My Digest

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Martin Amis: The last days of Muhammad Atta

'No physical, documentary, or analytical evidence provides a convincing explanation of why [Muhammad] Atta and [Abdulaziz al] Omari drove to Portland, Maine, from Boston on the morning of September 10, only to return to Logan on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11'
The 9/11 Commission Report

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On 11 September 2001, he opened his eyes at 4am, in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta's last day began.

What was the scene of this awakening? A room in a hotel, of the type designated as 'budget' in his guidebook - one up from 'basic'. It was a Repose Inn, part of a chain. But it wasn't like the other Repose Inns he had lodged at: brisk, hygienic establishments. This place was ponderous and labyrinthine, and as elderly as most of its clientele. And it was cheap. So. The padded nylon quilt as weighty as a lead vest; the big cuboid television on the dresser opposite; and the dented white fridge - where, as it happened, Muhammad Atta's reason for coming to Portland, Maine, lay cooling on its shelf... The particular frugality of these final weeks was part of a peer-group piety contest that he was laconically going along with. Like the others, he was attending to his prayers, disbursing his alms, washing often, eating little, sleeping little. (But he wasn't like the others.) Days earlier, their surplus operational funds - about $26,000 - had been abstemiously wired back to the go-between in Dubai.

He slid from the bed and called Abdulaziz, who was already stirring, and perhaps already praying, next door. Then to the bathroom: the chore of ablution, the ordeal of excretion, the torment of depilation. He activated the shower nozzle and removed his undershorts. He stepped within, submitting to the cold and clammy caress of the plastic curtain on his calf and thigh. Then he spent an unbelievably long time trying to remove a hair from the bar of soap; the alien strand kept changing its shape - question-mark, infinity symbol - but stayed in place; and the bar of soap, no bigger than a bookmatch when he began, barely existed when he finished. Next, as sometimes happens in these old, massive and essentially well-intentioned and broad-handed hotels, the water gave a gulp and then turned in an instant from a tepid trickle to a molten blast; and as he struggled from the stall he trod on a leaking shampoo sachet and fell heavily and sharply on his coccyx. He had to kick himself out through the steam, and rasped his head on the shower's serrated metal sill. After a while he slowly climbed to his feet and stood there, hands on hips, eyes only lightly closed, head bowed, awaiting recovery. He dried himself with the thin white towel, catching a hangnail in its shine.

Now, emitting a sigh of unqualified grimness, he crouched on the bowl. He didn't even bother with his usual scowling and straining and shuddering, partly because his head felt dangerously engorged. More saliently, he had not moved his bowels since May. In general his upper body was impressively lean, from all the hours in the gym with the 'muscle' Saudis; but now there was a solemn mound where his abdominals used to be, as taut and proud as a first-trimester pregnancy. Nor was this the only sequela. He had a feverish and unvarying ache, not in his gut but in his lower back, his pelvic saddle, and his scrotum. Every few minutes he was required to wait out an interlude of nausea, while disused gastric juices bubbled up in the sump of his throat. His breath smelled like a blighted river.

The worst was yet to come: shaving. Shaving was the worst because it necessarily involved him in the contemplation of his own face. He looked downwards while he lathered his cheeks, but then the chin came up and there it was, revealed in vertical strips: the face of Muhammad Atta. Two years ago he had said goodbye to his beard, after Afghanistan. Tangled and oblong and slightly off-centre, it had had the effect of softening the disgusted lineaments of the mouth, and it had wholly concealed the frank animus of the underbite. His insides were seized, but his face was somehow incontinent, or so Muhammad Atta felt. The detestation, the detestation of everything, was being sculpted on it, from within. He was amazed that he was still allowed to walk the streets, let alone enter a building or board a plane. Another day, one more day, and they wouldn't let him. Why didn't everybody point, why didn't they cringe, why didn't they run? And yet this face, by now almost comically malevolent, would soon be smiled at, and perfunctorily fussed over (his ticket was Business Class), by the doomed stewardess.

A hypothesis. If he stood down from the planes operation, and it went ahead without him (or if he somehow survived it), he would never be able to travel by air in the United States or anywhere else - not by air, not by train, not by boat, not by bus. The profiling wouldn't need to be racial; it would be facial, merely. No sane man or woman would ever agree to be confined in his vicinity. With that face, growing more gangrenous by the day. And that name, the name he journeyed under, itself like a promise of vengeance: Muhammad Atta. In the last decade, only one human being had taken obvious pleasure from setting eyes on him, and that was the Sheikh. It happened at their introductory meeting, in Kandahar - where, within a matter of minutes, the Sheikh appointed him operational leader. Muhammad Atta knew that the first thing he would be asked was whether he was prepared to die. But the Sheikh was smiling, almost with eyes of love, when he said it. 'The question isn't necessary,' he began. 'I see the answer in your face.'

Their Coglan Air commuter flight to Logan was scheduled to leave at six. So he had an hour. He put on his clothes (the dark blue shirt, the black slacks) and settled himself at the dresser, awkwardly, his legs out to one side. Two documents lay before him. He yawned, then sneezed. While shaving, Muhammad Atta, for the first time in his life, had cut himself on the lip (the lower); with surprising speed the gash had settled into a convincing imitation of a cold sore. Much less unusually, he had also nicked the fleshy volute of his right nostril, releasing an apparently endless supply of blood. He kept having to get up and fetch more tissues, leaving after him a paper trail of the staunched gouts. The themes of recurrence and prolongation, he sensed, were already beginning to associate themselves with his last day.

Document number one was displayed on the screen of his laptop. It was his last will and testament, composed in April 1996, when the thoughts of the group had turned to Chechnya. Two Moroccan friends, Mounir and Abdelghani, both devout, had been his witnesses, so he had included a fair amount of formulaic sanctimony. Any old thing would do. 'During my funeral, I want everyone to be quiet because God mentioned that he likes being quiet on occasions when you read the Koran, during the funeral, and also when you are crawling.' Crawling? Had he mistyped? Another provision stared out at him, and further deepened his frown: 'The person who will wash my body near my genitals must wear gloves on his hands so he won't touch my genitals.' And this: 'I don't want pregnant women or a person who is not clean to come and say goodbye to me because I don't approve of it.' Well, these anxieties were now academic. No one would say goodbye to him. No one would wash him. No one would touch his genitals.

There was another document on the table, a four-page booklet in Arabic, put together by the Information Office in Kandahar (and bound by a grimy tassel). Each of them had been given one; the others would often produce their personal copy and nod and sway and mutter over it for hour after hour. But Muhammad Atta wasn't like the others (and he was paying a price for it). He had barely glanced at the thing until now. 'Pull your shoelaces tight and wear tight socks that grip the shoes and do not come out of them.' He supposed that this was sound advice. 'Let every one of you sharpen his knife and bring about comfort and relief of his slaughter.' A reference, presumably, to what would happen to the pilots, the first officers, the flight

attendants. Some of the Saudis, they said, had butchered sheep and camels at Khaldan, the training-camp near Kabul. Muhammad Atta did not expect to relish that part of it: the exemplary use of the box-cutters. He pictured the women, in their uniforms, in their open-necked shirts. He did not expect to like it; he did not expect to like death in that form.

Now he sat back, and felt the approach of nausea: it gathered round him, then sifted through him. His mind, inasmuch as it was separable from his body, was close to the 'complete tranquillity' praised and recommended by Kandahar. A very different kind of 33-year-old might have felt the same tranced surety while contemplating an afternoon in a borrowed apartment with his true love (and sexual obsession). But Muhammad Atta's mind and his body were not separable: this was the difficulty; this was the mind-body problem - in his case fantastically acute. Muhammad Atta wasn't like the others, because he was doing what he was doing for the core reason. The others were doing what they were doing for the core reason, too, but they had achieved sublimation, by means of jihadi ardour; and their bodies had been convinced by this arrangement and had gone along with it. They ate, drank, smoked, smiled, snored; they took the stairs two at a time. Muhammad Atta's body had not gone along with it. He was doing what he was doing for the core reason and for the core reason only.

'Purify your heart and cleanse it of stains. Forget and be oblivious to the thing which is called World.' Muhammad Atta was not religious; he was not even especially political. He had allied himself with the militants because jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation. To unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word: nothing could compete with that. He played along with it, and did the things that impressed his peers; he collected citations, charities, pilgrimages, conspiracy theories, and so on, as other people collected autographs or beermats. And it suited his character. If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character, and with an almost sinister precision.

For example, the attitude to women: the blend of extreme hostility and extreme wariness he found highly congenial. In addition, he liked the idea of the brotherhood, although, of course, he thoroughly despised the current contingent, particularly his fellow pilots: Hani (the Pentagon) he barely knew, but he was continuously enraged by Marwan (the other Twin Tower) and almost fascinated by the pitch of his loathing for Ziad (the Capitol)... Adultery punished by whipping, sodomy by burial alive: this seemed about right to Muhammad Atta. He also joined in the hatred of music. And the hatred of laughter. 'Why do you never laugh?' he was sometimes asked. Ziad would answer: 'How can you laugh when people are dying in Palestine?' Muhammad Atta never laughed, not because people were dying in Palestine, but because he found nothing funny. 'The thing which is called World.' That, too, spoke to him. World had always felt like an illusion - an unreal mockery.

'The time between you and your marriage in heaven is very short.' Ah yes, the virgins: six dozen of them - half a gross. He had read in a news magazine that virgins, in the holy book, was a mistranslation from the Aramaic. It should be raisins. He idly wondered whether the quibble might have something to do with sultana, which meant a) a small seedless raisin, and b) the wife or concubine of a sultan. Abdulaziz, Marwan, Ziad, and the others: they would not be best pleased, on their arrival in the Garden, to find a little black packet of Sunmaid Sultanas (average contents 72). Muhammad Atta, with his two degrees in architecture, his excellent English, his excellent German: Muhammad Atta did not believe in the virgins, did not believe in the Garden. (How could he believe in such an implausibly, and dauntingly, priapic paradise?) He was an apostate: that's what he was. He didn't expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion. And, strange to say, he would find neither.

He packed. He paused and stooped over the dented refrigerator, then straightened up and headed for the door.

In its descent the elevator, with a succession of long-suffering sighs, stopped at the 12th, the 11th, the 10th, the ninth, the eighth, the seventh, the sixth, the fifth, the fourth, the third and the second floors. Old people, their faces flickering with distrust, inched in and out; while they did so, one of their number would press the open-doors button with a defiant, marfanic thumb. And at this hour, too: it was barely light. Muhammad Atta briefly horrified himself with the notion that they were all lovers, returning early to their beds. But no: it must be the sleeplessness, the insomnia of age - the dawn vigils of age. Their efforts to stay alive, in any case, struck him as essentially ignoble. He had felt the same way in the hospital the night before, when he went to see the imam... Consulting his watch every 10 or 15 seconds, he decided that this downward journey was dead time, as dead as time could get, like queuing, or an interminable red light, or staring stupidly at the baggage on an airport carousel. He stood there, hemmed in by pallor and decay, and martyred by compound revulsions.

Abdulaziz was waiting for him in the weak glow and piped music of the lobby. Wordless, breakfastless, they joined the line for checkout. More dead time passed. As they fell into step and proceeded through the last of the night to the car park, Muhammad Atta, in no very generous spirit, considered his colleague. This particular muscle Saudi seemed as limply calf-like as Ahmed al Nami - the prettyboy in Ziad's platoon. On the other hand, Abdulaziz, with his softly African face, his childish eyes, was almost insultingly easy to dominate. He had a wife and daughter in southern Saudi Arabia. But this was like saying that he had a flatbed truck in southern Saudi Arabia, so little did it appear to weigh on him. He had also, incredibly, performed certain devotional duties at his local mosque. And yet it was Abdulaziz who carried the knife, Abdulaziz who was ready to apply it to the flesh of the stewardess.

When they reached their car Abdulaziz said a few words in praise of God, adding, with some attempt at panache, 'So. Let us begin our "architectural studies".'

Muhammad Atta felt his body give an involuntary jolt. 'Who told you?' he said.

'Ziad.'

They loaded up and then bent themselves into the front seats.

Abdulaziz wasn't supposed to know about that - about the target code. 'Law' was the Capitol. 'Politics' was the White House. In the discussions with the Sheikh there had been firm concurrence about 'architecture' (the World Trade Center) and 'arts' (the Pentagon), but they had disagreed about an altogether different kind of target, namely 'electrical engineering'. This was the nuclear power plant that Muhammad Atta had seen on one of his training flights near New York. Puzzlingly, the Sheikh withheld his blessing - despite the presumably attractive possibility of turning large swathes of the eastern seaboard into a plutonium cemetery for the next 70 millennia (that is, until the year 72001). The Sheikh gave his reasons (restricted airspace, no 'symbolic' value). But Muhammad Atta sensed a moral qualm, a silent suggestion that such a move could be considered exorbitant. It was the first and only indication that, in their cosmic war against God's enemies, there was any kind of upper limit. Muhammad Atta often asked himself: was the Sheikh prepared to die? In the course of their conversations it had emerged that, while plainly reconciled to eventual martyrdom (he would have it no other way, and so on), the Sheikh felt little personal attraction to death; and he would soon be additionally famous, Muhammad Atta prophesied, for the strenuousness with which he eluded it.

These meetings and discussions - with the Sheikh and, later, with his Yemeni emissary, Ramzi Binalshibh - now lost weight and value in Muhammad Atta's mind, tarnished by Ziad's indiscipline, by Ziad's promiscuity (and if Abdulaziz knew, then all the Saudis knew). He thought back to his historic conversation with Ramzi, on the telephone, in the third week of August.

'Our friend is anxious to know when your course will begin.'

'It will be more interesting to study "law" when Congress has convened.'

'But we shouldn't delay. With so many of our students in the US...'

'All right. Two branches, an oblique stroke, and a lollipop.'

Ramzi called him back and said, 'To be clear. The 11th of the ninth?'

'Yes,' confirmed Muhammad Atta. And he was the first person on earth to say it - to say in that way: 'September the 11th.'

He had cherished the secret until 9 September. Now, of course, everyone knew: the day itself had come. He was impatient for his talk on the phone with Ziad, scheduled for 7am at Logan. Ziad was still claiming that he hadn't yet decided between 'law' and 'politics'. It looked like 'law'. As a target, the President's house had lost much of its appeal when they established, insofar as they could, that the President wouldn't be in it. At that moment the President was readying himself for an early-morning run in Sarasota, Florida, where Muhammad Atta had been taught how to fly, at Jones Aviation, in September 2000.

It was during the drive to Portland International Jetport that the headache began. In recent months he had become something of a connoisseur of headaches. And yet those earlier headaches, it now seemed, were barely worth the name: this was what a headache was. At first he attributed its virulence to his misadventure in the shower stall, but then the pain pushed forward over his crown and established itself, like an electric eel, from ear to ear, then from eye to eye - and then both. He had two headaches, not one; and they were apparently at war. The automobile, a Nissan Altima, was brand-new, factory-fresh, and this had seemed like a mild bonus on 10 September, but now its vacuum-packed breath tasted of seasickness and the smell of ships below the waterline. Suddenly his vision became pixelated with little swarms of blind spots. So it was then asked of him to pull over and tell an astonished Abdulaziz to take the wheel.

There seemed to be a completely unreasonable weight of traffic. Americans, already about their business... Tormenting his passenger with regular glances of concern, Abdulaziz otherwise drove with his usual superstitious watchfulness, beset by small fears, on this day. Muhammad Atta tried not to writhe around in his seat; on his way to the car park, 10 minutes earlier, he had tried not to run; in the elevator, 10 minutes earlier still, he had tried not to groan or scream. He was always trying not to do something.

It was 5.35am. And at this point he began to belabour himself for the diversion to Portland: a puerile undertaking, as he now saw it. His group was competitive not only in piety but also in nihilistic elan, in nihilistic insouciance; and he had thought it would be conclusively stylish to stroll from one end of Logan to the other with less than an hour to go. Then, too, there was the promise, itchier to the heart than ever, of his conversation with Ziad. But his reason for coming to Portland had been fundamentally unserious. He wouldn't have done it if the internet, on 10 September, had not assured him so repeatedly that it was going to be a flawless morning on 11 September.

And he didn't solace himself with the thought that this was, after all, 11 September, and you could still get to airports without much time to spare.

'Did you pack these bags yourself?'

Muhammad Atta's hand crept towards his brow. 'Yes,' he said.

'Have they been with you at all times?'

'Yes.'

'Did anyone ask you to carry anything for them?'

'No. Is the flight on time?'

'You should make your connection.'

'And the bags will go straight through.'

'No, sir. You'll need to recheck them at Logan.'

'You mean I have to go through all this again?'

Whatever else terrorism had achieved in the past few decades, it had certainly brought about a net increase in world boredom. It didn't take very long to ask and answer those three questions - about 15 seconds. But those dead-time questions and answers were repeated, without any variation whatever, hundreds of thousands of times a day. If the planes operation went ahead as planned, Muhammad Atta would bequeath more, perhaps much more, dead time, planet-wide. It was appropriate, perhaps, and not paradoxical, that terror should also sharply promote its most obvious opposite. Boredom.

As it happened, Muhammad Atta was a selectee of the Computer Assisted Passenger Prescreening System (Capps). All it meant was that his checked bag would not be stowed until he himself had boarded the aircraft. This was at Portland. At Logan, a 'Category X' airport like Newark Liberty and Washington Dulles, and supposedly more secure, three of his muscle Saudis would be selected by Capps, with the same irrelevant consequences.

Muhammad Atta and Abdulaziz submitted to the checkpoint screening. Their bags were not searched; they were not frisked, or blessed by the hand wand. Abdulaziz's childish rucksack, containing the boxcutters and the mace, passed through the tunnel of love. Just before boarding, another gust of nausea gathered about Muhammad Atta, like a host of tiny myrmidons. He waited for them to move on, but they did not do so, and, instead, coagulated in his craw. Muhammad Atta went to the men's room and released a fathom of bilious green. He was still wiping his foul mouth as he walked out on to the tarmac and climbed the trembling metal steps.

Coglan 5930 was not only late it was also an open-propeller 19-seater, and it was full. Excruciatingly, he had to wedge himself in next to a fat blonde with a scalp disease and, moreover, a baby, whose incredulous weeping (its ears) she attempted and failed to slake with repeated applications of the breast. Between heartbeats, when he was briefly capable of consecutive thought, he imagined that the blonde was the doomed stewardess.

The plane leapt eagerly into the air, with none of the technological toil that would characterise the ascent of American 11.

He had gone to Portland, Maine, for his quid pro quo with the imam.

The hospital, where he lay dying, was a blistered medium-rise, downtown: one more business among all the other businesses. Inside, too, Muhammad Atta had no sense of entering an atmosphere of vocational care - just the American matter-of-factness, with no softening of the voice, the tread, no softening of the receptionists' minimal smiles ... Directed to the ward, he moved through the moist warmth of half-eaten or untouched dinners and the heavier undersmell of drugs. The imam was asleep in his bed, recessed into it, as if an imam-sized channel had been let into the mattress. His lips, Muhammad Atta noticed, were dark grey, like the lips of dogs. Dead time passed. Then the imam awoke to Muhammad Atta's unsmiling stare. He sighed, without restraint. The two of them went back a way: to the mosque in Falls Church, Virginia.

'You have a citation for me?' asked the imam, unexpectedly alert.

'It's from the traditions. "The Prophet said: 'Whoever kills himself with a blade will be tormented with that blade in the fires of Hell... He who throws himself off a mountain and kills himself will throw himself downward into the fires of Hell for ever and ever... Whoever kills himself in any way in this world will be tormented in that way in Hell.'"'

'Always there are exceptions. Remember we are in the lands of unbelief,' said the imam, and went on to list the crimes of the Americans.

These were familiar to his visitor, who regarded the grievances as real. Depending on how you tallied it, America was responsible for this or that many million deaths. But Muhammad Atta was not persuaded of a moral equivalence. Certain weapons systems claimed to be precise; power was not precise. Power was always a monster. And there had never been a monster the size of America. Every time it turned over in its sleep it entrained disasters that would have to roll through villages. There were blunderings and perversities and calculated cruelties; and there was no self-knowledge - none. Still, America did not expend ingenuity in its efforts to kill the innocent.

'Is it an enemy installation?' the imam was sharply asking.

Muhammad Atta gave no reply. He just said, 'Do you have it?'

'Yes. And you will need it.'

The imam's hand, to Muhammad Atta's far from sympathetic gaze, looked and sounded like the foreclaw of a lobster as it rattled up against the laminate of his bedside table. Its cupboard opened, drawbridge-wise. The thing within exactly resembled a half-empty eight-ounce bottle of Volvic.

'Take it, not on waking, but when you feel your trial is near. Now. You were kind enough to say you would describe your induction.'

Here was the quid pro quo: he wanted to be told about the Sheikh. Just then the imam abruptly turned on to his side, facing Muhammad Atta, and for a moment his posture repulsively recalled that of a child starting to warm to a bedtime story. But this lurch was only part of a larger manoeuvre of the imam's. He edged himself backwards and upwards, so that a few stray hairs, at least, rested on the pillow. Muhammad Atta had unthinkingly assumed, earlier on, that he would give the imam a reassuring, even an idealised portrait of the Sheikh - the long-fingered visionary on the mountaintop who yet, in his humility and openness, remained a simple warrior of God. Now he recomposed himself. Never in his life had he spoken his mind. The smell of drugs was particularly strong near the yellow sink, half a yard from his nose.

'I had several meetings with him,' he said, 'at the al Faruq camp in Kandahar. And at Tarnak Farms. He casts the spell of success on you - that's what he does. When he talks about the defeat of the Russians... To hear him tell it, it wasn't the West that won the Cold War. It was the Sheikh. But we badly need that spell, don't we? The spell of success.'

'But the successes are real. And this is only the beginning.'

'His hopes of victory depend,' said Muhammad Atta, 'on the active participation of the superpower.'

'What superpower?'

'God. Hence the present crisis.'

'Meaning?'

'It comes from religious hurt, don't you think? For centuries God has forsaken the believers, and rewarded the infidels. How do you explain his indifference?'

Or his enmity, he thought, as he left the bedside and the ward. He considered, too, that it could go like this, subconsciously, of course: if prayer and piety had failed, had so clearly failed, then it might seem time to change allegiance, and summon up the other powers.

At Logan, he and Abdulaziz were the only passengers at the carousel supposedly serving the commuter flight from Portland. And the carousel was silent and motionless. Staring at a carousel with actual baggage going round on it suddenly seemed a fairly stimulating thing to do. Meanwhile, the eels or stingrays in his head were now having a fight to the death in the area just behind his ears.

Sometimes for moments on end he could step back from the pain and just listen to it. This was music in its next evolutionary phase, beyond the atonal. And he realised why he had always hated music; all of it, even the most emollient melody, had entered his mind as pain. Using every reserve, he continued to stare at the changeless slats of black rubber for another 30 seconds, another minute; then he turned on his heel, and Abdulaziz followed.

'Did you pack these bags yourself?'

'What bags? As I took the trouble to explain...'

'Sir, your bags will be on our next flight. I still need to ask the security questions, sir.'

Americans - the way they called you sir. They might as well be calling you bub.

'Did you pack these bags yourself?'

Oh, the misery of recurrence, like the hotel elevator doing its ancient curtsy on every floor, like the alien hair on the soap changing its shape through a succession of different alphabets, like the (necessarily) monotonous gonging inside his head. It had occurred to him before that his condition, if you could call it that, was merely the condition of boredom, unbounded boredom, where all time was dead time. As if his whole life consisted of answering those same three questions, saying, 'Yes' and 'Yes' and 'No'. 'And did anyone ask you to carry anything for them?'

'Yes,' said Muhammad Atta. 'Last night, at the Lebanese restaurant, a waiter asked us to take a heavy clock-radio to his cousin in Los Angeles.'

Her smile was flat and brief. 'That's funny,' she said.

They made their way to Gate 32 and then retreated from it, into the mall. With a flip of the hand he told Abdulaziz to go and look for his countrymen. Muhammad Atta took a seat outside a dormant coffee shop and readied himself for the call to Ziad. Ziad: the Beiruti beach boy and disco ghost, the tippler and debauchee, now with his exaltations and prostrations, his chanting and wailing, his rocking and swaying... To discountenance Ziad, to send him to his death with a heart full of doubt: this was the reason for the journey to Maine.

Back in Germany, once, Ziad had said that the brides in the Garden would be 'made of light'. In bold contrast, then, to the darkness and heaviness of their terrestrial sisters, in particular the heaviness and darkness of Aysel Senguen - Ziad's German Turk, or Turkish German. Muhammad Atta had seen Aysel only once (bare legs, bare arms, bare hair), in the medical bookstore in Hamburg, and he had not forgotten her face. Ziad and Aysel were his control experiment for the life lived by sexual love; and for many months the two of them had peopled his insomnias. He knew that Aysel had come to Florida in January (and had scandalously accompanied Ziad to the flight school); he was also obscurely moved by the fact that a letter to her was Ziad's last will and testament. And he kept wondering how their bodies conjoined, how she must open herself up to him, with all her heaviness and darkness...

Muhammad Atta had decided that romantic and religious ardour came from contiguous parts of the human being: the parts he didn't have. Yet Ziad, as the obliterator of 'law' (and the obliterator of United 93), was duly poised for mass murder. Only roughly contiguous, then: Ziad could say he was doing it for God, and many would believe him, but he couldn't say he was doing it for love. He wasn't doing it for love, or for God. He was doing it for the core reason, just like Muhammad Atta.

'All is well at Newark Liberty?'

'All is well. We're in the sterile area. Did you see your precious imam?'

'I did. And he gave me the water.'

'The water? What water?'

'The holy water,' said Muhammad Atta, with delectation, 'from the Oasis.'

There was a silence. 'What does it do?' said Ziad.

'It absolves you of what the imam called the "enormity", the atrocious crime, of the self-felony.'

There was another silence. But that wasn't quite true any more. Muhammad Atta thought he might be getting more out of this conversation if there hadn't been a mechanised floor-sweeper, resembling a hovercraft, with an old man on it, beeping and snivelling around his chair.

'I'm preparing to drink the holy water even as I speak.'

'Does it come in a special bottle?'

'A crystal vial. God said, "All those who hate me love and court death." You see, Ziad, you are the trustee of your body, not its owner. God is its owner.'

'And the water?'

'The water is within you and preserves you for God. It's a new technique - it began in Palestine. Your hell will burn with jet fuel for eternity. And eternity never ends, Ziad - it never even begins. So there may be some delay before you get those brides of light. Perhaps you should have settled for your German nudist. Goodbye, Ziad.'

He hung up, redialled, and had a more or less identical conversation with Marwan, minus the theme of Aysel. In the case of Marwan (the other half of 'architecture', and just across the way, now, at United), different considerations obtained. The emphasis of their rivalry was not jihadi ardour so much as nihilistic insouciance. So the two of them exchanged yawning boasts, in code, about how low down, and at what angle, they would strike, and coolly agreed that, if there were F-15s over New York, they would crash their planes into the streets... Finally, dutifully, he called Hani ('arts'), the only Saudi pilot, with whom he shared no history, and not much hatred. Muhammad Atta hoped that he hadn't decisively undermined Ziad, who, after all, was a Saudi short (or two Saudis short, if you discounted the punklike Ahmed). No. He believed that he could safely rely, at this point, on the fierce physics of the peer group.

A peer group piously competitive about suicide, he had concluded, was a very powerful thing, and the West had no equivalent to it. A peer group for whom death was not death - and life was not life, either. Yet an inversion so extreme, he thought, would quickly become decadent: hospitals, schools, nurseries, old people's homes. Transgression, by its nature, was helter-skelter, and always bound to escalate. And the thing would start to be over in a generation, as everyone slowly and incredulously intuited it: the core reason.

Perhaps the closest equivalent, or analogy, the West could field was the firefighters. Muhammad Atta had studied architecture and engineering. The fire that would be created by 3,000 gallons of jet fuel, he knew, could not be fought: the steel frame of the tower would buckle; the walls, which were not intended to be weight-bearing, would collapse, one on to the other; and down it would all come. The fire could not be fought, but there would be firefighters. They were called the 'bravest', accurately, in his view; and, as the bravest, they took on a certain responsibility. The firefighters were saying, every day: 'Who's going to do it, if we don't? If we don't, who else is going to risk death to save the lives of strangers?'

As he sat for another few moments on the tin chair, as he watched the mall awaken and come into commercial being, filling up now with Americans and American purpose and automatic self-belief, he felt he had timed it about right. (And his face had timed it about right.) Because he couldn't possibly survive another day of the all-inclusive detestation - of the pan-anathema. This feeling had been his familiar since the age of 12 or 13; it had come upon him, like an illness without a symptom. Cairo, Hamburg, even the winter dawn over Kandahar: they had all looked the same to him. Unreal mockery.

Muhammad Atta took the bottle from his carry-on. The imam said it was from Medina. He shrugged, and drank the holy Volvic.

Boarding began with First Class. And if Muhammad Atta ever found anything funny, he might have smiled at this: Wail and Waleed, the brothers, the two semiliterate yokels from the badlands of the Yemeni border, shuffling off to their thrones - 2A and 2B. Then Business. He led. Abdulaziz and Satam followed.

He hadn't even reached his seat when it hit him. It came with great purity of address, replacing everything else in his stretched sensorium. Even his headache, while not actually taking its leave, immediately stepped aside, almost with a flourish, to accommodate the new guest. It was a feeling that had abandoned him for ever, he thought, four months ago - but now it was back. With twinkly promptitude, canned music flooded forth: a standard ballad, a flowery flute with many trills

and graces. The breathy refrain joined the simmer of the engines; yet neither could drown the popping, the groaning, the creaking, as of a dungeon door to an inner sanctum - the ungainsayable anger of his bowels.

So now he sat gripping the armrests of 8D as the Coach passengers filed by. Why did there have to be so many of them, always another briefcase, another backpack, always another buzzcut, another whitehair? He waited, rose, and with gruelling nonchalance, his buttocks clenched, sauntered forward. All three toilets claimed to be occupied. They were not occupied, he knew. A frequent and inquisitive traveller on American commercial jets, Muhammad Atta knew that the toilets were locked, like all the other toilets (this was the practice on tight turnarounds), and would remain locked until the plane levelled out. He pressed a flat hand against all three: again, the misery of recurrence, of duplication. He tried, but he couldn't abstain from a brief flurry of shoving and kicking and rattling. As he returned to 8D he saw that Abdulaziz was looking at him, not with commiseration, now, but with puzzled disappointment, even turning in his seat to exchange a responsible frown with Satam. Strapped in, Muhammad Atta managed the following series of thoughts. You needed the belief-system, the ideology, the ardour. You had to have it. The core reason was good enough for the mind. But it couldn't carry the body.

To the others, he realised, he was giving a detailed impersonation of a man who had lost his nerve. And he had not lost his nerve. Even before the plane gave its preliminary jolt (like a polite cough of introduction), he felt the pull of it, with relief, with recognition: the necessary speed, the escape velocity he needed to deliver him to his journey's end. American 11 pushed back from Gate 32, Terminal B, at 7:40. There was the captain and the first officer; there were nine flight attendants, and 76 passengers, excluding Wail, Walid, Satam, Abdulaziz, and Muhammad Atta. American 11 was in the air at 7:59.

Now he obliged himself to do what he had always intended to do, during the climb. He had a memory ready, and a thought-experiment. He wanted to prepare himself for the opening of female flesh; he wanted to prepare himself for what would soon be happening to the throat of the stewardess - whom he could see, on her jump-seat, head bowed low, with a pen in her hand and a clipboard on her lap.

In 1999, his return ticket from Afghanistan had put him on an Iberia flight from the UAE to Madrid. They had just levelled out when he became aware of an altercation in the back of the plane. Swivelling in his seat, he saw that perhaps 15 or 16 men, turbaned and white-robed, had crowded into the aisle and were now on the floor, humped in prayer. You could hear the male flight attendant's monotonous and defeated remonstrations as he backed away. 'Por favor, senors. Es ilegal. Senors, por favor!' Minutes later the captain came on the PA, saying in Spanish, English and Gulf Arabic that if the passengers didn't return to their seats he would most certainly return to Dubai. Then she appeared. Even Muhammad Atta at once conceded that here was the dark female in her most swinishly luxurious form: tall, long-necked, herself streamlined and aerodynamic, with hair like a billboard for a chocolate sundae, and all that flesh, damp and glowing as if from fever or even lust. She came to a halt and gave a roll of the eyes that took her whole head with it; then she surged forward with great scooping motions of her hands, bellowing - 'VAMOS ARRIBA, CONOS!' And the kneeling men had to peer out at this seraph of breast and haunch and uniformed power, and straighten up and scowl, and slowly grope for their seats. Muhammad Atta had felt only contempt for the men crooked over the patterned carpet; but he would never forget the face of the stewardess - the face of cloudless entitlement - and how badly he had wanted to hurt it.

And yet - no, it wasn't going to work. For him, the combination, up close, was wholly unmanageable: the combination of women and blood. So far, he thought, this is the worst day of my life - probably the worst day. In his head the weary fight between the vermin was finished; one was dying, and was now being disgustingly eaten by the other. And his loins, between them, were contriving for him something very close to the sensations of anal rape. So far, this was the worst day of his life. But then every day was the worst day, because every day was the most recent day, and the most developed, the most advanced (with all those other days behind it) towards the pan-anathema.

The plane was flattening out. He waited for the order. This would be given by the captain, when he turned off the fasten-seatbelts sign.

'We have some planes,' said Muhammad Atta, coolly. 'Just stay quiet, and you'll be OK. We are returning to the airport. Nobody move. Everything will be OK. If you try to make any moves, you'll endanger yourself and the airplane. '

He had stepped through the region of inexpressible sordor, and gained the cockpit. Here, in the grotto of the mad

clocksmith, was more cringing flesh and more blood - but manageably male. Now he disengaged the computer and prepared to fly by direct law.

It was 8.24. He laughed for the first time since childhood: he was in the Atlantic of the sky, at the controls of the biggest weapon in history.

At 8.27 he made a grand counter-clockwise semicircle, turning south.

At 8.44 he began his descent.

The core reason was, of course, all the killing - all the putting to death. Not the crew, not the passengers, not the office-workers in the Twin Towers, not the cleaners and the caterers, not the men of the NYPD and the FDNY. He was thinking of the war, the wars, the war-cycles that would flow from this day. He didn't believe in the devil, as an active force, but he did believe in death. Death, at certain times, stopped moving at its even pace and broke into a hungry, lumbering run. Here was the primordial secret. No longer closely guarded - no longer well kept. Killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just a part of the contribution you made - the massive contribution to death. All your frigidities and futilities were rewritten, becoming swollen with meaning. This was what was possible when you turned the tides of life around, when you ran with beasts, when you flew with the flies.

First, the lesser totems of Queens, like a line of defence for the tutelary godlings of the island.

When he came clattering in over the struts and slats of Manhattan, there it was ahead of him and below him - the thing which is called World.

Cross-streets, blocks, districts, shot out from underneath the speedlines of the plane. He was glad that he wouldn't have to plough down into the city, and he even felt love for it, all its strivings and couplings and sunderings. And he felt no impulse to increase power or to bank or to strike even lower. It was reeling him in. Now even the need to shit felt right and good as his destination surged towards him.

There are many accounts, uniformly incomplete, of what it is like to die slowly. But there is no information at all about what it is like to die suddenly and violently. We are being gentle when we describe such deaths as instant. 'The passengers died instantly.' Did they? It may be that some people can do it, can die instantly. The very old, because the vital powers are weak; the very young, because there is no great accretion of experience needing to be scattered. Muhammad Atta was 33. As for him (and perhaps this is true even in cases of vaporisation; perhaps this was true even for the wall-shadows of Japan), it took much longer than an instant. By the time the last second arrived, the first second seemed as far away as childhood.

American 11 struck at 8.46.40. Muhammad Atta's body was beyond all healing by 8.46.41; but his mind, his presence, needed time to shut itself down. The physical torment - a panic attack in every nerve, a riot of the atoms - merely italicised the last shinings of his brain. They weren't thoughts; they were more like a series of unignorable conclusions, imposed from without. Here was the hereafter, after all; and here was the reckoning. His mind groaned and fumbled with an irreconcilability, a defeat, a self-cancellation. Could he assemble the argument? It follows - by definition - if and only if. And then the argument assembled, all by itself... The joy of killing was proportional to the value of what was destroyed. But that value was something a killer could never see and never gauge. And where was the joy he thought he had felt - where was that joy, that itch, that paltry tingle? Yes, how gravely he had underestimated it. How very gravely he had underestimated life. His own he had hated, and had wished away; but see how long it was taking to absent itself - and with what helpless grief was he watching it go, imperturbable in its beauty and its power.

Even as his flesh fried and his blood boiled, there was life, kissing its fingertips. Then it echoed out, and ended.

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Señora Nostalgia dijo

Impresionante retrato de un monstruo. No me lo imaginaba menos. Es terrible, doloroso, el mal que mentes fanáticas, llenas de odio contra la humanidad, pueden causarle al mundo. Y lo peor, completamente convencidos de que están haciendo lo que es correcto. Madeleine

17 Septiembre 2006 | 06:59 PM

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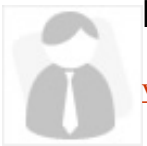

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