. He knew the world was awful. There was never a time when he didn't know. He made his money off of a corner of this awfulness. But he didn't like to be reminded.

Worse yet, he had no one to confide in. Without Mia, he had no one to talk to. No one to say, "oh, shit" and "I would have done the same thing." He didn't need to give Mia the context of everything; she already knew.

"Excuse me, sir," the man asked in officious and accented English, "Can I please see your pass, please?"

Sasha didn't have a pass, and was gently told to fuck off. By the time he'd gathered up his things and left the building, Karen was already standing outside smoking a cigarette.

"You look like a vampire," she laughed at him wincing against the glaring sunlight.

"Feel like one, too," Sasha rolled and lit up his own cigarette. "I am never up this early."

"Fun while it lasted," Karen said, looking at the building at little wistfully. Something about it looked a little more locked down than before. "Hot shower and everything. Got one in last night and this morning."

"I'll stop by the sauna for one this afternoon. I have to work, anyway." He was getting poorer by the second.

"You gays and your saunas," Karen blew little threads of smoke. "Luxury accommodation, that. I should become a male prostitute. I tried becoming a female one, once. That didn't last." She shuddered with the memory.

Sasha ground out his cigarette under his foot. Maybe Jacob was working at the sauna today. It seemed unlikely, but he had to stop by there anyway.

"Sergei!" Someone was calling him. He and Karen turned around to see a woman charging towards them. She was a tall, broad woman wearing a stained pink dressing gown over a pair of stonewashed bluejeans. Her brass blonde hair was frizzed up like a lion's mane. "Sergei!"

"Oh, shit," Karen said, stating the obvious. "The fuck is that?"

"I can't tell," he said.

The woman strode through a deep puddle, splashing mud above her knee. She hardly seemed to notice. She finally made it to the steps of the sports centre, panting heavily. "Sergei! Thank God you're here!" She stank of sweat and stale tobacco.

"OK."

"Listen, I need a favor," she said. "What have you got on you today?"

He started to dimly recognize her. "I'm sorry, but I've been fired. I got nothing."

"Look, I know I still owe you, but you don't have to lie to me."

"I wish I was lying, but I am out of everything right now," he shrugged. "Nothing I can do."

"Liar!" she grabbed his jacket front and started shaking him. He could feel her filthy nails nick his ribcage.

"Whoa, hey!" Karen grabbed her wrists. "Easy now! The man's got nothing. If he had it, he'd give it to you. We're all bit shook up, just calm down."

"Liar," the woman muttered, her eyes welling up with tears.

"Listen to me," Karen said, letting go of her wrists. "Crazy bitch to crazy bitch, I think you better go home."

The woman shuffled away the way she came, even going through the puddle again.

"That was good," Sasha said to Karen. "You could be a cop."

"Well, I did my best to deescalate the crisis. Mediation skills at work," she smiled, her eyetooth winking in the sun. "But who was that?"

"I think she's one of the hookers I used to sell to, but she still owes me."

"Right. Time for us to get out of this crazy place. Get back to our own crazy place."

Gerrit came in the next morning. "I've got some bad news. They're out of The Phantom of the Opera at the library. But I made you this..." He pulled a little white half-mask out of his pocket.

"The Phantom Pain of the Opera!" Ramona shrieked with delight. They fastened it to the space just above the stump with a safety pin.

"So when the pain hits you, just think of the song," He played a quick tune on air organ, "Duuun! Dun dun dun dun, dun!"

"I will! I definitely will. Thank you."

Today was her first day of therapy. She had the option of having the therapist come to her room or going to the therapist's office in the pediatrics wing.

"I can go to her," Ramona said, "I need different air."

The walls of the pediatrics were covered in huge decals of Sesamstraat characters. It wasn't busy, but the few kids there flipped through the Beano and Donald Duck magazines in the waiting room. It was funny to her, how her body was receiving treatment in the adult wing but her mind was still left to the children's wing.

In Ramona's old school, one of the boys had lost his father. When he'd started destroying desks and banging his head against walls, they had sent him to counseling. They had also tried to sort out some learning problems with him, too. It didn't seem like they'd succeeded.

He'd always come back so angry. "Man, I hate my counsellor! Always asking me about my feelings and shit! Making me draw pictures and shit! Making me take tests you can't even study for, man."

Ramona was actually a bit jealous of him at the time. She became even more jealous when her mother died and no one thought to send her to anybody. She went to the library looked up what kind of tests he would have taken and learned their names: Rorschach, Wechsler, Stanford Binet. They looked like good fun, actually. He was just whining for whining's sake.

The therapist was an older lady with smart silvery glasses. Her room was pale beige, with framed Kandinsky prints all over the walls, mixed in with a smattering of diplomas. There was a stack of clear plastic boxes full of toys and games next to her desk. From where Ramona sat, she could see the backs of picture frames on the desk.

"Oh, hey! Kandinsky!" was the first thing Ramona said as she was wheeled in.

The therapist was obviously not expecting this. "You know Kandinsky?"

"We had a large modernism kick at school last year. I'm Ramona, by the way," Ramona stuck her hand out.

"Dr. Smit." The therapist shook her hand.

Ramona could tell that Dr. Smit had been expecting a recalcitrant teenager, someone too shell-shocked and angry for engagement. But Ramona also knew that the faster she opened up, the quicker the slog. Let yourself laugh, let yourself cry, the quicker it goes. Less dead air, and way more interesting. At least this lady had tissues.

But Dr. Smit mostly asked about school. How was school? What level at school? Oh, VWO, that's very difficult. Yes, I went to VWO as well, when I was you age. How did you find the CITO? Oh, wow. Who are your friends? What do you like to read? Oh, wow.

That's very good. What do you want to do when you grow up? Which degree programs are you thinking of? Wow.

This woman obviously wasn't expecting someone quite like Ramona. And Ramona took a perverse entertainment in flouting those expectations. But by the time the hour was done, they hadn't even begun to talk about the accident, her father, even the leg, which was flaring in pain through this visit, none of that.

"Oh, dear, we're out of time," Dr. Smit looked disappointed. "But I'll see you again, same time next week."

"I thought I was supposed to see you twice a week?" Ramona said, as Gerrit came in to wheel her away.

"Well," Dr. Smit said with a smile, "I don't think we need to be that worried, to be honest."

"You'll never guess what I did!" Mia had called him once, after missing her shift. It must have been back in '88, because she had woken up Maurice, too.

"What?"

"I snuck into the University."

"You did what?"

"I went to the UvA. No one even asked who the hell I was. Confidence! Confidence, confidence. Confidence! Gets you anywhere."

"OK. What did you do?"

"I sat in on every fucking lecture ever! It was like twelve lectures! Biology, chemistry, French poetry, African sculpture, the whole world! Everything! It was amazing. Like sneaking into the cinema and hopping from film to film."

Sebastiaan held the receiver away from his ear. "That's great, Mia. Where are you?"

"I even saw my daaaaaaaaad!" She sang out the last syllable.

"Your what?"

"My dad! He did the microeconomics show! I watched from 3:30 to 4:45! He was really good! I took notes and when I ran out of paper I wrote on my trousers. So good!"

"Are you sure that was your dad?"

"He is Doctor Jan van der Berg. Of course it was my dad!"

"Did you try to talk to him after? Did you say anything?"

"Duh, no, I had American history after that. No time, no time at all."

"Where are you now?" Sebastiaan said.

"Home. Studying."

"OK. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I think so."

Sebastiaan hung up. Maurice blinked at him blearily.

"That was not her dad." Maurice said, shaking his head. "Poor girl."

When Maurice died a year after that phone call, something very strange happened. Mia had gone temporarily sane, just for Sebastiaan's sake. It could have also been one of her rare socially acceptable manias. She drove him everywhere. She

somehow pulled a car out of someplace (stole it, maybe?) and drove him everywhere. She was on time for their meeting with the funeral director. She was with him at the shop to help him buy a black suit. She stood by him when the cremation center refused to handle the body out of fear, and she hounded them till they treated him with dignity. It was she who managed to get Maurice's family onside for spreading the ashes over the Prinsengracht, rather than in the childhood hometown he had hated and fled from. She and Julia even cooked the food for the wake. It was the most peaceful Sebastiaan had ever seen them as a couple.

The most striking thing was that she knew when to shut up and let him think. She let him have some silence. Her clothes were appropriate, and her hair was pulled back. That alone made Maurice's death seem even more surreal than it already was, but she'd helped him a lot. He couldn't tell when exactly she had slipped back into being her old mad self again. But she'd done it quietly, seamlessly.

The Lady was outraged. "I just found out today that they made the leg for you in the wrong color. Poured the wrong paint into the mold. Now we're delayed."

"Seriously?" Ramona was more amused than offended.

"Yes. They just ordered a white leg to be made. I mean, the man came here and took the plaster cast. How could he not see that you're black?"

"I'm sure it's just a clerical error. I mean, it's not like I'm wearing shorts anytime soon, anyway. I just need to stand."

The lady looked at her straight in the eyes. "It's not just an error. Don't you dare let them give you second best."

Well, that was intense. Ramona flicked through her book, a little uncomfortably. She honestly didn't care about the color of her leg, she just wanted to walk. They can customize it later.

Frederick was the first to say anything. "I think they're disappointed once the dancing stops and the sex starts," he said to Sebastiaan. Sebastiaan started wondering if his years of providing low-quality stripping were just masking years of low-quality sex. This wouldn't happen if Mia was here. He would have hated to tell her but she was the best performer he had on staff. Punters had been asking about her and he didn't know what to say.

"Where's my blonde brick house?" The man who always arrived alone asked him.

"She's taken off for a while," Sebastiaan said, shrugging his shoulders.

Charles returned to the hospital to inform Ramona of the funeral for her father and Jacob. The cast of her mother's funeral were flying in: Tante Tina, Tante Freddie, Uncle Stefan, Cousin Floyd, Jim, Dawn, Leopold.

"I really don't think I can right now," she said. "With the leg it would be too much."

"We can go with a wheelchair."

"No, I really can't."

Charles nodded. "That's fine," he said, looking down. But she felt as though he'd use this against her at a later date, when she wasn't as weak. He'd done it to Jacob before, when their mother died: *You didn't even go to her funeral!* He couldn't be trusted to understand.

But her father hadn't minded when Jacob couldn't get out of bed for the funeral. He hadn't been out of bed for days.

"He needs his time," her father had said on that morning, quietly shutting the door to Jacob's room before they left. "These things aren't about the dead anyway, it's just for the living. Let the living do what we need to do."

Well, Ramona was still living. And she didn't want her first legless steps into the world to be towards a grave, surrounded by sad-faced relatives. Distant relatives, distant by blood and space.

"Rose has fixed up your room," Charles said. "The stairs to the first floor are quite narrow, but there's not much we can do about that."

The resentment filled the empty column beneath her knee, mixing with the pain. She didn't want to say it, didn't want to think it, but she already knew it: why did she have to be stuck with him? Of all the family, why him? He was the richest of them, but that was about it. He just needed to make everyone hate him; it was like a compulsion. Then as soon as she thought it, she felt desperately sorry for him.

"Granted the room is only temporary. The house is temporary. It looks like we're posted to the UK next year."

"What?"

"Yeah, there's an office in Aberdeen. We're upping sticks this summer. You can start school there. Man, it's a good thing your English is not as shitty as Jacob's was."

The back of her neck went cold. This was the only thing he'd said about their brother after everything that had happened. "Jacob's was." That "was" came to him so easily, like he was talking about a stranger.

"Mind you," he was saying, "their accent's a bit heavy up there. But you're like me; you'll catch on."

"Hm," she said.

"What's wrong? You look like you're about to cry," he said. A little alarmed, a little annoyed.

"No, I'm fine."

Rose and Sandra came in. Sandra hopped down from Rose's hip and jumped up and down by the edge of the hospital bed. "Op, op!"

Charles lifted her up to the height of Ramona's bed. She wriggled out of his grasp and crawled into the sheets next to Ramona.

"Well, hello!" Ramona hugged the giggling curly-haired angel next to her. All the bounding around was doing strange things to Ramona's ghosted leg. But she knew if she said anything, Charles would take Sandra away altogether.

"Tante Mona!" Sandra slapped at her good leg with a small teddy bear.

"Where have you been, cuddles? I haven't seen you in a long time! Who's that?" She took the bear from Sandra. It was small and white, with black beaded eyes and a stitched solemn mouth. "What's his name?"

"Peter!" Sandra said. "Oom Jacob gave him to me."

"Sandra." Charles said sharply. Sandra returned his glare, her father's daughter through and through.

"Why don't you get us some juice?" Rose said.

Charles slowly got up and left the room. Once he was gone, Rose took his seat.

"OK, we don't know where she got the bear. She keeps insisting that Jacob got it for her but that doesn't make sense because she's only had this bear since yesterday."

"That's, uh..." Ramona didn't know what to say.

"I just think she doesn't know what to do with his death, but Charles gets so impatient with these things. He takes it all personally, but she's only little! They can't tell imagination from reality. It's not her fault."

"But I saw him!" Sandra whined.

"Sssh," said Rose.

"It's OK," Ramona said, turning the bear over in her hands, then handing it back to Sandra. "I know what you saw."

Sandra's eyes widened, but Charles came back in. "They're out of juice in the hospital canteen."

Gerrit came in with the food cart. "Hello, everyone! Are you folks sticking around for dinner?" Ramona winced; for whatever reason, Charles was always acted suspicious around smiling strangers.

"No, this is a brief visit," he said, not returning Gerrit's smile. "What's that?" He pointed to the paper mask cutout on Ramona's tray.

"It's the Phantom Pain of the Opera," Gerrit said cheerfully. But Charles looked blank.

"You know, like the musical? And it's because I have phantom pain?" Ramona offered.

"Yes, I get it." Charles still didn't smile.

Why are you like this? Ramona thought at him.

After they left, Ramona picked up her crutches and made her way to the elevator. She went down to the gift shop in the lobby. Behind the aisles of greeting cards and coffee mugs, she found the wall of teddy bears, most of whom bore a striking resemblance to Peter. She picked up one bear and turned it upside-down. It had an embroidered logo from the hospital on its bum, just like Peter.

The prosthetic was more elaborate than Ramona had expected. There was a sock for the stump with a nail at the bottom. She had to line the nail up with the socket or else it would hurt like hell. Standing at her own height again was incredible. But walking felt like she was on the moon in stilts. Her left leg felt lighter in some ways, but the foreign weight of the prosthetic was undeniable.

Wander de Wink, the prosthetist, despite or because of his initial mistake, was very kind.

"The assistant who took the cast knew he was on the verge of being sacked for other stuff, so he's stopped paying attention to anything," he said. "Ran out of shits to give, I guess. I'm not sorry to see the back of him."

He had a wild nest of receding brown-gray hair. His loud Hawaiian shirt had a breast pocket bulging with little tools. He himself was an amputee, right leg below the knee. The prosthetists showed Ramona his own leg, which looked like a prop from The Terminator.

"For me, it was a car accident as a young man. But you are younger than I was. You'll need a lot of these legs in your life. You haven't stopped growing yet. As soon as it starts feeling dodgy in the stump, you come straight to my workshop and we get you in order. Pro bono, for life. On the house."

"Thanks. But I'm moving away in the spring. To Aberdeen, in Scotland?" She heard herself making it a question. It felt too strange to be a statement.

"Oh, God, up there?" He shook his head. "I don't mean to scare you, but that weather will wreak havoc with the stump. No matter; we'll work it out before you go."

"Are those... little lightbulbs in yours?" Ramona pointed to rings of lights encircling his knee.

"Yeah, if you want the LEDs, I can hook you up with the LEDs. It's very possible. You want a cycling leg like this?" Before Ramona could respond, Wander lifted up his trouser leg and pushed a button on the side of his knee. The bulbs on his leg lit up, white in the front, red in the back. "Extra safety features. We robots, we have to look out for each other."

Every time she went through physical therapy, psychiatry, anything, she felt unmoored not being able to tell her father about it. There was no one to report to, no

one to round the day off with. She found herself talking to him in her head. She could see him laughing at but liking Wander de Wink.

It's about time someone built in your lights, he'd say, it's the only way you'll finally stop leaving them at home!

She didn't want to tell the shrink about this. She couldn't lose this conversation, even if it wasn't real. There was no one at the end of the day to be proud of her anymore. And Charles didn't count. Besides, imaginary conversations with her father would only distract the therapist from details about school, which is all that woman wanted to know about.

She toyed with her packet of stump socks. The prosthetist warned her that the temperature was going to drop tomorrow, so the leg might feel different. It sat on the chair next to her bed. He had lined it with some leather padding, and was coming back in two days to adjust for the fit, and to bring alternate models. She felt like a fussy classic car.

A large gift basket from her school arrived, with an oversized greeting card covered in signatures in too many colors. She scanned it briefly, looking at names and exclamation points. Even the kids she barely knew in her year had signed it. There were signatures from teachers, reassuring her not worry about catching up on work. But that just made her wonder if she may have to skip a year.

"We miss you!"

"Take your time."

"See you next fall!"

So the decision had been made. She folded the card into fourths, then eighths, and shoved it into the drawer on the nightstand, where she would be sure to leave it behind.

Later in the afternoon, Gerrit helped her eat the fruit basket.

"Are you sure you don't want to save some for Charles?" he asked, opening a box of spekkies.

"I'm sure. I'll save some of the kaneel kussen for my niece, that's about it." She chewed a caramel waffle.

"What does he do?"

"He works for Shell," she said. "He lived in Zeeland for years, but they moved to Amstelveen just this year. Then we're in the UK next year. Right now he's got this project to put some more rigs... somewhere. I can't tell you much, I'm afraid. I said enough already."

"Uh oh! State secrets," Gerrit laughed. "But he seems like a nice enough guy."

"Really?"

"I mean, I don't know him that well. You're living with him after this, right?"

"Looks like it," Ramona said. She wondered if they'd let her keep the basket. It was really deep, with lots of tissue paper stuffed in to prop things up.

"I'm guessing if he works for Shell, he must have a nice house."

"Never seen his house," Ramona said. She picked up the new leg and played with the knee joint. "He's not a nice guy."

"What do you mean?"

"Just isn't."

"But in what way?" Gerrit frowned.

"Not in a creepy way. He's just not nice. He hasn't got time for anybody."

"Hm." Gerrit popped another marshmallow into his mouth.

"And it's not the job. He's been like this forever. Once he left for university, the only times he called home were on our birthdays, when he remembered. Even then it was just tell us how busy he was with other stuff. My mom let him get away with it but when she died my dad went nuts and sort of cut him off. They haven't spoken in a while. Not like normal people."

"That's a shame," Gerrit said.

"We're going to the UK next year. He just told me that today. Aberdeen."

"Aberdeen? That's in Scotland, isn't it?"

"I think so. Can you get me a book about it?" Ramona put the leg down.

"Of course. I can rustle up a couple travel guides for you."

"Thanks."

Merlijn tapped on his door. "There's a man at the door asking for you. He says it's about a woman named Samia? That's Mia, right?"

Sebastiaan got up and went to the front door. He found a tall older man wearing a tweed trench coat, wiping his glasses on his tie. The man squinted at Sebastiaan.

"Cornelis?" He gruffed out. He put on his glasses and sized him up. "You are not who I expected."

"I guess not." This man looked like Mia in drag. Positively chilling.

"I'm Samia's father. I need to speak with you."

"Would you like to come in for a coffee?"

"Yes, I would like that."

Sebastiaan worked the new Italian coffee machine, and, through the wall length mirror, watched Mia's father sitting behind the bar. The man had the clothes and air of an old Minerva-jochie, an over-the-hill fraternity boy in a blue blazer and greying blonde hair. But the face was all Mia. Sebastiaan couldn't comprehend how the whitest Dutchman alive not only sired Mia but managed to make her look exactly like him. Maybe it was Mia after all, playing an elaborate prank involving a sex change and stage makeup. The dim lighting in the club was not helping clear up the confusion.

Her father was scanning the club, appraising it. "For all you've done to this place, I assume you've bought the building?"

"Yes, I have. We're fully independent." Sebastiaan walked around the bar with the espressos and sat next to Jan. "I'm sorry, I know you're Mia's father, but I didn't catch your name."

"I apologize," The man reached into a breast pocket and handed Sebastiaan a crisp, warm business card:

dr. Jan v.d. Berg
Universiteit van Amsterdam
Amsterdam School of Economics
Faculty of Economics and Business

Ext: 5952

"Holy shit." Sebastiaan closed his eyes.

"You seem surprised."

"She watched you once. She saw you give a class. I didn't believe her."

"I remember that. Years ago," Jan said. "Absolutely unnerving having her there out of the blue, and she disappeared before I could even approach her afterwards. Looked like she was positively out of her tree. Not surprising." Jan's voice was resonant and professorial, so unlike his daughter's pressured, breathy speech.

"That's a shame." Sebastiaan said.

"You need to be straight with me." Jan said. "She dances here?"

Sebastiaan sagged a bit into his clothing. "She worked here."

"But she didn't dance here? Does she do other things?"

"Yes."

"I see." Jan looked over at the main stage, then back at Sebastiaan. "This was not what I was expecting. Can't say I'm surprised, really. A bit shocked, perhaps."

Sebastiaan stealthily checked his watch. He didn't have much time to shoo this man out before the punters came in. Disappointed fathers and eager customers did not mix. "How did you find us?"

"Oh, she gave me the directions. Told me that Thursday nights were a bit slow, this was a good time to catch you. Of course, she neglected to tell me what exactly your business is... Can't say I appreciate that."

"What?"

“She wants to see you, preferably around breakfast.”

“She’s alive?” Sebastiaan felt a cold lightness creeping into his legs. “She’s alive? I mean, I just couldn’t tell anymore...”

“I’m sorry, you thought she was dead?” Jan looked startled. “Heavens, boy, I had no idea. I’m sorry. Oh, she’s very alive. It’s that damned list in the newspaper, isn’t it? I thought they rushed that out a bit too soon.”

Sebastiaan sank down behind the bar till he was perched on the edge of a keg. He felt very tired. He hadn’t realized how much he had readied himself for Mia’s permanent disappearance.

Jan stood up and peered down at him over the bar. “You alright there? I’m really sorry. This must be quite a shock for you.”

Sebastiaan stood up again. “Where is she?”

“She’s staying at our house in Warmond for the time being. Can’t say that the wife appreciates her presence, but the children are delighted to meet their big sister. She’s not dead. And she is quite eager to see you. Shall we meet at 8:30 tomorrow morning? I can drive you.”

“Sure,” Sebastiaan said, wondering how he would kill the twelve hours in between. “We can meet here.”

“Splendid. I’ll see you then.”

She had another dream. Jacob was there, again in the doctor's coat. Except this time he was shaking her awake.

"Ro. Ro, wake up." He gently shook her shoulder. "You listening?"

She opened her eyes. He was still there. She grabbed him into a hug. She could smell his familiar leather jacket, still on under the doctor's jacket. Then she started to cry.

"It's OK," he said.

She took a long time letting go of him.

"Where were you? Where the hell were you?" she said, just to feel the sticky waking feeling in her mouth. This wasn't a dream.

Jacob pointed to the side table. "Is that my Walkman?"

"Yeah. It was in my pocket."

"Ah, thieving sister. You've been exposed!" He laughed. "So, this survived, too. Amazing. A bit singed." He ran a finger along the edge of the tape deck.

"Like me."

He had put one earbud in and pushed play, "Argh, crap. You and your Chopin. What did you say?"

"I said I'm a bit singed."

He wrapped the headphones around the Walkman and put it back down. "I should have been there."

"Why, so that we'd have matching prosthetics? But where did you go? You were gone before it happened." She was suddenly angry. "Why didn't you find me first?"

"I had some things to do-"

"I thought you were dead!" Ramona shrieked.

Jacob shushed her and then hid in the big empty wardrobe. The night nurse poked her head in.

"Just a nightmare?" Ramona called out, unconvincing.

"OK, cool." The nurse left.

Jacob slipped back out. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't want to leave you here like this, but things had to be done."

"Like what?"

"Because if I didn't do certain things, that would leave you with just Charles."

"What do you mean? You'd move in with Charles, too."

"That would never happen. He'd rather put me in foster care."

"How do you know that?" But she believed him.

"Look, I've got a flat now. You can live with me."

"Where?"

"Near the RAI stadium."

"Are you serious? You've been there this whole time?"

"Well, I just got the keys last week, but yeah. I'm there. I'm just right there. I even got a ground floor flat so you don't have to walk up the stairs."

"The missing leg hurts," she said.

"I know," he nodded.

"I thought you were dead."

"I'm sorry." He hugged her again, but was obviously listening to the footsteps going down the hall. "I have to go."

"No!" Ramona clutched at his jacket sleeve. "You can't leave! What about the bear?"

"Huh?"

"The bear. Sandra's bear. What was with that?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to see her. I went to the house, gave her the bear through the window. She needed a bear."

"I would ask what's wrong with you, but there's so much right," Ramona smiled.

Karen was pushing off when Sasha got home at four in the morning.

"Karen?"

"Sssh." She held a finger to her lips then pushed the plunger.

Sasha shuddered. Needles were so nasty; he'd wished he could convince her to take pills.

"Do you still want to go tonight?" Sasha asked when she was done.

"Yesss...." she said and fell asleep.

After a sleepless night, Sebastiaan rode his bicycle back to Raadhuisstraat and got into Jan's waiting Audi. The car radio was playing very energetic orchestral music which did little to calm his nerves.

"I hope you don't mind," said Jan instead of hello, "I like to start the morning with a little Donazetti. Sets the tone for the day."

Sebastiaan noticed that the steering wheel was covered in yellow post-its with hastily scrawled addresses, names and phone numbers, including his.

"You've been busy," Sebastiaan said, nodding at the wheel.

"Oh, yes," Jan said. "I could barely make any sense of what she was going on about. I had to do my own detective work because nothing she said made any sense. She just kept babbling like a madwoman. But I already knew something was wrong with her. I've known it for years. It comes from my side."

"What do you mean?"

"My family's Dutch Reform from the Bible Belt. Pure NHK out in Overijssel. The family trees can become tangled out there. Something began to haunt the chromosomes and we can't shake it yet." He looked at Sebastiaan's bewildered face. "Our women end up going a little crazy now and then."

"Wow."

"But I escaped from that place. I escaped and fell in love with a woman from the other side of the world and even that didn't rinse the madness out of the blood. Too strong. But at least it was enough to get me disowned."

Sebastiaan was quiet for a bit. It was strange to think of the Dutch side of Mia's family. She'd once jokingly referred to herself as a "Moroccan girl gone wrong with side of mayonnaise." He didn't think she had even been aware of how Calvinist to the bone her father's family was.

"Mia looks a lot like you, you know," Sebastiaan said. "It's a little startling."

"Everyone keeps telling me that."

"Everyone? Who's everyone?"

"Her landlady, the Schouten woman." Jan consulted his steering wheel. "The policeman who arrested her. My wife. You, just now. Everyone. But she doesn't look like me. Looks like her aunt. My sister, Liesje."

"When's the last time you saw Mia? Before she came to class."

Jan cleared his throat. "She was eighteen. I took her out to lunch and she stole my wallet. Escaped the restaurant through a window in the loo. Went on the lam for a few days. Took herself to France and back."

"Is that why you lost contact?"

"Heavens, no! That wasn't the first time she'd done something like that back then. No, no. After that, her mother took her to Morocco."

They were inching their way up the sluggish A-5 towards Leiden. The farms along the highway were heavily misted.

"Your daughter's been a great friend to me throughout the years," Sebastiaan said. "She's helped me through some tough times."

"And if I'm not mistaken, you've been a great friend to her."

There was a line of white windmills along the highway. All were spinning but one.

"How did you escape the church?" Sebastiaan asked.

"That's a funny story, involving many documents, most of them forged. This was back twenty years ago, when they had real power. It took marrying Samia's mother to truly escape. That made them back away. I kept the documents, though, just in case."

"Is your name even Jan van der Berg?"

Jan turned to him and winked, and gave him Mia's Chesire Cat smile. "Maybe."

Warmond was the last place he would expect to find Mia. The houses were positively massive. These were proper freestanding mansions, not the crazily tipped and crowded canal houses of Amsterdam. The Audi pulled up in front of a limestone house with a large picture window on the ground floor. Through the window, Sebastiaan could see straight through to another picture window to the backyard, which had a small pier on the canal. To the side of the front room, he saw Mia lying on a sofa. She was covered in a tartan blanket, and she shielding her eyes from the sun with her forearm. But it was unmistakably her.

"You've got to be kidding me," Sebastiaan said aloud.

"There she is," said Jan. "I hope the children aren't being too noisy." They got out of the car.

Sebastiaan noticed two children, a boy and a girl, running around through the length of the house, not far from where Mia was laying. The boy, who was holding a toy truck, ran up to her and pushed the truck alongside the couch. The arm that had been covering Mia's eyes swooped down and deftly snatched up the toy. She tucked it under the blanket. The boy's face crumbled into a pre-cry scrunch. Mia kept her eyes closed.

"Fuck," Jan muttered, quickening his pace up the rather long front path. He reached his door and walked in.

Unlocked, Sebastiaan noticed. He never understood the wealthy and their fetish for leaving things unlocked.

He followed Jan into the long, open-plan living room. It managed to be warm but academic. There weren't any family photos up on the walls, just framed prints of botanical etchings. Mia's couch stood on a smart Persian carpet. Jan rescued the truck from her indifferent clutches and returned it to its rightful owner.

"OK, OK," Jan said. "Outside now!" He swept both children through the large french windows, which opened to a long back-garden with its own pier on the canal. Mia blinked at Sebastiaan, and put her arm over her eyes again.

"You have a beautiful home," Sebastiaan said. He stood, hovering over the couch until Jan gestured to a seat. He gratefully sat down. Mia didn't look up. She seemed not to notice he was there.

"Thank you. This is all my wife's doing. She's an interior decorator. Would you like anything to drink? Coffee? Tea?"

"I could use a coffee," Sebastiaan said. When Jan left the room, Mia peeked out from beneath her arm and stuck her tongue out at him. Then she smiled, which brought on a rage in Sebastiaan.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Sebastiaan hissed.

She frowned. "A lot," she whispered.

Jan came back with Sebastiaan's coffee, which he placed on the glass coffee table. He looked at Mia.

"Are you talking to me today? No. Fine. I'll be upstairs if you need me." Jan looked at Sebastiaan, quietly exasperated. "It's a shame, really. She was so wonderful with the children yesterday." He slipped into the corridor and up the stairs.

Mia looked out from under her arm again. "Oh, man." She exhaled.

"Oh, man, what? Oh, man, you're alive? The fuck happened to you?"

She put a finger to her lips. "Ssh. Little ears." Sebastiaan suddenly noticed that the boy was back in the room.

"Why'd you take truck?" he asked her, pouting.

"Because papa never gave me a truck," she said. "So I took yours. Now leave."

The boy stomped back outside.

"Brat," she said, when he was out of earshot.

"So, that's your brother?" Sebastiaan said, watching the kids poking sticks into a rabbit hutch. "Brother and sister?"

"Yeah. His wife's my age. I think. She looks my age," Mia sat up. She was wearing a blue and orange New York Knicks jersey. Her hair was frizzed further than usual, and her roots were starting to show. "I asked her how old she was and she just ignored me. Those little guys are eight and ten. Could be my kids. Jesus."

"I thought you were dead," Sebastiaan said.

"I know. I'm sorry," she said.

"Did you even think? I mean, do you have any idea?"

"When my mother died, everyone else fell off the map," Mia said, her eyes fixed on a large antique globe on the other side of the room. "I ran to the wrong people."

"Where did you go?"

"You know, I'm not sure. I spent a couple days running around the crash site. I don't even know why. Just stumbled around there wearing like, a bathrobe and jeans,

looking like a crazy person? I think I took the bathrobe because it felt like a coat,” she paused, reached into her trouser pocket under the blanket and brought out a cigarette and lighter. Her voice was slower than it used to be, possibly from time with Jan. “It took me a couple days to realize it wasn’t a coat.”

She flicked the lighter, which was clear plastic and running low on fuel. Sebastian noticed red crosshatchings and burn marks on her forearms. He hadn’t seen those on her in years.

“Anyway, I ended up at this weird party in one of the Bijlmer basements. Some kind of crack party. OK, I’m lying, I think I was the only one there doing crack, everyone just kind of tolerated me. I think I did crack for a minute, and I was like ‘OK, that was a bad move. I need to get help.’ What I should have done, in retrospect, in the cold sober light of retrospect, was look for you.”

“But you came here, instead. I understand.”

“Oh, no!” She laughed. “I didn’t come here. I went to Hugo and Olga’s.”

Sebastiaan dug his palms into his eyes. “Christ.”

“What can I say? It made crack-sense. At the time.”

“They didn’t say anything to me. I saw them, day in, day out, they said nothing. Those fuckers knew I was looking for you.”

“You also openly hate them.” She looked at him over her cigarette pointedly. “They weren’t going to tell you anything. Anyway, I show up at their door at dawn, crying, sobbing, mascara running with crack—”

“Mascara?”

“It was the long stay kind that you need alcohol to remove. Don’t interrupt. So, I show up there, and I’m like, ‘Help me, my mother died and I’m on crack’ and so they wean me off the crack with coke.”

“They are beyond fired,” Sebastiaan muttered.

“See, this is why we can’t have nice conversations,” Mia said, but she was smiling. It made Sebastiaan smile, too. It felt like he was properly getting her back for the first time.

“Fine. I won’t fire them. I’ll just kill them.”

“It worked, though. Coke cured crack. Coke with sex,” she said, watching Sebastiaan. “I knew you wouldn’t approve.”

“I never understood their appeal to you. They’re disgusting people.”

“Well...” Mia stubbed her cigarette out on a cheap black ashtray. It didn’t match anything else in the room; Jan probably got it just for her.

“Anyway.”

“Anyway, we were supposed to go on vacation to Malaga, the three of us, and then they dumped me here. Told me we were going to the airport, suddenly we’re here.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I don’t know how they found him. I hadn’t seen him in years. So now, I’m here,” Mia played with the stamped cigarette, then lit another.

“That doesn’t make any sense. You started going on vacation and they dumped you here? How did they even find this place? And why did they leave you? Was there a fight?”

“I told you what I know. Ask them.”

Sebastiaan remembered his coffee and took a sip. There definitely had to have been a fight. She was leaving details out, that was sure. “Do you really remember what happened at Julia’s?”

Mia rolled her eyes and slunk down into the blanket. “Ah, man. Hardly.”

Sebastiaan opened his knapsack and took out the manuscript. “She didn’t know what you were talking about till you left, so she gave it to me.” He held it out to her. “Here.”

But Mia cringed at it, “No, that’s OK.” She actually looked embarrassed, for the first time he could remember.

“Are you sure? You displaced feline vertebra just to get your hands on this. Must have been important.”

“What? Oh, God, the cat,” she closed her eyes and shivered. “Really, I don’t need to look at it.”

Jan came downstairs. “Liesje— Samia. Samia, have you taken your medication today?”

“No.” She kept her eyes closed, like a spoiled kid, but Sebastiaan could tell she loved the attention.

Jan shuffled in the doorway, looking a bit helpless. “Why not?”

“It makes me fat and tired. I end up peeing like a horse every hour.”

“But this is new medication. He said this one would be completely different. Why not try it?”

"Not yet."

"Alright," Jan shrugged. "I can't tell you what to do, Samia."

"It's Liesje."

"Sorry, Lies— Samia!" He sighed and turned away as she giggled.

The next morning, Ramona blinked awake straight into the black beady eyes of a teddy bear. It looked exactly like Sandra's. She hid the bear behind the stack of library books. Hopefully, the Lady wouldn't ask anything about it.

Fortunately, the Lady had other things to deal with.

"We have it from a very good source that a journalist is trying to look for you," she told Ramona. "You're safe for now, but keep an eye out. You don't need to say anything."

"What journalist?" Ramona was kind of curious. It could be cool to be interviewed.

"De Telegraaf."

"Oh." Ramona knew from her father that they were trash.

"Just trash," said the Lady, pursing her lips.

After lunch, Ramona tested her prosthetics. The Lady had arranged some bland new clothing in her size for when she got out. For the first time in weeks, she pulled on a pair of jeans, sneakers, and a hooded sweatshirt. Putting the sneaker on the prosthetic felt like dressing a mannequin. She walked down the hallway and to the handicapped

loo, where there was a full length mirror. It was quite startling. She was a bit thinner now, younger looking. Her cheeks were kind of hollowed. But she was standing up.

She walked through the hospital, giddy with the sense that she was in disguise. She didn't look like a hospital patient anymore! But her stump still hurt like hell, and she had to wrap two socks around the prosthetic so the sneaker wouldn't slide off. Still, no one would look at her twice.

Mia insisted on giving Sebastiaan a tour of the house. They went to the garden, where the children were sitting in a rowboat which was moored to the pier. The sky was a glaring white, and the boat bobbed in the breeze. The children squinted up at them expectantly.

Mia pointed to the kids. "Ruud, Ericka," she pointed to Sebastiaan. "Sebastiaan."

"Is that your boyfriend?" Ericka said, and both children started giggling.

"No. I don't have boyfriends and Sebastiaan doesn't have girlfriends. Come on,"

Mia led him back inside before they could ask any questions, "More in here."

The stairs were carpeted with a Persian runner. "Ah," Mia pointed down, "Traces of my people. Now this," she said, leading him to the first room on the first floor, "is where I'm staying." Her guest room was narrow and high, with a view over the back garden. The bed was a slender single against the wall. Some clothing lay in a corner. On the nightstand, there was a little shiny pile of gears and dials.

"Watch guts," she said, pointing, "he's letting me take apart some stuff."

"How long will you stay here?" Sebastiaan asked.

“Not long. I haven’t been back to mine since everything. I just need to some time away from there. It’s not like I’m afraid that I’ll kill myself. I’ve never been suicidal. Come on, look at this.”

The next room she took him to was Jan’s study, where Jan was sitting at his desk, his feet propped up on a low radiator. The study was a pretty substantial room lined with white shelves, all jammed with books. A long sepia map of the Netherlands with insets of Suriname and the Antilles was taped to one of the windows, giving the room a yellow light.

“Can we see Leisje?” Mia asked.

Jan looked a bit startled. “Sure. The picture’s right on the shelf. Just be careful with it.”

Mia handed Sebastiaan a small framed photo which had been perched on a file cabinet. The picture was black and white, and showed a woman in her twenties. She had thick blonde hair that fell over and under the heavy-looking scarf on her shoulders. Her eyes were blankly looking into the camera.

“She’s like me, without the tan,” said Mia.

“She really is.” Sebastiaan could see why Jan kept tripping up the names.

“But the curious thing is that you sound like her,” Jan said, shaking his head.

“You talk like her, you think like her. It’s a bit creepy, if I’m honest.”

Mia folded her arms and laughed.

“See, I knew you wouldn’t mind my saying that. She liked scaring people, our Liesje did. She always liked to laugh.”

“Dead now,” Mia said.

“Suicide,” Jan said.

“Oh,” Sebastiaan said.

“See, that’s where I’m not like her,” Mia said, thoughtfully. “I was never suicidal.”

Jan shrugged, spreading his hands as if the truth was too cumbersome to grasp.

“I wasn’t,” Mia said. “I mean, it would get dark, but I’d never do anything.”

“So now you know it’s hereditary,” Sebastiaan said.

“Out in the hinterlands, where I come from,” Jan said, “you could be branded as cursed. It was considered an act of God. But now, we know better.”

“Well, look out for Ericka,” Mia said.

“I know.”

“You just need to watch. Stay tuned, if you will.” With that she left the room.

Mia and Sebastiaan walked a few blocks away and waited for the bus to Leiden. Margo, Jan’s wife, was on her way back home and Mia preferred to be out of the way. Sebastiaan also needed to get back to Amsterdam before tonight’s show, and Leiden Centraal was the closest rail station. They stood in the bus shelter. It started to drizzle.

“You know, my mother wanted me to be here,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“The last thing we talked about was finding Jan, finding out why things are like this for me. I probably told Hugo and Olga about it at some point. That’s why they brought me here.”

“Are you trying to tell me I can’t fire them?”

“You can’t! They’re way too hot,” Mia giggled, while Sebastiaan groaned.

The bus pulled up and they got on at the back. Sebastiaan stamped his card but Mia didn’t even bother.

“When do I get you back?” he asked.

Mia scratched her head like a dog, shaking her hair. “Uh, I’m not sure when I’ll come back to Raadhuis. Jan wants me to do some clerical stuff for him at the university.”

“Oh,” Sebastiaan’s stomach went into a cold knot. He was losing her, after all.

“I mean, it’s not official yet, but seeing as nepotism is such a strong force in Dutch academia, I’m good as guaranteed.” The bus leaned into a turn, sliding Sebastiaan away from Mia towards the aisle. He gripped the pole to maintain his balance.

“So, you’ll be at a desk,” he said. “In the daytime.”

“Coming home to Warmond. Yes.”

“Wow. That’s a huge...wow, what a change.”

“I’m sorry, Sebastiaan,” she said. “I guess I need to do this right now.”

“No, no understand. Just don’t be a stranger, you know?”

“Of course.”

“And my door’s always open.”

She laughed. “You mean if they get sick of me and kick me out?”

“You know what I mean.”

"No, I know. Seriously, you've been the best friend I've ever had. If you think you'll get rid of me because I don't work there anymore, you've got another thing coming." They smiled at each other and looked away.

Kruitberg and Groeneveen stood behind crime scene tape. By now, the police had wised up and were actually guarding the place. The electricity had been knocked out, so the streetlights were dead. But even in the dark, Karen and Sasha could see the huge hole left by the plane and the fire. The jagged cement shone gray against the blue black sky. Sergei could see a ramp of rubble leading right up to the fifth floor where Nazir had lived.

Karen and Sasha stalked the perimeter, crouching and slinking like the Pink Panther cartoon. There had to be a hole; there was always a hole. This time the hole was across the canal which ran under Groeneveen. Just across the water, they could see an open door. They waded through the knee-deep canal, slowly in order to muffle the splash. Sasha could feel bits of plaster rubble scrape through his trouser legs. They crawled to other bank, snuck into the open door and up the stairs to the second floor.

It was cold and smoky smelling. The end of the hallway opened up to the night. They could see the elevated metro roll by in the distance. Sasha charged towards edge, stopping an inch before the drop. Karen shrieked into her hands. Sasha laughed.

The doors were open. The firemen had kicked them all in. They walked into one apartment. It smelled horrible.

"Oh, my God," Karen breathed into her sleeves. "Bodies."

"No, it's the fridges." Sergei recognized the smell of melting meat and dairy.

"Power's out so everything went bad."

Karen waved her penlight around. She waved her hand in front of it, making it strobe. "Such a great place for a party. Without the smell, of course."

"So I guess it offers dental?" Sebastiaan said to Mia.

"Dental, vacation money, all of that."

"Hey, I do vacation money!"

She laughed and hugged him on the platform.

The train was *spitsuur* full when it pulled in. A few people got off at Leiden Centraal, but it was going to be a sardine can until Sebastiaan would hit Amsterdam. He stood his ground by the door so he could lean for the rest of the ride, and see Mia through the window. She waved to him as the train glided north. He couldn't help feeling that it was the last time he'd see her.

He stole a seat at Slotervaart. Someone had wedged a copy of that day's NRC Handelsblad between the chair and the wall. He unfolded it and flipped to the wanted ads, and found the notice he had placed for a hostess. He'd have to call them and pull it from the paper. It was hopeless, trying to replace her like this.

It took them a few hours to find the Aladdin's cave. Along the way they found loose change and some dead cats. But it was worth it in the end. Its wallpaper held the

bubbles from the fire, but that was as damaged as things got. It was full of gym equipment and brown moving boxes.

Berlijn. Londen, Parijs. Karen ripped open the Berlijn box. "Look, look, look."

Sasha shoved the penlight in it. He saw thick plastic bags stuffed with little pills, pills with hearts etched on them.

"It's the warehouse!" Karen was already filling her pockets. Sasha started filling his pockets from the Parijs box.

Karen felt around for boxes. She opened one full of powder. It was either white or yellow, too dark to tell. She rubbed some on her gums to check it.

"YES!" She started shoving the bags down her trousers.

"How will we get this all out of here?"

"Let's just try—"

"Ssh.. I hear someone." They both froze. "From outside. Someone is outside."

They tiptoed towards the one open window in the room and crouched low. They poked their eyes over the frame and looked down.

People in white spacesuits were all over the area with shovels. Some were sweeping what looked like metal detectors over the rubble. It was a quiet operation, with nothing but beeps and whistles coming from below. There were over a dozen of them, spread across the field of debris and working apart.

"Holy shit, aliens," Karen whispered.

"Ssh."

The people weren't taking away the debris, like the team from the daytime. Rather, they seemed to thoughtfully pick at it, turn things over, only to put them back again. They weren't going to be leaving in a hurry.

Sasha turned back to the boxes and pointed significantly. "I think I know what they are after."

Karen gasped. "No." She clenched round her trousers where she had stuffed the drugs.

"Maybe. This place is a mess before this happened. What else would they look for? Ancient Ghanaian artifacts? Clearly, they want the shit."

Karen's eyes wobbled in thought. "Explains the detectors."

They both peeped out of the window again and watched the spacemen sweep slowly around the site, like beachcombers.

Sasha took a handful of white powder from a bag that Karen had already opened and quietly crept out of the room. "I wanna try something," he whispered.

He carefully walked to the end of the hallway which opened into the night. He crawled on his stomach until his chin hovered over the jagged edge, and the wind rustled his hair. From his vantage point, he could see some spacemen touring the hole caused by the plane. He opened his clammy palm and sprinkled the handful of dust over the abyss. The white wind spread over the spacemen, who obviously kept sweeping the rubble. Sasha watched the drugs spread and disappear. The aliens didn't pick up anything.

He walked back to Karen, who was frozen in the corner where he left her. "OK, it's not that," he said. They resumed their post at the windowsill.

"No dogs," Karen said after a while. "No drugs dogs, no cadaver dogs. What could be here that they don't need a dog for?"

"Cadaver?"

"Dead bodies."

"Right," Sasha shivered at his new word. They seemed to have cleaned for "cadaver" already, getting the bodies who couldn't escape the building. But the ghosts. Maybe they were sweeping for ghosts. The Dutch knew how to be thorough.

That night, Jacob was back. He was wearing the doctor's coat again. It didn't seem like it took a lot to break into the hospital.

"Aberdeen?" He frowned at the name of the place, Dutchifying it in the process. *Oberdain?*

"Yeah, look," Ramona opened the book Gerrit brought her. "It's so grey, isn't it?"

"Christ, it's worst than here..." Jacob flipped through the full color pages in the center of the book.

"It's all made of the same stone; granite. It's supposed to be even colder than here. The prosthetist said the weather will drive my stump mental."

"Jesus." Jacob shook his head. He remembered more of Suriname than she did, of course. He couldn't believe anywhere was colder than Amsterdam. "No, you can

return these books. We're not going there." He closed the travel guide with decisive thump and put it back on the nightstand. "Look out the window. I got you something."

She looked out of the window down to the front courtyard. "I don't see anything."

"The red one. By the streetlamp, look!" Jacob pointed.

There was a red Batavus bicycle chained to the lamp. "You bought me a bike?"

"Yeah. I figured your old one was gone."

"Thanks." Unlike Charles, he didn't assume she'd be a useless lump in need of carting around. "How can you afford this?"

"Uh..." He shifted from one foot to another.

"Because bicycles, teddy bears, and flats cost money. How can you afford it?"

"I'm still looking for work, but I'm OK for now."

"And where the hell are you getting new clothes from? All your stuff was torched."

"Don't worry about me. Worry about your leg, worry about getting better. Just wait for me, OK? Wait but don't worry."

"Will you stop treating me like some kind of stupid child? You need to tell me what's going on."

"OK, look," Jacob opened his backpack and took out a long wooden box. He opened it. It was half full of large guilder notes, the brown-pink colors of hundreds and fifties.

"How?" Ramona stared dumbly into the box and looked up at him. "Are you selling... *drugs*?"

"Uh, yes. Well, I was. Yes, I was selling drugs for a long time."

“But...but you have to stop!”

“I will. I am. I’ve stopped, OK? I was just saving up for an emergency.”

“But why?”

“Ramona, this is a longer conversation for a longer day. But right now, I think it’s time for us to leave.”

As Sebastiaan disinfected the stage after the show, it occurred to him that he had still held onto Mia’s notebooks. He went to his office, shut the door, and took them out of his backpack. He undid the belt around them and opened the first one.

The density of the black ink hurt his eyes. The writing was small and cramped, carving into the page where the ballpoint when dry. The lines and margins were covered in writings and occasional drawings of little machines. Little machines made of gears and wires, with arrows pointing around indicating what they would do. The sentences were long and angry, when legible. Ramblings about being judged on one’s own home, about Julia. Other times she wrote all the numbers she could think of until changed her mind, or filled in white spaces with curlicues.

He rubbed his eyes and opened the second book, expecting more of the same. Instead he found himself. What he had changed in the club that day, the decisions he’d made, the jokes they made about other people. He found Hugo and Olga, too, ridiculous odes to their beauty and perfection. The writing was still a mess, but less tense. There was no venom in the pages. She’d drawn an elaborate diagram, attempting to explain

how to pierce one's tongue with a lightbulb's filament so that it flickered every time you opened your mouth.

Sebastiaan smiled, re-belted the books and put them in the safe behind his desk. She'd come back for them one day. He knew he'd see her again.

Sasha tapped Karen awake, "They're gone!"

They crashed down the emergency stairs, louder than they should have, back outside, and splashed through the cold canal. They ran, chanting a whispered chorus of "Oh, my God", started by Karen.

"Oh, well." Karen had said, as they panted their way to recovery in an underpass. "Hungry now." So they walked around the neighborhood for a few hours. The sky was misty orange until it resolved itself into grey. They watched shops open and people hurry to work. They found a Turkish cafe and split a lahmacun in silence, looking out the window. They sipped their cans of Minute Made orange juice, their trousers still damp against their legs.

"Well, you've got enough to keep you busy." Karen nodded to his pockets.

"So do you."

"I guess."

"Time to go home now?" Sasha asked. Karen nodded. Sasha and Karen stubbed out their cigarettes, and left the Turkish cafe.

The next morning, Charles waited in the hospital lobby. He had come for a visit, but they'd somehow managed to misplace his sister. The blonde nurse guy and the woman with the clipboard had been gone for twenty minutes. He had time to wait. He went to buy a paper from the gift-shop. He contemplated getting Ramona flowers or something. No, no need to spoil her.

Rose came in with Sandra. "We got the parking space. Is she ready?"

"No, they can't find her," he said, shrugging.

"What?"

The woman with the clipboard came back. "We've checked around, and we're checking with our manager of security right now."

"Um, Desiree?" The elderly security guard behind the desk waved her over. "Is this who you're looking for?"

They all crowded behind his desk, where he had two monochrome closed-circuit monitors. He had rewound to last night, to two in the morning. One screen showed the empty hospital lobby. Empty until two familiar figures passed through, one pushing the other in a wheelchair.

"Oh, my God," said the nurse, covering his mouth with his hand. Sandra peered at him, amused.

The next screen showed the parking lot. The figure in the wheelchair stood up and walked over to a pair of bicycles. The second figure unlocked the bicycles, and helped the first one onto the saddle. Then the second figure got onto his own bicycle. They joined hands and pedaled out of the camera's view.

"Bye-bye, Oom Jacob," said Sandra, through a mouthful of fingers.

Postscript

The novella developed from a variety of influences. In 2007, I had the opportunity and privilege to work with homeless LGBT children at the Ali Forney Center in New York City. The clients I met there were street smart, but still very young. They had been rejected by their families and even by other homeless shelters, which is why Ali Forney existed. Another strand to the novella had been brewing in my mind for years. Since 9/11, I had noticed the wide proliferation of rumors in wake of major disasters. I was interested in the idea that of the larger disaster occurring in the middle of a personal disaster, and was interested in the idea that one abrupt, major horror could present an escape from an ongoing personal horror.

The Bijlmeramp and September 11 have some startling elements in common, especially on a visual level: a Boeing 747 crashed into two identical buildings and caused a massive spectacle. However, the disasters share the further common trait of occurring in capital cities with powerful reputations for openness. The cosmopolitan characters of both Amsterdam and New York were tested by their respective disasters. In some ways, the cities failed these tests. Amsterdam's municipal government was not forthcoming about the hazardous material carried on the plane. New York City shamefully neglected to care for relief workers at the site of the crash after they were exposed to toxins.

In her essay "Violence, Mourning, and Politics" Judith Butler asks some uncomfortable questions: "The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And finally, What

makes for a grievable life?” (Butler 2004, 20) While Butler’s essay focuses on America’s foreign policy, these questions apply both to Amsterdam and New York. Rather than asking these questions, or even being aware of these questions, both cities abruptly chose who was included and excluded from their definition of “we.” Those left out of that “we” were left to the mercy of unseen poisons.

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There is an implicit danger with criticizing certain works of disaster literature, only to write a work of disaster literature. However, the two halves of this Creative Writing PhD. Thesis quickly formed a symbiotic relationship. Through reading the books, I was able to make decisions about which themes to pursue or abandon in my own fiction. The novella became a chance for me to respond to blind spots that I was finding in the books I was reading for the research half. For example, I insisted on having narrators who would have direct ties to the affected area, and could not hide from the aftermath behind a middle-class background or money. Only when I was quite far into it did I realize that both of my characters were of mixed race. This subconscious decision was possibly a stubborn did at the homogeneity of the protagonists in the 9/11 novels.

As a native New Yorker, writing about the Bijlmerramp allowed me to write about certain elements of mass tragedy while giving me some much needed distance from September 11 itself. Perhaps with time, I may want to write my own 9/11-related work of fiction. If I were to do so, I would gladly adopt the novella format again. Rather than writing a larger novel and excerpting 40,000 words for this thesis, I opted to present a complete story within that word limit. I found that the size constraint placed by the

novella form forced me to use my words economically. I had to shape characters who were similar enough to inhabit the same story, but different enough to be placed in various situations. In silencing the initial characters mid-way through, I was able to explore more of their world and examine them through the eyes of others. Rather than directly depicting the crash, I chose to represent the chaos through fracturing the narrative.

I earnestly hope that I avoided repeating the patterns that I saw in the novels I analyzed. But I am already plagued with a few doubts about my own work: was Ramona too much of a wise child? How quickly and perfectly was Jacob set up after the crash? Could I have more room to problematize Hans? Fortunately, the novella's length constraint keeps me from eternally tinkering at this one particular work. It also gives me a sharper lens for approaching this subject in the future.