

Fighting the Fear: Everyday Terror in the American Short Story Collection after 9/11

A Study of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*

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Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* represent the emphatic force that can be created within the short story collection genre—both became national bestsellers and won the coveted Pulitzer Prize. Though different in scope, style, and subject, these collections each contain at their core what has become a fundamental aspect of American literature since September 2001: terror. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Olive Kitteridge*, characters feel and attempt to cope with terror in their everyday lives. Both Egan and Strout contextualize individual terror against the broader national and cultural form felt by the United States after the events of 9/11. The presence of the void left by the Twin Towers is a potent symbol of terror within each collection, paralleling the characters' experiences with that of post-9/11 America while highlighting the existence of everyday terror and providing a lens for character self-reflection. This essay will focus on two categories of terror that figure into both collections, terror of the unknown and terror of being alone, and how coping strategies employed by Egan's and Strout's characters correspond to the American public's response to the wider terror instilled by 9/11.

Before moving on to a discussion of terror in Egan's and Strout's works I will briefly summarize each collection. Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, published in 2011, defies typical categorization. For instance, the work is comprised of thirteen numbered and named chapter-stories, which I have so termed because of their

ambiguous nature, including a seventy-five page PowerPoint presentation. The ties between these chapter-stories are often vague or minimal and many could easily stand as separate pieces, an aspect typical of the structure of a collection. Marko Fong reflects on this in his review of the work, stating that “the larger plot grows out of the accumulating episodes rather than as the result of a pre-constructed plan” (Fong 1). Yet at the same time the epigraph, overarching themes, and recurring characters of the work as well as its organization into two parts is more reminiscent of the form of the novel. In either case, the work spans over forty years, from 1980 until 2020 (Fong 1), and is loosely centralized on the lives of teenage-punk-bassist turned music-producer Bennie Salazar, who is obsessed with finding the “pure” sound of music, and his former assistant, Sasha Grady, a troubled youth and kleptomaniac who grows into a loving mother of two. I say loose centralization because while Bennie and Sasha are recurring focalizers¹ for Egan’s chapter-stories—and each reveals something further about the lives of Bennie, Sasha, or both—many feature minor characters as focalizers, such as the son of Bennie’s former mentor, three former friends from his teenage years, his wife, his wife’s former boss, and his wife’s brother, as well as Sasha’s best friend from college, her uncle, her twelve year-old daughter, and her former one-night-stand who becomes an associate of Bennie nearly twenty years later. In addition to this motely cast is a motely perspective due to the chapter-stories touching on the characters’ lives at various points, varying the points-of-view even further. As Danica van de Velde notes,

¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary of Literary Terms, “focalization” is a used in modern narratology to describe “the kind of perspective from which the events of a story are witnessed” (OEDLT online). A focalizer is then the person or character through which the narrative is being focalized, that is, the point-of-view through which the thoughts, feelings, and events are being filtered.

Egan's collection is linked together "by the degrees of separation between characters" rather than a continuous narrative structure (van de Velde 123). For instance, the tie between the first chapter-story, "Found Objects," and the second, "The Gold Cure," is a passing comment made by Sasha about her boss, Bennie, who becomes the subject and focalizer of the following chapter-story. However, what truly unifies these chapter-stories is not their general focus on two people, but on the types of terror-inducing struggle each character faces throughout the collection: addiction, loss, alienation, and death. Strout's work, released in 2008, is more of what might be expected from a short story collection, and is organized into thirteen, named, independent stories. These stories are primarily set in the small town of Crosby, Maine, though the setting may at times shift to other places such as New York. The piece's temporal organization also suggests a collection rather than a novel as the stories "are not presented in linear fashion" (Montweiler 73) so that the reader "must attempt to navigate the tricky terrain of chronology" (Montweiler 77) even as they navigate the work's various perspectives. For while the collection is called *Olive Kitteridge*, which implies a continuous central character, only a few stories feature her as the main character and focalizer; in fact, Strout's first offering, "Pharmacy," is from the perspective of Henry Kitteridge—relating his work in the town's pharmacy and his interactions with a young couple—Olive's husband, rather than herself. The stories that focalize through Olive invariably concern her feelings and memories of family, such as in "A Little Burst" where she copes with her son's marriage to a woman whom she detests, and fears is stealing her son away from her; in "A Different Road" where the Kitteridges become hostages in a hospital robbery and afterwards must struggle to deal with the deep truths revealed to them about their

relationship during the robbery; in "Tulips" Olive is trapped between the strained and distant relationship with her son and the stroke-induced vegetative state of Henry; in "Security," wherein Olive visits Chris and his second wife in New York and once again must face the reality that his perception and hers of their lives will never quite match; and finally in "River" where Olive is finally able to find some measure of peace about her past and look ahead to the future with hope. In the stories that do not focalize through her specifically, Olive often appears as a background character, either in a brief scene or referred to in some fashion; however, these stories also explore familial and marital relationships and deal with terror-ridden issues as varied as suicide, infidelity, alcoholism, parent and child abuse, elopement, and anorexia, providing the true unifying framework of the collection.

Terror in American Literature

Though critics and writers alike have become more aware of the presence and influence of terror since 9/11, terror has been a major aspect of American literature since its inception. The presence of terror in current American literature can be traced back through the gothic romance tradition of the nineteenth century to the wilderness narratives that emerged from Puritan reactions to life in the New World (Mogen 94). The conflict between civilization and nature—between mental and physical landscapes—felt by early American settlers resulted in the genesis of American frontier mythology, which was, and still is, primarily concerned with exploring "the shadows surrounding civilized clearings" (Mogen 14) whose borders represent both enticement and terror (Mogen 14-15). American frontier mythology has since fused into new forms that seek to interpret and shape the future (Mogen 104), including contemporary American literature, which tries to interpret terror and predict how it will affect a national or global future. Fiction that employs futuristic

settings is particularly adept at adapting frontier mythology, allowing for the discovery of new frontiers as well as the recovery of old ones (Mogen 102). For example, Egan's final story, "Pure Language," set over twenty years after 9/11 (Egan 331), pushes the frontiers of technology to the point where infants have become masters of the market (Egan 313, 322, 324-325); reflects on the development of new frontiers in terms of acceptable security measures, which are presented as responses to 9/11 (Egan 330); and tries to reclaim former frontiers more concerned with human connection and defining moments in time—something "powerful and fine enough to eclipse the chopper throb" (Egan 335)—which Scotty's concert eventually becomes (Egan 335-337). Other contemporary forms of terror reflect frontier symbolism as well. Previous fears of the shadows beyond civilization represented by the wilderness find continuity in modern ambivalence towards madness (Mogen 101). In fact, Leslie Fiedler argues that if the myth of America is to continue existing, writers must be willing to conduct a dialogue with the mad (Mogen 102). The terror and madness in early American literature was embodied by the wilderness. The Puritans and other early settlers looked out to the fringes of their settlements and saw darkness and the unknown staring back at them. Without civilization, the influences of religion, community, and law, there was only madness, both of mind and of soul. This of course was in itself terrifying to consider, and thus the terror associated with the wilderness only increased. While madness in early American narrative was thus typically represented using concrete and physical objects to reflect deeper psychological concerns, modern American literature has relegated the wilderness into the mind itself—exploring madness not from without but from within. Indeed, the mad is more than a mindset or an illness: it is the frontier within our own mindscape, the

limits of our self that lie just beyond our own awareness and consciousness. American literature has thus seen terror shift from the shadows at the edge of the clearing to the edges of our own consciousness. This shift is represented within both Egan's and Strout's collections—especially Strout's with its discussions of depression and mental health (Strout 33-34, 36-42)—where terror is specifically related to the individual and how he or she perceives and experiences the world within his or her own mind. However, this shift in terror was not a completely organic transition: it exploded as a response to a national event.

After 9/11 terror became a more prominent figure in American literature, often in new subtle ways that addressed the consequences of prolonged feelings of terror that had arisen after the immense shock to the American psyche caused by the 2001 attacks. These consequences included the breakdown of communication, identity loss or crises, alienation, loss of innocence, and relationship tension, all of which were felt on a national as well as an individual level. While the United States struggled to come to terms with what had happened, so did its individual citizens. In fact, post-9/11 American writers felt a complete failure of language, an inability to even communicate what *had* happened: Toni Morrison said there were “no words stronger than the steel that pressed you in itself” and Suheir Hummad wrote there was “no poetry in the ashes of canal street./ no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna./ not one word” (Morrison and Hummad in Gray 1). 9/11 brought the war to America, “to have the mainland not only invaded but attacked from the skies and devastated was not only unusual but unique”—the homeland was no longer secure, no longer home (Gray 4-5). The Twin Towers had symbolised American “national achievement and aspiration,” which became all the more important

after their physical presence “appeared to dissolve into the skies” and became one of marked absence (Gray 5). The destruction of this American icon was thus a terrifying, symbolic gesture of the complete deletion of the nation (Gray 6). Moreover, the attack was witnessed by a global public—“the impact, the explosion, the fall of the towers were there for all to see in what media people like to call ‘real time’” (Gray 7)—shattering the myth of America’s inviolability (Gray 11).

Egan’s and Strout’s collections reflect the sudden explosion of terror in American literature after September 2001. In these works the global, national terror felt in response to 9/11 is distilled into representations of personal, everyday terror their characters struggle to cope with. This feature is highlighted by the presence of Ground Zero, the marked absence of the Twin Towers, in each collection (Egan 331, Strout 200). This void, this negative space, serves as a symbol of the scar terror left on the psyche of the nation, a scar each individual citizen still carries. Moreover, Ground Zero and 9/11 are symbolic unifiers of these collections; though each character struggles alone, they are not alone in their terror, but are a small part of a larger public response to crisis. In Egan, 9/11 is temporal. The attack lies at the heart of her timeline (Fong 1), serving as a reference point that separates “then” from “now,” “A” from “B”; its quiet but haunted presence extends both backwards and forwards in time, subtly influencing each story in the collection as each character is touched by the terror it represents (Fong 1). This realization culminates in “Pure Language” as Alex reflects on the trajectory of his life and the place that he now stands:

Traffic had stopped and choppers were
converging overhead, flogging the air with a
sound Alex hadn’t been able to bear in the early

years—too loud, too loud—but over time he'd gotten used to it: the price of safety. (Egan 330)
The weight of what happened here more than twenty years ago was still faintly present for Alex, as it always was when he came to the Footprint.² He perceived it as a sound just out of earshot, the vibration of an old disturbance.
(Egan 331)

In Strout, 9/11 is more personal. "Security" recalls the attack as a distinct memory, the terror represented by the skyline, "seen from a distance... building against buildings, gray against a gray sky" (Strout 200), a skyline readers know is now incomplete. 9/11 has left a gap in the New York skyline that echoes the holes terror has left in Olive, whose individual struggle is made universal by the glimpses of similar terror found in the other focalizers. Moreover, Olive gives voice to the trauma and the terror of the attacks:

...back when those planes ripped through the towers, Olive had sat in her bedroom and wept like a baby, not so much for this country but for the city itself, which had seemed to her to become suddenly no longer a foreign, hardened place, but as fragile as a class of kindergarten children, brave in their terror. (Strout 200)

Olive's comparison of one of America's most famous and powerful cities, the site of that potent American icon, to a class of terrified kindergarten children pathetically humbles the self-assumed all-powerful nation to a huddled mass of innocence, fear, and attempted courage. Moreover, this comparison equates the experience of public terror to individual terror, allowing such moments of keen awareness regarding 9/11 to serve as reference

² New name for Ground Zero in the future Egan presents in "Pure Language."

points that invite comparison with the collections' smaller forms of terror.

The two forms of terror focussed on in this essay reveal the deep parallels between the public terror felt after 9/11 and the everyday terror Egan's and Strout's characters face. Terror of the unknown is perhaps the form most easily linked to 9/11, a response that questioned whether 9/11—with so much pain, suffering, and loss—could have been prevented if only the nation had *known* more. The desire for knowledge to prevent harm manifests in these collections in at least two ways: terror of the unknown in others, their motivations and actions, and the unknown in ourselves, where we cannot explain why we are the way we are or why we behave a certain way. The second form is the terror of being alone. While this form is less obviously tied to 9/11, it is the fear that arose after the Towers had fallen and the weight of loss developed its acuity, when the American public realized how the attack had separated their nation from the rest of the world, leaving it alone to cope with what had happened. Egan's and Strout's characters similarly suffer from isolation, outwardly or inwardly, due to their various traumas, and are left to cope alone.

Americans employed different coping strategies to understand the events of September 11, 2001. Some denied it, desperately hoping it was a hoax, or attempted to assimilate the destruction and "the sheer scale of terror" by comparing it to classic space invader stories (Gray 10). Others responded with the recurring American tendency "to identify crisis as a descent from innocence," where "paradise is lost" (Gray 2), and nostalgically attempted to regain that former state "with a desperate retreat into the old sureties" (Gary 16). Still others tried to move on, which can be seen in the reignited interest of some American writers in "the speaking of silence, the search for verbal forms that reach beyond the condition of

words" (Gray 14), a strategy that attempts to press forward, to try and cultivate new modes of communication, new narratives, a new future.

The primary parallels that Egan and Strout draw between everyday and public terror are the coping strategies people employ to overcome that terror. Although Egan provides a voice for those "pushed to the outskirts of society" and "cuts across the invisible divide that separates the characters' public representations and their personal selves" (van de Velde 128), she strips the spiritual from the narrative, leaving only the cold, barren "truths" of life (Cowart 248). This leaves characters to cope with reality and terror on their own, only increasing their sense of isolation and disorientation. In comparison, Strout's characters are primarily isolated by their traumas, which cause breakdowns in communication and relationships that leave characters feeling as if they are alone in their struggles. Nevertheless, instances occur within the collection where certain characters are able to meet on a common ground and accept aid from others. Both of these collections present three main coping methods for attempting to overcome terror of the unknown and of being alone, which reflect the wider national, as well as individual responses to 9/11: nostalgia, denial, and moving on. For instance in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Benny and Lou, and in *Olive Kitteridge* Kevin Coulson and Henry Kitteridge, employ nostalgic coping strategies; similarly Egan's Bosco, Ted Hollander, and Strout's Nina White respond with denial; while Strout's title character, Olive, and Egan's central female, Sasha, demonstrate how looking to the future can be used to overcome terror.

Terror and Nostalgia

Nostalgia may manifest in various ways and for various things. It can be a longing for the ideal past (Boym 21) or a "means for holding onto and reaffirming identities which ha[ve] been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times"

(Davis in van de Velde 131). Just as many Americans returned to “the old sureties” of American identity and greatness after 9/11, Benny employs nostalgic coping mechanisms throughout Egan’s collection. His obsession with and longing for the purity of music embodies his longing for his former identity from which he has been alienated because of his terror of being alone. Benny’s fear of being alone is what pushes him into becoming Lou’s protégé in both music-producing and womanizing after Alice chooses to be with Scotty rather than with him (Egan 55). This career is what leads him to his first wife, Steph (Egan 131-132), whom he loses after his infidelity, which itself is another misguided attempt at connection (Egan 134). Benny’s nostalgia is at first characterized by his determination to regain his libido using gold flakes (Egan 21-22) in the collection’s second chapter-story “The Gold Cure.” His endeavor to regain his virility is an attempt to re-establish his former identity as a lover, an identification that in turn highlights his terror of being alone. But this attempt is unsuccessful. Even after his seemingly successful new start with his second wife and child (Egan 310), wherein he has presumably regained some measure of virility, Benny still engages in nostalgia: he has quit producing popular, lucrative music to return to the more pure “raspy, analog sound” (Egan 312). This nostalgia manifests further in his reverence for Scotty and the purity of Scotty’s music in “Pure Language” (van de Velde 130). The nostalgic quality of this reverence is particularly evident as Benny had previously felt only a passing pity, disdain, and even slight fear of Scotty in “X’s and O’s” when Benny was at the height of his music-producing career. Scotty—“a shell whose essence has vanished” (Egan 332)—an old friend from Benny’s teenage years, is yet another part of Benny’s past he vainly uses to try and regain his former self. Once again, this attempt results in failure as the music they create is mere

amusement for children (Egan 335-336). Moreover, after the concert, instead of returning home to his family, Benny wanders the streets with Alex in search of Sasha's apartment (Egan 337-339), chasing down another woman he "was crazy about" (Egan 338), which is made even more pathetic by the fact that she is no longer even there (Egan 339).

In *Olive Kitteridge*, Strout addresses inherited tendencies, including dispositions towards melancholy and terror in the form of depression, where "history weighs heavily on survivors," as they "attempt to understand their complicated family legacies" through both reflection and recreation (Montwieler 78, 74). For instance, in "Incoming Tide," Kevin Coulson hopes to overcome the terrifying unknown in his past with a nostalgic return to Crosby—"the *longing* he felt for that place" (Strout 44)—his childhood home (Strout 30-33), seeking "a sense of closure... [and] a sense of order that science, psychoanalysis, and art have been unable to [provide]" (Montwieler 77). Kevin's terror stems from not knowing why "his mother's need to devour her life had been so huge and urgent as to spray remnants of corporeality across the kitchen cupboards" (Strout 33). It is a why he has been chasing all his life (Strout 36-37) and represents his fear of the unknown within himself, something hidden and uncontrollable.

Kevin seeks to overcome the unknown with knowledge, which he attempts to glean by a nostalgic return to the source of the unknown and then reclaim by taking his own life there (Strout 33, 39, 45). Kevin's nostalgic endeavour fails, as does Benny's and Henry's, as he is interrupted by his former teacher Mrs. Kitteridge, who seems to sense his intentions and quietly, but stubbornly, prevents him by occupying him with firm but empathetic conversation (Strout 34-45)—one of the few instances where terror's victim is not left to cope alone. Olive's efforts are not in

vain: "Kevin became aware of liking the sound of her voice, he felt adrenaline pour through him, the familiar, awful intensity, the indefatigable system that wanted to endure" (Strout 39). She is able to distract and dissuade him until they witness Patty Howe fall from the cliff (Strout 46). Kevin's determination to rescue her, "to keep Patty from falling away" (Strout 46)—again at Mrs. Kitteridge's insistence, who was "shouting 'Hurry up! Hurry!'" and pointing to Patty's sinking form (Strout 46)—signifies a shift in his response to trauma: he has, at least momentarily, overcome his terror. No longer worried about reclaiming his unknown past, Kevin is firmly entrenched in the now: "He would not let her go....Look how she wanted to live, look how she wanted to hold on" (Strout 47). In sum, only by abandoning his nostalgia is Kevin able to overcome his own terror, plunging into the ocean, that great metaphor of the unknown, to save Patty in a way that no one had been able to save his mother. Henry's rumination on his pre-retired past in Strout's first story, "Pharmacy," reveals the terror he feels about an unknown, shifting future. Henry's ruminations signify an attempt to cope through reflective nostalgia, which contemplates "the irrevocability of the past and human finitude" and "meditate[s] on history and the passage of time" (Boym 50). For Henry, this reflective nostalgia is focussed on the workplace, marriage, and religion. More than half of the story relates to the particular "ritual" (Strout 3) of working in the pharmacy which Henry enjoys: driving to "the old store" (Strout 3-4), performing opening and closing duties, helping customers, interacting with Denise and Jerry, and closing down (Strout 4, 7-8, 10-14). The joy Henry feels regarding the repetition of these acts affirms their nostalgic quality. Henry's concerns about marriage are evident in his investment of time and affection with the young Thibodeaus (Strout 7-8, 10-11), which is particularly demonstrated in the playful routine

greeting between the two Henrys (Strout 10). Henry's concerns about religion are stated outright: "only a handful of the congregation goes to church regularly anymore. This saddens Henry, and worries him" (Strout 15). The depth of this worry is revealed when Henry uncharacteristically speaks sharply to Olive, "Is it too much to ask.... A man's wife accompanying him to church?" (Strout 9).

The objects of Henry's ruminations reveal a concern about maintaining the traditional values he perceives as deteriorating even in his relatively small community. That is, as Olive succinctly puts it, "Henry wants everyone married, everyone happy" (Strout 38). Henry generally attempts to reverse this deterioration by gently encouraging others, like the widowed Denise Thibodeau (Strout 19-22, 25-26), to embrace those more traditional values. However, he may react stubbornly and even forcefully, as he does during the robbery at the hospital in "A Different Road" when the boy in the blue mask continually violates traditional decorum by swearing (Strout 116-117) and leaving Olive exposed (Strout 119), which ultimately results in an argument between Henry and Olive (Strout 120-122). While Henry pursues this coping strategy in a much milder way than Benny, and less dramatically than Kevin intends, he is ultimately no more effective, as he is unable to prevent the shifting unknown of the future, which at last unexpectedly strikes him down with a stroke in "Tulips," preventing any resolution (Strout 146). Both the uncertainty of the future and the suddenness of the stroke that leaves Henry crippled, and essentially without an identity for he is never able to speak for himself again, once again reflect American responses to 9/11. The suddenness as well as the consequences of Henry's debilitating stroke serve as a mirror for the attacks in New York, which shook the American identity at its core and left the nation both

speechless and with a startlingly uncertain future. Moreover, like Henry, many Americans called for a return to traditional values to strengthen and protect the American identity, as if this could some way return them to the safety and innocence of before while simultaneously preventing any future damage.

Terror and Denial

Like nostalgia, denial may manifest in multitudinous ways. Nevertheless, denial is primarily employed by those who know the terror they face, consciously or otherwise, but attempt to disprove it or erase it, often through self-destruction. In "A to B," the first chapter-story of Egan's B-side, that is, part B of the collection, the aging, widening Bosco attempts to deny his terror of the unknown. Though "unrecognizable as the scrawny, stovepipe-panted practitioner of a late-eighties sound" (Egan 125), Bosco refuses to accept that his life and identity have changed, and instead attempts to prove he is still that same "hive of red-headed mania" he was when he was one of Benny's most successful clients (Egan 125). Bosco's desire to pursue his "Suicide Tour" and his death in the spotlight "is [thus] the ultimate...rejection of the 'goon' that is time" (van de Velde 131). This response is nostalgia taken to the uttermost limit; it is no longer a longing to return to the past, but a desire for destruction in a moment of preservation of that past, which becomes eternal upon death. Bosco attempts to deny the terror his new identity and unknown future instill by seeking to erase them completely. But Bosco fails; he survives his tour (Egan 257) and must continue his struggle to cope with terror.

Nina White from Strout's "Starving" similarly tries coping via denial. Nina is a twenty-three year old (Strout 94) who suffers from "that disease where you don't eat anything...[and] she's had it long enough there's some damage to her heart" (Strout 88). After a fight with her boyfriend, who has taken up with another lover, Nina has

nowhere to go (Strout 91-92). Shortly after, Daisy, Olive, and Harmon take Nina into their lives as a surrogate child: Daisy opens her home to Nina while she decides what to do next (Strout 93); Olive, in a rare moment of motherly instinct, embraces the girl, whose “tears cree[p] from her closed eyes” (Strout 96); and all three urge her to eat and assure her she is loved (Strout 91-98). This group of foster care-givers, who *choose* to care about Nina’s well-being, even send her a gift and a card to remind her of their love after her real parents have taken her home (Strout 99). Despite these kindnesses, Nina continues to deny her fear of “being without love” (Strout 94), and like Bosco she attempts to regain her previous self—the self that was cherished by a boyfriend rather than cast away in favor of another (Strout 92)—with self-destruction by taking laxatives (Strout 100). Unlike Bosco, Nina does not survive. Her denial kills her in the form of a heart attack (Strout 101), demonstrating how denial not only fails to help sufferers of terror and trauma cope, but destroys them at their core.

Ted Hollander similarly responds to his fear of the unknown in others with denial. In Egan’s “Goodbye, My Love” Ted must confront the truth lurking behind “the aimless, strung-out youths” (Egan 208) he so casually dismisses. His terror of these youths, small and every day, is revealed as he encounters a group of them in the Piazza Vittoria. He shrinks from “the aimless, unclean, vaguely threatening youths,” despite his prodigious height, weight, and innocuous face (Egan 213). The reason for this: he is afraid Sasha will be among them (Egan 213). Why is he afraid of the niece he was sent to rescue? It is because of what she, and all such youths, represents. Ted describes the Piazza Vittoria group as “members of a disenfranchised youth” (Egan 213): they are a failure of society, individuals that slipped through the cracks and degenerated into something they were not meant to be.

This association features in Ted's comparison of Sasha as a child to how she is now, a stranger whose motivations and feelings he cannot understand or predict: "As a little girl, she'd been lovely—bewitching even" but over time became "a glowering presence at the occasional Christmas or Thanksgiving" as her adolescence grew into "a catalogue of woes...[that] included drug use, countless arrests for shoplifting, a fondness for keeping company with rock musicians...four shrinks, family therapy, group therapy, and three suicide attempts" (Egan 213). The Sasha that Ted is searching for is not the woman he thought the bewitching little girl would become. Adult Sasha is proof that life does not always turn out as is expected. This frightens Ted because his own life has suffered an unforeseen turn. Ted was once consumed with passion for his wife, but now "he no longer had a drowning, helpless feeling when he glimpsed her beside him in bed" (Egan 210) and without his love "a sort of amnesia had overtaken Susan" (Egan 210). The promise they made in New York to "make sure it's always like this" (Egan 231) has been broken. Ted and his wife are strangers who just happen to live together, and Ted's confrontation with Sasha forces him to realize the unbearable truth about Susan and their life: "he'd let her go, and she was gone" (Egan 232). As a result of his terror and the revelation it hides, Ted suffers a loss of feeling at home the world, which is represented by his very presence in a foreign city, and a loss of innocence, as his revelation, once made, can never be forgotten. He must learn to cope with both of these consequences, but does so by attempting to deny them. Rather than reigniting his relationship with his wife, Ted is touring the museums and art galleries of Naples, and half-heartedly trying to find Sasha and bring her home. Even twenty years later, long after his divorce, he thinks back to *that* Sasha, the personification of his loss (Egan 233). Egan thus

demonstrates that denial cannot overcome terror of the unknown, a revelation that is subtly extended to America through the presence of New York as the location where the broken promise was made, equating Ted and Susan's broken promise with the promise of an invincible America indomitably broken by 9/11.

Overcoming Terror

Another method of coping with terror is to move forward, to seek out new narratives and modes of expression. This coping strategy endeavours to accept the trauma that has occurred and the terror it has produced, understanding it cannot be undone, rather than obsess over what has been lost or discovered. This is the final strategy presented by Strout in her collection. Olive has experienced multiple traumas throughout her life, including her father's suicide (Strout 39, 71) and being held hostage at gun-point during the hospital robbery (Strout 113-122). However, Olive's terror is not a result of these large events, but smaller everyday epiphanies. Olive suffers from a terror of being alone, of being misunderstood and unloved. This fear is primarily connected to her relationship with her son Chris and her gradual realization that he perceives their relationship in a much different light than she believed. There are two main instances where this occurs, in "A Little Burst" at Chris's first wedding when she overhears Suzanne talking about Chris, who has "'had a hard time you know. And being an only child—that really sucked for him'" (Strout 70), and in "Security" when she visits Chris and his second wife at their home in New York. That Suzanne, and by extension Chris, perceive this "hard time" as a result of Olive's mothering is implied by Suzanne's description of her new in-laws: while "'Henry's a doll'" (Strout 70), Olive is made the butt of a joke, with Suzanne's comment about her dress—"made from a gauzy green muslin with big reddish-pink geraniums printed all over it" (Strout 62), which Olive thinks "worked out well" (Strout 62)—"'Oh, God, yes,' says Suzanne... 'l

couldn't believe it. I mean that she would really *wear it*" (Strout 70). Olive is devastated: she feels "the deep sting of embarrassment" and wonders "What does Suzanne know about a heart that aches so badly... it almost gave out, gave up altogether?" (Strout 71). Moreover, Olive's terror has only intensified after Henry's stroke leaves Olive physically alone as Henry is moved to a long-term care facility and Chris remains in California rather than returning home to help care for his father and support his mother (Strout 147-148). Olive's epiphany about Chris is repeated and deepened during her fight with him in the penultimate story where he and Ann tell Olive her "'moods change kind of fast sometimes, and it's been hard. For him growing up. You know. Never knowing'" (Strout 229). For Olive it is an attack that leaves her feeling even more isolated and misunderstood, especially after the allusion to her desire to be loved in her sudden reminiscence of Jim O'Casey, who once asked her to run away with him (Strout 212-214). These realizations about her son's perceptions cast doubt on Olive's understanding of the past and her own memories, destroying the security she formally found in family, and she "is undone by her own sense of inadequacy" (Montwieler 77); her terror of being misunderstood and unloved looms high. Again the location of this realization in New York directly ties Olive's terror and isolation to American responses to the events of 9/11, particularly since the attacks have already been specifically mentioned by Olive at the story's beginning.

Yet Olive is eventually able to overcome her trauma and her terror by moving on. In "River" Olive develops a relationship with Jack Kennison, which while unexpected, allows her to finally admit her faults as a human being and accept them: Chris hates her and it is partly her fault (Strout 267), she has never apologized for anything (Strout 267), and she hit her son when he was growing up

(Strout 269). After overhearing Suzanne, Olive thinks, "A person can only move forward... A person *should* only move forward" (Strout 70), and at the end of the collection Olive finally does so. She overcomes her own obsessions about her future death and makes the decision to forge a new path and to be happy:

And so, if this man next to her now was not a man she would have chosen before this time, what did it matter? He most likely wouldn't have chosen her either. But here they were, and Olive pictured two slices of Swiss cheese pressed together, such holes they brought to this union—what pieces life took out of you....It baffled her, the world. She did not want to leave it yet.

(Strout 270)

And so Strout ends the collection with "a sense of hope and intimacy," not an "idealized, youthful intimacy... [but] an alternative connection the more poignant for its very lack" (Montwieler 80), which aligns with the "the implicit theme of metamorphosis" in frontier mythology that often sees the protagonist "seeking new horizons" (Mogen 105). In sum, while "Security" echoes the crushing devastation of 9/11 with Olive's own terror, the subsequent story also offers hope for both Olive and America. Like Olive, New York is pitted with holes, both physically and psychically, but these holes can be filled in by moving on, for the world, despite the terrors it offers, is still worth living in.

Egan provides a similar conclusion for her main female character, Sasha, who begins the collection as a single, work-driven kleptomaniac and by the end has evolved into a stable mother of two. Sasha's terror is of the unknown, primarily in herself. As revealed in the first chapter-story, "Found Objects," Sasha does not understand her need to take things from others, things she does not even use, nor can she stop herself (Egan 4-5).

She does not understand, and is ashamed of, how she became a prostitute in Naples, which she confides to Rob in "Out of Body" (Egan 194). Her struggle with this unknown drive is a long one, beginning in the childhood her uncle Ted describes, full of active rebellion, crime, and therapy (Egan 213), and which is never explained or justified as Sasha herself does not know or understand its origins.

Sasha does not engage in nostalgia as a coping mechanism to overcome this trauma and the terror it has engendered. She wishes to move beyond the past rather than return to it (van de Velde 131) and instead of dwelling on the traumas in her past, Sasha focuses on the life she now has with her family, as seen in "Great Rock and Roll Pauses." She has found a healthy expression of her former disorder in art, where she "makes sculptures in the desert out of trash and... old toys" and considers their falling apart as "'part of the process'" (Egan 242). The rest of her focus is on her family, and her interactions with her children show attentiveness and love: she seriously discusses musical pauses with Lincoln (Egan 247, 245), she tries to encourage Alison to write (Egan 253), jokes with her (Egan 254), and has even given Alison one of her own keepsakes, a toy horse (Egan 255). Sasha's appreciation for her family and new life is represented by her collages, which "'tell the whole story if you really look'" (Egan 265). It is important to note that Sasha's focus on her family is not a form of escapism or failure to deal with issues. In fact, her marriage to her college boyfriend Drew (Egan 255) and Alison's knowledge of Rob (Egan 272-273) suggest an acceptance of the past and a focus on the now, because she knows that like the light from the setting sun, time is slipping away. Just like Olive in Strout, this happiness, or at the very least contentment, now occurs in the time after 9/11, demonstrating that it is not only

possible for the individual to overcome terror, it is also possible for the American nation.

Conclusion

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* are part of the larger development of terror in American literature that arose in response to the public terror felt during and after the events of September 11, 2001. In her collection, Strout focuses on the "scenes, unforeseeable shifts, contingencies, [and] adaptations... that [characters] are forced to survive and accept or at least live with" (Montwieler 81). These scenes and shifts are the events of daily life that are often permeated by terror: routine work at a pharmacy, attending a winter concert, a son's wedding, an elopement, ordering a shirt online, visiting family, a funeral, and caring for a declining husband. The New England community Olive calls home serves as a microcosm for greater America, as the collection's multiple narrative focalizers demonstrate that Olive's struggles are not singular, but representative of the conflicts all Americans face, both before and after the September 11 attacks. However, it is only after visiting New York, the site of that national horror, where Olive herself faces a terrible reality and conflict that she is able to move forward and overcome all the various smaller terrors of her life. Egan's collage of "narrative threads and temporalities, subjectivities and voices, styles and tones" (van de Velde 123) also focuses on the everyday moments of life—first dates, business meetings, rock concerts, tennis matches, parental bonding, new jobs, and death. The pause between A and B in her characters' lives "figure[s] as an unrepresentable site of haunting.... [which] takes on a particularly tangible quality through Egan's engagement with... [the] void left in the space where the Twin Towers stood" (van de Velde 132). However, she does not provide any "mythic, valorizing narrative of the type that structures and conveys

meaning" (Cowart 249). Instead, Egan details the individual, but inherently related, struggle of characters that attempt to cope with the terror in their lives before and after the centralized event of September 11, 2001, and try to determine and accept their evolving identities, creating dual microcosms of pre- and post-9/11 America while highlighting the differences between the two. The former is a world of comparative innocence, of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, while the latter is fraught with environmental, military, and political tension as well as individual struggle; yet despite these massive changes those who are willing to move on, to not allow themselves to remain subjected to their terror, like Sasha, are able to find peace and contentment. In sum, Egan's and Strout's collections serve not only as a representation of how public terror has affected Americans on the individual level but also as an avenue for an expression of that terror and how to overcome it.

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