

Half Staff 2018

A NOVEL

John Morse



IDLEKNOT PRESS

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To my wife, Carole
1 Corinthians 13

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Part I.

Chapter 1

Washington, DC
August 20, 2017

What a perfect day for a ballgame! Past the halfway point in the season, the Washington Nationals were hosting the Milwaukee Brewers and hoping to improve their dismal forty-three wins and eighty losses record. Thousands of loyal fans would brave the stifling heat and drenching humidity to get to the Nationals Stadium for the last of the summer series. Washington would be starting up again after the long hot recess, and the pace would be unbearable by mid-September. People wearing ball caps with the stylish pretzel "W" and red baseball jerseys were swarming towards Southeast, Washington. The combat zone of the District of Columbia had been transformed in the late 1990s from a drug-infested slum to a vibrant neighborhood anchored by the stadium on one end and the re-furbished Navy Yard on the other. The Department of Transportation built an impressive headquarters building right on the water surrounded by loft apartments and several new hotels. Hundreds wedged into the Yellow Line train as it came up from the last underground stop at the Pentagon, banked to the left and emerged into the bright sunlight flooding the cars for the short trip over the Potomac. The rush to the Stadium started early.

The District Department of Transportation added two extra cars to the Yellow Line trains for game day to handle the large family crowds. None of these Yellow Line cars, including the extra ones, would make it to the next stop at L'Enfant Plaza. Just like one of those planned high-rise demolitions shown on TV, three of the Metro's heavy reinforced concrete bridge foundations were instantly pulverized in a perfectly timed series of massive underwater explosions designed to produce shear stresses which would destroy the thick bridge support

structure, twist the tracks and tear them like a piece of tablet paper. The conductor had no time to react as the tracks suddenly veered to the right and downward like some amusement park ride.

His hands were still steady on the controls as he saw the muddy Potomac River rushing into view. Eight Yellow Line cars followed each other into the water. The sound of forty tons of steel and aluminum shearing and twisting drowned out the screams of the eager Nats fans, tourists, and weekend workers, as each car slammed into the car ahead, trying to find space for their seventy-five foot lengths in less than thirty feet of water. It was similar to the massive fog-induced collisions on highways in the West involving fifty automobiles or more, but turned on its head, vertically, with forty feet between the bridge and the water and another thirty feet to the bottom. Each of the eight cars carried well over one-hundred riders with several near their maximum capacity of one-hundred and seventy five. The last car landed on its back, speared in its mid-section by car number seven before breaking into two pieces which hesitated on the water's surface for several long seconds before sliding off on opposite sides and disappearing. There would be many no-shows in the Stadium today. Some died of blunt force trauma, others more slowly by drowning as their common metal caskets tumbled to the bottom and filled with muddy water. Many tried to escape by breaking the fixed windows on the way to the bottom. The large fixed picture windows separated the living from the dead by a thin piece of tempered glass about a quarter inch thick. The bodies thrown around inside the trains added to the panicked stampede of fear and caused scores of people to drown just beneath the surface. Ironically, the Nats won anyway.

Chapter 2

Bucharest, Romania

August 21, 2017

A city of stark contrasts, Bucharest's crumbling facades stood between strip malls and still wore the faded trappings of the brutal Communist dictatorship that kept the city at a stand-still for decades. It had been almost twenty years since Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu were given due process in a ninety minute trial and unceremoniously machine-gunned in the square on Christmas Day. Hundreds of the city's gritty survivors gathered to see the fitting end of a cold and ruthless dictator who robbed Romania's spirit and soul. The area around the bodies had been trashed and smelled strongly of urine. Empty bottles and cans littered the ground. A veteran limped up to the body of Elena and unloaded a mouthful of yellow spit onto her bare feet. Someone needing a pair of shoes had torn the cheap Russian loafers from the stiff limbs. They'd taken the socks too, marveling at how the feet were so clean and looked as though they'd been carved from a block of Italian marble. Up the street from the square stood the Athenee Palace Hilton Bucharest, a grand edifice resembling a stately government building from a bygone era. The magnificent structure had been architected by a German and built in 1914. Years of exhaust-borne dirt and grime stained its marble exterior.

Mr. Brown seemed an odd name for the dark, olive-skinned man who carried a United States passport and stayed a single night. The front desk clerk asked him if he needed any help with his luggage. He replied with a painful smile and a shake of his head, holding up a thick black engineer's flight bag. The automaton at the desk ushered him out with a cheery "Have a wonderful day!"

He walked out into the sunlight and turned right. Around the corner of the hotel past the casino were a series of apartments with first floor shops sharing a common roof and dirty, depressing brown stucco walls. The fourth store front housed an adult shop featuring live shows, magazines and videos and a large selection of toys. For months, people living in the squalor here noticed the acrid smell of chemicals. A local

doctor observed a disquieting number of his patients complaining of migraine headaches. The authorities had been called several times, but nothing ever changed in Bucharest. The local police had the building under surveillance for several months but not because of the sudden onset of migraine headaches. No, there was another more sinister reason.

Mr. Brown took the ancient lift to the fourth floor and knocked on an unmarked door. A small man's head appeared as the door opened slowly and after recognizing the expected visitor, swung open wide. The man ushered him down the hallway into a large bedroom converted to a makeshift laboratory. Two men worked silently sealed in an inner room isolated by heavy translucent plastic sheeting that billowed the walls before it was evacuated through a connecting room. Inside the plastic cocoon, the open plastic drums emitted visible vapors that looked like a chemistry teacher's worst nightmare, but neither man paid any attention because they wore industrial air masks to complement their protective chemical suits. The familiar transaction was completed mechanically, wordlessly. Mr. Brown opened the flaps on the top of the hard-sided bag and banded bundles of Romanian Lei were replaced by two dozen plastic blocks which looked like oversized computer power supplies. The high grade C-4 explosive had been made without the taggant chemical to identify it. He nodded to the small man and left the bomb boutique. He'd been there for less than five minutes. Now outside, he only needed to deliver the case to a locker at the train station and drop the key in the sharps box in the men's bathroom. A simple and straight-forward task with generous compensation and no W2 form required from an employer he would never meet. A dream job by any standard. Little did he know these power supplies would wreak havoc 5,000 miles away months later. On the other hand, he didn't really care.

Chapter 3

Doha, Qatar
August 22, 2017

It was very early in the morning, but the wires were still full of news about the tragedy in Washington. Some commentators feebly speculated the Yellow Line disaster might be linked to America's crumbling infrastructure. Most questioned whether this could possibly be another terrorist act. The evening editor at Al Jazeera received a claim of responsibility from Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula within minutes of the event. But this attack was dramatically different than recent Al-Qaeda attacks. The editor picked up the phone and dialed a local number.

"Nadir?"

"Yes, who is calling me in the middle of the night?" The voice on the phone sounded irritated and confused, like someone being roused from a deep sleep.

"It's Khalid from Al Jazeera. I hope I didn't disturb you." The editor smiled knowing that whether Nadir was sleeping or busy with one of his wives or mistresses, he was disturbed. He said, "We got a message via the usual sources about the train attack in Washington. It seems like you are stepping up your campaign, and I wanted to see if you wanted to make any specific comment before we go to print? As always, you would not be identified." There was an uncharacteristically long pause before Nadir responded in a clipped voice.

"I will call you back."

Khalid drummed his pen on the desk and then sat back in his chair. Nadir's response was certainly not what he expected. Usually, he had a well-rehearsed script and talking points at hand, and such calls turned into a one-way press conference. The editor knew full well that Al Jazeera served as Al-Qaeda's bullhorn to the rest of the world. It was reality and he'd gotten over it. Real journalism had disappeared from the landscape and would not be appreciated by the masses anyway. Entertainment was today's stock-in-trade. The state of

journalism and reporting aside, Khalid sensed Nadir was not on his game tonight. Nothing concrete could be gleaned from his response, but his long pause seemed strange. He dismissed the possibility of Nadir not being aware of such a large scale attack and filled his cup with American coffee left on the burner for hours. Strong and bitter, it would keep him alert until Nadir called back.

"Khalid?" The question came as the phone was answered.

"Yes."

Now fully engaged, Nadir rambled on for several minutes cursing the United States and exclaiming that the infidels just witnessed the first of many such attacks which would be coming to America's heartland. He ended the statement with one of his classic lines.

"Make no mistake; Al-Qaeda's strength and reach are growing daily. More people are ready to sacrifice everything for our holy cause. We are everywhere. You remember Paris in November last year? The worldwide caliphate is now a reality. My friend, how many more Yellow Lines will it take for America to wake up to the reality that they can never win this fight?"

Nadir delivered the diatribe in the familiar angry voice Khalid expected.

"Do you want to make any specific comments about this specific attack? The wire reports are projecting 300-400 casualties," asked the editor evenly.

There was another pause before the phone went dead.

Chapter 4

Boston, Massachusetts

October 15, 2017

The man enjoying a large black coffee pushed his right hand up under his glasses and pinched the corners of his eyes, leaned back in his chair and smiled confidently to himself. The West neither understood the enemy nor its tactics. Throwing money at problems worked against the Russians to end the Cold War almost thirty years ago. Everyone jumped on the bandwagon without even asking where it was going. Today, the US economy lacked the muscle to win a spending war of attrition.

He shook his head in disbelief and took another drink from the paper cup. Sure, the Anti-Terrorist units formed since 2001 were now tied together by a sophisticated intelligence-sharing network with instantaneous links to allies overseas. Coupled with the continued success of the drone campaign in Pakistan and Yemen, and the Special Operations units operating in Libya and elsewhere in Northern Africa, the mood in the United States had grown more confident but the continued high unemployment rate and a still-skittish stock market dominated the news.

Early candidates for the United States' 2016 Presidential campaign crowed about the Administration's success in breaking Al-Qaeda's back, and the nightly news pundits declared a cautionary victory against terrorists on virtually every front. Dealing with the savagery of ISIL proved problematic but even the horror of mass be-headings or immolations got only fleeting coverage. The liberal idea that things would improve on their own if only we would offer greater understanding and friendship had taken root and those who advocated tighter borders and more government spending were all too often drowned out by the go along, get along press.

The story about a terrorist plot to carry out coordinated bombing attacks around central London appeared as a small sidebar near the back of Section A of the Boston Globe. The combined intelligence resources of the United States and Britain had been successful in

uncovering the communications nodes used by Al-Qaeda and the hundreds of groups it had spawned since the 9/11 tragedy. Yet these successes were tested with much greater frequency than was reported in the press. Reflecting the political mood, the press slowed the linking of obvious terrorist events to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

ISIL proved to be cleverer with communications, using mosques for written communications which were then encoded and published in a string of newspapers unwittingly carrying orders in their "Help Wanted" or "For Sale" sections. Internet gaming provided a simple and undetectable means of global communications. At times almost complicit, the White House spin doctors all but outlawed the term terrorism, and the term's use in the same sentence with Islam or Muslims had risen to the level of a journalistic capital offense. While the task of preventing attacks remained a 24/7 effort involving thousands on both sides of the Atlantic, a cavalier attitude took hold on the United States' side of the effort. The people being protected seemed to take it for granted, something the government was expected to provide. The Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 brought home the reality that lay just under the surface of the pervasive calm. The terrorists could strike almost at will and nothing could prevent a well-planned attack from within.

The coffee was very good—hot and strong—warming him to face the blustery 35°F temperature of an early-winter afternoon in Boston. Draining the cup, the man stood and headed towards the door, folding the paper and carefully adding it to others in the overflowing recycling bin. He tossed the cup into the trashcan, buttoned up a heavy dark topcoat and pulled on his gloves before pushing the glass against the bite of the wind. The cold numbed the exposed flesh on his face as he began walking up Boylston Street towards Boston Common. His pace was confident and leisurely, knowing a new type of terror had been unleashed that would cover the front page and have the pundits' backpeddling from their sanguine predictions. Day-to-day life would move from predictable to uncertain and fear would spread like wildfire.

He slid into a grimy Yellow cab and said "Logan."

The latest Al-Qaeda statement contained a dire prediction that in years to come, children in the United States would never see the American Flag flying at the top of the flagstaff. The pledge made it

very clear. Al-Qaeda's objective was to make certain the Stars and Stripes would hang at half-staff each and every day.

Chapter 5

Washington, DC
October 22, 2017

Having just returned from a very successful G-7 meeting in Vienna where he'd reinforced cooperative efforts with allies on a range of issues including those related to both terrorism and cyber-security, President Samuel Chapman looked back on his first ten months in office with a pained satisfaction. He'd lived up to his campaign pledge to kick-start the economy with permanent tax cuts and ramrodded legislation through both houses which his party controlled. Sure, he had to make some concessions, but the fact remained he'd done what he promised though at a terrible personal cost. Between the morning briefings, endless sidebars and the European penchant for late dinners each evening, he'd given all the energy he could muster to the recent overseas trip, including meeting separately with every journalist wanting to interview him. So it did not surprise his wife, Ann, when her husband started to fall asleep at the table during a quiet lunch on his first day back. After lunch, she suggested he take a nap. He protested feebly, and she walked him to the bedroom and made him promise to stay put. Minutes later, she buzzed his appointments secretary to have his afternoon schedule cleared. President Chapman lay down and fell asleep almost immediately. Sadly, he never woke up, suffering a massive heart attack within the hour.

The Chief Justice swore the Vice President, John Bowles, into office the same afternoon in a hasty ceremony concluded before Samuel Chapman's body lost the last of its internal heat.