



Part two

## The last days of Muhammad Atta

On 11 September 2001, he opened his eyes at 4am, in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta's last day began. (Part two: to read part one, click [here](#))

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**Observer**

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 Beirut 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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