

Terrorism

Short Story by Allison Fine

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One fall day, a Sunday, most notable for a certain undertone of chill, not enough to be cold, just enough to signal winter coming, the colors of the leaves radiant, made more so by the sun's immaculate intensity flowing through them, Michael, a man born yesterday, (but really a man born thirty-seven years before yesterday) left his apartment at 303 12th Street at 1st Avenue in the East Village of New York City, locked the lock on the doorknob, slammed the door and breathed a sigh of immense joy. It was Sunday; he did not have to be anywhere and most important he did not have to be at Brown Harris Stevens Brokerage (established since 1873) where he worked as a real estate broker. He had no idea of what Brown Harris Stevens had been in 1873 and he had long since got over being proud to work there. The only reason he was still there was because his girlfriend, (who was now not his girlfriend) and intended wife, (they had been engaged) had a father, now dead, who was an important member of said firm, whose specialty was sales in The Hamptons, Palm Beach and Manhattan of course, (both the firm and her deceased father). Once her father died Sarah dumped Michael, who could never have been a stand-in for a father anyway, and could not even boast a certain sly edginess that would make him dangerous. Her beauty astounded him. Apple breasts in perfect symmetry, a small, feral face with a pointed chin, dark cascades of wavy hair to the middle of her back, a long, slender torso without an ounce of fat, lengthy, lean thighs—he hated thinking about her.

The day stretched ahead of him like a soporific deep sleep filled with watery dreams. Door locked, messenger bag slung over his right shoulder, he planned to hit the 2nd Avenue Deli, pick up a Sunday Times and slosh through a day of wandering, of nothing, of watching, of zilch really. Having been born thirty-seven years prior to the day before this Sunday, although he had been born yesterday, (this was an incongruity he did not question) Michael knew his place, his thought and his motivation for a Sunday in the fall in New York. Inside his messenger bag he kept a notebook where he recorded the swirl of postures and attitudes that came into his mind. It was not poetry. It was not a journal, or heaven forbid, a memoir, it was nothing really, but he lived in the illusion that it served to rally his mind and anchor him to some reality other than the one he lived. And this was important: the fantasy that he was a creative being outside of his job; the misapprehension that he had anything to say. The last entry read with a certain *gravitas*, a sense of quickening, as if life were hurrying forward or pushing him from behind—that it was all a dream anyway and he had no intentions of waking.

After talking with a client concerning a vacation home in The Hamptons I took a brief moment to collect myself in the men's room. John Mott was there with his usual arrogant expression fixed to his plastic molded face. I went into the stall and retched into the toilet. I don't think it was breakfast.

He felt the visceral imagery had a luminous quality to it. He checked his pocket for his keys before heading down the stairs and out into the glorious day. Oh shit, he thought, I've locked my keys in the apartment. He did not have a roommate. He did have his cell phone. He did not have any friends in the city—only clients, associates and enemies. He could not call Sarah a friend and she was in Palm Beach with the man she

had decided to marry. It wouldn't matter anyway; she didn't have a copy of his keys. He thought this might be a religious moment—a time to reassess the values of his life and decide whether he was cut out for it or not. Although, he reasoned, killing oneself over locking oneself out of one's apartment was not a sufficient excuse for suicide. He didn't really feel torn apart about the Sarah-thing either because that had all fizzled over a year ago. This was not mourning or loss or sadness or anything—this was a lesson in what? He could not say.

The super was not available because he did not live on the premises, nor did he visit the apartment house except irregular intervals (which could never be predicted) to check on various things like the heat or complaints about bugs (intermittent) or some other things that had nothing to do with Michael who had been born yesterday but actually thirty-seven years before yesterday. There it was. Michael had a number for the super in case of emergencies, (he couldn't really decide what an emergency would be) although this surely was one of them, however the number, written on the back of his American Express statement was locked inside his apartment along with his keys. Acid indigestion and consternation welled up inside of Michael. His neighbor Abby, a young girl of twenty-two, passed him in the hallway. She wore a red T-Shirt and had tattoos on both arms.

“Hi Michael.”

“Hi Abby.”

“Great day, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Going out?”

“Well yes.”

Abby gave no indication of what a loser she thought Michael was, or that she suspected him of being slightly weird. Everyone in New York was weird in some way or another. He didn't seem dangerous and she highly doubted that he was a stalker or somebody who got off on watching people through their windows. She wondered when was the last time he had sex.

“Well, have a nice day.”

As she started down the stairs Michael said: “Hey Abby, do you know—?”

“What Michael?”

“I locked myself out of my apartment.”

“Oh. I've done that. Call the super.”

“Well, I don't have his number on me. Do you have his number?”

“No, I don't. Sorry.” Abby stood on the stairs, somewhat impatient to get outside and into the great fall day, waiting for Michael to finish.

“Well—“

“Well, you could call the management.”

“They wouldn't be there on a Sunday.”

“True. Well, I gotta go. Good luck.” Abby rushed down the stairs before he thought of something else to say.

Michael knew he could call the police, who might think he was a burglar, or call a locksmith, who would likely charge him \$200 to come out on a Sunday. He wanted to avoid both. It wasn't worth \$200. He suddenly remembered that he might have an extra set of keys at the office. Well, he knew for sure that he had an extra set of car keys at the

office. (He rarely drove his car. It was parked at a long term parking facility five blocks from where he lived and he only used it to show clients houses or condos outside of Manhattan, or when he took small trips out of New York to New Hampshire, at the Hancock Inn, Hancock, New Hampshire, established 1789, where he often stayed to get away from New York. He knew no one there and he never met anyone there, except in passing, but it satisfied his need to feel American and proud and free and out of his familiar milieu.) The historical significance of the place dripped from the gabled eaves like fat dripping from a roasted turkey. The place had been established the first year of Washington's presidency, it had once hosted cattle drivers and rum runners, (Michael had a difficult time imagining cattle driving in New Hampshire, everything was so small and quaint, or pseudo-quaint), however he did not want to walk the five blocks to his car even though he would more than likely walk five blocks to the 2nd Avenue Deli. It didn't matter. How far you walked wasn't the issue; it was where you walked *to*. Since his keys were locked inside the apartment, his office keys were also locked inside the apartment. That meant he would have to call someone from work to let him into the office. This filled him with anxiety. He was unsure, undecided really, whether he ought to stand here outside his door thinking about all this, weighing the pros and cons, or put it off for two hours, go out, hit the deli, buy a newspaper, have his coffee and then think about it. The more he tried to decide which of these options to follow up on, the more anxious he became. The hallway was small and closed in and he started to feel like a caged animal. In spite of his not having an explicit plan, he walked down the stairs, pushed the door to the outer world open and entered into the once-glorious fall day he had looked forward to joining all morning. The day was ruined.

“Gentle people are not passive and weak!” This vocal announcement came from a poorly dressed young man standing on the sidewalk a block from Michael’s building. The youth held a sign badly printed and smudged with the words: *Copious inner power is manifested by gentleness*. The large cardboard, which he had nailed onto a broomstick with the broom still on it, didn’t have enough room for the word *gentleness* and thus he had broken up the word into three parts: *gent-tel-ness* with the *ness* at the very bottom of the sign practically running off the sign into the infinity of air. And, of course, he had misspelled the word *gentleness*. This sort of imperfection really irked Michael who prided himself on at least spelling things right, and especially if one is on the street advertising some ideology.

“You spelled *gentleness* wrong,” he said to the young man as he passed. There was no cup or box or guitar case so obviously he expected no remuneration.

“Infinite patience to you,” the man said.

“Yeah—well fuck you,” Michael said and instantly regretted it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I’m just in a bad mood.”

“We’re all in a bad mood,” the kid replied, “but we don’t swear at people.”

“I thought you were passive and weak,” Michael told him.

“I’m *not* passive and weak, that’s just the point!”

“So, what are you?”

The young man, who Michael could now see might be older than first impression, in fact might be as old as him, thirty-seven or even older, turned his deep-set green eyes onto Michael’s face endeavoring to scrutinize who was it with the hubris to interrupt his day.

“I don’t think I need to talk to you about this,” he said. “My story is obviously not your story.”

“I don’t think you’re gentle at all. I think you’re jealous. And it appears to me that your established habits are truly ‘gentle-challenged’ if you get my drift.”

“Drift off,” the man said acrimoniously. “This broom can be a weapon too, you know.”

Michael left the young man, cursing the day, the fall, his keys and the broom.

Later, the young man, whose name was Russell Platt and had come from Grand Rapids, Michigan to New York City to study violin with Dorothy DeLay, the famous Julliard violin teacher who died March 22, 2002 and left him stranded without a teacher, and the money ran out, inexplicably his grant was cancelled and no one in the violin program thought he was good enough or dedicated or passionate enough to renew it, and his parents, a father who was a retired press operator and his mother, a retired nurse, could not afford to sustain him in New York and told him to come home and get a job at the shop where his father had worked or to finish his education at Grand Rapids Community college, would describe to the police Michael’s appearance and his demeanor and say: “the man was definitely upset and he said some very inappropriate things to me, things that signaled his unwillingness to understand or comprehend the nature of a soft manner and kind intentions.” The police were not in the least concerned about that. They wanted to know what he was wearing.

Michael went to Starbucks and although he really wanted a copy of the Sunday Times he disdained to buy it, especially as the headlines had warnings about global warming. He noticed that even in November the weather hadn’t turn cold—not like it was

when he was a boy growing up in Ithaca, New York where by November cold, nasty bitter winds would have already stripped the trees bare and created that dark, gloomy overcast that threw everyone into wishing for Christmas and behaving like lunatics preparing for Thanksgiving. It was sixty-five degrees and pleasant. Although Michael wished to feel pleasant about a sunny Sunday in November, he felt the intrinsic gloom of it all anyway. People were annoyingly cheerful at Starbucks. This was not how he wanted to spend his day. He bought a triple, hazelnut skim Latte no foam and walked back out, without the Times. Sitting on a bench outside of Starbucks he bummed a camel light off a couple entwined into each other like the branches of a twisted tree. What kind he could not recall. Michael never perceived trees except to discern whether they had leaves, did not have leaves, were green, big, small and had colors or not. The visual world was just a backdrop to Michael's perception and navigation through life—a pleasurable, satisfying backdrop or a disagreeable, distasteful and often offensive setting, much like stage scenery. Bad stage scenery that had been painted by amateurs or worse, children who had no visual sense. Michael had no visual sense. It was the atmospheric kinesthetic sensation of what surrounded him that had an effect on his mood. Sunny, people whining or crying or laughing or kissing, children running ahead of their parents, the sound of laughter or lamenting or worse, the gentle hum of the city—a non-nurturing sound--the dirge of unexpressed grief. He felt as if he were pursuing a deer without a guide, a hunter lost in the forest. A forest of tangled trees that had become the city he lived in that he thought he knew so well. Which he did not know at all. Or did not know anyone at all inside of it. And whose inhabitants were a mystery to him. He might be a mystery to himself, he reflected.

Michael decided to call Leon, the administrative assistant at Brown Harris Stevens, a man of fifty-six who had decided at age forty-seven to get an education and improve his life. Michael had the same contempt toward Leon's self-improvement that everyone else in the office had. A middle-aged man with little to recommend him, few prospects, a divorce and three children behind him—in short, a man that even the disdained of the world could look down on. Including Michael. Leon carried with him a sense of entitlement, an annoying measure of hubris; a grating smirk that said he didn't give a damn about advancing because he knew it would only bring disaster. This unwillingness of Leon's to admit to his lowly status, to humble as a man who had climbed up from the pit of adversity, irked Michael. He secretly wanted to bring Leon to his knees, but he often found himself at Leon's knees begging for information. Hesitating, like a man trotting to and fro in front of a church waiting to get married, Michael called Leon's number. It was stored in his cell phone in case he needed to reach Leon about contracts, phone calls or messages.

“Leon.”

“Yes?”

“It's Michael.”

“I know. It's Sunday Michael. I'm not up yet.”

“I see. Well, I'm sorry.”

“What is it Michael?”

“I've somehow locked my keys in my apartment and I need to get into the office and get my extra set.”

“You have an office key Michael—can't you let yourself in?”

“My office keys are on the same key ring.”

“Well, that’s stupid Michael. You should keep them separate.”

“Yes. Well, that’s not going to do me good now, is it?”

“Can’t you call a locksmith?”

“They’re bound to charge me an astronomical amount on a Sunday.”

“True. You can afford it. You just sold that property in Tribeca didn’t you?”

“Leon, what I have at my disposal is not your business.”

“It is when you want me to get up on a Sunday and let you into the office.”

“Fine. Then you won’t do it, right?”

“I’ll do it. But I’m not in a hurry. My girlfriend’s here and we were going to go out for Brunch.”

“I’ll meet you.”

“Forget it. Where are you now?”

“Starbucks, 2nd Avenue.”

“Fine. I’ll go over to the office in about an hour.”

“Great. Thanks Leon.”

“You’re not welcome.”

After Leon hung up on him before saying goodbye Michael reflected on how it was possible for Leon to disrespect him when he, Michael, was clearly in the superior position. People and things possessed of creative power that did not come from hard work, obsequious toadying and money bewildered him.

Now he had an hour to kill before getting a taxi over to the office. Starbucks had terrified him; the cheerful attitude created by caffeine and obvious joy in life had soured

his disposition. He thought he might wander down the street a bit and sit on a bench in Tompkins Square Park. He had nothing to read. He had no one but himself to blame for that. He walked over to the park and sat. An old man with a 3-pronged walker was already sitting there. He looked neat and fairly clean and didn't smoke. His short white hair was combed carefully across his skull; he wore a plaid jacket and a light blue scarf, which matched his eyes, although Michael didn't notice this.

“Nice day,” the old man said.

“It was,” Michael replied.

The old man looked at him. “It still is.”

“Yes,” Michael said, hoping to avoid explaining his previous statement. He'd had enough of the park. He didn't want to sit next to an old man for the rest of his life, and it felt like a lifetime sentence. He walked out of the park back onto the street to soak up the noise. His life changed when he chose to go south down 6th Street back to 2nd avenue. A canvas covered van screeched to a halt right in front of him. Three men in black hooded jackets jumped out carrying large machine guns—rifles, Michael wasn't up on firearms. One of them stuck the butt of his rifle into Michael's back and shoved him toward the back of the van.

“Get in.”

“What?” Michael asked. He looked around to see the man but his face was covered with a dark blue stocking cap with slits for his eyes and mouth. One of the other men grabbed his arms and shoved him into the back of the truck. As he got in the men slammed the back doors shut and the van took off. Michael thought he might be sick with

the van lurching so. He looked around and saw a dead cat on the floor of the van, its mouth open and its eyes looking frozen in terror.

“What is this?” he screamed out but of course the men were in front of the van and couldn’t hear him. One of the men crawled into the back of the van and put a dirty rag over Michael’s mouth.

“Shut up,” he said and went back into the front cab. The van staggered around a corner and Michael’s bowels let loose inside his pants. After quite a long time, Michael was unsure how long it was, but it must have been at least forty minutes or so, although time was incomprehensible to him, the van stopped and one of the men opened the back door.

“Get out,” he ordered.

Michael crawled out. He had no idea what part of the city they were in, but he thought it might be somewhere near the Bowery. They stood in front of a large warehouse with the door open revealing an immense, dusty room filled with boxes stacked to the ceiling. What am I doing in this world? Michael thought just as one of the men shoved him into the warehouse and shut the door. There were a bunch of chairs around a filthy table filled with trash from McDonalds, coffee cups with cigarette butts floating in them and the remains of half-eaten food. I am a hostage, he thought as one of the men pushed him into a chair and grabbed some yellow rope from the table.

The men removed the gag from Michael’s mouth.

“You stink.”

“I shit my pants.”

“Hey Folker, you got some pants some where’s?”

“No.”

“Go to the toilet over there and clean up.”

Folker, a big man with a belly like a hog, wrenched Michael out of his chair and thrust him toward a small toilet in the back of the warehouse. Folker stood at the door when Michael walked in. His own smell made him gag. The toilet was littered with trash and he saw a dead mouse in the corner. The sink was yellow with crud.

“Take off those pants,” Folker said. Michael took off his pants and his briefs and put them in the sink.

“I’ll get you something. Wait there.” Folker left Michael standing in the toilet naked from the waist down. He looked up and saw a small window and wondered whether he could climb out of there by standing on the toilet but the thought of running out into the street without his pants unnerved him; he didn’t think he’d get far and he didn’t know where he was--they might shoot him in the back. He decided to remain where he was.

“Here,” Folker came back and handed him a pair of dirty sweat pants. Michael put them on after wiping himself off with some paper towel from a roll on the sink. Folker grabbed his arm and led him back to the chair. He tied him back up and stood at the table with his two friends who had removed their masks. None of them looked like good people to Michael—they all looked nasty, angry and filled with animosity.

“Why are we here?” Michael asked and Folker came over to gag him again.

“Shut up.”

“You’re here because we want you to be,” one of the other men said. He had a fat, square face, red hair and watery blue eyes.

Michael's cell phone rang from his pants pocket in the bathroom. He figured it was Leon ringing him from the office.

Folker looked around like a dumb animal searching for the source of the noise.

"Is that yours?" one of the other guys asked.

"No."

"Folker, go find the phone."

Folker walked around in circles and finally figured out the ringing was coming from the bathroom. By the time he got there the ringing had stopped.

"Is that your phone?" the redhead asked. Michael nodded yes. Folker came back from the bathroom with the phone in his hand.

"It fucking stinks in there, Jesus."

"Shut the fucking door," the redhead said. The other guy was dark, skinny, with bad pimply skin and an earring in his left ear. He grabbed the phone from Folker, walked over to Michael's chair and pulled the dirty rag from Michael's mouth.

"Answer it."

"It's not ringing now." The pimply guy backhanded Michael across the cheek. Michael fell off his chair onto the dirty floor and tasted his own blood. "All right," he said. As he wiped his nose blood was on his hand. Folker handed him a wad of napkins from the table. "Wipe it," he said, "we don't want a mess around here."

"This guy's a loser. Man. Shit."

The two others laughed at the pun.

Michael saw from the caller ID that Leon had called. He dialed the number. Leon answered.

“Michael?”

“Yeah.”

“Where the fuck are you? I’m here at the office waiting for you.”

“I got detained. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t sound good. Are you sick?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you—I’ll run the keys over to you.”

Michael looked at the three men who were sitting around the table lighting cigarettes and drinking from a bottle of Tequila.

“I don’t know,” Michael said.

“What’s going on?”

“I—“

“Are you in trouble or something?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to call the police?”

“I’m in a warehouse.”

“A warehouse? Have you been kidnapped or something?”

“Yeah.”

Folker walked over to Michael. “Who you talking to?”

“My administrative assistant.”

Folker grabbed the phone from Michael. There was blood on the phone from Michael’s hand. He wondered if his nose was broken.

“Don’t call back,” Folker said into the phone and slapped it shut. He threw the phone over to redhead who threw it into the trash. “That takes care of that,” the redhead said and the men laughed.

“You’re really a mess,” Folker said to Michael, “blood and shit everywhere. You’re not going to be any good for us. We wanted you to run some shit for us over to Pittsburgh but fucking forget it. We’ll find some other asshole.”

“Get him the fuck outta here,” the redhead said, “he stinks and he’s stupid.”

The pimply-faced guy untied Michael, grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the door of the warehouse, pushing him out onto the sidewalk and slamming the door. Michael lay sprawled on the sidewalk without a clue where he was or how he would get home. He realized his wallet was in his pants inside the warehouse. He knocked on the door and Folker opened it.

“Do you think I could have my wallet?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Get the fuck out of here before I shoot you. Do you want that?”

Michael stood at the door realizing it might be better to get shot. His day was ruined and the life he led had no significance anyway. “Do you?” Folker said, emphasizing the *you*. At this moment in a flash of inspiration, a moment of fleeting artistic ambition, Michael found his reason for being. It’s better to die for truth than live for some wandering, chaotic sleepwalking assortment of terror and confusion, he figured. He thought of his mother, green leaves, frozen conversations with God about his misguided thoughts and intentions, religion never practiced, communion never taken, the poetry he once wrote at fifteen, a girl he knew in High School who wore short plaid skirts

and thigh high white stockings, memories of the things he wanted to do collided with memory of things he did until he could not tell the difference; he thought of the emptiness of his life that had led him to depression, the hopelessness that had led him here—there was a movement next to his arm and then operations ceased and there was no movement at all. Perhaps he had touched the enemy in battle and would live to tell the tale, but then he knew how illusions of grandeur had always failed him before and there was no magic in this decrepitude. A sobering expose of pathetic luckless happenstance, he thought. Was he a hero? The only thing that mattered was the story, but what was the thread without an ideology? The sacrifice had no significance and the mode had no supernatural range. This was no simple initiation ritual. He had not made it into resurrection. There was no heroic motif. His birth was a myth. The empty space where he could fight the war of his imagination opened.

“Shit,” Michael said as Folker slammed the door.