

GARY J BYRNES
**THE END,
MY FRIEND**



**A SHORT STORY COLLECTION FROM
GARY J BYRNES, AUTHOR OF PURE MAD**

THE END, MY FRIEND

SHORT STORIES

PUBLISHED BY GARY J BYRNES, MARCH 2010

Ever feel like you're living through the end of the world? Well, this is my little gift to help lift the gloom. Enjoy these stories on your laptop or ebook reader as a foretaste of my blockbuster novel **THE LAST PARTY** which will be unleashed as soon as it's finished (ideally by the end of 2010).

Watch this space and enjoy every day...

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THE LONG NIGHT

By Gary J Byrnes, 2007

Most people weren't happy that the atmosphere, thick with pollutants, had stopped letting sunlight through. Earth was cast into perpetual night. Crops withered, trees died, society crumbled.

But some creatures thrived. Foxes and owls, bats and moths. Temporarily, the world was theirs. All of it. And the nocturnal humans. They too relished the endless night.

'How long have we been here?' she asked, shouted.

His gaze fell from the naked dancers, rested on his watch for a long minute.

'Eight days, give or take. You want to dance?'

She shook her head, made the drink gesture. He lifted himself from the leather couch, made his way to the bar. His head nodded in time with the music, a remix of Purple Haze.

Eight days. He smiled. He remembered the sensation of wanting the night to never end. Now it was real and it felt good. Alcohol, stimulant drinks, narcotics coursed through his veins, maintained his high. And the music. DJs were liberated by the eternal night, there were no more limits. This party would never end.

He ordered the drinks, fumbled for money, remembered that there was no need to pay. With society finished, the old currencies had ceased to function. The party would continue until the booze was consumed and the power generators ran dry. Until then, the meek stayed home and called it hell, but the young partied, called it heaven.

They drank. Then they danced to an hour-long set of slow sounds. Then they went outside and made love on the crunchy yellow grass.

They lay on their backs and watched the sky, all boiling clouds, varying shades of black.

'I love this,' she said. 'Is that wrong?'

He raised his arms, looked at her with an easy smile.

'Excuse me while I kiss the sky.'

The music stopped.

THE WRITER

By Gary J Byrnes, 2008

It was a heavy evening after the scorching day; late summer, the month of the God Emperor Augustus. The air glowed, smoke from thousands of oil lamps and open fires catching the sun's fading power. The writer's eyes burnt as he stood on the balcony of his family domus on the Palatine Hill, watching the murmuring city stretched out below. He acknowledged a peculiar beauty in the wide sweep of wretched humanity huddled together; slums and tenements hugging the banks of the Tiber, hill after hill to the glimpse of distant, burning sea.

Later, a fat moon rose from behind the imposing home, cast its cold light over the dead day, the greatest city in history, the worried man. But the writer had a fire in his belly, a new idea burning, taking shape. At last, his simmering anger had found a purpose, some kind of direction.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' said his mother, touching his elbow and rubbing it fondly.

'From up here, yes. But it is a different life in the slums,' he answered. 'It stinks like a dead dog.'

'It's said there are a million souls in the city now, Marcus. A million. They are here by choice. This is the Golden City of Dreams. Dreams of wealth, success, excitement. You cannot blame our Senators or our Emperor for the squalor that success inevitably brings.'

'Especially since we have a Senator as guest this evening, mother?' quizzed Marcus, worried for his father.

'We must be gracious. Anyway, Maximus has been very kind to us. And he's your father's best friend in the Senate.'

'That's a very beautiful stola you're wearing, mother. Where did you get it? And is that black wig from India, perhaps? Has generals' pay risen again?'

She didn't answer, just stared at the city in silence until a servant announced the Senator's arrival.

'I will welcome our guest. Please, for me, be happy.'

'I'll try,' said Marcus, as if to himself.

His mind was racing: filled with conflict, many emotions. In recent months, he had begun to question the society in which he enjoyed a privileged place. The vast majority were poor or enslaved, while he had enjoyed a Greek education, the spoils of Empire and the stability of position. But it wasn't enough. Not any more. Not since he'd started hearing the stories, the stories he'd begun to write - in Greek so that they could be read throughout the civilised world.

Would his stories bring any fairness to the casually cruel and biased system that controlled so many millions of lives? Probably not, but he knew that was not reason enough to abandon his project. The simple act of writing would purge his own guilt and, like a pebble in a pond, who knew where the ripples would end up? His heart beat louder as he lost himself in the structure, the plot, the drama. He was giddy with the idea of a bestseller.

He heard his mother calling his name repeatedly.

He drained the goblet of wine and took a deep breath. He turned from the glorious musings, hesitated, went to the dining area. During the hot summer season, evening meals were taken in the peristyle, the open garden in the centre of the domus. The servants waited in the shadows while oil lamps on the pillars illuminated the guests. Two child slaves were tasked with using large feathers to keep flying insects away from the diners. The centrepiece was an innovation: a long oak table which overflowed with gold platters of grapes and bread and many jugs of wine. The guests were seated on plush, high-backed chairs, rather than the typical lounges.

'Mother, your generosity is unequalled in all of Rome,' said Marcus, touching his lips and bowing deeply. He turned to the guests. 'I welcome you, Senator, and all our guests on behalf of my father.'

'Indeed,' said his mother. 'He risks his life blood in Gaul so that we may enjoy the fruits of the Empire.'

'I thank you for your welcome, Marcus,' said Senator Maximus, resplendent in his purple-trimmed Senatorial toga. 'In these difficult times, the welcome of friends is indeed a respite.'

The other guests were his mother's current artist-in-residence; the wine merchant who lived next door; the merchant's wife. To Marcus, the artist was a pompous man whose ability didn't match his ego, a frighteningly familiar idea for a struggling writer. The merchant couple were wealthy, overweight and

vulgar in all their habits. Bacchus was their favoured god. So they called for more wine. The servants filled the wine goblets with mulsum: honey wine. All present stood and drank in honour of their hostess, her courageous husband and the House Gods.

For the first course, a plate of mixed salad with olive oil dressing was followed by sea urchins marinated in liquamen, the sauce made of salt and rotten fish. Salt was ubiquitous - Rome herself having been founded on a salt mine - and the finest spices from Ephesus were passed around the table. Praise flowed and Marcus was happy for his mother and thankful for his fortunate circumstances.

The talk was of politics, of course. There was discussion of little else at Roman dinners, Emperor Caligula having recently returned from Gaul with cartloads of seashells and thousands of slaves. Now, the Emperor was reimposing his will on the city at the centre of the world.

'I know Tiberius put the last independent legions under imperial control and will be remembered for not much else,' said the merchant, 'but I preferred him to Gaius Caesar Germanicus Caligula.'

'Little Boot has increased the free flour ration and the games are becoming more bloodthirsty,' said Maximus. 'So the masses are happy enough. But I must warn you all that he is seeking to replenish the state treasury.'

'How?' asked the merchant, worried. 'More taxes?'

'Worse,' said the senator. 'Extortion and confiscation. He has demanded tribute from many wealthy citizens. Failure to pay has led to confiscation of estates.'

The merchant became pale and quiet, calculating how much he could easily offer the Emperor should the agents come knocking. He decided to lead the discussion away from the disturbing topic.

'Yesterday, I saw two gladiators fight a lion,' he exclaimed. 'A lion! It managed to gore one of them before they dispatched it with a dagger in the ribs. It was truly a spectacle. The mobs lapped it up. But think of the expense in bringing a lion to Rome from the furthest part of Africa.'

'The servants are talking about his plans to make his favourite horse a senator,' said Marcus.

'Nonsense,' retorted Maximus. 'I fear these whispers are being put about by someone who sees opportunity in our emperor's madness.'

'Such as?'

'Claudius, perhaps.'

'Claudius does have the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard,' said the merchant. 'And Little Boot executed Naevius Sutorius Macro of the Guard after he ascended. So there will be no love lost there.'

'The Guard may yet save us all,' said Maximus.

The discussion was interrupted by the head servant, a Greek, who rang a beautiful gold bell to signify the arrival of the main courses. A full roasted pig, assorted baked fish, a roast pheasant and copious quantities of wine soon covered the table. The guests rejoiced and praised their hostess.

'Did you hear about Caligula's little episode in Jerusalem?' asked the artist, a self-obsessed man who observed his reflection in anything shiny at every opportunity.

'Please go on,' said the merchant's wife.

'Well, I have it on good authority that he wants to put a wondrous statue of himself in the Temple at Jerusalem.'

'How do you know this?' asked the merchant.

'My very good friend is the sculptor. The statue is almost complete. Fortunately our puppet there, Herod Agrippa, won't allow it. He thinks it'll drive the locals mad. They've been very restless in Judaea, apparently.'

The conversation waned, all mouths busy with the main courses, Marcus was more disillusioned with Roman society than ever before. He knew Caligula was broadly disliked, but now it seemed clear that the Emperor was mad and his citizens would suffer for his insanity.

'Yes, I've heard stories from Judaea,' said Marcus, quietly delighted at the opening.

'Do tell,' said his mother.

'I've been speaking with a Judaeen. He's a slave in the baths near the Forum. Nice chap. Quite intelligent. He can even read Greek.'

'Fascinating how some of the savages can adopt our ways,' said the merchant. 'But no more civilised than dogs.'

The others nodded their approval of the assumption, a commonly held superiority complex.

'So this man, Saul is his name, he told me about a character in Judaea. I'm writing a long story about him. A novel.'

'Wonderful,' exclaimed his mother, clapping her hands and kissing him on both cheeks. 'You will be the greatest writer the Empire has known. You are still so young. You have time. All you need is the idea. Praise to Mercury,' she said, raising her goblet, 'Protector of writers.'

'And merchants!' said the merchant as all at the table raised their drinks.

'Tell us your idea, Marcus,' they chorused.

'The idea is a sequel to the Testament, the holy book of the Judaeans. I hear it's very popular reading among the literate classes.'

'I've read some of it,' said the artist. 'I even have the scrolls in my studio. Quite fascinating, really.'

'It's magical,' said the merchant's wife. 'The part about the creation of the Universe is so exciting.'

'Genesis, isn't it?' said Marcus's mother.

'Everybody's talking about it. Escapist, exotic literature is such an antidote to political plays and love stories.'

'I'm so tired of the Greek myths.'

All agreed.

'Yes,' said Marcus. 'So I hope to capitalise on this interest in religious escapism and continue the story.'

'In which direction?' asked the merchant.

'More wine!' called his wife. 'Bring us that pale Spanish.'

'You'll like this,' said the merchant. 'It hasn't suffered for travel. Marcus, I apologise. In which direction will you continue the story?'

'This slave, Saul, has given me the entire structure,' said Marcus, excited now at the growing potential of his story. In truth, he was amazed at the popularity of the old Judaeian stories among Rome's elite. It all seemed to fit perfectly. 'Just a few months ago, a man in Judaea claimed to be the son of their god.'

'Yes,' said his mother, 'the Judaeans have only one god. How quaint.'

'Needless to say, he upset the local priests and they had him crucified. Our man Pilate was forced to order the killing.'

'As cunning as wolves, priests,' said the merchant.

'This crucified man supposedly performed miracles, such as turning water into wine.'

'Water into wine? Then off with his head!' exclaimed the merchant.

'Quite,' continued Marcus, after the laughter subsided. 'He is also said to have cured lepers and raised the dead.'

'All very interesting,' said the artist, a secret atheist. 'But it sounds like a simple religious fantasy to me.'

'It gets better,' said Marcus. 'After he was entombed, three days later, he rose from the dead.'

'Those Judaeans have had too much of the man's magic wine, I fear,' said the merchant.

'Apparently a lot of them believe this is all true. Besides all the magic tricks, he had a profound message: that all men are equal, that the Emperor and the slave are as one before God.'

'Be careful with this tale,' warned Maximus. 'That kind of talk could get you deported. Or worse.'

He'd thought of this risk, of course, and had already taken the decision to publish under an assumed name. Perhaps a Judaeans name for authenticity: Matthew or Luke or Saul. He would lose credit for his work and any chance at profit. But these motivations were no longer the drivers of his creative urges. His spirit demanded more. His soul had awoken.

The dishes were cleared and dessert of Syrian pears and Greek honey was placed before them.

'Your main character, Marcus. The magician, what was his name?' asked the merchant's wife.

'The Christ,' said Marcus. 'Jesus the Christ. But you knew that, didn't you?'

NOTHING BUT TIME

By Gary J Byrnes, 2008

The end had come suddenly. Events. April was fine. Unseasonably warm, otherwise normal. In August's withering heat, civilisation and society finished. Just events. But the crash was terrible.

He stood by the window, peeked into the street below, edge of the curtain. As he had done for days. She sat on the floor in the far corner, twisted the tuning knob on the radio. As she had done for days.

'There's nothing today. Not even static. That's bad isn't it?'

'It's the batteries darling. They're gone. Anyhow, I don't think there'll be any broadcasts for a few decades.'

'Are you hungry?'

'Starving. What have we got?'

'Nothing really. Nothing.'

'Jesus. How did it come to this?'

'Events.'

There was no movement outside, though it had been gloomily bright for hours. The heavy pall of smoke deadened the sun. Yet the heat was still oppressive.

'The fire in the City's still burning.'

'Will it reach us?'

'Maybe.'

There was no hope left. His mind raced through their options. Survival instinct. Only problem: there were no options remaining. Just one, which he'd put off until the hunger drove him.

Watching, watching, he thought of time and how his perceptions of it had changed with the collapse. There had never been enough time before. Hurried breakfasts, the Tube crush, the tedium of the office, the Tube crush, dozing in front of the TV, restless sleep without dreams. Typical life, always wishing for more time.

Now there was time and little else. What he'd give to exchange all this empty time for a sweaty Tube journey, crushed by normal - yes, normal! - people. Self-obsessed, nervous people, yes. People all the same. He remembered the occasional smile from a blond woman who often crossed his path on the walk to the office. He imagined the smell of traffic and coffee and flowers and a small tear trickled down his cheek.

He gazed at his wife. I promised you so much. A future. And now? She looked gaunt, pale. She needed food or she would die soon. Time. Too much, yet not enough.

'Movement outside.'

'People?' She perked up at the first event of the day.

'Scavengers,' he replied. Bitterly.

A small gang had captured a woman. Poor thing. One scavenger walked proudly in front, held a shotgun over his head, called out that his gang ruled the street. He wore a priest's robe over his fatigues, a huge crucifix on a heavy chain around his neck. His face was painted. He was like a kind of monster from an old movie. A few steps behind him, the woman was carried high. Her clothes - just rags really - were torn and she was screaming but no sound came.

She would be terrorised during daylight, roasted at sunset. He knew this from his observations. The painted man glanced towards the watcher. Both froze.

'What is it, darling?'

'Don't move. One of them's looking in this direction.'

Long, slow, painful seconds passed. The gang moved again, went away for their pleasures, their food.

'I don't think they saw me,' he said. Breathing again.

She said nothing, horrified at the prospect of becoming prey.

He decided that he would have to venture out. Do it now while they're occupied. Poor woman.

What was her story?

'I'm going out. I have to find you some food. Maybe a weapon. Anything.'

'Please don't. Please!'

'It's time.'

CLUELESS

By Gary J Byrnes 2007

I

The wasted man looked into his killer's eyes, smiled weakly. One last time, he held the page of crumpled newspaper close to his failing eyes, squinted, nodded.

'Yes. You can kill me now.'

Strong hands closed around the old man's neck, thumbs pressed on his throat. The killer trembled, hesitated. The old man closed his eyes.

'God is truth. Now do it.'

The killer's thumbs pressed harder into the windpipe. The victim struggled imperceptibly, eyes wide, but too late. The life that had been full - of happiness, the practice of medicine, family gatherings, the appreciation of poetry, the love of sunshine - slipped easily away. Since the world went crazy, the will to survive had faded to zero. The final image in his brain was of his beloved son, age six, pedalling his

new red tricycle in the patio garden, the happiest child on Earth. Then nothing. The body was lowered gently into the patch of moonlight on the dirt floor and the watching grey faces all around faded back into the darkness. Prayers were whispered from the darkness. But it was too late for prayers there.

'Goodbye, father,' said the killer as he folded the piece of newspaper and tucked it inside his rough shirt. He was confused and amazed at how easy it had been to kill his own father. This heap before him had given everything he had - finally his very life - for his son. Yet the hardness in the killer's heart meant that there could be no grief. So he dragged the bony body to the rear of the draughty billet and worked on the second phase of his plan. Dawn was seven hours away and there was much forming to be done.

II

The bored police captain sat uneasily in his spacious oak-panelled office. He shuffled through a slim pile of official reports, made the occasional note. Every few minutes, he stood and gazed through the window at the rushing city below. He was stifled. In truth, he had been considering a transfer into the military. As he straightened up his desk and prepared to leave for lunch, his secretary rapped at the door. He knew her knock.

'Enter.'

'Captain, I have a report that requires your urgent attention,' said the secretary, pointing towards the upstairs office suites.

'Oh? What is it?'

'A murder.'

'At last. I thought I would go mad. All the definitions have changed. I honestly don't know what constitutes a crime any more.'

He internally reprimanded himself for showing annoyance, however slight, with his political masters. But the secretary could be trusted. Still, he shot her a hard glance. She looked to the floor. A murder! His heart leapt. Somebody important? It must be.

He took the folder from her, flicked to the case page and quickly scanned it. Confusion, then anger seized him, made his hands shake.

'Is this some kind of joke? A Jew? What does the killing of a damned Jew matter?'

'Read on, Sir,' said the secretary.

He read on.

'The body was concealed in a golem. Curious.'

'Who better to uncover the truth?'

He scanned the wall, admired again his collection of framed press cuttings, diplomas and - in pride of place - his photo with the Great Leader.

'Yes, that's true. Nobody knows more about golems and Jew mysticism. But what does the formation of a supernatural saviour from clay have to do with some Jew infighting?'

'What is a golem, sir?'

'Adam was the first golem, mentioned in the Jew Talmud. Fashioned from dust, brought to life. In modern times, it symbolises a defender of the Jews. You make it from earth and water, make an inscription on its forehead, chant and chant some more. Then it will come to life and do your bidding. The most famous example is the Golem of Prague, believed to have defended the Jew ghetto there in the sixteenth century.'

'Ah, the one you - '

'Correct. The one I searched for in thirty-nine. According to legend, it lay in a secret room in a synagogue, awaiting the spell that would return it to life, to defend the Jews once more. I searched every synagogue, broke every wall. There was nothing. I disproved its existence, weakened the will of the Jews.' He glanced at the photograph, smiled. The Golem of Prague had made his reputation. 'Essentially, the golem is a metaphor. It represents the attainment of wisdom and holiness, the Godlike ability to create life. Just another stupid religious fairytale. But why conceal an irrelevant Jew's body in one?'

'A religious rite?'

'I don't know. The victim was of no importance. I smell a disagreement over money. Still, it will be good to get out of the office. I will leave for Dachau immediately. Send a message to the camp commander. I'll drive through the night, get there tomorrow early. Please arrange any necessary clearances.'

'Of course. Do you need a driver?'

'No, I need some freedom. And can you please inform my wife?'

He sat at his desk, began to write a list of items.

'I'll need to pack my camera, analysis equipment and probes, maybe some sausage and wine. A golem, eh? But first, lunch, something special.' He looked at her. 'Will you please join me? I apologise for

losing my temper just now.'

He stood and went to her, put his arms around her perfect waist. She smiled as he smelled her pinned-up hair, the Chanel perfume on her neck.

'And over a Jew!' she said, laughing.

He said 'A dead Jew!' and laughed with her.

III

The workers stood - swayed - in ragged lines on the camp's central square. Guards in winter coats circled, collars raised against the bitter January wind. Drooling Alsatians strained. The camp commander entered the square with his adjutants, addressed the workers.

'There was a killing in your billet last night,' he barked. 'The killing of Jews is solely the right of pure-blooded German officers and guards. The act cannot and will not be tolerated. Who was responsible? Tell me now!'

Silence, every freezing man staring at the cobbled ground.

'Very well. Take off your clothes.'

Resignedly, the two hundred and eight men of varying ages began to strip, peeling away flea-infested layers, exposing pallid, blotchy skin to the weak sun and freezing air.

'My only regret is that I am under orders to keep you alive until an investigator makes his way here from Berlin. An expert.'

At that word, the killer's heart lurched. His bait had worked, the trap was set. When the expert arrived, investigated the golem, then he would spring the trap. And escape from this cursed place. Switzerland just hours away.

'But I will beat you until you explain this golem to me,' continued the commander. 'Why bury a Jew like that?'

Nobody told about the golem. They knew it was a rhetorical question, asked by a brute, an unaware man. So the guards went through the ranks, beat and whipped and dehumanised the workers at random.

The commander looked to the twisting pipes and chimneys that loomed nearby. This was the final solution, right here, so why should they be distracted by the killing. What matter of it? He thought. A Jew?

The new ovens will see to them all soon. And this lot will be first in, he vowed. He strode to the nearest Jew, punched him hard in the stomach, kicked him, spat on him.

After twenty-seven minutes of abuse, night had fallen. So he ordered the workers to put their clothes back on and get indoors. The captain from Berlin wanted to preserve all evidence. That was all that saved them from a full night of pain. But it was alright to starve them. He watched as they trudged into their billet, to sleep four to a bunk under horsehair blankets.

'We'll be watching,' he screamed. 'Any Jew who touches the dead one shall join him instantly. Understood? Understood?'

Then he went to the ovens to supervise the first test, thankful that the dead Jew could not delay that milestone. The oven block was a low, redbrick building, which could have passed for a municipal swimming pool. It was well-lit inside and the air was noticeably warm and sweet-smelling. A steady hum throbbed through the space. Twenty naked and emaciated men stood in a ragged line, a dozen guards standing to attention as the commander entered.

The workers' eyes darted nervously. They knew something bad would happen, they just didn't know what. When, at last, the commander ordered them into the new showers, they smiled. They wanted to believe that, yes, they were simply being used to test the showers. This didn't necessarily make sense, but they clung to it anyway.

On the roof, pigeons squawked, squabbled for the best perches by the chimneys.

IV

The police captain found that it was easy to get in to Dachau. Only delay was a line of trucks ahead, each filled with gas cylinders. Finally, the iron gateway greeted ironically: WORK WILL SET YOU FREE. A kind of salvation for the human waste that would work, suffer and die there. An odd smell in the air, like roasting coffee. His papers were checked casually by a guard inside the gate, for who would want to come here without their own good reason? A long column of workers shuffled. Just ahead. The ragged men looked at him with the eyes of ghosts.

'What's that? Did one just smile at me?'

'I doubt that, sir. We kill the insane ones the day they arrive. They're no good for anything. You

may dine at the officers' mess. Immediately to your left.'

'Thank you. Then I need to see this dead Jew.'

'Block four, sir.'

'Very good. Where should I park?'

The guard indicated a space for the official car, made an entry on his report sheet and the investigation had begun. The captain was tired, should have taken a driver. Decided to get through it quickly, get away from the stink, find an inn, maybe that one he'd passed an hour before. Taking his camera and briefcase, he walked to the officer's mess. It was a pleasant stone building standing on its own, curiously fronted by a lawn and ornamental trees.

The mess was quiet so he was given the best table, beside a huge window which looked onto the lawn with the open square beyond. The waiter brought coffee and the day's paper, offered the menu, busied himself with a table of engineers in clean overalls nearby. They were in high spirits, discussing the oven schedule, the successful tests and the race to be the first Nazi camp to commence the actual extermination of the inferior races. Schnapps. They sent a glass to the captain, which he accepted warmly.

Then the captain read war news and ate good sausages, fried eggs, nutty bread. He drank four cups of coffee, didn't want to leave the cosy room. He tipped the waiter generously, loaded his camera, wished the engineers luck, went to examine a golem.

The golem was partially ruined, but still an impressive sight. A bulky male figure, over two metres in length, emerged seamlessly from the ground, hands by his side, face strong and impassive. Most of the golem's head and all the powerful body were carefully finished to a smoothness that didn't fit the matter. An area around the neck was torn away, fragments returning to the ground from whence they came. The dead Jew's face and upper body were exposed and starting to stink. His mouth was open, stuffed with dirt, his eyes caked. There, scratched into the dirt that formed the golem's forehead, he read - as expected - the Hebrew word EMET. He bent down, erased the first letter with his thumb. MET remained. Truth became death.

'Now you are deactivated, golem,' he said as a shiver rattled his spine.

The captain took photographs, observed how the earth that formed the golem had been scraped from the ground in the billet. That task had probably taken weeks, in preparation for the killing. But why? 'Why, golem?' No obvious clue. He searched his memory for every reference. Nothing clicked.

He left the building, which was little warmer than outside, ordered the waiting guard to send in

the suspects one at a time 'And tell them to hold out their hands, yes?'. He connected his ultraviolet bulb to its battery and lit the golem in a purple glow. The Jews came in. He held the bulb over each man's hands. The light sparkled off the minerals on the Jews' skin, residue from the concrete they were using to build the gas chambers and ovens. They filed in, filed out. Finally, hands that had little glow, too much dirt in every pore and fold. This is the man who made the golem.

'Stand there, Jew.'

To be thorough, he checked the rest of the sorry men. But there was just the one suspect. He advised the guard that the killer had been found and it would take just a little while to understand why. Just the two men in the billet now, their weak shadows falling across the golem. The captain lit a cigarette.

'Why did you kill him and why did you bury him inside a golem?'

The man just smiled weakly. Was this the one who had smiled earlier in the square? Something about him. Something odd, intangible.

'He wanted to die.'

'But why the golem?'

'What do you know of the golem?' asked the Jew.

'The Fuhrer has an interest in such matters. Know thine enemy and such matters. I know that the golem is a Jewish fantasy, a desperate cry for help by a doomed race. Your god has abandoned you, so why persevere with such matters?'

The Jew studied the captain, watched his mouth, his eyes, his hand movements.

'I did it out of respect,' answered the Jew. He straightened his back, lost his stoop, raised himself to a height equalling the captain.

'Are you trying to imitate my voice?' said the policeman.

'Are you trying to imitate my voice?'

'What is your game here?'

Now it was dark outside. It was time. The Jew reached inside his striped jacket, brought out a piece of folded newspaper. He handed it to the captain.

The police officer, now confused, unfolded the paper. Saw the story. The story about himself. The photograph of himself and Hitler. The smiling Jew hunters. He stared at the picture, his smiling face. His brain clicked as the actor's powerful hands closed around his throat and thumbs pressed his Adam's apple through his windpipe. He couldn't scream, just croaked, and his hands were too weak to break the

Jew's grip.

'I look like you, captain. Isn't that funny? A Jew that looks like a pure-blooded German officer.'

The Jew was strong. The captain fumbled for his pistol. Too late.

'Too good an opportunity to pass up, captain. We're not so different, we could be brothers. My father gave his life so that I might have a chance at mine. Thank you for being so predictable.'

The officer's life was extinguished.

'Enjoy hell.'

Now time was critical. The Jew undressed, removed the clothes from the body, put on the police uniform. A good fit, if a little loose around the stomach. But warmer. He smoked a cigarette and kept talking, imitating the captain's accent and voice modulations. He put his old clothes on the captain's body and set to work kicking the dead man's head.

'Filthy Jew!' he cried. Maybe the guard was listening.

Happy that the face was sufficiently disfigured, he lit another cigarette, cocked his cap slightly to one side, assumed the arrogant swagger of the superior race. He checked the captain's papers. They were not specific, allowed free travel. This was what he had prayed for most of all. Grinning, he packed up the captain's gear and left the billet for the last time.

Stop grinning, you fool.

The guard stood to attention.

'He admitted everything. The golem was just a stupid Jew attempt at salvation. I killed him for wasting everybody's time.'

He rubbed the tender knuckles of his right hand.

'Can you have the bodies cleared and burned? And advise the commander.'

The guard wasn't sure about any of this, but didn't dare question a captain.

'I need to get away from here. The smell of Jews is too much. How far to Switzerland? I promised my mistress I would bring back a fat diamond.'

'A short drive, sir. It's well signposted.'

'Very good. That's all.'

He walked to the temporary parking area, looked for the car with Berlin plates. A Mercedes. The key in his pocket fitted, so he began to breath again and drove to the gate. The guard didn't even check his papers, lifted the barrier, waved him through. He smiled, waved back.

His heart painfully pounding, blood rushing through his ears, he drove away from the miserable place. A long train approached slowly, drawing up beside the entrance. He glimpsed faces and hands through the gaps in the cattle cars' walls. He wished there was something he could do for them. Then he accepted reality, his reality, the reality of his escape. He rummaged in a basket on the passenger seat.

'Sausage! Bread!'

The smooth glass of a bottle. He pulled off the road and drank the wine greedily. As the dark towers of Dachau faded from his rear view mirror and the forest gave way to a view of moonlit snow-capped mountains, the Jew laughed.

'Oh my earnest captain, how could you not know the modern meaning of the word golem? Fool, stupid, clueless!'

GAIA'S EMBRACE

By Gary J Byrnes, 2008

Much colder now, the sun just a ghostly smudge, low in the murk. Dirty snow - polluted globs - drives into my face. I want to open my mouth, take the tumbling flakes into my parched throat, fight the urge. My dog furs, taken from a corpse in an old gas station, keep the worst of the weather at bay, but at the cost of a labrador's petrified stare.

After the fall, the lights went out, the grass stopped growing, the hope evaporated. Carnivores took over, cannibalism thrived. But the meat wouldn't – couldn't – last forever. The pyramid needs foundations. I pick at my coat, search out blackened fragments of dog meat, grind the hairy nuggets with sore, black teeth. I trudge through the black foam, seek some kind of shelter before the black horror of night.

Four days since I've met a living soul. That suicide camp I skirted near Disneyland. The corporates and the feds, those who ruined the world now help us to die, so that they can skin us and pick our bones and commodify our flesh in the final, grand insult. Pity those who give up. We must fight on, survive, pray that the planet will forgive us, let the flood of darkness subside. Down there, deep down, seeds sleep. And in the oceans' depths, plankton hibernate. This I pray. This I beg the Goddess.

There's a ridge ahead, maybe a cave to spend the night. I imagine a warm place, with an electric heater, a microwave, a fridge full of convenient snacks, an incandescent lightbulb, a TV or a newspaper to pass the dead hours. I smile at the memories of the easy life, the life that didn't require a thought about where the energy, the food, the commodities came from. Nobody cared, easy gratification was the thing. And did we do the thing. I used to write a blog about dogs.

My body tenses, blood petrified. Howling - the corporate screams of cannibals - not far behind. The animals have my trail. No time for analysis, I run, fall, take a mouthful of acrid sludge. I pick myself up, muffle my choking cough with a furry arm. The snow falls heavier now, the sun gone. Look, a hollow, sheltered from the worst of it. Take it. I curl into a ball, cover my body with handfuls of frozen muck. A long-dead branch helps break up my outline. Can they smell me? Oily black all around now, it's the end of the day. By my confused reckoning, Independence Day. I can smell fireworks, taste a hot dog. I suck at the fur.

Just my eyes look through the poisonous blanket. Part of me wants to give up, just go, just let some new generation have a clear shot. The shrieking monsters are nearer. I slowly close my blistered eyes, ease down into Gaia's embrace.

GHOST IN THE GRAIL

By Gary J Byrnes, 2004

My senses fade. Nerves switching off, withering. Confused sensations. My right eye is free. When I open it, I see a dark orange panorama of colour. Like an African sunset. But it's my quilt cover, an inch away

from my pupil. My hearing is still okay and easily picks up the melodies from the CD playing on my computer across the bedsit. Set to repeat on an endless loop until I'm found or the power is cut off again. Some U2, Best of 1990-2000. Class soundtrack for life, whatever your pursuit. Even better than the real thing.

I wonder what tune will be on when they break down my door. My sense of smell is limited, my nose pressed into the quilt. I detect the vague mustiness of sweat, skin, semen and the emissions of the invisible hordes of arachnid mites that share my bed. All yours now, boys. My fingers are blunt, like when they're frozen from playing snowballs. I know the bony springs are there in the mattress, just under my fingertips, but I can't make them out. My mouth has the dry taste of chalk and acid grapes. My stomach and bladder groan from the pressure of two pint glasses of water, thirty-six dissolved Solpadeine, a bottle of fairly pleasurable and expensive Bordeaux, a few large measures of cheap vodka and, for luck, five Valium, which slid down like oysters.

Before I collapsed on the bed, I smoked a large joint. Irish-grown, hydroponic Skunk. Not bad. Just to take the edge off the poisons. That was ten minutes ago. Now, face down on my rumpled bed in my squalid bedsit, I know I'm dying. You could say I'm totally fucked here. It's alright, it's alright, it's alright.

I'm lying in bed with my parents. Sunday morning. I'm about two or three. The sun's gushing in through a roof window. We're at the top of the house. I'm playing with a Dinky toy. It's a little red combine harvester and I'm harvesting my dad's chest hair. Mam laughs. Beautiful.

I want to piss, but I can't move. My thumb twitches. That's the sum total of my body's response to my brain's command to push myself up off the bed. Wasting away. Does it matter that I've pissed myself when they find me? Hardly. It comes out anyway. Faint warmth in my crotch, but I'm barely aware. Don't care. My complex mental processing system, the most powerful tool in Creation, begins to switch off. I sense that the sphincter that holds my bowel contents in will give up the ghost soon. I still don't care.

School. Plenty of alienation, but no more than anyone else. Irish. How I fucking hate doing Irish with the Christian Brothers. The time when one of the lads glues all the classroom doors shut over lunch hour. The raging, red-faced Brothers and the handyman taking the doors off the hinges. What a laugh. It was me.

The Grail is within reach. Take me to that other place. I expect feelings of warmth more intense than from pissing myself, but they don't come. The most powerful sensation is a stabbing pain in my

lower back. My liver. Choking in vast quantities of paracetamol and alcohol, it's in danger. Without a functioning liver, my blood becomes poison in minutes. Then I die.

Sex leads me to the Grail. In a way. First time. In a tomb in a graveyard. Believe that? We're kissing and fingering. Then I say I wish we had a condom. Then she says well I do. So I say can we? She says yes. Dark outside, but moonlight. Her skin is silvery. I fall in love a few more times. Then I meet The One. A summer in Ibiza. Then a rainy autumn in Dublin. Then she goes away. Hates the climate. You're in my mind, all of the time.

Just cycling home from school. Raining. Drizzly rain. Dirty. I've the right of way. This guy stops at the next junction. He pulls out. Too slow. He hits my front wheel. I'm not hurt, just in shock. Just a kid. The bastard stuffs a fiver into my hand and fucks off. A fiver! The bike costs twenty to fix. If I ever meet you, buddy. Too late for all that.

I spend my abundant free time learning. I'm seeking the meaning of life. As far as I can tell, there is no secret. No meaning. I search for it. It eludes me. Nobody else seems to know the answer either. I flirt with anyone who thinks they know. No good. The internet, the library, the church, the mosque. These are my temples of questions. Also the pub and the brothel. Dianetics, Hare Krishna, Buddha, yoga, all that crap. Tell me about it.

The beach. I'm maybe ten. I catch a little red crab. He's in a pool I make by the Atlantic's edge. I'm delighted with myself. When we have to leave the beach, I cry. I don't understand. I'm told to be a man. But how? I'm only ten. The crab is left to fend for himself.

I'm aware of my heartbeat. It pounds through my ears. It's slow. The pain in my liver is intense. I'm starting to twitch. It's in my hips, my spine. Every few minutes. The piss flows in spasms. I want a cigarette. Any brand, I don't care.

While I search fruitlessly for The Answer, the ghost comes to me. Quietly. Coolly. I'm sitting on the grass in the park one day. It's sunny. Humid. Nice girls in mini skirts. Birds gathering twigs. Nice smoke. Bells ringing somewhere nearby. Kind of idyllic. This guy walks over to me and casually introduces himself as Frank. He's old, a real codger. He's wearing a beige shirt, buttoned down at collar and cuffs. He's got big, brown, old man's shades on and a straw boater. And slacks. Brown, polyester slacks. He says hello and sits right down, creaking and complaining. Then he tells me how he's a ghost. Straight out. I say prove it. So he takes off his old man's shades and there, where his eyes should be, are two pools of inky black nothing. I say Okay, you're a ghost, now what? He tells me that I need to find the Holy Grail, the

actual Holy Grail, as that's where my answers are. I say Yeah, how would you know? He tells me that he's a ghost from the future and he knows what will make me happy. I say okay and he sits there for an hour more, saying nothing. So I turn to drugs. Take you out of this place.

I search more. I watch *Excalibur*, by John Boorman. It's on TV the night I meet the ghost, which I take to have deep meaning. The Grail is an Arthurian legend, but the film doesn't tell me much. Just that everyone who seeks it dies. And you have to be pure of heart to find it. That's me fucked then, I laugh. I rent *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Not as funny as it used to be. I make a mental note to avoid white rabbits. I get more facts from a Discovery Channel documentary and the internet. Turns out the Grail is the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper, water into wine, and some of his blood was collected in it as he died on the cross. Charming. Somehow this gives the Grail mystical powers. It lets you have communion with God. That's what I want. There are four or five churches around Europe and the Middle East that claim to have the actual, genuine Grail. I'm sure they're all hopelessly deluded. One is near Glastonbury and I waste weeks planning a joint Grail/Festival trip before I realise that, without a job or savings, I'm stuck in Dublin, probably forever. What you don't have, you don't need it now.

The light is fading. Sunset outside. An African-type sunset, maybe. With angry cars and snarling motorbikes instead of hyenas and wildebeest. Thinking about the time I find a MiniDisc player on the bus. It's a nice one. Sony. New. I put it in my pocket. I can confirm that your life does flash through your mind as you die. Bits here, pieces there. But I can also confirm that suicide is not painless. My liver is fucking crucifying me here. Is it getting better, or do you feel the same? The same.

The Grail only appears in literature about the twelfth century. Then it becomes part of pop culture. Dark Age pop culture. I think about it and figure the Grail is simply a work of fiction. There's no mention of it anywhere in the twelve hundred years from Jesus' crucifixion. Then we get Chretien de Troyes's unfinished poem *Le Conte de Graal*. The guy Chretien makes it up and it catches on with both peasants and royals. In the fifteenth century, Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* ties the Grail legend to the myth of England.

So there's no physical Grail, just the idea. Communion with God. It's all in your head. The ghost comes back. I'm in a bar. Another sunny day. Quiet pint and a cigarette. He sits beside me. I order him a whiskey and water. Jameson. I just know that's what he drinks. He swallows it and we talk. I'm the only one who notices anything strange about a guy like me having a pint and a chat in a pub with ghost. He tells me about how I'm right. The Grail is just a fiction. I feel good. He goes on to say how all religion is

also a fiction. Everything humans take as being real is false. Everything. I'm not too surprised. I always arrive at the same conclusions anyway. The only truth is that which is witnessed. All else is fiction. Energised by this affirmation, I discuss media conspiracies, pseudo-democracy and the class system that keeps everything running smoothly. The ghost nods at the appropriate times. I feel he is a kindred spirit.

Your dad's dead, says mam. I tell her she's a liar. She says no, he crashed the car. She cries and tries to hug me. I run away. He'd promised to bring me to the match. The liar.

I order more drinks and he takes a cigarette. He comes closer and whispers to me. He says that the Grail is a metaphor. It symbolises the act of becoming God. And it is attainable. Easily attainable. Here she comes.

I think about this for a long minute or two, watching the smoke from my cigarette escaping lazily into the mellow afternoon. So I ask how. So he tells me death. Death is the transition from finite chemical life to infinite spiritual life. He knows. He is the proof. If you could see what I've seen, he says.

I'm Hamlet in the school play. My friend Jack plays the ghost. Good craic. A creaky stage, old costumes, the Brothers helping the younger boys in the dressing rooms. The ghost is Hamlet's murdered father. Hamlet's search for meaning is fruitless.

Suicide is the answer, he says. No big deal. Once you're tired of being a chemical reaction with a spirit trapped inside, you toss the chemistry set aside. This is how you release the spirit. No big deal. Easy. Everyone's doing it, for Christ's sake. Man enough? Man enough to take the plunge? To become a God by choice, rather than wait for the pitiful agonies of old age? By choice. Faraway, so close, up with the clouds.

I tell him I'm ready and he tells me to look up the internet to find the best way to do it. Then he gets up and leaves, without even thanking me for the drinks. I drink some more.

When I look it up, I see that paracetamol, alcohol and tranquilisers are the way forward. I buy the Solpadeine in two different chemists, two twenty-fours, soluble of course. The codeine helps to numb my nerves while the paracetamol kills my liver. Some Valium I get from a mate who can get anything, even Viagra. No more need of them for me. I'm going beyond sex. I'm making love to the Universe. Then the alcohol, which I buy from the red-nosed drunk in my nearest off-licence. He says I must be having a party. I say Kind of, yeah. Now I'm ready.

Senses almost gone. I can move my right eyeball up a little, so I see the corner of the window. The moon rises, I think. A cold, stark light blazes onto a dying world. And this dying me.

I feel a presence. The hairs on the back of my neck feel it too. He's back. The sensation of somebody sitting down on the bed beside me. He talks. I can hear his words, but it's like he's away down a long tunnel. Did you come to raise the dead?

'You've done it now,' he whispers.

'I have,' I try to reply.

'You're a brave man,' he says, 'or a foolish one.'

'Foolish?'

'Well, why did you take me at face value so easily?'

'What?'

'I mean, how do you know I'm really from the future? You don't even know who I am.'

I'm confused. Low, heavy alarm bells begin to sound in my tired brain. Life is evaporating. My chemical reaction, the one that started with a sperm and an egg, is fizzing out. Darling, look at you.

'Who are you?'

'Who do you think I am?'

'I thought you were my father, like in Hamlet.'

'Sorry buddy, I'm you.'

'Me?'

'All ghosts are their beholders. People make ghosts in their head and then imagine them to life. That's just the way things are.'

'But are you from the future?'

'No. I'm from right now. Right here, right now.'

'So you don't have any answers?'

'None. I'm from inside your head. You made me. You made all this. Some would say you're mad. It's sad really.'

'What's sad?'

'It's sad that you're dying. You're stuck. Stuck badly. Listen, before you go, you want the good news or the bad news?'

'Always good news first.'

Stuck in a moment and you can't get out of it.

'Okay. The good news is that at least you're about to find out about God, heaven, infinity and all

that.'

'Great. So what's the bad news?'

'It's all fiction.'

A long silence and a kind of peace. My search is over.

'Heavy shit.'

'There is no heavier shit, my boy, than oblivion. Sorry.'

'Stay.'

Then the fizz turns to silence. The life is gone, dissipated to nothing. The chemical husk remains on the piss-soaked mattress, already decaying.

And the Ghost in the Grail waits patiently for its next host, the imagination of one more desperate knight on a doomed quest.

ONCE A MUSLIM

by Gary J Byrnes, 2004

One Tuesday, morning sunlight flooded into the room. Two people on a bed. One slept heavily, her bare breasts above the covers, rising and falling to the slow rhythm of her tiny, nasal snores. The other was awake, retching painfully into a large, white plastic bag. Ed's Easy Market, Sixth Avenue. Cartoon picture of Ed.

The self-harmed casualty sat on the edge of the bed, his bare feet heavy on the polished wooden floor. As another wave of nausea racked his body, he clenched the bag between his shaking knees, spitting more bright yellow bile to join the quarter pint that had come up in spasms over the previous hour. What is bile? He couldn't find an answer. How would you describe it? Battery acid, what that would taste like. About every four minutes, his body convulsed and ejected the poison it made itself. His tonsils burned and his throat was a volcano. After a while, the retching eased; there was nothing left, not even bile. The rhythmic retching continued, but it was just a painful mime, unproductive. The agony subsided.

He resolved, for the sixth time in his life, to never drink again. Remembering Jimi Hendrix and how he died, he walked unsteadily to the bathroom where he made a foul-smelling, amber piss. After washing his hands and face, with its puke-encrusted lips, he felt a little better. In the kitchen, he found some Alka-Seltzer and took two in a tall, frosted glass of water. He stood, waiting. After a minute or so, his stomach heaved and he threw up in the kitchen sink. He stood some more. After a few minutes, his body grew to like the traces of drug it had leached from the drink before expelling it. So he took some more. This stayed down.

Returning to his bed, he gazed for a few moments at the woman. What was her name? Jacqueline? J something. It would come. She looked like the kind of woman he always ended up with when he got too drunk. Silicon tits, model type. Her profile did have a strong touch of classical beauty to it, though. Result. Religion? Is she Jewish? Could be. Jesus, what a killer hangover. He got back into bed and sleep on, no college today, no anything. No nothing. Sleep the hangover from hell off, then try and have sex with her later. Maybe. Try and have an orgasm he would remember. What will she think?

His body was grateful for the water, the bladder release and the acid-neutralising painkillers, so it gave him the precious reward of sleep. It was just after 8.30 am and he rested in the arms of Morpheus (his expression). But the world turned, then came off the rails without him. Tom's comatose body twitched uneasily. He entered an edgy dream, in which he prepared a special meal for his gathered family and the rice kept turning into maggots. Dream Tom didn't understand what was happening and tried to laugh it off while hitting the booze. Pina Coladas. Meanwhile, a hijacked passenger jet flew low over the Village, not far from his apartment. Then it slammed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre.

An unusual sound followed. The cockroaches, living their frantic lives in the floors and walls around the dormant people, felt it loudest. A low rumble passed through the apartment building, racing through the tunnels and concrete, the fabric of Manhattan. Downtown, shattered glass, molten metal, fire and people rained onto the crowded streets. Tom's lover rolled over.

After a time, another jet flew low over the stunned city and hit the second of the Twin Towers. Another low rumble. Then more quietness. Emergency sirens screamed in the distance, comfortably far away. They slept on as the sun crept towards Greenwich Village, just outside their loft apartment's wooden-blinded window. Well after nine, the phone shrieked incessantly and woke him. She pulled the light quilt over her head, pouting her lips, but keeping her eyes tightly shut against what was a clear morning outside. He rubbed his head as he walked to the phone. It being cordless, it could be anywhere. His aching brain

had an extra sensitivity, so he found the handset quickly. It was under his neatly-folded jeans, there at the edge of the black leather couch.

'Hello...'

'Oh Tom, you're okay. Thank the heavens.' It was his mother, the one who had given him everything.

'Yeah, I'm fine. You sound frantic. What's wrong, Mom?'

'There's been an awful thing. Haven't you seen the news? Put it on.'

'I don't know where the remote is.'

'The Twin Towers have been attacked.'

'You what?'

'Just now. Turn it on.'

'Hang on.'

He put the phone on the coffee table, his hands trembling again. He scanned the room, then checked behind the couch cushions, under it and in the kitchen. No joy. Then he found the remote in the bathroom. He pointed it at the TV, squeezing the number 5, news channel, button as he walked back to the phone, still unphased.

'Hi Mom. Got it. Now what happened again?'

He never heard her answer. For at least thirty seconds, maybe longer, the news channel delivered overwhelming sensory overload. It was really happening. Smoke billowed from both towers. From every angle it looked bad, real bad. Flames leapt furiously from the shattered skyscrapers. At least the impacts were high, he thought, anyone below should be fine. Pity those poor bastards up top, who once enjoyed the most spectacular views in the world. Surely there should be helicopters pulling people off the roof? Can't they drop water from planes, like with forest fires? Confusion, crazy thoughts.

'When did this happen, Mom?'

'Less than an hour ago. Why are you still sleeping? Were you drinking?'

He couldn't take her lecturing, not now, so he cut her off gently, thanking her for the call. Pushing the end call button, he realised that he'd forgotten to ask if she was alright or needed any help. Later. For now, prioritise. Break the news to the lady in the quilt. Straighten up a bit. Shower? Go to bar. Chumleys? Drink. Flee city? If advised by emergency services, yes. If not, stay put and get drunk. Sounds like a plan. In a moment of clarity, he remembered her name. Jasmine. More clarity, please, he said in silent prayer to

the God of Memory.

'Jasmine. Jasmine, darling,' he gently shook her shoulder.

This was the perfect opportunity to show his sensitive side. Mustn't blow it, he thought, she's a beauty, best I snared in quite a while. The TV grabbed his attention with garbled reports about more hijacked jets in the sky. Maybe ten of them. Maybe heading for New York. All high buildings being evacuated. Holy Christ!

'Jasmine. Honey, you've got to wake up.'

'Stop. Go away. Can't a girl have a lie-in any more? What's this city coming to?'

'I'm sorry to wake you, honey. Something terrible's happened and you should know.'

She tuned out of her slumber and opened her eyes. As he explained what had happened, she saw the television. It was replaying footage of the second impact. Jesus H Christ! Did you see that?

'Oh my God!' she screamed as she jumped onto her knees. 'Daddy! He's in the tower!'

'They're doing everything they can to rescue them. I'm sure he'll be fine.'

Now the TV footage showed bodies falling from the towers' heights. Yes, I'd jump too, thought Tom.

'I'm going down there. I'm going!'

She found her crumpled clothes on the couch, all classy designer gear, never looked quite so swanky in the cold and sober light of day. She was badly rattled. But she still looked good.

'Wait. You won't be allowed near it. Surely you can see that?'

'Well I have to try.'

'Does your Dad have a cellphone?'

'Yes.'

In an instant, he had his phone and handed it to her as she stood with her skirt at her knees and her eyes swollen with ready tears. As she punched in her father's number, he went and got some orange juice and started a fresh coffee brew. He put her juice on the coffee table and waited for the coffee. The TV said that there were more hijacked planes in the air. It seemed that a genuine attempt to destroy America was in progress. Jasmine screamed. Wrong number. Slow down, girl. Try again. A pause. A delighted scream.

'He's okay! He's okay!' She held the phone to her chest with the pleasure of a child. Tom smiled. She kept talking to her dad. The coffee machine sighed deeply, its brewing job complete. He poured two

cups.

'NutraSweet? Cream?'

She didn't hear him, so he put it all on a stainless steel tray. He placed it by the OJ for her and took his coffee to the patio door. The blinds withdrew noisily to reveal a panicky situation below. Some people were running, most were walking quickly. The casual Village vibe had given way to an edgy hurriedness, more like Wall Street. He opened the door and stepped out onto the first floor, wrought iron balcony. The sound of a low-flying jet startled him. He spilt some coffee on his leg as he looked up at a jet coming out of the still-rising sun. It was low alright. An attack? It's gone. As he rubbed the burning coffee off his thigh, he remembered that he was naked. On any other day, he might have drawn some appreciative whistles and comments from the street below. Not today. People rushed by, their faces confused and anxious. So he went inside and found his clothes.

Pulling on his expensive jeans, his eyes remained stuck to the flatscreen TV, the silver bringer of bad news. For once, TV was a matter of life and death. Air Force jets patrolling Manhattan. That must be what went by just now. All aircraft grounded. All aircraft? That must be thousands of jets. Aircraft heading for Washington DC. More planes heading for Manhattan.

'Are you getting all this?'

She sat on the leather couch, her legs curled up under her body, the quilt off the bed and covering her so that only her model face was on view. She had tears of relief streaming down her reddened cheeks.

'It doesn't look good, does it?'

'No. Not good at all. How's your Dad?'

'On his way uptown, on foot. All the subways are closed. He says it's mayhem down there. He works on a low floor, the twelfth, so he got right out after the first plane hit.'

'Where's he headed? You guys live in Queens, am I right?'

'Yeah. You weren't so trashed after all. He's going to come for me and we'll walk up to the Queensboro Bridge and try and get across that way.'

'If it's still standing.'

He didn't mean to alarm her and regretted his comment, but the annihilation of the city was fast-becoming a possible prospect. Jesus. Drink. Smoke.

'It'll probably take him a couple of hours to get here. I'm having a spliff. Want a smoke?'

'Nah. But Tom, if you need to see your family or anything, I understand. Just go ahead.'

'I might have to make tracks soon, babe. It should be safe enough here for you, yeah? Would you mind? I'd hate leaving you here alone.' He was pleased with himself for keeping up the nice-guy front. Truth was, he actually did care about her, but was happy for her.

'You're so sweet, Tom. Can we get together again soon?'

'I'd really like that, babe. You're gorgeous.'

Now fully dressed in genuine Ck jeans and an open-necked white shirt, service-ironed, Tom realised that he hadn't had a shower. He decided not to bother today, just today. Who's going to pass comment on his personal hygiene today? Should be safe enough. He made a joint, with a large Bambu cigarette paper, a bud of finest Caribbean sensimilia and a cardboard filter. But what if the water goes? What if the power goes?

'I'm going to smoke this and have a shower. You need to take a shower, just go ahead. Take anything you need. Hear me?'

He went to the balcony again. It was busier now. Everyone had decided to get home. If we're going to die, it won't be at some dumb office with people we don't even like, it'll be with the wife, the kids, whoever. We'll all die together. One big, happy, dead family. He inhaled deeply, then coughed until he almost choked. The next inhalation was easier. A feeling of pleasurable lightness, accompanied by a tingling in his limbs, hit Tom and forced his ass onto a deck chair on the balcony. He continued to smoke, Jasmine calling out the latest grim updates. Washington had been hit. The damn Pentagon. Can you believe it?

'THC, please do your duty. Remove me from this brutal reality. Take me to a better place. No more clarity required. Can I just close my eyes and make it go away?'

He closed his eyes. Time melted, his stress eased. Two jets screamed by overhead. Must be more fighters, he guessed. No way any civilian jet's going to be allowed over Manhattan today. No fucking way. He finished the whole joint, then stood up dizzily. Looking out towards Bleecker, the heart of the Village, he felt disjointed, disconnected. The city rushed by. A flock of pigeons rose suddenly from a nearby roof. They wheeled through the clear sky and flapped by the balcony. Then a distant rumbling grew into a heavy roar. The balcony trembled beneath his feet.

'Hey Jasmine! You won't believe this! It's like an earthquake or something!'

'Tom, look! Jesus! Look!'

He went inside. Jasmine sat on the couch, transfixed by the TV, her right index finger pointing at the image of the South Tower collapsing in a monstrous cloud of dust and debris. It was slow motion

horror, but more hideous than any Stephen King story. This was real. Unbelievable, but real. The World Trade Centre coming down? Surely not?

'Holy fucking shit! I don't believe this! Is this for real?'

Her only response was to let her arm flop down onto her lap, then burst into tears. Again. Tom was torn between having a quick shower and watching the unfolding drama. The TV folks were certainly stunned and seemed to be losing their collective grip on the situation. The chunks of evil news raced relentlessly across the bottom of the screen. New footage of a smoking hole in the Pentagon Building jostled with images of the tower collapsing and nervous anchors. For the first time, Tom heard screams from the street outside. It was only just gone ten. He hugged Jasmine, her hot tears messing up his shirt. He decided to call his mother.

'Hi Mom. I knew you'd be in the office. You okay?'

'Fine, fine. You?'

'Still in one piece. Why don't you get home?'

'You know we've to finish a big order for tomorrow. Mr Lauren doesn't like to be kept waiting, you know.'

'I know, I know. But maybe he'll make an exception for today?'

'Well I don't know, do I?'

'Call him. Just call. You'll see.'

'The staff are a bit nervous, I must admit.'

'They're shitting themselves, Mom. Can't you see that? Call fucking Ralph, will you?'

'Thomas!'

'Sorry, but you're going to have to excuse a little bit of fucking language, Mom.' Silence. 'Look, I'm sorry.'

'Why don't you come up to us, Tom? Midtown's a lot further from all this than where you are. I'd like to see you. I would.'

Done deal.

'You're staying put? Okay, I'll get up there at some stage. Call me on my cell if there's any change of plan, will you?'

'I promise. See you soon. Take care. Good boy.'

Jasmine stayed on the couch. She hadn't touched her juice or her coffee. Tom cursed his parents'

Pakistani work ethic, then offered her a fresh cup, which she refused. She was in mild shock.

'Look, babe. I need to shower and I'm not going in there until you drink something. It'll do you good. Trust me.'

She drank some juice, so he took a shower. The bathroom was open plan, with the shower tray in the middle of the floor and a transparent plastic splash curtain hanging from the high ceiling. He quickly stripped, turned the big, old water knob and was soaked in a second. The water pressure was one of the key reasons he'd chosen this apartment over all the rest. Even by New York standards, this shower could kill. The water beat him relentlessly until his skin tingled. Like tiny fingers, it massaged his skull, soothing the last traces of his lousy hangover. The day had begun badly enough, but had since descended into some kind of farcical nightmare, one that's too ridiculous to be perceived as real, especially by an injured and dehydrated brain.

Water off, he slipped and slid across the marble floor to the towel cupboard. Choosing a huge, fluffy, white towel, he briskly dried his body and short black hair, then wrapped the towel around his waist. Feeling much better. Outside, Jasmine still sat transfixed by the TV.

'Okay, babe?'

'I'm fine. This is getting worse. A plane's come down in Pennsylvania of all places.'

'You're shitting me.'

The TV confirmed this latest event in a confused and psychotic morning. No confirmed reports of more jets heading for us, though. Could this be construed as good news, the absence of more bad news?

'Well I feel great. You should shower. I promise I won't try to get in there with you. Oh, Jasmine?'

'Yes?'

'Last night. Did we?'

'I'm so flattered. Not,' she smiled. 'No, stud. You were way too trashed. Like way.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. It was kinda nice just to cuddle. Really.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'Thanks. Now where's my Yves Saint Laurent?'

He looked through a chest of drawers and found a bottle of Polo. Very apt. A splash felt like a fragrant slap in the face. Perfect. Some gel in his hair, white gold neck chain, ring and Tag Heuer watch.

Fresh shirt. Check in mirror. Not bad. The double shower crossed his mind once more, but he dismissed it quickly. Sure, she might enjoy a bit of intimacy, on a self-reassuring, fin-de-monde kind of trip, but he wasn't going to shower again. Cellphone. Wallet. Besides, he just wanted out. Out into the maelstrom of the most awful day in history. Big gulp from big bottle of chilled Evian. History was literally being made all around him. Somebody would have to write that history down and TV just didn't cut it, from an experiential point of view.

'You going now?'

'Yeah, babe. I just gotta get out there. See my folks, you know?'

'You're good. Will you call me later?'

'Sure, what's your number? Did I get it from you last night?'

'No, but it's in your phone. I put it in while you were smoking that joint.'

'Thanks, babe. I'll call you. You sure you'll be okay here? Look, you better take a spare key, in case you need to go out for anything. You never know what'll happen.'

He found an elegant, ethnic leather key chain in a kitchen drawer and handed it to her. The fob was an elephant design and it had two keys linked to it for eternity, one for the apartment and one for the outer door. He kissed her lightly on the cheek. The salty smell and taste of a beach. She stayed on the couch, phone on her lap, tissues in her hand, TV bawling out its rumbling war news. He pulled on a tan leather sports jacket and blew a kiss from the open doorway, gently pulled the door closed and he was gone. Her eyes returned promptly to the TV while, inside her brain, she could think only of her recent, fading childhood and her last birthday party before her parents' divorce.

He closed the outer door, again quietly, and emerged from the safety of home into the wild ride of the street. His street. Minetta Street. Sidewalk radar on, expect the unexpected. Left to Bleecker and Sixth. Try Chumleys, see if it's open. Vodka. There were less people on the street now, which was still in deep morning shadow. No familiar faces, no neighbours. Sixth was busier, sunny, with crowds of office workers streaming up from downtown, all headed north. There were many tear-streaked faces, fading wills and fearful vibes. Not good. He was surprised at the numbers until a young Indian man told him that the Mayor had ordered the evacuation of everyone from south of Canal Street. Then his nervous face faded back into the crowd. Tom slowly crossed the avenue, the few cabs and buses swamped by people on the hoof. Snatches of conversation and dazed exclamations flew at his ears.

'Oh my God,' the ubiquitous phrase that was on everyone's lips.

'I saw it, I tell ya,' a young Hispanic man in a crumpled suit.

'Yeah on TV, like the rest of us,' his friend, who wore no jacket, sweating heavily.

'It was an American Airlines plane,' said a woman in office suit and sneakers, fifty-ish.

'I still can't believe this,' her companion wailed as she fell to her knees beside a newspaper vending machine. USA Today.

Tom went to help her up, but the friend gently shooed him away.

'There's nothing you can do. She hasn't heard from her husband. In WTC 1.'

Tom turned back into the heaving human current, his heart sinking by the second. Lots of dead people stories to come yet. The human cost hadn't really hit him until then.

'Keep going. Keep going. You can do this,' a grey-bearded man, overweight, panting, sweating and yet moving with determination, northwards to safety and maybe to sanity.

'Any news on your radio?' a black kid to his friend.

'What?' replied his friend, pointing to his headphones.

'Help, please. Help,' a feeble voice. Not a child, an old person.

He looked to his left and saw an old man sitting cross-legged on a cast-iron manhole cover. It had Brooklyn Foundry 1913 embossed on it, in strong, smooth relief. The man was pale and grey, you could almost say wizened. Tom easily lifted the old man's frail, exhausted body to the sidewalk.

'You from Brooklyn, old man?' A hunch.

'Yes, I need to get home to my wife. She's real scared and the phones are down.'

'Well you're going uptown, you know that?'

'God damn. Damn it. I was carried by the crowd. The trains are finished. I don't know.'

'Look, your best bet is to head back downtown a block, go left on Houston and keep going straight until you see water. Then you should see the bridge, down to your right. I heard it's open for people to walk across. Can you handle this?'

'I think so. Thanks. I was honestly lost, can you believe that? I lived here forty years and I got lost.'

'That's okay. You need water or anything?'

'Please.'

Tom found a street bottled water dispenser, fed it some coins and opened a plastic container of H2O for the old man. He gladly drank some of its life-giving contents. Tom twisted the cap back on and

stuffed the bottle in the old man's wrinkled overcoat. Then he pointed towards the corner and reminded him to stay on the inside of the sidewalk, take the first left, then look for the Brooklyn Bridge. And off he went, weaving unsteadily against the human tide.

'Poor fucker,' said Tom.

He left Sixth, the Avenue of the Americas, at last, and turned onto Bedford Street. Quieter now. People still rushed by, just not as many. Then, a curious thing. Two men were walking uptown on the opposite side of the street, right by Chumleys unmarked door. They were white, dusty, like phantoms. He crossed to them. Closer, he could see that they were businessmen, with once-expensive suits, briefcases still gripped pathetically, their contents rendered pointless by a terror from the sky. The men's eyes and mouths were wet stains in their complete coating of fine, dry age.

'What?' was all that Tom could ask. They stopped.

'From the tower. When it collapsed, we were five blocks away. This dust cloud came across. Like nothing you ever saw.'

'Like Hell, that's what.'

'You guys look like you could do with a drink.'

They looked at each other, still dazed and confused, but knowing he was right. They had survived the worst, surely? Tom hugged them both together, inhaling the acrid dust and having communion with these eyewitnesses to the horror.

'Come on. You're standing right outside my favourite bar and it looks open.'

He pushed the door which, being clean of any form of advertising or signage, you either knew what lay behind, or you didn't. Simple as that. He held it open as the two honoured guests walked through, both feeling slightly ashamed at their desperate condition. Not to worry. A similarly dust-attired woman sat at the bar, drinking a large Martini and smoking a thin cigar.

'Barman, these two gentlemen have survived downtown and they deserve a drink, if you please. Whiskey, guys?'

They nodded, hugged the dusty woman and took seats at the bar beside her. The barman was a friend of Tom's and, Tom knew, wouldn't charge these men today.

'Two whiskeys, Dan. Large.'

'And yourself, Tom?'

'I think a vodka tonic. Or should I have a screwdriver? No, tonic, for now, thanks.'

Pulling over a high stool, Tom put a fifty dollar bill on the counter. The barman charged him only for the vodka tonic.

'Survivors drink free here today,' he said.

With this sentiment, Tom couldn't agree more. It's part of western culture to have a stiff drink in times of great stress. Well, if this wasn't the perfect excuse to get loaded, what was? As he settled into his drink, he savoured the oasis effect of the bar. It calmed him. Time slowed again.

There were maybe a dozen other people in the bar, including the three dust-covered ghosts. Everyone looked at a TVs. Different channels showed different takes on the events, but there was no getting away from the shocking truth. The barman had been listening to a radio, which he brought to where Tom was sitting.

'Police band,' he said, with a curious grimace, like it was even more bad news. He increased the volume.

'This is 17. I can't hear from anybody. Hello?' a panicky, woman's voice.

Bursts of harsh static broke the snatches of talk as they skimmed the emergency services' bands.

'No survivors here,' a tired man.

'What's with the water pressure?' a man, speaking from a great distance, like the moon.

'Seven people reported missing in this office. You want names?' a police woman, with a Hispanic accent.

'Could be about to go,' a young man,.

'Thousands, I don't know,' a woman, matter-of-factly.

'The hospitals are okay, everyone's either dead or fine,' a tired-sounding middle-aged woman.

'Six units went up, then it came down. That was that. They're all dead! Everyone!' a breathless fire-fighter.

'Looting at 36th and Broadway. Any chance of some back-up?' a breathless cop.

This last piece of news startled Tom. That was near his parents' clothing factory and office. The thought of a breakdown in society, with lootings and killings hadn't occurred to him before then. He turned his attention from the radio, looking to the TV for more on this. The barman took the radio away.

'Could you get me another, Dan?'

'You okay, buddy?'

'Man, in a freaky kinda way, I feel good. Just glad to be alive, I guess.'

'Here's to that,' replied Dan, placing a fresh drink before Tom and tapping the bar counter with his knuckles. This meant that the drink was on him.

Tom smiled and moved closer to the two men he'd brought into the bar. They were sharing their experiences with the dusty woman, so he didn't interrupt, just listened. They spoke of the horror of seeing the second jet hit, as all the offices for blocks around had downed tools to gawp at the tragic spectacle. What they thought was a stupid accident suddenly became something far more sinister when the second plane flew in low. Before tens of thousands of disbelieving witnesses, World War 3 was declared. The two men were financial consultants and they spoke of seeing people jumping from a thousand feet up and of the fire crews racing to the heart of the darkness. The conversation made the hairs on the back of Tom's neck stand up. Then there were cries from the cluster of drinkers near the TVs. The second tower fell to earth. Oh my God.

The bar was filled with cries of dismay and exclamations to God. This was a killer blow. Maybe it had been inevitable after the collapse of the first tower. But it still shocked. The dusty woman burst into tears. She was comforted by her ghost companions. Tom called his mother. No answer and no machine. He swallowed his drink and looked around the dark bar. Covers of books by Hemingway, Salinger and Kerouac were framed proudly on the walls. All drank in Chumleys at one time or another. Tom had always hoped that some of their residual presence would rub off on him. He wanted to be a writer more than anything else. But he hadn't really tried it, as of yet. He knew his parents would blow a gasket if he even hinted at not wanting to take over the business. He resolved to at least try to write and, if it worked, to hell with fashion, let his sister take over.

He finished his drink and tried calling work again. Still no answer. He tried his parents' house. Machine. He left a message. He used the bathroom, pissing into the same urinal that Ernest Hemingway had doused with his own fragrant wastes. He returned to the bar, sat and drank for a long while. He ate some food, nachos and chicken pieces, which Dan put out for free. He drank more. People drifted into the bar all the while. The day had been shattered beyond recognition. There was no grasp of what to do. The normal Tuesday was gone. The void was being filled with alcohol and the comfort of human contact. Tomorrow would be a different story, but everybody knew in their gut that things would never be the same again. Never. Feeling drunk at last, he tipped the barman and made his way to the street.

'Take care, buddy.'

'Might see you later, maybe.'

Back towards Sixth and up Minetta, now bathed in sunshine. He buzzed the door as he passed the apartment, but no reply. Jasmine's Dad must've made it up and taken her home. How would he deal with the Jew thing and the Brooklyn thing if their relationship took? Later. On to Washington Square. A massive cloud of pigeons flew around the park, in an anti-clockwise loop. The arch at the top of the Square was thronged with people. Tom remembered that the arch afforded a remarkable view of the distant towers, framed within its high curve. He made his way to the best viewing position. For the first time that day, he had a view of the towers. Only they weren't there anymore, just a dirty, grey-white cloud. Nothing, empty space. The geography of Manhattan had been changed forever, the silent sentinels of commerce had vanished. Everybody was shocked. More tears, exclamations and dismay. Oh my God, the phrase of the day. Keep going.

East, past NYU, his part-time college, to Broadway. Broadway would take him directly to his family and, if they weren't at work, which seemed increasingly likely, they must be gone home. At least he would have made the effort. Approaching Broadway, he could see that there would indeed be some effort involved in reaching his destination. Hundreds, thousands of people milled past, from right to left, heading inexorably uptown. He had the best part of thirty blocks to travel, so jumped right in and allowed himself to be carried by the flow. He slowed as he passed the Eighth Street subway station. It was closed and armed national Guard soldiers stood by the entrance. They were nervous, jumpy. Some wore chemical protection suits. Tom's heart skipped a beat. First sign of the military on the streets. Not good.

The pace of the migration north wasn't as intense as he'd feared. Many of those who made the journey with him had already walked more than thirty blocks and they were tiring. The Flatiron was ahead, the narrow, triangle of skyscraper that was put up in 1903 on the strip of land where Broadway's drunken path across the ordered avenues of Manhattan met Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street. Halfway there. There was good-natured banter within the crowds. All the weary travellers were in some degree of shock. Humour and the spontaneous expression of emotion were two natural by-products, the confused brain's attempt to maintain sanity. Tom remained quiet, enjoying the intensity of the experience. The Flatiron passed, its ornate street clock proclaiming that it was now 3.30. The looming bulk of the Empire State Building asserted its presence through toothless gaps in the mouth of midtown. Others saw it, too.

'It's been emptied. My sister works there. They're expecting an attack any minute, she says,' it was a young woman, pulling at Tom's arm.

'Really? Did she make it out okay?'

'Yeah, it's just a shell now. Just a shell.'

She faded back into the crowd and Tom walked on. He couldn't help looking to the sky whenever the Empire State came into view, fearing another misguided plane would come roaring in from his peripheral vision. But all he saw were the ever-present, swooning, jet fighter vapour trails, plus some helicopters buzzing towards downtown. Macy's was ahead, marking the hub of New York's garment and fashion district. He tried the factory on his cellphone again. Still nothing.

Macy's was closing early. A phalanx of burly security men in navy blue outfits stood at the main entrance. The steel shutters were half way down, the harried shoppers being shoved gently out into the street. The security guys were of all colours and each was armed, either with a holstered sidearm or a nightstick. They watched the crowds with anticipation. But instead of raging mobs of anti-capitalist looters, they only had to fend off some confused well-to-dos who'd made their way to the store for distraction.

'No ma'am, you can't come in. We're closing. Haven't you seen the news?'

'Young man, it's my right to shop. I'm an American.'

Soon after, Tom made it to the factory. West 36th Street, near Seventh, Fashion Avenue. The lobby was quiet, with some of the building's occupants emerging from the elevators and rushing to the street. Most had evacuated, by the look of things. Tom found an empty elevator and punched for the 12th floor. In a few seconds, he was in the lobby of Black Swan Fashions, the label his parents had started. Though doing cutting and stitching for the big designers was the more glamorous side of the business, its real profits came from exporting western-designed clothes to the wealthy classes in Pakistan and, more recently, India.

Wang, the Chinese head of security was nearby and he came to Tom. No sign of anybody else about.

'Mr Swan. You okay?'

'Fine, Wang. Where's my parents?'

'Gone, Mr Swan. They just left five minutes ago. Gone home to Westchester, they said. Everyone else gone home too. Just a few left in back. The Mayor said there's no work tomorrow.'

'Yeah? Good. I tried to call.'

'Phones have been down since ten. We don't know why.'

'TV anywhere? I haven't caught up in a while.'

'In my office. Go ahead. I stay here.'

'Thanks.'

Tom went into Wang's office, with its bank of grainy, black-and-white views of the floor. An empty stairwell, a deserted locker room, banks of quiet sewing machines. The TV was on and the wall-to-ceiling-to-floor-to-wall coverage continued. Navy warships were out in the Atlantic, ready to shoot down any more hijacked planes. The Mayor said that some subway and bus routes were operating. When asked about how many had died in the attacks, he said "I don't think we want to speculate about that. More than any of us can bear." State buildings and important infrastructure locations had been evacuated across the country and there were no civilian planes in the air. Not one. The President was in an "undisclosed" location. Wow, they were really jumpy if they couldn't even guarantee the safety of the President so he could go about his business on the day when leadership's needed most. That was big. After a few minutes, the news began to repeat, so Tom left the office, wishing Wang well and telling him about the reports of looters he'd heard. Wang said not to worry, flashing Tom a dirty, big Colt automatic, which hung by his heart, inside his red blazer.

Back to Broadway. Once an Indian trail, leading from downtown trading posts to the upstate wilds, Broadway would still bring the committed traveller all the way to the state capital, Albany, 150 miles to the north. Today, he only needed it to bring him a couple more blocks. The urge for a drink pushed him to 42nd Street and the tattered human condition led him to the strip bars.

He stood on the sidewalk, deciding which bar would be best. He'd been in most of them before, but typically at five in the morning and with friends. Pussy Galore? Up Close & Personal? Vixens? Crowds bustled past, as they always do on 42nd. A man hit Tom hard with his shoulder as he pushed by.

'Watch it, Arab,' he said angrily.

'No man, you watch it,' called Tom after him. The man turned and came back.

'You a wise guy, Arab?' he asked. This guy was heavy, Italian and ugly.

'I'm not an Arab, I'm as American as you are,' pleaded Tom, confused and hurt.

The man punched Tom in the face and was gone, back into the swirling crowd. Tom was dazed. The pain of the blow surged past his adrenaline. He touched his cheek. Sore. His nose. Wet. He looked at his fingers. Blood. Some people stopped to stare. A young woman, a shop worker, gave him a tissue from her handbag. He wiped the blood from his face with the stale but welcome tissue. A cop approached. Another Italian-type.

'C'mon, move along. What's going on here?'

'This young man just got a punch. The guy that did it is gone that way,' answered Tom's Samaritan, pointing west along 42nd.

'You okay, buddy?'

'Yeah. I'm fine. The bastard called me an Arab.'

The crowd closed in. Some had pity on their faces. On or two had anger, even hate. The policeman brought his face to within an inch of Tom's, his hot breath reeking of garlic.

'Just move on, okay? I don't know if you are an Arab. My advice is to move on, okay? If anything starts, I'm not sure I can stop it. There's no back-up. None. Got that?'

'But what about the guy who hit me?'

'Look, stop busting my balls here, move on.'

Then he caught Tom by his shoulders, turned him around and propelled him back towards Broadway. Tom stumbled forward until he passed by the entrance to Pussy Galore again. The guy at the door called to him.

'Hey buddy! Beautiful ladies inside. Beer only five bucks. C'mon! What are you waiting for?'

'Nothing.'

Tom went inside. Down a flight of steep steps and deep into the bowels of 42nd Street, where everything was for sale and human flesh was just another commodity. This was a base Wall Street, a primitive trading floor. The bar was packed. The really long counter had a guy every yard, eyes up, gazing at the tall, voluptuous South American woman who gyrated lazily on a narrow stage behind the bar. There were more guys, and a few hookers, seated at round tables that were scattered across the dirty, unswept floor. The lighting was low and the music, Meatloaf, was loud. Tom shouldered his way to the bar and ordered a beer.

'Seven bucks,' said the middle-aged woman, who'd been a dancer until her breasts sagged beyond that invisible line that all strippers know and fear.

'Seven? Guy at the door said five.'

'That's Happy Hour. Six 'til eight. Starts in a half hour. Seven bucks.'

Tom paid, just glad to be off the menacing street. He drank three bottles of beer before the Happy Hour bell rang, to a mildly enthusiastic cheer from the customers. He didn't know if the cheer was to welcome the reduced beer price or the fact that three women now danced behind the bar. And each one of them was actually attractive. He caught the eye of the South American beauty, who rolled her hips, and

took off her bra-top while staring right into his eyes. She threw her bra and he caught it.

After two more songs, the set ended and the dancers left the stage, replaced by a young black woman with massive breasts, undoubtedly silicon, but Jesus! Tom sipped his beer and the Amazon came for her bra.

'Thanks for catching it. It would have been unwearable if you'd missed.' She had a cute accent and brown eyes so big, he could have gone for a walk in them.

'Glad to be of help. Where are you from?'

'Lower East Side. You mean originally? Brazil. Sao Paulo.'

'From Brazil to Pussy Galore, eh?'

'Nothing wrong with this. I make good money.'

Tom realised that he hadn't tipped her, hadn't made it clear how she pushed all his buttons. He fished in his wallet and tucked a fifty into her tiny, white G-string.

'Thank you so much. What's your name?'

'Tom. Tom Swan. Pleased to meet you.'

'My name is Annabella. Nice to meet you, Tom Swan.'

She took his hand and kissed it lightly. Tom bought her a beer, which she drank quickly. Then her break ended and she was back on display. She worked the stage, but always kept a close eye on Tom. Her dance companion was the black girl from mammary heaven, but Annabella ensured she didn't stay close to Tom for too long. The night faded into a beery, breasty haze, its tired monotony broken only by Annabella's infrequent breaks, each of which she spent with Tom.

'We're closing early tonight, Tommy boy. Before midnight. You sticking around?'

'I don't have much on,' he slurred.

'You want to maybe come back to my place after? For a drink?'

'Do you...?'

'You can stay the night for a hundred dollars. Interested?'

'Yes. Interested. Please.'

'You just hang on in there while I do the last few sets and then get changed. Okay?'

He nodded his assent. His head had been dropping, but it felt less heavy now. He was really drunk. Long, hard day. He went to the bathroom to freshen up. The cracked and dirty mirror showed him a cracked and dirty man. He was filthy, blood crusts on his nose and mouth, hair dishevelled. His white shirt

was a mess, covered in dust, sweat and stains, plus his own blood. There was no towel, paper or otherwise, in the toilet, so he decided to leave the clean-up for now. Maybe freshen up in Annabella's. He urinated into a blocked and leaking toilet, then returned to his nine dollar beer.

After some more Meatloaf-accompanied stripping, the show was over. Annabella disappeared with the other girls and the bar stopped selling overpriced booze. Nobody was hustled out yet, though. The dancers would have the opportunity to make some after-hours money before the place was emptied by the sleazy muscle that lurked in the shadows.

Tom drained his beer as Annabella reappeared. She looked fabulous, in skin tight black leggings and a low-cut turquoise blouse. Her rich, black hair flowed in curls over the shoulders of her brown leather jacket.

'Let's go, baby' she whispered into his ear.

They walked east, past Broadway. The streets were quiet now. The day had been too much for most people, so they stayed home and watched the news on TV. Over and over. Passing Times Square, the news screens and illuminated tickers flashed the same news. They found a cab, which brought them to Annabella's apartment. It was one of those ex-tenement jobs with old, small windows and dirty, great fire escapes. Straight from a movie. A cop movie with murders in it. He followed her up four flights of steps, marvelling at her ass.

Her apartment was small but clean. He'd half-expected to find her kids and babysitter waiting up for her, but the place was, thankfully, empty. He used her shower, paid her the agreed fee and had fast sex with her on her large but lumpy bed. He fell asleep quickly, holding tight to her curvy, warm body, so tight she could hardly breath. As he slept, she gently released herself from his embrace, propped herself up on an elbow and watched him closely, enjoying his presence, smiling wryly at how this man with money had landed in her life, today of all days. Sure that he was asleep, she found the remote on her bedside locker and turned on the news with the volume low. Tom slept heavily, the TV showing the horrible impacts again and again, as his addled brain tried to make sense of it all.

THE GARDEN AT THE INN

By Gary J Byrnes, 2004

"A similitude of the Garden which is promised unto those who keep their duty to Allah: Underneath it rivers flow; its food is everlasting, and its shade; this is the reward of those who keep their duty, while the reward of disbelievers is the Fire."

- The Glorious Koran. Surah 13. Ar-Rad, The Thunder. V 35.

I was face down in a smoking crater, my hands pressed to my ears, while fire and rage rained down all around me. Thundering shock waves shook my bones. A deafening roar came closer and I peered out of my hole to look for the source of the noise. No more than twenty metres away, a Soviet Hind helicopter gunship screamed past, sweeping the ground with its nose-mounted cannon which lashed fire all around the plain. Was I in hell?

I peered in the direction from which the gunship had come. Another helicopter approached, this time firing its unguided rockets in a pattern that mercifully stopped short of my hiding place. On the road ahead were two Soviet tanks, two armoured personnel carriers and some trucks. Flames leapt from the tanks and APCs. Bodies were scattered on the ground all about, some on fire. A few Russian soldiers were still alive, firing wildly at a position off to my left where the Hind was also concentrating its attention. Dusk was falling in the valley that stretched beyond.

Both helicopters circled round to bring their armaments to bear on what I knew must be the position taken by my comrades. I had lost my AK during the ambush, after the helicopters surprised us; my mind was disorientated from the explosive concussions and my eyes and ears were bleeding. A picture came to my mind of an anti-aircraft missile. I remembered that I had been carrying a Stinger on my back when we ambushed the Russian armoured patrol. Then I knew that I was in Afghanistan and we were winning a war against one of the world's Godless superpowers.

I carefully crept forward out of my hole and began feeling the ground in the gathering gloom. Smoke from the destroyed vehicles was burning my eyes and adding its stinking blackness to the approaching nightfall. I knew that time was short for the helicopters, which did not have night-flying capabilities. A dull glint caught my eye. I crawled a short distance on my stomach. It was my Stinger round, a launch tube with a missile inside. To make it operable, I had to find the separate grip stock and a battery coolant unit. I saw a body a few metres from me. It was my Stinger team colleague. His head had been

blown off by the helicopter. He was just seventeen years old. I would mourn him later.

He had carried the grip stock and three batteries in a backpack and, fortunately, they were undamaged. I had been well-trained in using the Stinger and within seconds I had fitted the grip to the launch tube and attached a heavy cylindrical battery. The battery coolant unit is vital as it supplies power to the missile until it launches and also supplies argon gas to cool the heat detector in the missile's nose. So my weapon was ready for firing. The first Hind had completed its circuit and was now coming straight for me. Its cannon blazed and rockets leapt from its wing pylons, turning the ground around me to smoking ruin. Shrapnel and rocks flew at me and I felt pain lash my body. Though my body pulsed with adrenalin and fear, I was ready to die as a martyr, fighting in the name of Allah. This readiness gave me a great elation deep inside. If this helicopter killed me, I would go directly to heaven, where Allah would meet me and give me eternal life and happiness. Only later would I come to appreciate how much of an advantage this gave us over our foes. Heaven for us was guaranteed, but the Christians and Jews were unsure whether they would go to hell or to their heaven. Truly a man must fear death if eternal damnation might await him? But I would not let this helicopter kill me. I was determined to destroy it and save my comrades.

I looked through the sight and put the Hind into the central range ring. I was ready to fire when a Russian soldier opened up on me with his Kalashnikov. A round pierced my side and I fell to the ground in agony. I looked towards my enemy in time to see a rocket-propelled grenade slam into his position, blasting him to pieces. I glanced towards my brothers and saw my commander. He was reloading his RPG launcher and gave me a thumbs-up and a big smile. Ignoring my pain, I retrieved my Stinger launcher and reacquired my target. With the Hind back in my sights, I pushed the safety actuator forward and down. This activated the missile's seeker, which gave a low tone. I then depressed the uncaging switch and heard the high-pitched whine which signalled that my missile had locked onto the enemy craft's engines. I kept my bearing on the helicopter as it passed directly over my head. With its exhaust ports in my sights, I squeezed the trigger. My missile shot forward from its launch tube. Lancing fire and thunder, it roared after the gunship. Within two seconds, it hit its target and a mighty explosion tore the gunship asunder. It fell to the ground and secondary explosions from its own munitions finished the job that my CIA-supplied missile had started. There would be no survivors from its two man crew.

I quickly removed the used launch tube, grabbed another BCU and looked around for a new missile round. As I scanned the sky, I could see the other gunship turn away and flee. The surviving

Russians from the burning convoy fought on, knowing that they stood no chance, but knowing too that we did not take prisoners. I had to find a gun, so I laid down the Stinger and left my hole. As my eyes combed the ground near where I had found my headless colleague, shadowy figures emerged from the smoke and dust beyond. One of the shadows came towards me and a man with God in his eyes, the beard of a Believer and an assault rifle held easily in his hands, called to me.

'May Allah forever aim through your eyes, brother Muhammad. Come, let's finish these infidels off,' he shouted joyously.

It was Osama, my commander in MAK, the Muslim organisation which had brought me from Pakistan to fight the disbelievers who had invaded the land of our Muslim brothers. I had met Osama just a few months before, at a Stinger training camp run by our American allies. Then I joined Osama's unit. With the Stinger, I brought down many enemy helicopters. Truly that marvellous device would bring us victory over the hated Russians.

'I have no gun,' I answered hoarsely.

He took an American-made automatic handgun from his waistband and threw it to me as Russian bullets hit the ground all around us. I cocked the gun and ran forward with my five brothers. There were only four Russians still alive. They crouched behind rocks and fired sporadically in our direction, still in total shock from the severity of our assault. Minutes before, we'd detonated two one thousand pound landmines when the tanks reached target position. Then we fired RPGs at the APCs and used heavy machine guns and AKs to kill anyone who tried to escape. We had killed more than twenty already. The survivors' faces were blackened and tear-streaked. They shouted at each other in panic. RPG rounds slammed into their positions as our AKs spat lead in controlled bursts. After a few minutes, the Russian fire stopped and we carefully approached the smoking convoy. All were dead, save one, a badly wounded sergeant. His right arm was blown off at the elbow and his eyes were wide with fear. Osama ordered that he be treated and returned to our base for questioning. He would be killed after he told us what he knew but, for now, a tourniquet was applied to his upper arm, stopping his arterial bleeding. He was given a morphine injection to lessen his pain, but the terror remained in his eyes. Osama turned to me.

'You have been shot,' he said, gesturing to my side.

I looked down and saw the gaping bullet wound on my left side, just above my belt. The pain was now starting to fight its way through my body's adrenaline surges.

'Yes, but I lived to see this great victory,' I replied, looking into the eyes of my leader.

'Allahu-Akbar, God is great, now rest,' he answered as he took a morphine injection from my first-aid pack and stuck it into my thigh, then dressed my wound.

'Allahu-Akbar.'

I sat on a rock while my comrades checked the area for further survivors and useful munitions. No more Russians were alive and a number of AKs were retrieved, along with a quantity of ammunition. We returned to our ambush site to search for the missing Stinger round. We found it and covered our dead comrade with rocks. Osama recited a few words from the Qur'an and we moved on. We walked a kilometre to our jeeps, which were concealed in a rocky gorge. Osama wrote in his notebook. The smoke from the destroyed convoy and helicopter could still be seen against the glowing sunset as darkness fell over the valley. We loaded the jeeps and began the drive to Jalalabad. Our prisoner begged for mercy but, as we spoke no Russian, his pleadings fell on deaf ears. After a while, he became quiet. A comrade checked his pulse and found that he had died. His body was kicked from the moving jeep as we drove through the night. Every bump on the rocky trail sent darts of pain across my abdomen. Eventually, I passed out.

I woke early the next day in a Mujahideen field hospital near Jalalabad. Our forces encircled the city and its only means of resupply was by Russian airlifts. My torso was bandaged tight and a saline drip was fixed to my arm. I tried to sit up, but pain shot through my body and I collapsed back onto my bed in agony. A Kuwaiti medic came to me and asked how I was feeling. He gave me some more morphine. Morphine is such a magical reliever of pain, it was truly fortuitous that Afghanistan was the best place in the world to grow the opium poppy.

Osama came to see me in the afternoon. He was accompanied by an American commando, who waited at the entrance to the tent.

'I must take a journey with my American friend,' he said, though he cast a curse on the man in Arabic.

'Where are you going? Can you trust him?' I asked, continuing the conversation in Arabic.

'The Americans are a necessary evil. We need their help now, but perhaps they will eventually come to regret it. Allah needs us to make sacrifices. I will return in a few days. Take these notebooks and study them when you can. Guard them with your life. The Russians are almost finished, but our work here is not. Here are some books you might also enjoy,' he said, handing me three paperbacks.

I later learned that he was going to an intelligence briefing with other Mujahideen leaders, Pakistani intelligence officers and American special forces to plan the final destruction of the Russian invaders. He

was given another large amount of cash by the Americans, to assist with the running of his unit. As the pain ebbed from my body and waves of pulsating opiate pleasure enveloped me, I fell into a deep slumber, gripping the notebooks tightly.

The next day, I awoke feeling much better. I was able to sit up in my bed and began to read. The paperbacks included one in English, 'Catch-22' by Joseph Heller, which made the US military look like deluded clowns. Very enjoyable. But I read that much later, choosing instead to concentrate on Osama's notebooks. Osama was a major player in a coalition to control the global supply of opium, the base ingredient for heroin. The plot brought all the key players in the region together. Warlords, politicians, even the CIA profited. Income from the opium trade, which amounted to many hundreds of millions of dollars per year, was used to fund the war against the Russians. Some of the cash found its way into the pockets of Afghan peasants and migrant workers - their only income. Osama's notes led me too to his conclusion, that the Americans would try to suppress the opium trade once the war was won and their aims had been achieved. The Mujahideen role in the opium business mainly involved organising workers to tend the crops and giving security to plantations and opium convoys. Many of the opium cultivation areas were known only to us. We would ensure it stayed that way. The Americans were happy to facilitate our supply of heroin to the bleak cities of Europe so they could keep their spending on the war to a minimum. Defeat of the 'Evil Empire' on the battlefield was the Christians' sole objective in Afghanistan and, to them, there were no rules.

Few expected that Islam would become their target after the Soviets and no Muslim expected that we would see American armies occupying the homeland of the Prophet, with Saudi Arabia, Iraq and even Afghanistan itself becoming regional military bases for the Crusaders. As that first Afghanistan war drew to a close, we fully expected to stay on in the region and concentrate on the opium trade, while studying the Qur'an with some of the great Islamic scholars and Imams in the region. Osama had spoken of going to war against Israel after Afghanistan, but defeating the Russians remained our only goal in those days. So much has happened since 9/11. Many surprises, but much has gone to plan also.

So I studied Osama's notes. I learned about the opium cultivation methods used in Afghanistan, the crop cycle and the network of warlords, civil servants and diplomats that was used to export the different forms of the drug. Osama was examining how to develop heroin processing labs. These would allow us to refine the raw opium into a drug that is worth ten times as much. An excellent long-term strategy, I agreed. When Osama returned, two weeks later, my injury was healed. A 7.62mm round had

gone through my side, without damaging any vital organs. He was very happy and gave me joyous news. The Soviets had signed a peace deal and would begin withdrawing their forces from Afghanistan within weeks. Word spread around the camp and everyone's mood was lifted greatly. He told me to rest for another two days and then we would go to Pakistan for some comfort, as a reward after our months of bitter combat.

I lay on my bunk, a wide smile fixed to my face. We had defeated the largest army in the world. Allah was truly with the Mujahideen, the Soldiers of God. Afghanistan had long been in the Soviets' sphere of influence. After the fall of the Shah of Iran, the Americans lost valuable listening posts and a military partner very close to the Soviet Union. When Deputy President Hafizullah Amin murdered Afghan President Taraki in 1979, he did so with American assistance. The Soviets, fearing that America would move into Afghanistan to make up for the loss of Iran, reacted. In December 1979, barely three months after he assumed control of Afghanistan, Amin was murdered by Soviet Spetsnaz commandos and four armoured divisions rolled in from the north. Karmal, leader of the Afghanistan Marxist party, was installed as president and the war of Islamic resistance began. The embryonic Mujahideen met in Peshawar and Pakistan's President Zia agreed arrangements to supply the Soldiers of God with the funding and military supplies that flowed in from the Islamic world and the Godless West. In uniting Muslims from across the region, the Soviets had shown us our true power. For almost ten years, we fought the Soviets at close quarters, where their artillery and air power were useless. Now they knew defeat. No Godless Marxist-Leninist ideology could withstand the might of Islam.

Osama came for me and we travelled by jeep to the mountains on the border with Pakistan, the road to Peshawar. These high lands would yet become my home. We inspected poppy fields and met our Mujahideen brothers in scattered bases. We stayed for a few days in a comfortable hut at the end of a long, lush poppy valley. We were hidden from the barren plains as paradise must be from disbelievers. Osama marked his chosen locations for the heroin laboratories on a map he carried and drew a sketch of the valley.

By then, I had a clear grasp of how opium was cultivated and its economic importance to the poor Afghans that made up ninety-nine percent of the population. We decided to travel onwards with an opium shipment which was headed for Peshawar.

We set off at sunset, using well-travelled mountain paths and avoiding all roads and villages. There were twelve mules in our caravan, each laden with two large baskets of raw opium. The caravan was protected by six Mujahideen fighters, each armed with an AK, knives and rocket-propelled grenades. The

Mujahideen were fearsome men, having fought in some of the bloodiest battles against the Russians. They came from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Egypt. They were my brothers and I felt safe with them, though we were in the most lawless place on earth. We had little to fear from the Russians, they were concentrated towards Kabul, but there were risks from bandits and Pakistani police. Occasionally, desperate bandits and border police would work together to try and steal Mujahideen opium. They rarely succeeded, but they were indeed devious.

We travelled on mountain ponies, which were sure-footed and had great endurance. The mountains were impressive, with towering peaks as far as the eye could see. It was cold at altitude and the scarcer oxygen meant that it was no easy trip. We crossed into Pakistan at the highest point on our journey, the trail covered in snow and the mules slipping often but proving their worth many times over. The border was marked with an Arabic inscription painted onto a boulder beside the trail. It read: 'One day, there shall be no borders between Muslim lands; we shall be one nation under Allah'. We smiled at this, each believing it completely.

The journey was uneventful and, four days later, we were on a low hill overlooking Peshawar. Our comrades continued north, into the Khyber pass, with their opium-laden mules. The frontier town of Landi Kotal, famous for its trade in drugs and guns, would be the destination for our opium. Once a fair price had been agreed with traders, the money would be spent on weapons or brought to one of the Mujahideen's private bankers in Peshawar for later use. Osama and I continued directly to Peshawar, as the caravan would have little need of our guns now that we were in Pakistan proper and stealth was its best weapon. I looked forward to relaxing and rebuilding my strength in Peshawar. Osama was fired with enthusiasm for establishing a base of operations for our brave fighters. A phantom base for a phantom guerrilla army.

We approached the outskirts of Peshawar from the west, with the imposing Balahisar Fort appearing to gaze at us and the other travellers on the road from the Khyber Pass. We would raise very little interest, just two dusty men on ponies, but we took the precaution of concealing our weapons in our saddlebags, keeping our automatic pistols tucked inside our robes. As we passed into the fort's shadow, Osama reminded me that it had been built by the Mughals in the sixteenth century. It now housed Peshawar's government offices and would, one day, be a target for us. We stayed in Old Peshawar and travelled to Chowk Yaadgar, the place of remembrance, a large public square which had been the focus of rallies against the British occupiers, and later, the Indian enemy.

'We will find a discrete inn, where we can rest without raising suspicion,' said Osama.

We found a good, family-run establishment with stables. We put our ponies in for food and a wash and cleansed ourselves of the dust and dirt from our trek over the mountains. We then went to the nearest mosque, as we had not prayed in clean surroundings since leaving Jalalabad.

'Having fed our souls, now we must change some money and feed our bodies,' smiled Osama.

We returned to Chowk Yaadgar and strolled across to the money changers on the west side of the square. The setting sun cast long shadows across the square and the bankers squatted in the coolness of evening's fall. Rows of men, mostly fat and wealthy looking, sat on hand-knotted carpets, their safes behind them, calculators and armed guards at close hand. Osama selected a money changer with whom he had an acquaintance.

In a matter of seconds, the money changer had calculated how many Pakistani rupees we would receive for our American dollars. After commission, it was almost thirty thousand rupees for four thousand dollars. That would be enough to get our organisation up and running, paid for by the Americans. He counted out the rupees from his safe and put the money in a finely woven waist pouch. Osama tied the pouch around his waist, while the banker counted the dollars. The deal was done. We shook hands and, as night fell, went in search of some food.

As we crossed the square, I suddenly felt great relief. It came upon me like a wave. We had left the war behind us and were surrounded by our own people, true Muslims, every one of whom supported our war against the Soviets. The inscription we had seen in the mountains was true, Allah united us and would help us to raise Islam to its destined position as the world's leading faith. As my mind relaxed, I became aware of the scents of flowers wafting on the warm air. Peshawar is famous for centuries as a place of gardens and blossoms. The scents blended with the irresistible smell of food and we made our way to a restaurant whose sign proudly proclaimed the finest chappli kebabs in Pakistan. We found a quiet table and were soon waited upon by the owner. He brought us chapplis, plates of naan bread with a spicy burger of beef mixed with corn flour, tomato and chillies with eggs on top. We ate the chapplis ravenously and washed them down with steaming hot green tea.

When our hunger was satisfied, the owner offered us a smoke of his hooka pipe. We were so happy to be in Peshawar, we accepted his offer. As the cool smoke entered my lungs, the nagging pain from my bullet wound faded away. Soon after, I was in a reverie. The sights, the sounds and the smells all around me carried me to a place I had not known, a plateau of peace and contentment. In the many years since,

I have not known such peace.

Soon, Osama began chattering with great enthusiasm about our organisation and how we would operate. MAK had brought us to Afghanistan, but it was controlled by the Pakistanis and Saudis, with too much influence from the Americans. We would create a new body, one with Islamic purity at its core and respect for its members more important than any geopolitical power games. We decided to use our money to purchase a guest house there in Peshawar. This would become our transit point for fighters going to, and coming from, Afghanistan and our heroin distribution centre. Our base. We would also use it as an administrative centre. Every fighter who joined our cause would have his personal details, including next-of-kin, kept here. Any fighter who gave his life in the service of Jihad would be mourned properly and his family would know of his braveness. Later, when Osama was given more of his family's fortune, all Al-Qaeda martyrs would go to heaven knowing their families would be looked after financially.

We had used Peshawari inns as transit posts for much of the war in Afghanistan. But the Americans and Pakistanis knew where they were. This would be the first inn known only to us.

The next morning, after prayers, we sought out an inn suitable for our needs. After a few hours, we discovered the perfect place. It was beside the Chowk Yadgar bird market and looked a fine building. The sign outside read 'Singing Bird Guest House'. It had a heavy, carved wooden door and ornamental balconies outside each window. We had brought our baggage and horses with us so that we could book into the potential acquisition as travellers and assess it in secrecy. The entrance hallway was wide and airy and the man seated at the desk welcomed us with a smile.

'May Allah be thanked for bringing you to us,' he said. Where have you come from?

'We have travelled far and are in need of some rest,' answered Osama.

'You don't have the dusty appearance of two who have travelled far,' ventured the innkeeper, though he did not have an interrogative tone to his voice.

'We arrived late last night and stayed in the first inn we found,' answered Osama.

'Well I thank you for coming to me today. I have not had good business these past years. With the war, nobody wants to travel to Kabul. But at least peace is now in the air.'

'Would it be possible for us to get a large room to share? One with a good view of the square?'

'But of course. May I take your names for the register of guests?'

We gave false names and the man showed us to our room. It was perfect. Soft, clean beds, good washing facilities and an excellent view of the square. We could observe many comings and goings without

being seen ourselves. And always birdsong in the background. Beautiful, uplifting birdsong.

The inn had sixteen bedrooms, a dining area, an ample kitchen and a good-sized office. It was secure, with buildings to either side and a walled garden to the rear. The inn could only be entered by the front door. The little garden provided an oasis of calm and beauty. Caged birds of all hues sang at sunrise and sunset. Well-watered plants, lush succulents and climbing ivies, the palpable coolness of shade all calmed the mind and soothed the body. It was a blessed place, a gift.

That evening, we had dinner with the innkeeper, who was a widower and whose children had long since grown up and left him. Osama enquired as to his trustworthiness. Osama had a gift of asking someone unknown to him a direct question. He could judge a man by his answer and could tell whether or not he could be trusted. He believed the innkeeper was honest and asked him directly if he would sell the inn to us, for use as a Mujahideen safe house.

The innkeeper thought our proposal over for a long while, asking many questions. We answered each question patiently. In the end, he agreed on a price of twenty-five thousand rupees, plus a monthly salary. We gave him all we had. He said it would be enough to cover all guests' costs for many moons, six at least. He seemed content, shaking our hands to seal the bargain before he retired to his bed.

Osama and I sat in the tiny garden late into the night, drinking mint tea and whispering about our achievement like excited children. Such plans we had. Such hopes, such dreams. The new moon showed her face to us, an omen of hope and success. So Al-Qaeda was truly born that night, in a garden of sleepy birds, fragrant flowers and dancing fireflies.

(This story was expanded to a full-length novel, THE DEATH OF OSAMA BIN LADEN.

Available from [scribd.com/garyjbyrnes](https://www.scribd.com/garyjbyrnes).)

PERHAPS A FEW

By Gary J Byrnes, 2009

He stood by the tall window, its twelve panes grimy with late summer dust. Gazing down at the busy street, he was filled with revulsion towards the people below.

‘Animals,’ he said, draining his glass of Scotch.

He went to the table by the wide fireplace and filled his glass. A waiter knocked and enquired if there was anything the Major wanted. More whisky.

He checked his watch then. The Doctor would arrive soon. Well, he was expected soon. Who knew what might happen in his primitive, Godforsaken place.

A fresh bottle arrived, the Doctor immediately behind.

They shook hands, the Major appalled by the filth of the man.

‘Damned awful place,’ said the Doctor. ‘The carriage ride in from the ferry was interminable.’

‘A drink?’

‘Thank you, yes. I don’t normally...’

The Major held up a hand, as if to say no excuses necessary. He filled two glasses and gestured towards the armchairs by the table.

‘Have you checked in?’

‘Yes, thank you. They’ve taken my bags. Do you mind if I go and change? Clean up?’

The Major looked at the little black case the Doctor carried.

‘That can wait, Doctor. Our business first.’

‘Here,’ he said, placing his case on the table, taking a little key from his waistcoat pocket, inserting it in the lock, hesitating. ‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Just open it.’

The case revealed two small glass phials, sealed with cork stoppers. The phials were cushioned in dark velvet. They might have been precious jewels.

The Doctor said ‘Phytophthora infestans, Major. In its most virulent form. We’ve been studying it in the labs at Kew since we picked up a sample in Belgium. It is a virulent form, particularly so.’

The Major picked up a vial with both hands, held it to the window, seemed unimpressed by the greyish powder.

‘Looks dead.’

‘It’s fine, Major. Now tell me. How do you plan to use it?’

The Major put the vial back in the case, wiped his hands on his trousers and took up his whisky again.

‘Will the wind spread it?’

‘Yes,’ mumbled the Doctor, his face quite pale. ‘Get to high ground on a windy day. That’s all.’

‘Excellent. The Irish, as you are now aware, are a backward race. They breed like rats, have no desire to progress and offer little to the Empire. Unskilled labour, yes, but our need for their backs is fading. Technology is the future and the Irish have little part to play in Victorian Britain.’

He finished his drink, poured another.

‘But they are human beings,’ countered the Doctor, ‘however useless and pathetic.’

‘That’s debatable, Doctor. Back to your question. I aim to use it to destabilise the population, but just a little. There have been rumblings in the west. The Catholics now think that they deserve land rights and we are concerned that the nationalists will use this against us. So, by attacking their ability to feed themselves, we plan to make them more dependant on the Crown.’

The Doctor’s legs suddenly weakened. He sat down heavily, took a long drink. His back was wet. He felt awful.

‘You can’t. It’s not right. What if it takes hold? It could be catastrophic.’

‘Those little vials? Hardly, Doctor. That’s just enough potato blight to wipe out a few fields’ worth. That will achieve our aims. None will die.’ He shrugged. ‘Well, perhaps a few.’

BLOOD ODYSSEY

By Gary J Byrnes, 2009

ONE - COLD FOR JUNE

A chill seeped through the body armour, my fingered gun barrel cold as a dead man. Where was summer?

Gone south, the jetstream pulling down northern air, that's what the weather woman said. Some azure light in the sky at eleven. That was something.

'I think I'll pop a grenade into the next skanger in a souped-up Subaru,' said Tony beside me, texting away. 'Just for a bit of heat, d'you know what I mean?'

'Yeah, man. How long more of this shite?'

'Thirty minutes. Then I'm off to get locked.'

'I'm with you.'

The uniforms, all hi-vis jackets, stiffened as each car inched forward to the checkpoint. Blue flashes, Stinger chains coiled on the footpath.

Somebody, try and drive through. Please.

The squat bulk of the Martello Tower loomed beside us, part of a network around the coast from Napoleonic times, keeping an eye out for the invasion that never came. Some meaning there but I can't find it.

'Tony?'

'Yep?'

'Is that the tower out of Ulysses?'

'Where Buck Mulligan had his shave? Yeah, that's the one. Not the tower in Sandymount, which is what most people think.'

'You've read it then?'

'Just the first chapter. Load of shite.'

'Any chance of a lend?'

'Nah. Gave it to Oxfam.'

That's that, then.

A signal came from a uniform and I tensed up. A nod of Tony's head and we moved closer, took up position beside the Lexus jeep with the blacked-out windows.

'It's the Builder,' whispered Tony, clear as day in my headset.

The rest of the unit perked up at the message. MP5 submachine guns were held a little more tightly as the uniforms checked tax discs and scrutinised the driver's licence.

The Builder sat calmly in the driver's seat. His shaved head carried a fake smile. Too clever to be carrying, but we'd go through the motions anyway. His bird sat beside him, wearing pyjamas, tapping her

iPhone, consciously disinterested.

Dirty prick controlled half the heroin supply in Dublin. You know the score: no need for me to pen a misery memoir.

But we could never nail the fucker.

His documents checked out, so the uniforms got him out into the night and went through the vehicle. He took a good look at me, trying to see through my balaclava. My index finger moved off the trigger guard.

Just try something, scum. Just try it. God, the urge. Where was it coming from?

Our Alsatian was brought into the game, sniffed around inside the car against the Builder's protestations.

'I don't want dog hair on me bleedin' seats.'

Go fuck yourself, buddy.

'Smelly mutt.'

What about a pig comment? Nothing. Go on, you dirt-peddling bastard. Try it.

Then a call across our ultra-secure network. Shooting in Dalkey. Dalkey? Probably just Bono on drugs, setting off fireworks with Mick Jagger.

The checkpoint was lifted. The Builder waved as he drove on to his luxury penthouse overlooking Dun Laoghaire harbour and yacht club. We got into our jeeps, used our sirens to tear south, away from Sandycove and into the swankiest part of the city.

The incident was nothing. Just two guys peppered by a shotgun blast. They panicked, crashed their Beemer on the Vico Road, there by the viewing spot. A few pellets here and there, a little blood. Scumbags. Nothing to say to us, no leads. Car fucked.

'Who was it then? Mary-fucking-Poppins?'

The bay below us glistened, a fat moon rising over Bray. Beautiful. Really nice. I could see why all the rich fucks set up shop in Dalkey.

And my woman, my lust, my heat, my faster faster heartbeat, just down the road. Jesus, all I wanted to do was go to her.

We did our bit for an hour as the local uniforms stopped cars, did their door-to-door. Gangs of kids swarmed about, age five up. Where do these little fuckers spring out of whenever we're around?

They couldn't live around here, could they? Just look at the mansions, nestling snugly against the hill, twelve foot high gates, blinking LEDs on the access panels.

Council flats were the pox on the landscape, leeching poison into the locality, but none in Dalkey, far as I knew. Was it the council's new policy of buying up the houses that nobody wants and parachuting in the scum? Dispersal? Funny to think of junky scum with their feral kids living next door to the rock stars and bankers.

'Give us a look at yer gun, mister.'

'Shouldn't you be in bed?'

'Ah go on.'

'Haven't you school in the morning?'

'Ah fuck off yeh bleedin' peeler cunt.'

A ten-year-old gurrier telling a heavily-armed cop to fuck off? We've lost the war. It's over. I walked back to Tony before I lost my temper, slapped a child. A fucking child.

'How're things with Penny?' he said. Not again.

'Nothing doing, man.'

'Jesus, can't you try and work it out? My missus loved our nights out, wants to see the Karaoke King back in action.'

Those days are gone.

Another buzz across the network. A real shooting. In Limerick this time. A lot more serious, with a couple of senior gangsters nailed to railway sleepers before being shot. Then they were chopped into mince by the 22.20 Heuston express. Classic.

'Fuuuck! They're going nuts down there. I'd say we'll be sent down again,' says Tony.

'Fuck that. If I've to endure another day down Stab City, I'm quitting this unit man.'

'Come on.'

'Fucking mean it.'

'What would you do? Go back to being a plod?'

'Detective, maybe. Get after some of the bastards, instead of standing around waiting to react.'

'That'd still mean two years on the beat with night classes on top. At your age? Don't be a sap.'

It was a screaming nightmare. But how to wake up? How?

TWO - WAITING

Penelope slept, dreamt of smiling horses. The TV yammered, no chance of white noise: Big Brother. A work file splayed across her lap, sales forecasts on the white carpet. Projections not looking so hot. Her son came into the room, drunk, clumsy, feeling sick, knocked his kneecap against the coffee table, the corner getting right under there.

‘Fuck!’

She stirred.

‘Mac. What time is it?’

‘Early enough. Go to bed, mam. He’s not coming home.’

She looked up at her boy, her dote, and wondered where all the years went.

‘I only stayed up over work, not this shite.’ TV off. ‘Big meeting tomorrow.’

So Mac made toasted cheese sandwiches and wet the tea while she went back over her papers. Her phone chimed, another message.

Wanna go for a drink?

She ate with her son. They chatted a little, went to their cold beds.

THREE - CALYPSO

At last, at her tiny place, that cottage with the red window frames and the hanging baskets and the long crack in the white plaster on the front wall. Down the little alley, the sea a black shadow behind me, the musty fresh smell of it – like her secret smell - and the sound of breaking waves, far, far out the strand. The street light flickers as I put the key in the lock, my hand trembling with that same excitement of the seventeen-year-old about to lose his virginity. The smell of that.

She’s waiting in the little parlour, her legs up under her on the couch, pink blanket over her, she lets it slip to the wooden floor, the blanket sighs, she’s wearing nothing, her arms out for me. I say There’s a hello, so she says Hello and I say I missed her. We kiss a wet and salty and primitive kiss and I am hard. No, harder. Is this all I need to be happy, my work forgotten, my broken past discarded? Yes, she says. Yes. And I take my clothes off, my old t-shirt with the faded Led Zeppelin logo, the fallen angel. Symbolic? Moi? My, Converse sneakers, jeans, shorts, the pile builds quickly and I’m in her, her hot thighs around

me tightly, my knees on the floor and it hurts and it hurts. The time melts and is it seconds or is it hours and I come inside her and she too cries out that yes, that's it, lover, that's it and she shakes and bites my shoulder. That hurts too, but not as much as my knees on that hard floor of oak from a tree that bloomed in majesty during the Famine and now, here it is, crucifying my blasted knees.

We sit together on the couch then and drink a Chilean merlot, Tesco, Finest, and her lips grow redder, her foot on my crotch, teasing me. And I drink and think and think and drink. God, what is she and what does she see in me?

What do you see in me? I say. She doesn't answer. I'd only said it to myself again. Don't ruin it. Don't fuck this up too. I savour the moment, the warm dryness of the wine, the imagined sunshine from an unknown continent half a planet away, captured by the fruit, the humble, glorious berry. She holds up her empty glass and I go to fill it, but instead she takes the bottle, guzzles it, streams of wine flowing down her neck, over those same veins that throb with the wine of her. So she looks at me then and I do her bidding. I lick the wine from her skin and I lick where there is no wine at all and I lick every inch of her. Every last inch.

It is morning and I am in her bed, she's on her side, facing away, always looking to the mirror, her arse presented to me, that meandering curve so perfect in its degrees, the hazy darkness of the divine cleft. I admire her body for an hour, its gentle swell like the sea a hundred yards away and I am called. Sleep, my sweet and I shall return with breakfast of sausages and black pudding and rashers so salty your tongue will cry out.

I leave gently, into the whiteness of morning by the beach and a blue sky owned by the fierce gulls that would take your eyes out.

The strand is quiet. I walk down to the water, a good half a mile away, the flats a mirage and ships, fine big ones, way off, looking like they're beached on the sand. Odd sensations on Sandymount Strand, like it's somewhere in-between, neither land nor sea. Well, that's exactly what it is, I say to a dead crab who says nothing back. And I see my mother in him, and she also mute as she decays in Glasnevin Cemetery and I wish I'd said so many things, Ma. But you never gave me a chance, Ma, you never gave me a chance. And I reach the water and it is cold. I see the little sails then, over at Dun Laoghaire, the rich kids out with daddy while mummy sits in the 4X4 on the pier and frets.

Back towards shore and I see my wife's face in the little pools of saltwater and his face as well – but I don't know who - and I swear to get even and I want to hit myself. All is ashes. But she's there, over there. Across the road, lying in that same position, wanting me to come with breakfast, and it's not all bad.

Over to a pile of jumbled rocks and I find a nice flat one to lay upon like an escaped lizard and the sun warms me and it's like I'm being born and there is a sound behind me, a nervous laugh and chatter and a woman and she's panting now and he's grunting and I edge along the rock and catch a glimpse and it makes me stir and I go the shop and buy breakfast and freshly-squeezed orange juice.

And I go to her.

FOUR - HARCOURT STREET, 0800

I reported for duty on Monday, an automaton, donned the blue canvas, checked and loaded my Sig Sauer 226, no need for heavy armaments until our operational requirements had been outlined. I was on the edge, walked rigidly down the lino-floored corridor, sat in the briefing room with the eleven others in my unit.

There was no small talk, no How was the weekend?, no What a night last night. I nodded to Tony, got a little wink back.

The CO arrived, told us to sit.

'First things first. We're not going to Limerick.'

Thank fuck. There was a positive murmur. Not just me then.

'Unit C is already deployed,' he continued. Good luck to them. 'We're on standby here, so get some target practice in. Ye'll be needing it before this day is out.' Then, alarmingly, he looked straight at me, 'I can guarantee ye that.'

Then he droned on for a good twenty minutes about current gang activity in the Dublin Metropolitan Area, the display behind him flashing to display hotspot activity, those red ones possibly linked to any or all of the top five gangs.

It was like watching TV.

Right after the briefing he told me to follow him down to his office.

He sat there, reading printouts, stood when I entered. A bit of a smile. He was from Cork. Sharp.

'Coffee?'

‘Thanks.’

He punched buttons on his desk phone and asked his assistant to head out to Java Republic for a couple of What? Black? Yes.

‘I hear you want out.’

‘Straight to the point. Yes, I do.’

He sat down on the edge of his desk, pointed to a chair. I sat down for my bollicking.

‘Now I don’t like this kind of talk in my unit. I don’t want any bad apples here, you know that.’

‘Sir.’

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘It’s this whole reactive thing. That’s all we do is react. You can’t prevent crime by having armed checkpoints on every corner.’

‘So you think becoming a detective will let you solve the gang wars?’

‘I really don’t know.’

‘Hmm,’ he said as our coffees and Danishes were dropped in. Gift. ‘You’re not very decisive for a crimefighting superhero. Or is that the way you’re meant to be?’ he smiled.

‘Maybe. Maybe not.’

We laughed at that and enjoyed our coffee for a couple of minutes while he took a call about security preparations for some poncey ambassador.

‘See,’ he said, pointing at the phone. ‘I accept your point. They want us to be babysitters when we’re not out in the field. And that’s where we should be: out hammering the fuckers.’

‘I’m with you there.’

‘And that job you did, delivering pizzas to the drug dealers’ party in Finglas and collaring that prick O’Malley with the coke on his nose. Brilliant. Legend.’

‘Yeah, but only got a year for possession.’

‘That’s not the point. He’s in the Joy. That’s what matters. Look, do me this favour will you?’

‘I’ll try.’

‘You’ve only been in the unit, what, four months?’

‘About that.’

‘So give it a few more. You fit in really well and everybody likes you. You’re an excellent shot and you’ve a brain on you. Stay with us and you’ll have your opportunities.’

‘What kind?’

‘Everything you want.’

He stuffed the vanilla custard Danish into his mouth and drained the coffee cup. Then he stood in front of me and held out his hand, looking straight into my eyes.

I stood, shook his hand.

‘See you tonight,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘If you want to make a real difference. 2300. Location A3 H7.’

I knew exactly where he meant, a quiet location by the river, south inner city. We used it for meeting snitches and the like.

‘Okay.’

‘Civvies, clean. Okay?’

‘Okay to drive?’

He thought for a second.

‘Yeah. Now go shoot some paper.’

FIVE – TOWN

O’Connell Street throbbed, still hundreds milling about, taxis lined up to the horizon, much traffic. It was warm, so lots of flesh out. And the spire, shining against the virile indigo sky. Just a five second look at it all as I drove east on the quays to the Custom House and across the Liffey to the Southside again, left and straight out past the coffin ship to the gloomy stillness of Sir John Rogerson’s Quay.

Quieter here. After the Ferryman pub, a car waited, engine running, lights off, across from a rusty lightship. I pulled in behind, looked around as I walked to the inside rear door. It clicked open. A driver in front and my boss in the back seat.

‘Thanks for coming.’

‘No bother. What’s happening?’

He had a large padded envelope on his lap, his right hand resting on it.

‘See anything out there?’

‘Is that the Builder’s jeep up the street?’

‘Correct.’

‘No muscle?’

‘No. He’s on a social call tonight. He’s got a bird in that apartment block. Comes here twice a week. Clockwork.’

I glanced at the package, knew what was coming.

‘Is this a hit?’ I asked.

He smiled, nodded.

‘Are you able for this?’

‘Is this the first?’

‘No. But we’re only getting started.’

I looked around the street, analysed my escape route, held out my hand.

‘Good man. It’s a Glock. Clean. Cocked. Into the river when you’re done. Anyone stops you, show your ID and keep driving. Just get away. Any questions?’

There was nothing. My heart was beating on the back of my tongue, my mouth arid.

So I stood in the shadows of the red ship, the package in my hand. A fog horn cut through the night air from down the river. I shivered.

A click. The Builder was at the lobby door, half out, checking the street. He didn’t spot me, so he left the building.

I took the gun from the envelope, flicked off the safety catch.

NINE TWELVE

By Gary J Byrnes, 2005

The day after it happened, she began to detach from life. Things didn't feel different exactly, just distant, unimportant. Irrelevant.

Her kids, normally driving her to love and rage in equal measure, simply faded into the background.

No longer did they manipulate her emotion, determine her state. They became irrelevant somehow. And her husband, never a hugely emotional or expressive person anyway, just sat before the TV, made the odd comment. She just said Yeah or Whatever. And when he wasn't around, she couldn't picture his face, which she thought was odd.

One morning, watching TV and eating Cheerios, the kids started giggling loudly.

'Did they say what I think they said?' she asked

'Why, mom? What did they say?' asked her son, laughing more.

'I thought they said - . Oh, whatever.'

So she went to her husband, who was fixing his Italian blue silk tie in the bedroom.

'You know, I could swear I heard a cartoon character say Fuck just now.'

He stopped to look at her.

'Jeez, honey. You're too stressed.'

'But the kids laughed.'

He shrugged, to say And? So she went back to the breakfast counter and listened intently to the rest of the show. Then they all left, the kids to school, he to work downtown.

She smoked cigarettes and drank espressos until afternoon came. Then she found herself in front of the bathroom mirror, suddenly felt like shed been staring at herself for hours.

She said 'What are you doing, exactly?'

'Just looking,' she answered.

Life was on fast forward, but there was no pause button. She became a spectator, aware of what she was doing - mostly - but that sense of detachment growing stronger. She had little interest in food, wine, fashion: all the things that used to mean so much. Even the sky outside looked different. Was it always so grey, bubbling grey like there was a hidden fire up there, somewhere? And all the time, like for months now?

Months. What did that mean? She looked at the clock. Like it always was. But different. She stood before it for a long time until she realized. No ticking. No motion. Time frozen at seven-twenty. AM or PM, she didn't know: it was an old grandfather clock. Literally, her grandfather's; a wedding gift.

So she forgot about the clock and went in search of her wedding photographs.

Later, the family sat down to dinner, the TV yammering away on low volume. Always the same stuff: people talking; music videos; ads for things and services that simply didn't make sense: Are you sick

and tired of having a colon that just won't listen? Where's the street that's good to eat? Did you know that eleven out of ten kids don't? Why is Rex?

Always questions, no obvious answers.

There was little conversation over dinner. Shortly after the dishes had been cleared and put in the dishwasher, she felt a void in her stomach.

'What did we have for dinner?' she asked.

Nobody could remember.

Another day, another question. The city outside looks and sounds the same as ever: car horns blaring; people moving; choppers buzzing; jets soaring. But why does everything seem slower? She went to the clock again. No ticking, time same as it ever was. But the pendulum was swinging now. Silently. It occurred to her that this style of clock used to be known as a coffin clock.

She watched daytime TV again. In one of the shows - a panel quiz where contestants had to tell lies in order to win prizes - she heard mention of work.

'Why aren't I in work?' she asked herself. 'What do I work at? Where?'

She went through the family documents files, her tired eyes flicking across her history. But nothing made sense, the documents just didn't add up. She got bored and put all the papers in the garbage chute. They didn't matter any more.

Later that night, while watching a movie - a comedy which wasn't at all funny - with her husband, she stood in front of the TV.

'Honey?'

'Tell me something.'

'Anything. What?'

'Do I work?'

'Of course you work. How else could we afford the rent on this place?'

'Okay. What do I do?'

'You work with money don't you? You're an accountant, or a broker, or something like that.'

'Why haven't I been going to work lately?'

'Haven't you?' His face showed that he was puzzled, a little scared, even.

'Fine. Where do I work?'

'Look, you can see it.'

He walked to her and took her hand. Then he led her to the window and opened the drapes. There, glistening in the middle distance, downtown, were two gleaming golden towers, illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun.

'You work in the World Trade Center. You love it there.'

Next day, alone again, she did some research. On the web, she learnt about the city in which she lived, as if discovering New York for the first time, like some old Dutch explorer.

It began to make sense, at last. She looked at all the news sites. All the news was just like on TV, crappy, mindless stuff. Okay, so the penguin in Central Park Zoo had five chicks. Great, but hardly a headline grabber. So there would be a full moon tonight. Was this really news? When she read the breathless copy about an amazing exhibition by second year photography students at Parsons - breaking news! - it clicked.

So she went back into the archives of the New York Times. Back a couple of weeks and the news was the same: no news. Then, the hammer blow. From nowhere, talk of imminent nuclear war. Seemed that America was on the verge of launching a nuclear strike against seven countries across the Middle East. Pakistan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan. This wasn't just sabre-rattling; there were dozens of pages of reports and commentary. Eyewitnesses spoke of US aircraft launching pre-emptive strikes on radar posts in Iran, of commandoes destroying naval vessels in the Persian Gulf, of the assassination of the Syrian dictator. All this happened on one day. The reports of widespread panic didn't gel. She looked outside, down at the street. Normality. Could this have been the scene of mass panic just a couple of weeks before? But the reports seemed so real, utterly believable. But why? What had made everyone fear nuclear war? And why had the fear dissipated like a ghost at sunrise?

She went back a day earlier, half-afraid of what she might discover. The images screamed at her: the Twin Towers - her place of work - engulfed in bright orange fireballs against a piercing blue sky. The smoke and dust of the collapses. The pain and confusion on the streets below. She sat and stared.

'What in hell does it all mean?' she asked.

'What, honey?' said her husband, who'd come in without making a sound. 'Hey. Where are the kids?'

'I don't know. Look. Do you see this? The Twin Towers were blown up!'

'You're kidding me! What? Now?'

'No. Before. I don't know when. Look.'

She got up from the computer so he could scroll through the unbelievable news. She thought hard about how any of it could make sense.

'I think I'm dead,' she said. 'I'm a ghost.'

'What are you saying?'

His face was pale, showed no emotion. Not even confusion. He turned back to the screen.

'I was in the Towers when the planes hit. I didn't make it. I've been here since. This is my purgatory. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.'

He wasn't listening, clicking through the news reports, going on to the day after, the nuclear tension.

She went to the window, looked out, more confused now.

'Honey, there are reports here of missile launches in Pakistan and Iran. ICBMs, maybe nuclear.'

'Yeah?'

She stared at the clean geometric edifices. The Towers are still there. Still there.

'It's not just me who's dead,' she said quietly to her reflection in the window pane. 'We're all dead. All of us.'

THE END