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FIRST CHAPTER

'The Second Plane'

By MARTIN AMIS

It was the advent of the second plane, sharking in low over the Statue of Liberty: that was the defining moment. Until then, America thought she was witnessing nothing more serious than the worst aviation disaster in history; now she had a sense of the fantastic vehemence ranged against her.

I have never seen a generically familiar object so transformed by affect ("emotion and desire as influencing behavior"). That second plane looked eagerly alive, and galvanized with malice, and wholly alien. For those thousands in the South Tower, the second plane meant the end of everything. For us, its glint was the worldflash of a coming future.

Terrorism is political communication by other means. The message of September 11 ran as follows: America, it is time you learned how implacably you are hated. United Airlines Flight 175 was an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, launched in Afghanistan, and aimed at her innocence. That innocence, it was here being claimed, was a luxurious and anachronistic delusion.

A week after the attack, one is free to taste the bile of its atrocious ingenuity. It is already trite but stringently necessary to emphasize that such a *mise en scène* would have embarrassed a studio executive's storyboard or a thriller-writer's notebook ("What happened today was not credible" were the stunned and wooden words of Tom Clancy, the author of *The Sum of All Fears*). And yet in broad daylight and full consciousness that outline became established reality: a score or so of Stanley knives produced two million tons of rubble. Several lines of U.S. policy were bankrupted by the events of last Tuesday, among them national missile defense. Someone realized that the skies of America were already teeming with missiles, each of them primed and cocked.

The plan was to capture four airliners in the space of half an hour. All four would be bound for the west coast, to ensure maximum fuel load. The first would crash into the North Tower just as the working day hit full stride. Then a pause of fifteen minutes, to give the world time to gather round its TV sets. With that attention secured, the second plane would crash into the South Tower, and in that instant America's youth would turn into age.

If the architect of this destruction was Osama bin Laden, who is a qualified engineer, then he would certainly know something about the stress equations of the World Trade Center. He would also know something about the effects of ignited fuel: at 500°C (a third of the temperature actually attained), steel loses 90 percent of its strength. He must have anticipated that one or both of the towers would collapse. But no visionary cinematic genius could hope to re-create the majestic abjection of that double surrender, with the scale of the buildings conferring its own slow motion. It was well understood that an edifice so demonstrably comprised of concrete and steel would also become an unforgettable metaphor. This moment was the apotheosis of the postmodern

era — the era of images and perceptions. Wind conditions were also favorable; within hours, Manhattan looked as though it had taken ten megatons.

Meanwhile, a third plane would crash into the Pentagon, and a fourth would crash into Camp David (the site of the first Arab-Israeli accord) or possibly into the White House (though definitely not into Air Force One: this rumor was designed to excuse Bush's meanderings on the day). The fourth plane crashed, upside down, not into a landmark but into the Pennsylvanian countryside, after what seems to have been heroic resistance from the passengers. The fate of the fourth plane would normally have been one of the stories of the year. But not this year. The fact that for the first few days one struggled to find more than a mention of it gives some idea of the size of the American defeat.

My wife's sister had just taken her children to school and was standing on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Eleventh Street at 8:58 a.m., on the eleventh day of the ninth month of 2001 (the duo-millennial anniversary of Christianity). For a moment she imagined herself to be on a runway at Kennedy Airport. She looked up to see the glistening underbelly of the 767, a matter of yards above her head. (Another witness described plane number one as "driving" down Fifth Avenue at 400 mph.) There is a modest arch that fronts Washington Square Park; American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston to Los Angeles was flying so low that it had to climb to clear it.

We have all watched airplanes approach, or seem to approach, a large building. We tense ourselves as the supposed impact nears, even though we are sure that this is a parallax illusion and that the plane will cruise grandly on. My sister-in-law was right behind Flight 11. She urged it to swerve, to turn into the plentiful blue sky. But the plane did not turn. That afternoon her children would be bringing refreshments to the block-long queue waiting to give blood at St. Vincent's.

Now the second aircraft, and the terror revealed — the terror doubled, or squared. We speak of "plane rage," but it was the plane itself that was in frenzy, one felt, as it gunned and steadied and then smeared itself into the South Tower. Even the flames and smoke were opulently evil, with their vampiric reds and blacks. Murder-suicide from without was now duplicated within to provide what was perhaps the day's most desolating spectacle. They flailed and kicked as they came down. As if you could fend off that abysmal drop. You too would flail and kick. You could no more help yourself than you could stop your teeth from chattering at a certain intensity of cold. It is a reflex. It is what human beings do when they fall.

The Pentagon is a symbol, and the WTC is, or was, a symbol, and an American passenger jet is also a symbol of indigenous mobility and zest, and of the galaxy of glittering destinations. The bringers of Tuesday's terror were morally "barbaric," inexpably so, but they brought a demented sophistication to their work. They took these great American artifacts and pestled them together. Nor is it at all helpful to describe the attacks as "cowardly." Terror always has its roots in hysteria and psychotic insecurity; still, we should know our enemy. The firefighters were not afraid to die for an idea. But the suicide killers belong in a different psychic category, and their battle effectiveness has, on our side, no equivalent. Clearly, they have contempt for life. Equally clearly, they have contempt for death.

Their aim was to torture tens of thousands, and to terrify hundreds of millions. In this they have succeeded. The temperature of planetary fear has been lifted toward the feverish; "the world hum," in Don DeLillo's

phrase, is now as audible as tinnitus. And yet the most durable legacy has to do with the more distant future, and the disappearance of an illusion about our loved ones, particularly our children. American parents will feel this most acutely, but we will also feel it. The illusion is this. Mothers and fathers need to feel that they can protect their children. They can't, of course, and never could, but they need to feel that they can. What once seemed more or less impossible, their protection, now seems obviously and palpably inconceivable. So from now on we will have to get by without that need to feel.

Last Tuesday's date may not prove epochal; and it should be the immediate task of the present Administration to prevent it from becoming so. Bear in mind: the attack could have been infinitely worse. On September 11 experts from the Centers for Disease Control "rushed" to the scene to test its atmosphere for biological and chemical weapons. They knew that these were a possibility; and they will remain a possibility. There is also the integrally insoluble hazard of America's inactive nuclear power stations (no nuclear power station has ever been dismantled, anywhere). Equivalent assaults on such targets could reduce enormous tracts of the country to plutonium graveyards for tens of thousands of years. Then there is the near-inevitable threat of terrorist nuclear weapons — directed, perhaps, at nuclear power stations. One of the conceptual tasks to which Bush and his advisers will not be equal is that the Tuesday Terror, for all its studious viciousness, was a mere adumbration. We are still in the first circle.

It will also be horribly difficult and painful for Americans to absorb the fact that they are hated, and hated intelligibly. How many of them know, for example, that their government has destroyed at least 5 percent of the Iraqi population? How many of them then transfer that figure to America (and come up with fourteen million)? Various national characteristics — self-reliance, a fiercer patriotism than any in western Europe, an assiduous geographical incuriosity — have created a deficit of empathy for the sufferings of people far away. Most crucially, and again most painfully, being right and being good support the American self to an almost tautologous degree: Americans are good and right by virtue of being American. Saul Bellow's word for this habit is "angelization." On the U.S.-led side, then, we need not only a revolution in consciousness but an adaptation of national character: the work, perhaps, of a generation.

And on the other side? Weirdly, the world suddenly feels bipolar. All over again the West confronts an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ideocratic system which is essentially and unappeasably opposed to its existence. The old enemy was a superpower; the new enemy isn't even a state. In the end, the U.S.S.R. was broken by its own contradictions and abnormalities, forced to realize, in Martin Malia's words, that "there is no such thing as socialism, and the Soviet Union built it." Then, too, socialism was a modernist, indeed a futurist, experiment, whereas militant fundamentalism is convulsed in a late-medieval phase of its evolution. We would have to sit through a Renaissance and a Reformation, and then await an Enlightenment. And we're not going to do that.

(Continues...)

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