

## BEVERLY SKY

*The Mind of God: The Big Think*, 2014  
Fabric collage on canvas, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY: STEVE DUNWELL

## JOE MENO

# War on Terror

She had been a reporter for six years, first at *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, then back in Chicago at the *Daily Southtown*; then she'd landed a poorly paid entertainment-and-culture staff position at the *Sun-Times* a year ago just as several other newspapers around the country had begun to fold. About her were all the obvious signs of a major print medium, an entire civilization, in decline. But she was forty-one, too old to jump the track again.

Before she made it home, she got a text from her younger sister. *Help*, was all it said. She punched the vinyl steering wheel, turned left from the wrong lane, and ended up at her sister's place, a tiny one-bedroom apartment on the city's far southwest side.

Krista was in the bathroom, vomiting. Her son, Brody—six years old—was watching TV on the couch. The kitchen table was filled with prescription bottles, some of them open, some turned upside down—Krista's unorthodox way of remembering which medicines she had already taken. She had been in remission for two years from breast cancer, but recently her oncologist had discovered a malignancy in the other breast. There was now a possibility that some of it had spread to her liver and lungs. She had begun chemotherapy three weeks ago. She was going to have to get another port put in. Now everything was going too fast.

Sam kissed Brody on the head, put the lids back on the prescription bottles, and then went in to check on her sister. Krista was curled up beside the toilet bowl, head on the floor. She looked pretty, even in her red pet store uniform. Her teeth were yellow from chain-smoking, her hair white-blonde with its dark roots showing, the ends brittle and matted from the chemo and from dyeing it so often. There was a round photo-button on her uniform vest lapel, a picture of her son. She lifted her head and gave a false smile.

"Hey, kiddo," Sam said, kneeling beside her.

"I left some of the bottles open," she murmured.

"I got 'em."

Krista nodded. Sam ran some warm water, folded up a dirty washrag, soaked it, and pressed it against Krista's head.

"Where were you?" Krista asked. "I texted you like five times."

"Nowhere. They killed some people in Libya." She scratched her nose. "Do you want to get up from there?"

"No. Will you get Brody into bed?"

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012, a group of armed men stormed the American embassy in Benghazi and killed four people, including a U.S. ambassador. Sam got a call from a friend an hour after it happened, and watched it all unfold on cable TV in the near-empty break room. It was around seven at night. She flipped from channel to channel, searching for any familiar faces. She had done five years in the Peace Corps, and then two in the Foreign Service Office of the U.S. Department of State. When she was certain no one she knew had been hurt, she strode out of the break room, turned off her computer, and grabbed her purse. It felt like, at any moment, something terrible could happen; at any moment, something could go seriously wrong.

She waited for the elevator, and when it arrived, felt spooked seeing it so empty. The elevator was always empty now that the entire photography staff had been laid off.

Same with the parking lot. She hustled through the deserted lot over to her car—a badly used Honda, its catalytic converter and muffler hanging from the chassis by baling wire—fumbled for her keys, and then looked up. On her windshield was another note, placed beneath the driver's-side wiper blade, the ink bright pink: "You're Dead, Bitch." She crumpled up the note, unlocked her car, and threw the piece of paper in the glove compartment along with the other balled-up threats.

Sam nodded, quietly stepped out, and closed the bathroom door. Brody was already asleep on the couch, still in his school clothes. Sam got an arm under his head and carried him to his bed. Then she sat down on the couch, searched for the remote, and put on the news.

Sam always told everyone she and Krista were best friends, but the truth was they were sisters, and not even close ones at that. Samantha also told people they had invented their own language when they were kids—just like twins—but it was Sam’s language, words she had made up, chosen, imagined. No one understood what they were saying except for Sam. In the backyard, up in the limbs of the pink dogwood, they spoke in this tongue, appearing like two displaced refugee children, Krista doing her best to play along.

“*exo moxo rexo. exo moxo kexo,*” Sam said.

“*exo moxo rexo. exo moxo kexo,*” Krista repeated. In this way, Sam tried to put her sister under a spell, but it never seemed to work.

Sam was two years older, but always felt like the younger one. She had been shy as a child, distracted, forced to wear a bandage all during first grade to correct astigmatism in her left eye. She had a startlingly thin face and light blonde hair. After she fell out of the dogwood tree and broke her left leg when she was eight, she was given over to long spells of moodiness. Once the bone healed, Sam pushed herself to run on it as hard as she could until it was stronger than it was before. She was a born doubter and also an atheist. This had made her an important asset in the Foreign Service Office, though it lent even her most benign newspaper stories an unmitigated air of tragedy.

Krista had a slightly upturned nose and a chipped front tooth. Everything else about her was unfairly attractive. She wore her blonde hair short, had big blue eyes, and was graced with a spectacular pair of dimples. Her fingernails were constantly dirty. She moved through the world as if there were nothing to be afraid of, as if blunt corners, sharp edges, lead poisoning did not exist. She had broken an arm, cracked two teeth, and been bitten by a neighborhood dog, all by the age of three. She had not gone to college. Instead she had stolen several thousand

dollars from their parents, using their credit cards. She had had a series of bad boyfriends, including one who was married and another who died in a motorcycle crash. She dropped out of high school when she was eighteen, moved in with a guy who worked at a video store, and was married by the end of the year. Now thirty-eight, she had been divorced, had a child, had cancer twice, and settled into a dead-end job at a chain pet store because of its decent health benefits.

Sam slept on her sister’s couch, woke at six A.M., helped get Brody fed and dressed, and then offered to drop him off at school. She waved goodbye to Krista, who sat on the toilet in her red pet store vest and underwear, smoking. It was no longer any secret that she had begun smoking again.

Sam got back to her place in Bucktown, showered, changed her clothes, checked her e-mail. There were two messages from her editor about some new tell-all book from one of President Clinton’s secret girlfriends, and one message from Tim. *Hello*, it said. *See you at 2*. She read it, smiled, deleted it, then decided to change her dress again.

Tim Morton was fifty-four, was separated from his wife, and had two adult children, both at private colleges. He had been the newsroom manager at the *Sun-Times* for the last twelve years. He had won a Pulitzer for a series of stories about gun violence when he was a fresh-faced reporter some twenty years before. Now he was seen as something of a lion among the staff. Gray hair, strong chin, gruff demeanor. When he asked her out for a drink, she felt an embarrassing, immediate schoolgirl thrill.

They met at the Old Town Ale House, had two rounds, then walked the few blocks to a condo Tim was subletting from a racquet-ball buddy. They had sex in a nice, neat, orderly fashion. Afterwards, they lay in bed, Sam pressing her head upon his hairy chest.

“Did you hear about Benghazi?” she asked. “What the heck’s going on over there?”

“Some right-wing Christian nut job made a movie and then it went viral and all these poor Muslims overseas saw it and ... unintended consequences, I guess. Or not so unintended.”

“That’s awful,” she said. “Sometimes I wonder if the world was always this bad, if there were always so many bad things happening all at the same time.”

“It’s always been like this,” Tim said, putting a hand on the back of her head. “What’s different is now we see and hear everything.”

Sam nodded, wondered if what he’d said were true, then set her head back down. There was a sense that, even while listening to Tim’s breath, at any moment someone she knew was probably in danger. When would she, when would someone she loved, be blown up?

A half-hour later, as she was putting on her bra, she got a text from her sister: *SOS*.

She sighed, kissed Tim on his bald spot—which had become their signature parting gesture—and then drove the half-hour back out to Oak Lawn. Krista was on the shabby gray couch, stubbing out a cigarette while lighting up another.

“What? Did your doctor call? Is it bad?”

“I just figured out they cancelled *One Life to Live*. What the fuck am I supposed to live for now?”

Sam sighed, took a seat on the couch, and then took a drag from her sister’s cigarette.

When Sam was ten, she got chicken pox from a boy named Danny Dwyer at school. Their father and mother, both thoughtful orthodontists, put Krista in Sam’s bed, hoping to get the irritating episode over with in one fell swoop. The girls erected a tent out of sheets and applied calamine lotion to each other’s bumpy legs. At night, Krista slept on her stomach, Sam on her side. For five days, it was the closest the two siblings had ever been, would ever be. Sam often thought about those few nights, their limbs smelling of calamine, Sam telling make-believe stories, the unfamiliar though comforting rise and fall of this stranger’s milky breath beside her neck. After that week, however, any time Sam thought of her sister, she tended to think of her as her burden, her enemy.

She was late filing a story about celebrity baby names. She fudged it, googled some familiar-sounding article in *Cosmo*, paraphrased it, then e-mailed it with a lengthy apology, saying she had had a family emergency. Her edi-

tor called a few seconds after she sent it. Sam picked up her cell and Cassie asked, “Don’t you know people in the State Department?”

“I dunno. Like one maybe.”

“Didn’t you work there?”

“For two years. I was a nobody. I didn’t even have a title.”

“For two years?”

“My boss got replaced by the incoming administration. I was a glorified secretary. Not even glorified, really. Barely even an assistant.”

“This thing in Benghazi is really lighting up. Do you want to put a call in and see if you can get somebody to talk to you off the record?”

“Wait a minute. This sounds like real news.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a real reporter?”

“I don’t know. Am I?”

“Jerry Paulson’s supposed to be writing copy on this, but he hasn’t had a contact in the State Department since Kennedy was shot. This could be a big break for you. Something like this could get picked up by A.P. if you do it right.”

“Okay. Let me make a call.”

Sam hung up the phone, searched through her sent e-mails, and found a birthday message to her old friend, Anna Chu, from a year before. Anna still worked in the department. Sam and Anna had started around the same time. Anna had gone to Harvard, had been more ambitious, much more organized. She had given up on any kind of social life. Ten years later, Sam was a reporter turning out plagiarized celebrity gossip and Anna was a senior-level government official. Sam wrote a quick, informal e-mail, sent it to Anna, then immediately checked her inbox again. It had gone through.

Later, Tim texted her, asking if she wanted to meet up for drinks. It seemed like all she ever did with him was drink and have sex. How about an actual date? But who had the time or mental energy for such an extravagance? She checked her watch, saw she had to pick up Krista for chemotherapy in a few hours, did the math, texted back. *Maybe tomorrow*, she said.

When she got to Krista’s place, she found the front door unlocked, the radio blaring something from *Journey’s Greatest Hits*. She quietly stepped inside and surveyed the room.

There was a pair of men's jeans on the floor, and nesting inside one of the legs, some crumpled-up white boxers. Sam prodded them with her shoe and looked toward the closed bedroom door.

"K?"

The only bedroom in the apartment was Brody's, one of the few signs of normality, but Sam knew her sister sometimes used it to entertain men while he was at school.

"Krista?"

Krista opened the bedroom door, looking flushed. She had on a worn-out blue sweater. No underwear. Her chest and face were irritated with small red bumps from someone's unshaven face.

"Sorry. We got ... give me a minute." She walked over, lit a cigarette, picked up the man's pants, and then crept back into the room. Sam slumped onto the couch and turned on the news. The president was giving a press conference about the attack in Benghazi. He looked worried, and this president never looked worried.

Two or three minutes later, a man with dark shaggy hair and a patchy beard stumbled out. He nodded at Sam and glanced back at the bedroom, deciding if he should say something, paused, then headed out. Sam watched him struggle to get one of his shoes on as he closed the apartment door. Krista suddenly appeared in her red pet store uniform.

"Is that what you're wearing to chemotherapy?" Sam asked.

"It's the only thing I have that's relatively clean." She blew out a mouthful of smoke.

Sam pursed her lips. "I thought you had cancer."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I dunno." She paused, glanced back up. "Who was that guy?" she asked.

"Who, Brad? I met him on the internet. Why, what's wrong with him?"

Sam thought it would hurt more if she didn't answer. So she said, "Aren't you going to be late?"

"They can kiss my ass. They're lucky I come at all."

"It's chemotherapy. *They're helping you.*"

"Sure, by putting poison in my body."

"Wait a minute. Aren't you going to put on a bra?"

"Aren't you?" Krista asked, though this made absolutely no sense. "Let me look for it. That idiot must have flung it

somewhere." Sam knew then that it was better not to argue, and decided to wait for her sister in the car.

When Sam was twelve, she discovered her first armpit hair. By then, Krista had already been in a training bra for a full year. Krista had also begun to shave her legs, explicitly ignoring their mother's wishes. That same year, a man approached the girls on the street as they walked home from school. He wore a dirty red windbreaker and tan pants. He began to talk to them before they realized his zipper was undone, his male member fully exposed. Sam grabbed her younger sister by the arm, but Krista did not seem worried. She did not pause or look away. "Krista," Sam said, pulling on her sister's sweater. "Krista." Finally, Sam had to drag her away. Two blocks away, when they were out of danger, Sam asked her what she was thinking. But Krista only laughed.

"Hip-fucking-hooray," Krista muttered, her face looking swollen and sallow.

Sam sat in the oncology ward waiting room, thumbing through the e-mails on her phone. A message popped up from Anna Chu. Sam glanced around the waiting room and smiled. She opened it and saw: *Now's not a good time.*

She squinted, bit on her fingernail, and wrote back, *Just give me two minutes. Please,* then hit send. She waited again for a response. There was none. About twenty minutes later a nurse rolled Krista out in a wheelchair.

"She's all done," the nurse said, smiling.

She drove Krista home, waited for Brody to get back from school, prepared him a dinner of cold cereal, then swung by the *Sun-Times*. Tim was at his desk in the bullpen, squinting at an Oxford English Dictionary. "I can't find the word 'vituperative.' When did it stop being a word? See, this, this is the problem with the world." He glanced up and smiled at Sam, then tried to straighten his thinning hair. "Let me guess. Couldn't stop thinking about me?"

Sam rolled her eyes. "Are you still following this Benghazi thing?"

"Angry mob storms an embassy. Where's the story?"

"Cassie called and asked if I had a contact in the State Department."

Tim's eyebrows went up. "Do you?"

"I do."

For a moment, Tim seemed soundly impressed. "I had no idea. So what's the problem?"

"The problem is, this is a big opportunity, and I've never covered this kind of story before, and I need to know how not to blow it."

Tim grinned pompously. "I want you to know how attracted I am to you right now. Coming here, asking to partake of my wisdom."

"I want you to know I'm going to walk away in five seconds if you keep talking like that."

Tim leaned back, grinning wider. "Just tell her it's all off the record. Tell her you just need some background. Then ask her what she thinks happened. Ask her to tell you what she thinks people ought to know."

"That's it?"

"That's it, Brenda Starr."

"Who the hell's Brenda Starr?" Sam asked.

"You don't know Brenda Starr? Jesus. How about Lois Lane?"

"Who? Superman's girlfriend?"

"She's a reporter. Brenda Starr's a reporter. These women should be your role models. Jesus. This is why the news is junk. No one cares about context anymore."

"Morton, you mean no one cares about old-people humor."

"Nice. Ask me for advice and then insult me."

"I'm sorry." Sam glanced around and then quickly kissed Tim on the forehead before hurrying out.

In the parking lot, there was a new note on her car's windshield, beneath the arm of the windshield wiper. "Cum dumpster." Sam stared at it and shook her head. "Yikes," she said. "That's a new one." She crumpled it up, opened the car door, then flung the balled-up paper to the floor.

She ate at a fast-food drive-through on Division, swung by her place, picked up some new clothes, then drove back out to her sister's. It was just past ten P.M. when she pulled into the lot.

Krista was on the couch, a white plastic garbage bag beside her head. Brody was sitting beside her. They were watching some cartoon where all sorts of things were exploding.

"Hi," Sam said. "How is everyone?"

"Shitty," Krista groaned. "Where have you been? I vomited all over the rug."

"She vomited on me, too," Brody said with a grin. "On my shoe."

"I thought you said you were going to help me with this," Krista whimpered.

"I am. I am. But I have a job. I have to work. I have some things of my own I have to do sometimes." She looked at Brody. "Brody, honey, can I talk to your mom for a minute?"

Krista frowned. "He can stay. He isn't a child."

"He's six. He is literally a child."

"I don't mind," Brody said. "I can watch TV in my room."

"Thanks, pal," Sam said, and watched him drag his blanket into his bedroom. She took a seat beside her sister and then began rubbing her hair. "I'm doing the best I can with this. If you feel like you need more help, maybe we need to hire somebody."

"Hire somebody? Are you fucking crazy? What am I going to pay her with? Coupons for pet food?"

"I don't know. I just ... I can't do everything. I have a job, I have my own life. I'm here as much as I can possibly be."

"Please don't stop rubbing my hair," Krista whispered. Her eyelids began to droop. She was no longer listening. Sam ran her fingers back and forth along her sister's scalp. The hair there was frail, wispy. It had begun to fall out again. Sam frowned, studied a strand, looked down at her sister's pinkish scalp, then turned off the TV.

At the age of thirteen, Sam had often wondered if maybe she was a lesbian. Or maybe a little bit in love with her younger sister. Which was crazy, absolutely nuts. What sane person would think a thing like that? Maybe she was bipolar. Or maybe just a boy trapped in a woman's body. Her face had become lean and long, just like their father's, her eyes a shrewd, unattractive shade of brown, her lips virtually nonexistent. For some reason, she was always aware of the wideness of her too-bony shoulders, especially when she walked into rooms. She had grown up to be a little too masculine, a little too strong. Krista, on the other hand—wow, the way boys stared at Krista as they climbed the steps to school, the way her legs looked in the same hand-me-down pair of jeans, Krista's lips, Krista's eyes, Krista's hair, even the way she grinned goofily across

the table at dinner when she was eating, everything always seemed so effortless, so pleasing.

But now there was a hardness in her sister's face, deep lines around her mouth and eyes. Sam glanced down and watched her sister sleep, and tried not to think of the future.

In the morning she fed her nephew, helped Krista into Brody's bed, put the TV on for her in his room, then dropped Brody off at school. She checked her e-mail, then again ten minutes later. There was no new message from Anna Chu. There were two voice mails from Cassie, her editor, asking if she had had any luck. Sam sent her an e-mail, lying outright, saying she'd have something soon, then looked up and nearly crashed into a school bus. She promised herself for the one millionth time she would not look at her phone while she was driving, but checked her e-mail twice again before she was back home.

She worked out at the crummy half-price gym by her house, took a shower, checked her e-mail, sent Anna Chu another message. This one got immediately bounced back with a note saying Anna was out of the office. Sam chewed on the fingernail of her right thumb and paced the apartment. She began to fool around putting together an unfinished bookshelf. The instructions were all in Swedish. A few minutes later, her phone buzzed, giving her an out. It was a text from Tim, asking if she wanted to meet. She glanced over at the bookshelf, then down at the phone, and then texted back and said, *Okay*.

They met at the Old Town Ale House again. As they were finishing their first round, Sam announced, "I think I'm going to need you to start wooing me."

Tim's eyebrows fell sharply. "How's that?"

"I think I'm going to need you to woo me a little more."

Tim took a sip of his beer and frowned. "Ha. I think you got me confused with someone else."

"What? I'm serious. Come on. Look around, Morton. I'm a catch."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-eight."

"How old?"

"Forty-one."

"Do you, in your right mind, think anyone, anyone who's forty-one, is still a catch?"

Sam frowned. "Come on. I'm okay-looking, I'm healthy, I have relatively few scars, no kids, a decent job. I feel like you ought to like me more than you do."

Tim finished his beer in one long gulp. "Is this going to be a long talk? Because if this is going to be a long talk, I'm going to order another drink."

"Just say something nice, and if I like it, I'll go back to your place and then we can have sex."

Tim studied Sam's face, then looked down at his shoes as if the answer were somehow written down there, then glanced back up. "You always smell good. I think that's a very considerate quality."

Sam squinted. "That's the best you got?"

"Come on. It's short notice. It used to take me months to come up with things to write in my wife's birthday cards. Seriously. I used to go through like nine or ten drafts. At the end, the best I could come up with were things like, 'You have legible handwriting.'"

Sam frowned, raised her hand to the barman and said, "Check, please."

She walked out into the night feeling like she would always be alone. Later Tim texted and called her but she was pretending to be dead, lying on the floor of her apartment, the unfinished bookshelf in the corner—its shadow looked like the oblong, awkward shape of her heart.

The next day she went to pick up Krista for chemo. When she opened the front door, she found the apartment filled with marijuana smoke. Krista was inhaling deeply from a joint, sitting beside Brad, neither of them wearing pants. She offered the joint to Sam, was rebuffed, then passed it back to Brad, who was watching a TV show about alligators.

"We're late," Sam said. "What the fuck are you doing?" She propped open the door and began to try to clear the air by waving her arms around like a lunatic. "I don't think you're supposed to get high right before you get chemo."

"What the fuck does it matter?" Krista asked. "I've got fucking cancer. Can't I at least feel good about it?"

"You're entitled to feel good about it," Brad said.

Sam turned and glared. "If you don't mind, my sister has a chemotherapy appointment," she said.

"I don't mind," he said with a dopey smile.

"Great. Brad doesn't mind," Sam said, rolling her eyes. "Can we please go?"

"You're always in such a rush," Krista said with a frown. "Fucking take the time to smell the roses. You're not the one dying."

Sam became palsied with rage. Finally she turned to her sister and muttered, "Get the fuck up and get downstairs."

"Be cool," Brad said, looking up from the TV.

"Listen, dipshit," Sam said, pointing a finger in his face. "I don't know what carnival dropped you off in town, but this moron over here is fucking sick. She's sick and she's apparently too selfish to worry about taking care of herself. So now it's my fucking problem." She turned back to her sister. "Get up and come on."

Krista sighed like the emotional teenager she was, and stood. "I've got to go," she whispered to Brad.

"It's cool."

"Do you want to hang out here?" Krista offered. "We'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Sure," he said, smiling, putting his feet up. Sam directed a deathly glare in his direction, and then gave her sister a shove toward the door.

"Stop touching me," Krista shouted.

"Then start walking."

Krista pulled on a pink leather coat with fringe and shuffled out as slowly as she could.

In the car, there was a painful silence. Sam could hear the rusty catalytic converter rattle over each bump. Finally Krista turned from the passenger-side window and said, "You think you're so fucking smart. You think because you live on the North Side and work at a fucking newspaper that you're some kind of fucking genius."

"I never said..."

"I know what you said. But I don't need your help anymore. I'll do it myself."

"Really?" Sam asked.

"Really."

"Great," Sam muttered.

"Great."

Sam pulled into the hospital, left the car running, threw the car into Park, walked around the front end, and

then tore open the passenger-side door. "Go ahead then. Get out. Go do it yourself."

Krista looked up at her sister, her eyes filling with tears. She was too proud to break, to apologize, just then. She climbed out of the car and took off toward the hospital entrance on unsteady gold high heels, tripping twice.

When Sam was fifteen and Krista thirteen, they both fell in love with the same boy. The boy's name was Mark Pearson. He was seventeen, and had moved with his parents into the ranch-style house across the street. He wore his brown hair long, went to the public high school, and preferred to mow his parents' front lawn with his shirt off. He spent a lot of time in the garage, trying to play metal guitar and smoking marijuana. Over and over that spring, they heard his weak attempts at "You Really Got Me" echoing up to where they watched from Sam's window. Mark Pearson had given himself a tattoo on his left upper arm that said, "Disgrace." Whenever the sound of a lawn mower fouled the air, the girls would line up in Sam's window and stare, as, by luck, Sam's window had the better view.

Sam knew she was in love the first time he waved to her and brushed the hair back that had fallen in his eyes. Once, watching from the window, they saw him stop the lawn mower, lean over, and rescue three baby birds from a nest that had fallen from a tree. The way he carefully lifted each frail, pink animal from the lawn, gently placed it back in the nest, then stupidly stood atop the mower and put the nest back in the tree, gave Sam a jolt inside her chest and behind her knees.

Almost immediately, the girls realized they would have to destroy each other in order to get what they wanted. Apparently Krista had no problem with this. She invited herself over to Mark's one afternoon while he was cutting the lawn, and talked with him as if they were old friends. She sat on his front steps only inches away, smiling, leaning her head back, laughing. Sam had been busy writing Mark Pearson's name again and again in her math notebook when she realized what had happened. She peered through her window and saw Krista giggling, saw Krista grinning, saw Krista touching the tattoo on Mark Pearson's upper arm. Moments later, Krista followed him into the cool shadows of Mark Pearson's unattached garage. Two

days later, Krista announced she had lost her virginity. Sam felt betrayed and deeply embarrassed, realizing at once how cruel life was, how unfair. All of this had taught Sam that she was not the kind of person who did well in a crisis. She was a thinker, not a doer. She realized she would always, always be unprepared for the worst.

She felt like she needed to be with someone, felt like she needed someone to talk to. She texted Tim, called his cell, sent him an e-mail. There was no response. She paced her apartment, yelled at the slanted bookcase, tried to read some poems. On the TV, the Republican presidential candidate was asked about Benghazi and smiled smugly. The footage showed the ruined embassy, the photos of the dead. She shut off the TV and went back to her car.

Tim was at his desk, staring over a pair of cheaters at his computer.

“Did you get the big scoop yet, Brenda Starr?”

Sam smiled weakly. “I could really use a drink right now.”

Tim glanced down at his watch and frowned. “Sorry, some of us have to work. Besides, I thought you wanted someone who was going to woo you.”

“All I need is a friend right now.”

Tim stood and placed a hand on her shoulder. “You’re going to have to wait until five P.M. to cry on this shoulder. If you haven’t noticed, we’re on a deadline around here.”

Sam nodded and slumped down at an empty desk. She texted her sister but didn’t get an answer back.

About a half hour later, she received an e-mail from Anna Chu. *Call me*, the e-mail said, and listed a new cell phone number. Sam dialed the number, her hands sweating, and began pacing about the newsroom.

“Anna?” she asked.

“Sammi?”

“How are you?”

“I’ve been better. It’s a mess out here.”

“What’s happening?”

“Lots of finger-pointing. You still work for the *Tribune*?”

“The *Sun-Times*.”

“They actually still have newspapers where you live?” Anna asked.

“Funny.”

“You know the only reason I called you back is because of what happened in Bolivia.”

“Ha.”

“No, I mean it. We were the only ones who got malaria, and you acted like it was nothing. I was never so scared in my life. I tried calling my parents but I couldn’t get through, and the nurses acted like they had never seen an IV before, and then I looked over at you and thought, I’m not going to die. Sammi’s right here.”

“All I did was sing George Michael songs.”

“You and George Michael saved my life.” She took a breath. “Listen, this is all off the record, right?”

“Right.” Sam stopped back at the desk and picked up a pen.

“I only got like another two minutes here, in between meetings,” Anna said. “So what do you want to know?”

“Everybody’s reporting it as an angry mob. Because of the video. What do you know?”

“That was no angry mob. They had mortars. Nobody brings mortars to a fucking protest. The video, the protests, that was all just a cover.”

“Do your guys think it was the Libyans?”

“Maybe. But this was coordinated. If it was the Libyans, it was with someone else.”

“Were ... Had there been any specific threats?”

“There’s always specific threats. If the CIA tried to run down every possible...”

“But do you feel like they were ready for an attack? Everyone’s talking about the security and...”

“I know people in that embassy. People there are friends of mine. We try to do our best and I ... I don’t know. How can you ever be ready for this kind of thing?”

Sam stopped writing and looked up. The office spun around her, the sound of the newsroom fading, other peoples’ slight movements falling away. She did not know when she had sat down. She glanced down at her notes and then up again and suddenly Anna announced, “Listen, I better go.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Anna.”

“Don’t. Because you didn’t hear any of this from me.”

“I promise,” Sam said.

She hung up the phone and found an open computer, and then began typing as fast as she could. “An undisclosed

source in the State Department suggests...” She looked up and tried to think the rest of the line through. In the end, everyone was always unprepared for the worst; there was nothing you could do. Everything afterward was always a form of denial. She nodded and began typing once more. Her phone buzzed. She glanced up and saw it was a text from Krista. *Please*, it said. She switched her phone off and kept on typing. The phone buzzed again, repeating the message. She held it up, stared at the message once more, then stood.

She hurried out to the parking lot. As she turned to the far row where her car was parked, she caught sight of a flash of faint color and movement. Someone in a light pink skirt was kneeling beside her car’s back tire. It was one of the staffers, some woman whom Sam had met but could never remember the name of. She had mousy brown hair and large glasses and was roughly Sam’s age. The woman looked up, saw Sam approaching, frowned, and then stood, adjusting her bifocals shyly. The back tire began to make a funny noise. Sam glanced down, saw a small hole, saw the silver keys in the woman’s hand, and said, “Jesus. What the fuck?”

The woman pointed the keys to the ground. Her face twisted into an abject frown. Sam knelt down beside the tire, poked her finger into the hole, and asked, “What ... what the fuck are you doing?”

“I don’t know. I’m ... I’m sorry.” The woman sniffled, looking at her feet. “I ... I’ve been here twelve years. I’ve been here twelve years and nobody cares.”

Sam frowned too. “You’re the one with the notes?”

The woman nodded. “I ... I was up for a promotion. Then they hired you.”

“That was a year ago.”

But the woman only nodded. “You come in here, and you’re so thin, and everything’s all manicured, and you act like you’re better than everyone else, like people aren’t even people.”

Sam’s face went flushed. Partly it was from embarrassment; partly it was because she had been called thin. “I don’t think I’m better than anyone else. I’m a fucking mess right now.” She looked up and then stood, wiping her hands on her skirt. “I’m sorry. I have to go. My sister is ... I’m sorry.”

The woman nodded. Sam glanced in her rearview mirror as she backed up. The woman in the pink skirt gave a slight wave. Sam did her best to try and smile.

She drove on the flat out to the southwest side, parked at an odd angle in the lot, and hurried up the outdoor apartment stairs. She knocked on the shaky front door, found it open, and stepped inside. Krista was on the couch staring at the spot where the television should have been. Sam glanced over, saw the odd rectangular outline of dust, saw the steady, unchanging absence of the television set, and frowned. The TV was now gone.

“It was that fucker. Brad,” Krista murmured, eyes red from crying. “I know it was him.”

Sam took a deep breath, set down her purse, and took a seat beside her sister on the couch. Krista frowned and laid her head in her older sister’s lap. Sam smiled softly, feeling forgiving, feeling foolish.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I ... Things have been hard for me, too, and I ... I’m sorry.”

“You ought to be,” Krista murmured, closing her eyes.

Sam placed one hand on the top of Krista’s head—felt the ridge of her ear, the pulse at her temples, the thin wisps of hair—and whispered, like a hypnotist, “You are not a complete mess. You are an okay person. Most of this is not your fault.”

“I am not a mess. I’m an okay person,” Krista repeated, eyes closed, as if in a dream. “Most of this is not my fault.”

**Joe Meno** is a fiction writer who lives in Chicago. He is the winner of the Nelson Algren Literary Award, a Pushcart Prize, and the Great Lakes Book Award, and is a finalist for the Story Prize. The bestselling author of six novels including *Hairstyles of the Damned* and *The Boy Detective Fails*, he is a professor at Columbia College Chicago in the creative writing department. His latest novel, *Marvel and a Wonder*, will be published in September 2015.