

CAFÉ CULTURE

by Jack Dann

Jack Dann's last story for us was the Nebula-Award-winning novella, "Da Vinci Rising" (May 1995). His latest novel, *The Rebel: an Imagined Life of James Dean*, came out from Morrow in August 2005. (Check out www.ReadTheRebel.com and/or visit the author at jackdann.com.) Jack lives in Australia on a farm overlooking the sea and "commutes" to Los Angeles and New York. After far too long an absence, he returns to our pages with a deeply disturbing look at an unpromising future.

A word of warning: there are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

"From these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."
—Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

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After six Baptist suicide bombers met their god in the fiery nave, aisles, apse, towers, and main altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the cafés that crowded Fiftieth and Fifty-First Streets became de rigueur for writers, artists, actors, news personalities, wealthy dilettantes, activists, dissidents, tourists, the Christian left, and wannabees. Young Muslim women, faces covered in black muslin, sipped ginger ale beside their Armani suited, bearded partners, while students wearing Christ's Commandos® T-shirts argued about the morality of selling a watch that had lodged in a schoolgirl's neck during an explosion on a school bus.

"Well, the poor thing's dead. The suicide bomber's watch went to pay for the funeral."

"That would have been one heck of a funeral."

"It was."

Max Rosanna's Café was always mobbed with those who needed to be seen and those who needed to see, and the outside tables closest to the stained glass door of the establishment were always on reserve for the titled, the famous, and those who could slip old Max a thousand dollar bill for a sweaty croissant and a flat white coffee. Max's was directly across the street from the cathedral ruins, and Max had his contractors cement the

shards of stained glass from the exploding cathedral into the floors and ceiling of the café. At night, lights strobing, Max's would glitter like an old psychedelic dream.

But it was spring, 11:00 AM, Friday, and the pioneers of the New Rebellion, the New Yorkers who would not show even a flicker of fear, wanted to be in the street. They were boarding their buses, riding their subways, sipping their coffees, eating their croissants and bialys, being seen at Max's, and taking their chances.

Leo Malkin couldn't afford Max's, but he had done some renovation work on the café for the fat man and was always guaranteed a table *somewhere* on the premises. But on this clear, clean, beatifically sunny Friday morning, not a chair could be had; it was like trying to get into the Ginza Bar or the Peppermint Lounge in the middle of the last century. Two bouncers kept the line of desperate patrons-to-be away from the patio of the café, which looked like an oasis of shadow under its awnings and umbrellas.

After being patted, introduced to a soap opera star, and consoled by Max, Leo walked toward Sixth Avenue, toward the demolished RCA Building. Every café was mobbed, and the conversations buzzed like flies on the street. He passed a boy of around fourteen, who glared at him with absolute hatred. Leo nodded to him, which, admittedly, was a stupid reaction. *Maybe it's because I look Jewish, but I could just as easily be Arab, and he looks Semitic.*

"Hey!" Leo shouted at the boy.

The boy turned and stopped. He had delicate features, dark skin, big brown eyes, and coarse black hair cut in bowl fashion. He looked somehow familiar.

"What's with the look?"

The boy was wearing jeans and a checkered work shirt; both were slightly too large for him. The jeans were rolled in heavy cuffs over his engineer boots, the shirt was long and wasn't tucked in. The boy shook his head and smiled a beautiful ragamuffin smile that somehow chilled Leo to the bone.

And then the beautiful boy was gone, snapped back into the crowd.

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Ikrima Margalit walked jauntily down Fiftieth Street, the distant sun warm on his face, his ultra-light explosive vest more like a silk handkerchief than a vest constructed of material that would make a belt loaded with C-4 look like a New Year's Eve sparkler. He carried no detectable shrapnel, no old fashioned (yet effective) ball bearings, no nails, screws, nuts, or thick wire. His very bones would pierce the nonbelievers. He would explode like a claymore mine, and, somehow, God in his mercy would turn the very sidewalk, cars, and streetlights into killing, cleansing objects of death. Those who understood such things used to call acetone peroxide Mother of Satan because it was so unstable; but this new explosive was stable as a table, and it was called Mother of God after the blessed Virgin.

To his right and across the street was the old Macy's building; to his left was the noisy line of cafés his mother called temples of corruption. They didn't look like anything but cafés, and the people sitting around sipping coffee and smoking kef were young and happy and pretty. The air smelled perfumed. The hydrogen-powered cars whispered past, as if in slow motion; every once in a while a driver would honk his horn in dumb rage and desperation and would be automatically fined. It was a perfect day, and young Ikrima could feel God so very close to him, could almost hear him between the noise of conversation, the susurrations of tires, and the occasional honking horns and sirens. Ikrima knew exactly where God was. His mother had told him that He was just on the other side of the vest that was now like part of his body, part of his very being; and right next to his skin was Paradise, and there, in Paradise, being looked after by the perfect virgin houris were all his friends and heroes, including his blessed father. His mother was on this side of Paradise, with him; and although Ikrima was shivering, as if cold, as if his clothes were cold and wet, he wasn't afraid.

His mobile rang, a tick-tock melody, the very latest song from *Memri*.

"Hello, Momma."

"Hello, Ike, my blessed son. Tell me where you are?"

"I'm at the place. It's just up ahead, and I can see the fat man you told me about, the one who is corruption to corruption."

"Yes, my son."

"I am almost there, Momma, but I see two girls. They are Muslims, Momma. Dressed in—"

“They are not,” his mother said. “Whatever their dress. Now tell me when you are ready.”

“Now, Momma. I love you and will see you with God in Paradise.”

“Yes, my darling, yes,” and Ikrima Margalit pressed the little button of a detonator and became light, exploding, exposing light. He flew to his God in a million pieces. The ground exploded and shards of glass and cement and steel flew like missiles into flesh. The fat man Max exploded in the light, as did everyone around him, and Ikrima joined the houris in self-abnegating love, vengeance, and honor.

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Ikrima’s mother Dafna stood in the living room of her commission apartment on 184th Street. She was in her early forties, yet still considered beautiful and shapely. She held the tiny mobile phone to her ear, but the connection was dead; all she could hear was the scratching of her coarse black hair against the earpiece. Her son was suddenly, just-this-minute dead, immolated in the holy cleansing fire of jihad. One minute she was with him, speaking with him—*Oh, my darling, how I love you*—and the next minute she was listening to her own breathing while her beautiful, precious, brave son made his instant transit to God. He would not be tempted and seduced by life; he was the most precious of God’s martyrs. She dropped the phone and bowed to Allah, who made her simultaneity of grief and poignant joy possible. She felt an overwhelming warmth in her loins, as if she were truly being touched by God. She felt a buzzing in her ears, as if God was speaking directly to her, whispering to her like electricity; and she bowed to Him in the East, then fell to her knees in prayer. She nodded, finished, and stood up, shouting joy at the top of her lungs. Her neighbors pounded on her door, which she opened so that she might accept their congratulations; and they sang, “This is not a grieving tent. This is a congratulation tent.” She and her beautiful son Ikrima would soon be together in Paradise. He had done his duty, his last act of devotion. Soon she would do her own divine duty; but first Dafna had to work, for it was Friday, and all her clients paid her on Friday. She cleaned townhouses, condominiums, and co-ops on the Upper East Side inside the Wall of Safety. Once she had collected her money—everyone paid in universal, which was as good as cash—she would go to the Martyrs’ Center and pay for her order of posters, bracelets, calendars, wall hangings, fridge magnets, and watches, which all contained pictures of her martyred son. Then, as a last act of faith, contrition, and celebration, the Martyrs’ Center would distribute the trinkets and keepsakes along with baskets of food and

medicine to everyone in her building.

Thus did Dafna accept her neighbors' well wishes, tears, laughter, encouragement, cakes, and coffee; then she politely shooed everyone out of her apartment, took off her favorite crepe linen *abaya* with chamoisette fringes, hung it in the closet on a pink, cushioned hanger, and donned her own explosive vest. Dressed in jeans, flannel shirt, and a coarse black *hijab* that covered her hair and fastened under her chin, she left for work.

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Leo Malkin wasn't going to work today.

His manager Sam Feinstein had arrived at Mrs. Edelman's penthouse at eight sharp with a plumber and a carpenter to renovate her bathroom. Mrs. Edelman was one of Leo's best customers, for she owned four slum apartment buildings that needed constant maintenance. Sam knew what to do and didn't need Leo's help, even though he insisted on calling Leo every five minutes for authorization. Sam did most of the work these days and would oversee five jobs today. Leo concentrated on bringing in new customers, keeping his distributors sweet, taking care of the books, and hiring helpers and tradesmen for Sam. Although it wouldn't buy him a Roller or a condo inside the wall, it was a living.

His Aunt Martha had willed him a lifetime tenancy in a three bedroom walk-up on West Seventy-Ninth Street, which boasted "glimpses" of Broadway. Leo couldn't sell the condo, nor could he redecorate or renovate without permission from the estate's attorneys; and as he had no children who could inherit, the condo would probably end up going to a distant cousin ... or, more likely, to the lawyers. His ex-wife Cheryl loved the flat, as she called it; and when she left him two months ago, she told him it was harder leaving the flat than leaving him.

Leo loved Cheryl and was devoted to her—obsessed with her; but for all his pleading and coaxing and acting out, she had left him for a tall, lanky, flat-chested, curly-haired woman named Nandy. Now how the hell could you fight that? He tried, oh, Lord, had he tried. He had even swallowed his pride and accepted Cheryl's invitation that they all live together for a while as an experiment. Cheryl, for her part, was oh, so solicitous in every way. She gave him her body whenever he asked, she always invited him to go out with her and Nandy, and she even urged Leo to sleep with Nandy, which he did. After that, he felt tainted, hollowed out by the empty pain of grief, which he located in his solar plexus. He lost twenty pounds. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer and asked them to leave. They joined a commune

somewhere on the Lower East Side and became sub deacons of the First Church of the Epiphany.

Leo walked along the edge of Central Park until he came to Seventy-Ninth Street. His house cleaner Dafna would be cleaning his apartment today. Since he usually wasn't at home when she cleaned (she was pretty, and Leo didn't want to chance a lawsuit), he always left her money and a note on the dining room table. She had her own set of keys.

But he definitely wanted to see Dafna today.

He had heard the explosion at Max Rosanna's Café, went back to see the carnage, the explosions of flesh and fragmentation of bone, the wounded and limbless, the dead and dying. He scanned his mobile for police reports of the suicide bomber: the perpetrator was a boy (or perhaps a girl, the announcer said) with a bowl haircut and checkered shirt (according to video from a nearby street cam); and Leo remembered the beautiful boy he had passed on the street, remembered the look of hatred and scorn, and remembered seeing him once before—for Leo never ever forgot a face.

Leo had seen the boy when he had interviewed Dafna at his condo.

He quickened his pace.

Of course, the chances were long that Dafna wouldn't be working today.

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She took her money from the envelope on Mr. Malkin's dining room table and left her keys; after all, she wouldn't be coming back there again. She contemplated just leaving without cleaning, but she had been paid to do a job; and she was not going to leave this world owing anybody anything. Except God. To Him she owed everything. Before she started cleaning, however, she took advantage of the privacy of Mr. Malkin's home to adjust her explosive vest just one last time. It was too tight around her breasts; she had pulled it tight purposely to be reminded of the closeness of Heaven and her son Ikrima; but it hurt her nipples, as her son had when he suckled. She went into Mr. Malkin's marble bathroom, which was due to be washed down with stronger detergent, and took off her *hijab* and work shirt. She loosened the vest, rubbed under her breasts, which were itchy, and then prayed and carefully checked and retied the vest, taking special care that the detonator wire wouldn't catch when she moved her arms, bent over,

or arched her back. Then she prayed and thanked God for giving her this opportunity to please him. She would do her allotted tasks, and then without a backward turn, without even going to the toilet, changing her clothes, or washing her face, she would blow herself into Paradise on a crowded street during the rush hour.

Such was her plan ... until she felt the profane heat of someone's eyes staring at her. She screamed as Leo Malkin grabbed her, pinning her arms behind her back. He was breathing heavily, like an animal, she thought wildly. He smelled of tar and sweat and burning; he smelled bestial, like the streets, like Hell, like darkness.

"Don't move," he said, shushing her, squeezing her, and Dafna prayed, for surely this stinking pig of a man was going to rape her, bloody her vagina, which had not felt the monstrosity of a man since her husband died for God. She tried to wrench free of him, pull away just long enough to detonate her vest and blow this eructation of a building into dust and entrails; but Leo was implacably strong and disgustingly erect. She closed her eyes tight, waiting for the inevitable. If he loosened his grip for an instant, she would send him to Hell ... while she would be carried by winds of fire into Paradise.

But he pulled the wiring away from her vest in one quick, smooth movement (after all, he was an electrician), and she sobbed as he relaxed his grip. He held her, as if this could become an impossible, tender moment. She felt his erection pressing hard against her, felt a terrible, ugly, guilty warmth suffusing her groin. She would give herself up to him. She wouldn't fight. She would be a statue: unfeeling, unyielding marble. There would be another day for her to join her son and husband as a martyr, and what was going to happen to her now, the horror of the next few moments, would purify her as a martyr.

Perhaps, just perhaps ... she might escape, run away, repair her vest, hand out gifts, explode into Heaven.

Abruptly, he released her.

"Take the vest off," he said.

"Not with you watching me."

"Either that, or I'll take it off for you."

She nodded and removed the vest, handing it to him while she

covered her breasts with her right arm. He turned away from her and, standing in the bathroom doorway, said, "Put your shirt back on." She did and he demanded she give him the detonator, which she had tried to hide from him. "I saw your son," he said.

"My son? Where...?"

"On his way to Max's. I know what he did. And so do you, don't you."

Dafna met his gaze, would not avert her eyes.

"Your son looked at me the same way you are now," Leo said. "How could you ... why?"

And she smiled at him, just as her son had.

"Let me pass, Mr. Malkin, or do you wish to see my breasts again and humiliate yourself?"

Leo stepped aside, and as Dafna walked past him, she felt an inexplicable regret. She felt an urge to succor and comfort the beast, to give herself to him. Dread and claustrophobia followed her into the elevator and into the street.

If she had her vest, she would have pressed the detonator.

But her last filthy thoughts would forever bar her from the ecstasy of Heaven. She had consigned herself to the humiliation her son and husband had escaped.

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Holding the vest to his chest, Leo paced back and forth in the living room. He was still breathing heavily, was still excited, guilty, humiliated. Why had he allowed her to pass? To walk away? To procure another vest and murder innocents? He laughed at his thoughts, for there were no innocents, except little babies perhaps; but not much of the world was lost when little babies fell back into the darkness from whence they came. Leo took off his shirt, loosened the straps of Dafna's vest, and then put it on, shrugging into it as if it was an old, comfortable sweater. He pieced the wiring back together, just a few twists, and made sure the connections were solid. The wiring was bluecoat, which was virtually undetectable. He put on his shirt, slipped the detonator into the side pocket of his trousers, and walked out of his condo.

He left the door wide open.

It would be a good long walk downtown along Broadway, past the upmarket shops and bistros, past the checkpoints, and into the mid-town/downtown safety zones. Safely pacing, heels clicking on pavement, pushing through the crowds, walking in a straight line, fully focused, Leo and his vest, wires, and detonator went unnoticed. His mobile buzzed and vibrated insistently in his pocket, but he ignored it.

He was calmness itself.

He walked to the First Church of the Epiphany on Tenth Street without incident. The church was a confection of Gothic Revival style and Stanford White design. He admired it and then walked inside, where he admired its famous and magnificent mural by John Le Farge. He stood veiled in crimson light from the great stained glass windows above the nave and waited. Cheryl and Nandy would surely be arriving soon, and Leo would greet them with loving kindness and personally guide them into the blinding light and exploding stillness of ascension.