

New Fiction by Jesse Neevogelman: Improv



The terrorist sat down at the cafe at a quarter to one. She had always been punctual. Beneath her clothing was a bomb improvised from ammonium nitrate. The bomb was uncomfortable. She kept thinking things that didn't matter, like: ripping off the tape will be painful, or, it's going to leave red marks on my skin. She raised her hand and ordered a cappuccino and a chocolate croissant. Why not a little pleasure? Someone had left a newspaper at the table. She didn't feel the need to read it. She knew all about what was happening now, here and all over. She looked around the cafe at the other people eating and drinking. She didn't feel much of anything. It was difficult to imagine, really, that anything would be different in just a few minutes. She'd been in a hundred cafes just like

this. A thousand! Nothing strange had ever happened before.

She looked down at the newspaper on the table. The sports section. How about that? She'd thought it was the news, but it was just sports. She didn't know anything about sports. Everything going on in the world and there was just sports happening and that's what people chose to read about. She looked around the cafe. All these people care about sports! she thought. She picked up the section and flipped through the games, reading the box scores carefully. This is what people care about, she said to herself, as if trying to understand something. She flipped to a page that printed the scores of local high school games. She hadn't known newspapers printed high school games. She found her high school and read through the names of the varsity basketball players and how many points they had scored. She recognized a last name: Ramakrishnan. She had known a Ramakrishnan in high school. It wasn't a very common last name. His son, maybe. She checked and saw that he had scored twenty-eight points, the most in the game. A surge of pride went through her, so strong and sudden it made her anxious. What did he have to do with her? Nothing.

Her food came. She paid and left a very big tip. Why not? The waitress smiled at her. A lesbian maybe. Go ahead, what did she care? That wasn't the type of thing that mattered to her. She took a bite of the croissant and sipped the cappuccino. Ah. Very good. She would miss this. What a funny thought. She wouldn't be able to miss anything. She laughed to herself. What a funny time to be funny! Her heart was beating very fast. She felt calm, but her heart was beating very fast. As if it were someone else's heart. Wouldn't that be something. The bomb goes off and this old man across the world dies because she'd actually had *his* heart all along. That's who I would apologize to, she thought. I had no idea, she would tell his widow. It wasn't supposed to be him.

She checked the time. There was a clock above the cash

register and another by the door. Everyone had their phones out, and their phones were also clocks. There were clocks everywhere. She thought the world had done away with clocks, but she was wrong. There were clocks on the coffee machines. Timers beside the ovens she could see through a glass window into the bakery. Clocks that everyone thought would go on forever, but really they would stop. A clock strapped to her chest. Oh no officer, she thought. I'm sorry for the confusion. As you can see, that's just a clock.

Just a few minutes now. Not one o'clock, actually, but twelve-fifty-nine. A little joke to herself. They would all expect it at one on the dot. But no, it was twelve-fifty-nine. As good a time as any! she wanted to scream. She pictured a hero from a movie, running computer programs in some dark basement, cracking the code. At twelve-fifty-five the program would blink—they've got her. At a cafe just down the street. The hero checks the clock (there's always a clock nearby). We've got five minutes! he yells and rushes out the door, and as he's running as fast as he can, he knows he has just enough time to stop her. Five minutes, the exact right amount, and he throws open the cafe door, just over a minute to spare, just what he needs, and then, boom. Twelve-fifty-nine. Ha!

The clock above the door crowed. She looked up wildly, heart pounding. Was it time? But the clock was five minutes fast. She let out a breath. She hadn't been scared before, but now she was. Stupid clock. It should be illegal to have the wrong time on a clock. There should be someone whose job it is to go around to all the clocks and arrest the people putting the wrong time on them. She looked at the clock again, and this time she was surprised to find the clock was not just a clock, but was actually the belly of a wooden rooster. Cock clock, she thought, which calmed her. Then she looked around and saw all sorts of other things she hadn't noticed: paintings of cardinals and shakers shaped like crows and napkin holders that looked like hummingbirds. It was a bird cafe! Ten minutes

she'd been here, and she hadn't even realized it was bird themed. Some old lady must really love birds, she thought, and for some reason this made her feel very sad. All those goddamn bird decorations that would be broken. That woman's whole life collecting bird decorations and one day she starts this cafe and thinks, these goddamn bird decorations are just too darn special to sit cooped up in my dusty old house. The public needs to see all these freaking birds. So she puts them in the cafe. Bird mugs and bird napkins. Close up photos of beaks in tulips. Signs with bird sayings like, Toucan Do It!, and Flock Off!

Flock off! she wanted to yell, but didn't. All of you, just flock the flock off!

She touched the lump under her shirt. There was no button. Just time. The clock would reach a certain time, and then it would happen. This made it easier. She didn't have to press anything or do anything. It was almost like it was happening to her. She just showed up at this place and it happened. If you zoomed out far enough, she thought, there was no difference between her and any of them. She had been a normal woman and then, at some point, the circumstances of her life had led her to this particular cafe at this particular time and the bomb had exploded and she had died. Just another victim.

Would anything change? She didn't know. She wasn't really concerned with that part. She was concerned with doing something. She was concerned with being heard. They would hear her, alright, this time. What they did after, well, that was up to them. There was danger, always, in telling people what to do or how to feel. That's how people end up in situations like hers. People always telling them what to do and how to feel until one day they turn around and say, No! This is what I am doing and this is how I feel!

She had always known there were bad things in the world. It

seemed to her that all the people who tried the hardest to fix them only made it worse. There was a book she liked that said, All our worst crimes are committed out of enthusiasm. Yes! she had thought. That's exactly it. All these bad things in the world because people think they know the answer and want to get there. She had lived her life with this in mind. Skeptical. Questioning everything. Always knowing everything that was wrong but never knowing anything that was right. Then, years later, she had reread the book and noticed another line: skepticism is the rapture of impasse. And she thought, Yes, that's exactly it. All these years of questioning, she had done nothing. She had been skeptical, so she had done nothing. Then all the things she had been skeptical of just happened. Better, then, to commit a crime with enthusiasm!

So she had made the bomb. Improvised explosive device. That's what they called it in the news. Not that anyone would know that, only reading the sports section. It was an evocative name. It made it sound desperate and spontaneous. It demonstrated creativity. That's not a very good bomb, a professional bomb maker might say. Well, I had to improvise!

She had taken an improv class in college. She had hated it. She had hated it because the people were awful. The people were awful and they stared at her when she didn't know what to say and they were always saying things like, The first rule of improv is always say, Yes! No one seemed to know any other rules. They just repeated that rule over and over. Once, when it was her turn in class, she got on stage and her partner said, Wow, what a crazy day at the zoo! What a stupid thing to say, she thought. Even if it had been a crazy day at the zoo, she would never have said that. She didn't know how to respond to something so stupid. So she just said, Yes. I can't believe what the chimpanzee did to that tiger! Yes, she said. The zookeeper is going to have some trouble cleaning up! Yes, she said. She said, Yes, over and over until the teacher had said, Alright, that's enough, and she was allowed to sit

down again.

She looked around at the cafe and suddenly it felt to her as if she were stuck again in a terrible improv scene. That everyone around her was trying poorly, desperately, to seem natural. Off-the-cuff. She took another bite of croissant and closed her eyes, imagining herself on stage. There's a bomb in the cafe! Yes, she said. Everyone is going to die! Yes, she said. Yes, yes. She squeezed her eyes. Yes, yes, yes. She squeezed as hard as she could. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Even the word eyes was made of yes. Yesses everywhere. Yes, yes, yes. Eyes closed yes. If her eyes were closed when it happened, it was like she wasn't there. If her eyes were closed when it happened, it was like she wasn't there. If she closed her eyes when it happened.

Yes.

But she couldn't make it. She peeked. She had always been a peeker. At Christmas, tearing the corners off wrapping paper to see what was hidden inside. That's how she felt then, in her final seconds, squinting through one eye at the people around her. Sticking her eye to the dark hole she had ripped in the paper and hoping it would let her see some new world that had not yet come to pass. But it was just the same. Just people. Yes. And she realized with a start that each of these people had their own lives, and that those lives were about to end. But that, of course, was the point.