

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.

New Poetry by Amalie Flynn:

“Strip”

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New Poem by Eric Chandler: “The Path Through Security”

my family lived there before it was Maine
before this was a even a country

they still live there so we visit
we fly in and out of the Jetport

we place our shoes in a tray
empty our pockets on the way home out west

the guy asked which one of us was Grace
I pointed to the infant perched on my arm

she was selected for
enhanced security screening



it's possible that happened in the same tunnel of air
the hijackers passed through

the imaginary tube
the human-shaped ribbon through time

the permanent trace of their movement through space
I could see it all at once

we have repeatedly walked in
the steps of those men

the hotel manager where they stayed
had a nervous breakdown

I flew over the Pentagon and Manhattan
one year afterward

other deployments far away
that all blend together

we drove by that hotel again
as we left Maine this summer

we take off our shoes
in a new part of the terminal

and our departure gate is always next

to the old closed security line

little kids run around under a big toy airplane
that hangs over that spot now

a child-sized control tower and terminal building
instead of x-ray machines

we wait to go home
and I always look over

at the playground
in the path of destruction

Killing is Easy



Killing is the easiest thing in the world, easier than sex. Easier than raising a family or bringing a child into the world, or building a house. Easier than painting or writing or music. Killing is easier than sleeping.

Before November 13th I couldn't have told you how 9-11-2001 felt. Watching the attacks in Paris, the killing, I remembered helplessness and a physical desire for vengeance, like fourteen years were gone. As I texted, instant-messaged, and emailed friends in the affected zone, desperate for news of their safety, I felt alternately overwhelmed by great sadness and murderous rage. It was clear then, as it is now, who was responsible for the injustice. And I wanted payback.

For those who have not felt the call to kill in the name of humanity and justice, it is a godly thing. Reading through the initial reports, I choked back tears, heading—where else?—to the gym, hoping to direct this urgent compulsion toward the noble desire for blood somewhere, *anywhere* else. On the

stationary bicycle and then at the weight machines watching the President express solidarity for France, I fantasized about my phone buzzing with news from a friend in the military calling me back into service. In the interests of honesty, I must admit that this fantasy involved him telling me that the time had come to clean the Middle East once and for all. From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, and then the vast Atlantic Ocean off North Africa, we would impose the final, drastic justice this situation demanded. That's what I *felt*.

That's what the ISIS terrorists in Paris must have felt reading news of defeat after emasculating defeat for their movement in Sinjar, in Syria, and in Iraq. *We have to do something, and the time has come to martyr ourselves.* They must have believed that they were correct to act, and enjoyed the doing of the deed. Killing is the easiest thing in the world.

That seems to be what Francois Hollande was feeling when he implicitly committed France to military action against ISIS, [saying, among other similar things: "It is an act of war that was committed by a terrorist army, a jihadist army, Daesh, against France,"](#) and "we will lead the fight and it will be merciless." As the attacks in Paris unfolded, I felt the same way.

And that's the end of civilization. It's popular to joke about France and Europe being weak, now, being militarily incompetent in the aftermath of WWII, but things are stable in Europe and mostly safe as a result of progress, the horror our grandfathers felt when they saw the red gurgling aftermath of their deeds stain their hands, uniforms, and relationship with the natural world. Until 1945, Europe and Eurasia had been by orders of magnitude the most violent place in the world. Mechanisms for killing on an industrial scale never imagined anywhere else were [pioneered in the USA and perfected in Europe.](#) When it comes to violence, Europeans are not just masters—historically, they transcended mastery, elevating it

first to the realm of [art](#), then, later, incorporating it. It took us *seventy years* to suppress the natural European inclination toward violence on a level that would make even a hardened ISIS fighter's stomach turn and head spin—seventy years, which, in the balance, doesn't seem like enough by half.

The end of civilization is when one acts based on feeling, and especially that low, barbaric feeling to hurt or murder. I know, because I felt it last night—can still feel it in waves. In Afghanistan, over 26 months, the two infantry units I was with killed hundreds of Taliban, Haqqani and Al Qaeda operatives (over 1,000?), taking 15 deaths in return—killing is easy. But what gives me and people like me our reason for being in the liberal West—the evolution of liberal arts education, pioneering human and then civil rights, the components that make us superior to ISIS terrorists, dogs, spiders, and lizards, is that we aspire to be *reasonable*—we are capable of thinking out the logical conclusion of our actions, and acting differently given different stimuli, acting generously and altruistically although our bodies may tell us that killing or hurting would be more satisfying. This was the lesson the West drew in the aftermath of World War II, on the bodies of so many Germans, Russians, Japanese Ukrainians, Polish, French and more—enough bodies to make Syria again three times over. This is the lesson I drew from war, as well. Killing is easy, but it only leads to more killing. And there's always more blood than you know. Blood that's sticky, and gets everywhere.

No, people who believe that France and Europe are weak because they do not act sufficiently violently for their tastes (a) don't [know the region's extraordinarily bloody history](#), and (b) don't believe in [biology](#). Civilization and modern western society—cultural constructs that encourage cooperation and altruistic behavior—are fragile things, to be nurtured and protected at all costs. They're the product of peace—in times

of war, people become callous, cease caring about others, wantonly indulge in the brief satisfaction of vendetta. Small acts of humanity and grace become acts of heroism.

After finishing my time at the gym and hearing from most of my friends, I returned home, showered, and headed out to dinner with a photojournalist friend to discuss the night's events, process what I was feeling. Fielding phone calls on the drive into the city, drinking beers over Turkish kabab, then calling other friends on the way back home, I was able to stabilize the urge to hurt and hate, to ameliorate it with that greatest benefit of living in a developed, safe, modern country—generosity.

Even though it feels now like hurting the people responsible will provide satisfaction, will solve the hurt, logic as well as a brilliant, counterintuitive moral imperative unearthed by Christianity instruct us that the answer in this situation is to open our arms wider, to “turn the other cheek” to the despicable insult, rather than to deliver injustice for injustice, which other cultural traditions and tribal societies would demand. The parasites that are ISIS feed on blood and violence. Let us, by our actions, demonstrate our moral and intellectual superiority. History instructs that we can go down a very different path—we could, if we desired, exterminate them—but then, wouldn't we just be descending to their primitive, animalistic level?

Some reactionaries in European and Western society would have us do precisely that—would turn Europe back into the brutes they were 70 years ago, or would indulge America's more recent penchant for “shock and awe.” This is a popular anti-intellectual idea on the right: we should do what feels good, and to hell with civilization. To beat the thugs we must become thugs ourselves. Here's [one such confused hot-take](#). Suffice it to say, if someone is advocating for violence, that person is not civilized, nor do they support humanistic values like charity, magnanimity, and (ultimately) the precious

elements that separate humans from apes or lower forms of animals. They are the enemy.

On the other side are people who over-intellectualize the problem, and would stifle any action—those of the extreme left, who have already begun stating their belief that one should experience a similar emotional reaction to the bombing of Baghdad as one does to the terrorist attack on Paris. As a humanist, I am more sympathetic to a call for widespread empathy than I am to kill (empathy is harder than killing), but it is unsympathetic at best (and inhuman at worst) to claim before the bodies are cold that one must feel for all humans or for none at all. It is a truism among this group that Westerners don't react to tragedy outside their community (this type of reaction is already common on Facebook and Twitter), as though feeling for anyone besides oneself were a bad thing if one does not immediately think to feel for everyone. Insisting that others should have to always feel empathy for everyone all the time (that they should behave like bodhisattvas or saints) or never at all (that they should behave like sociopaths) exhibits an interesting symmetry, but doesn't seem like a useful or productive philosophical or human stance, although I suppose it must make the claimer feel satisfied on some level or they wouldn't do it.

For the 95% of Westerners affected by the tragedy who aren't on the extreme left or right, it is okay to feel something about this tragedy without needing to take on the problems of the world. If you have a personal connection to Paris, as many do, rage or grief is perfectly natural. If you don't have a personal connection to Paris but do to the event, rage or grief is perfectly natural. And in either case, regardless of how one's natural and appropriate feelings on the subject (I certainly felt like exerting violent vengeance on behalf of a city in which I have lived, visited often, and to which I have longstanding and deep cultural ties), the next step is to divorce thought from feeling, and to act in keeping with our

cultural, humanist heritage: reasonably.

This means collectively and individually helping other humans (the refugees of war, the migrants, the aspirational and the cursed), because it's within our power to do so. We of the developed world are not infected with that ideological disease one finds so often among the mad, the disaffected, and those living in chronic poverty—the cultural *imperative* to kill—as are these ISIS psychopaths. No—let us this once demonstrate our laudable willpower and the unquestionable superiority of our civilization by letting the sword fall from our hand—let us show our strength by not doing what is easy, and easier for Americans and Europeans than anything else (for we are the best at that easy task of killing)—let us show the world mercy. Otherwise we risk losing what was bought with an ocean of our own blood.