

# Fingerprints

DENISE SCARFI

**T**he plan has gone all wrong. As Barbara Clare crosses the iron bridge on her way to pick up Bernie, recently escaped from one of Spain's post-Civil War concentration camps, an imposing form blocks her path. It is like that ominous scene at the end of an action film—the plan nearly executed, the frail bridge, the sinister, moonlit face of the “bad guy” (in this case, Sandy Forsyth) blocking the way. Sandy, Barbara's more recent beau, has apparently gotten wind of Barbara's plan to rescue the lover she'd been told was “missing believed killed” years ago at the Jarama (Sansom 14). Bernie is a Communist, and when he was picked up, injured, fighting with the “reds” against Spain's nationalist army, he was sent to a labor camp in Cuenca. Barbara is yards from Bernie's hiding place in a cluster of trees when Sandy emerges from the darkness. “Well, the worm turned into a dragon all right. And to think I made you,” sputters Sandy (Sansom 495).

“I made you.” C. J. Sansom's *Winter in Madrid* plays with this concept—this “making” of a human being—and with sudden, doomed realizations of our powerlessness against the quicksand of fate. External factors mold and sabotage fragile plans. What is thought to be a step-by-step, elaborately designed rescue laid out by Barbara and a Spanish informant turns out to be part of a larger, Fascist scheme. Sandy isn't the only one who shows up unexpectedly during Bernie's rescue: “This rescue was set up by us, Señor Brett. Colonel Aranda and I are old friends. . . . We have files on anyone who was involved with the Republic and when I saw Miss Clare was passing herself off as Forsyth's wife, my friend and I decided we could embarrass him” (508). Maestre explains how a group of free-thinking people with good intentions were actually pawns in his elaborately designed scheme to embarrass Sandy Forsyth and arrest a crew of “Communist sympathizers.” Maestre “made” them—he planted hope of Bernie's existence in Barbara's head and worked to control every subsequent move (495). The implications are frightening. Is there anything more horrifying than realizing that your “decisions” were not quite your own, that they were premeditated by someone else?

When we think of “pawns” we often think of people who aren’t in control of their actions, brainwashed zombies at the ready to execute the commands of a higher power. But Barbara and those who aid in Bernie’s escape are smart, subversive. Barbara refuses to subscribe to any Civil War ideology (she is neither Republican nor Fascist)—her obstinate neutrality marks her as someone who thinks for herself. On the television show, *The X Files*, Agent Mulder’s greatest defeat comes when the alien conspiracy he believes he’s uncovered—through various breaches in protocol and a level of free-thinking (and weird thinking) unheard of in the FBI—is revealed to be a cover-up for even greater corruption, a cover-up to re-direct the eye of a suspicious nation from other, more important secret things. Agent Mulder finds himself a pawn, a government vessel of deception (and self-deception). He has been “made.”

Billy Kwan, in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, considers himself Hamilton’s “maker”: “You slow idiot: I put you on course; I made you see things; I gave you the woman I loved, who loved you, who’s carrying your child. . . . I created you!” (Koch 223). Hamilton had arrived as a journalist in Jakarta without experience or government contacts. Because his predecessor hadn’t stuck around long enough to show him the ropes or introduce him to important people, Hamilton finds himself on his own until a Chinese-Australian dwarf named Billy Kwan befriends him and offers his services. Billy is a cameraman with contacts, and as long as Hamilton uses his footage, Billy gains him access to newsworthy people and events: “I can be your eyes,” says Billy, after they’ve made their deal (33). By the end of the novel, he has not only helped build Hamilton’s reputation as a leading journalist, but he’s also paired him up with Jill (the “woman [he] loved”) and led Hamilton toward a domestic life he never thought he wanted.

I am not really interested in *how* Billy Kwan “created” Hamilton or how Sandy “made” Barbara, but I am interested in those stomach-dropping moments when characters realize they are not quite in control of their lives. These moments raise the question, what is predictable and what is not? What in life can be controlled, molded toward the outcome we desire, and what remains vulnerable to chance and influence? Are the notions of fate, chance, and free will the distant, oppositional points of a triangle, or do they overlap, work messily together during the unraveling of one’s life?

Both *Winter in Madrid* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, for all their declarations of god-like character building, are deeply concerned with childhood as a formative experience. *Winter in Madrid* essentially begins with Rookwood, the English public school (expensive private school) attended by

the novel's primary male characters. Bernie was a rebel back in those days, at Rookwood on scholarship and unable to shed his leftist politics as easily as he sheds his cockney accent. Sandy was also a rebel but a different kind—he was always opportunistic and money-hungry, concerned with proving himself to family and teachers who didn't believe in him. Harry was the common friend of these childhood enemies, a proper schoolboy in love with traditional Rookwood values and able to see the good in Bernie's political passion and in Sandy's desire for success. Though the action of the novel jumps ahead to adulthood, and across the channel to Spain, this dynamic remains largely intact, and no character will let us forget it: "Funny, when I was a little boy I wanted to be good. But I could never seem to manage it somehow. And if you're not good, the good people will throw you to the wolves. So you might as well just be bad," reasons Sandy (426). My own brother once tried out this twisted logic on my parents after bicycling home drunk on a Sunday afternoon. "Everyone thinks I'm bad no matter what, so I just decided to be bad," he cried. Once a troublemaker, always a troublemaker. At least this is Sandy's fate as he develops from Rookwood "bad boy" to a businessman profiting under Franco's regime. Because Sandy presents himself as someone "trapped" into bad behavior, we wonder how much choice he had (or believed he had) in the matter of his own becoming.

Sansom's characters are stubborn—they hesitate to flee the grip of that which formed them. Despite Harry's affinity for Rookwood stability, he realizes that "either you rebel, or they send you sleepwalking through life" (444). Having worked as a spy and translator within a corrupt, post-war Spain, having fallen in love with a Spanish woman named Sofia, having agreed to help Barbara rescue Bernie from the labor camp, Harry has seen things and is no longer "sleepwalking through life." He is actively and emotionally involved. He takes risks and faces danger. And just when we think we have a changed man on our hands, someone who's strayed from the course dictated by his upbringing, Harry steps back into line. By 1947, he is settling into plump middle age as a French instructor at Haverstock, an English public school. While discussing possibilities for change within England with Barbara, Harry admits defeat:

"Who owned everything before the war? The people who went to schools like Haverstock. And who owns everything now? It's the same."

"Then why do you stay there?" she asked. She felt angry with him, sitting there stoically eating the revolting food, already looking like some dusty old bachelor.

“Because you can’t really change anything,” he said wearily. “They’re all too strong, they beat you down in the end.”

“I don’t believe that. You have to fight.”

“I lost,” he said simply. (528)

Harry’s defeat at this moment mirrors his confrontation with Maestre at the end of Bernie’s escape, but only in the larger instance (the life that has led him to Haverstock) does he recognize all along that he’s just going through the motions. He has willfully resigned himself to a life of “sleepwalking” rather than being startled by a situation that suggests the impossibility of changing (444). When he was rescuing Bernie, tricking priests and driving fast, he believed in his capacity to veer off course. But caught and informed of the Fascist scheme that duped him, Harry resigns himself to “living within the system,” his breathless impulse towards change flattened. Harry becomes Sandy, satisfied with being forever typecast as the “sleepwalker” he once was.

Both *Winter in Madrid* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* take place in foreign lands during war and political upheaval—the foreign landscape (Spain, Indonesia) often providing the impetus for change, for action, that would mark a character’s departure from a comfortable circle of friends and all that implies (“sleepwalking”). The foreign place allows characters like Harry and Hamilton to “see things,” to find themselves and track their life-paths in relation to (and because of) provocative surroundings (Sansom 101).

Harry is sent to Spain by the British government to spy on Sandy, who’s involved in money-making schemes that might allow Spain the resources to join the war as Hitler’s ally. There, in his pursuit of cross-cultural love and unlawful escapades, straight-laced Harry becomes more interesting—does things, as we have learned, that could be considered “out of character.” Hamilton is similarly seduced and transformed by the “exotic” atmosphere of Indonesia; his submission to the foreign is depicted in a scene where he’s drawn to a *wayang* show on the side of the road, attracted to the light that casts shadows of performing puppets onto a screen. He’s not only drawn to the beauty of the *wayang*, but also to its purpose and intrigue amidst the unraveling crisis of the political-economic situation. He wonders if “the *wayang* frame was perhaps erected here . . . so that the people of the kampong could forget, for a whole night, the presences of hunger and pain and threat at the edges of their green world” (Koch 191-92). He sees what Billy wants him to see—the strangely juxtaposed atmosphere of beauty and struggle invisible (or unimportant) to journalists who spend much of their time in air-conditioned hotel rooms and Western-style bars.

But how much does Hamilton see, and to what extent does what he sees truly change him, alter his inherent behavior or character? Not much, concedes Cookie: “. . . he had come to be very fond of Java, but this says nothing, since such fondness was an illusion. . . . The country was essentially unlovable for us, since we could not share its memories” (189). Cookie, the narrator, does mention that “he had decided to commit himself to Jill,” something we didn’t expect from a young, adventurous journalist who couldn’t stand the thought of being “tied down” (189). But perhaps this change isn’t a surprising, rebellious move at all—perhaps it’s that all-too-familiar resignation to normal family life so precious to Hamilton’s nostalgic sense of Englishness (189). If the tempting lure of Indonesia does anything for Hamilton, it evokes his cultural longing to be a proper Englishman—the new and different loses out to the tried and true in the battle for Hamilton’s heart, just as it does with Harry. Poor Harry forgets adventures (and ladies) when he decides to pursue the life of bachelor-scholar at Haverstock. We can’t dismiss the idea that these foreign escapades are actually formative experiences, but they often represent the rejection rather than the pursuit of a particular path—a re-defining of the expected rather than the mapping of new routes.

Marisha Pessl’s *Topics in Calamity Physics* is all about type-casting, about the adolescent struggle to conform to ready-made images; characters are reduced to tropes with scripted speech and actions that cause the reader to question the role of free and unique thought in the playing out of plot. When Jade finds herself “cast as Unwitting Eyewitness” to a swimming pool drowning at a costume party, Blue (the novel’s precocious protagonist) writes, “Some people have a knack for finding themselves, if not the star of every Detective Film, Skin Flick, Love Story, or Spaghetti Western, at the very least, one of the supporting players, or appearing in an unforgettable cameo for which they garner critical acclaim and considerable buzz” (174). Throughout the novel, characters are imbued with an over-consciousness of the clichéd nature of their actions; they recognize that everything they do has been done before in movies and in books. “Life, death,” says Nigel after the drowning, “It’s all so Hollywood” (175). “So Hollywood”? Aren’t life and death so . . . life and death? For the postmodern children of Pessl’s novel, the translation from life to art and back to life makes things look repetitive and predictable. The resignation they feel at being actors in the (formulaic) movie of their lives, that consciousness of re-trodding well-worn paths, is similar to Harry’s acceptance of the “sleepwalking” life (Sansom 444). The high school students of *Topics in Calamity Physics* aren’t as much concerned with the controlling hand of God or Fascists as with the recognizable nature of their

actions—and perhaps this is a kind of fatalism, the knowledge that it's all been done before (proven on-screen and in books) with varying yet limited outcomes. Life, death, love—our contemporary reliance on Greek myths to explain our actions is a tell-tale sign that very little has changed (or will change) in the way of human behavior. There are systems in place that dictate rigid paths and challenge our notions of freedom.

Like Harry and Hamilton, Blue, as a new, senior-year student at St. Gallway, enters an unfamiliar environment and makes interesting friends (a clique known as the “Bluebloods”) who expose her to change and “newness” (Pessl 26). But despite the makeover, bar-hopping, and house-partying that mark her inclusion, Blue's unique behavior within this “Magic Circle” often singles her out as an eccentric, invulnerable to full-on assimilation (110). ““We are all worms,” [Blue] said carefully, “but I do believe I am a glow-worm”” (424). Blue quotes from one of her father's books as she confronts the group that has rejected her after the death of Hannah, their leader and favorite professor.

The Bluebloods have always been a volatile, rowdy crowd and Hannah Schneider, an enigma. With a sketchy past and an over-enthusiastic penchant for nurturing her special group with Sunday dinners and engaging conversation, Hannah remains elusive and intriguing. After crashing Hannah's costume party (the one eventually spoiled by a drowning), Blue rummages through Hannah's bedroom in search of clues to her personality: “I sensed, somewhere within the context of these singular details, within her knife collection, empty walls, shoe boxes and thatch bedspread was Hannah's Plot, her Principal Characters—most significantly, her Primary Themes” (184). Hannah is a mystery to be solved, someone who can be read like a book as long as the right evidence presents itself. Her collection of missing-persons articles provides clues to her personality just as Billy's dossiers on Hamilton, Jill, Sukarno, dwarves, and other stuff reveal aspects of Billy's unique self. Even documents about other people retain the collector's (or author's) fingerprints.

The characters and the plots of these novels make us wonder why—if people are so difficult to figure out, so closed and enigmatic—are many of their actions so predictable? Why are complex, unique people like Barbara vulnerable to schemes fashioned by God-like figures who seem to know which buttons to press? Maestre knows that Barbara will pursue a hint at Bernie's survival and that she'll follow predictable steps to set him free. Billy senses that Hamilton will react to the information he shares with a compassion unique to foreign journalists and that he'll make Jill happy, so he orches-

trates certain scenes to fulfill his plan. Blue and her friends can't get through a single dramatic moment without picturing themselves through a camera lens and identifying a comparable scene, one that then dictates future behavior. We see how easily these people can be controlled, and so we wonder whether our enigmatic nature is just an illusion that masks our all-too-predictable selves. Or is our predictability a mere generalization, the *real* illusion beneath which buzz and hum our more interesting and free-thinking minds?

Concepts of fate and free-will contradict one another, yell simultaneously, "I'm real, and that one's the fake!" It's not so easy to discern between the planned and the impulsive, between the fated and the fluked. Consider the opening lines of Janette Turner Hospital's novel, *Orpheus Lost*: "Afterwards, Leela realized, everything could have been predicted from the beginning. Every clue was there, the ending inevitable and curled up inside the first encounter like a tree inside a seed. The trouble was that the interpretation was obvious only in retrospect" (3). We're reminded of the Fascists' set-up, of Barbara and Hamilton's realizations that they've been "made," of Blue's retrospective unraveling of the mystery surrounding Hannah. It's that after-the-fact consideration that makes impulsive, free-minded navigation look like a map well-followed. It is that stomach-dropping revelation of external influence that makes a complex person with a unique mind look like a perfectly ordinary human doing things that ordinary humans do.

I was stuck in this puzzle of independence when I came across Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*. Jacques fervently believes in and lives by his Captain's mandate, "everything which happens to us on this earth, both good and bad, is written up above." He attributes his shattered knee to "that innkeeper and his inn!" because "while I was getting drunk on his bad wine I forgot to water our horses. My father noticed and got angry. I shook my head at him and he took a stick and hit me rather hard across the shoulders. There was a regiment passing through on its way to camp at Fontenoy and so out of pique I joined up. We arrived. The battle started. . . . Shot in the knee" (21). Jacques believes that this chain reaction was "written up above," and so he curses that initial moment at the inn, in which (to borrow Hospital's language) "the ending" is "curled up inside the first encounter like a tree inside a seed" (3). Only in retrospect does Jacques recognize the near-fatal error he made in getting drunk on the innkeeper's bad wine, and his ultimate feeling is of resignation to the controlling forces "up above." The Fascists replace God in *Winter in Madrid*, and Harry's sense of defeat in understanding the controlled chain of events that led to sabotage and Sofia's death is what keeps him from trying to instigate change in the future. Harry adjusts to life as a Haverstock school

teacher just as Jacques slowly rides his horse when he should be picking up the pace—if it's all “written up above,” what's the use in hurrying or trying to do something new? The outcome will be the one mandated by God or other manifestations of “higher powers,” no matter what.

My initial instinct was to consider fate (both in terms of God and powerful, external forces) the “great equalizer,” a force so big and smart that it levels out and groups together the mortals of the world. Fate and control and “things we cannot change” strip us of individuality, “make us,” rob us of dominion over how we fashion ourselves. But Jacques shows us that to be molded by someone else does not, in fact, imply a relinquishing of individualism. Fully under the influence of a heightened sense of fatalism, admittedly moved and jostled by the great Puppetmaster, Jacques asks, “Can I be anything other than myself, and being me, can I act otherwise than I do?” (Diderot 25). Jacques is not one of the chess-piece masses. He is unique precisely because his actions, however inevitable and beyond his control, could not have been performed by anyone else. His predestined moves carry a signature, a fingerprint that distinguishes them from infinite (predetermined) variations.

And this is how Blue manages to be special despite the Hollywood-esque nature of her “Life Story” (Pessl 71). Despite a near constant referencing to her systematic “making” (nearly all of the novel's 514 pages are speckled with citations backing up Blue's thoughts and actions) and despite an obviously influential, academic father who forces his child to recite *The Waste Land* and memorize vocabulary while on the road (24), Blue charts her own path through St. Gallway society and through the mystery that is Hannah Schneider; it is her personal response to this “making” (her particular approach to filling the shoes she's been handed, to wielding the tools she's developed with the help of her father and influential texts) that comprises her Destiny.

While on a camping trip with the famed teacher and the rest of the Bluebloods, Hannah Schneider disappears into the woods, and Blue discovers her, hanging by her neck from an extension cord. The death is declared a suicide but Blue, unconvinced, performs some rigorous detective work (her techniques modeled from characters in books and movies, of course) and unearths a more complicated truth. Hannah, a member of the scattered, secret, left-wing terrorist group called the Nightwatchmen, was murdered. Blue is able to make this startling revelation because Hannah dropped her hints. Like Maestre's baiting of Barbara, dependent on an understanding of Barbara's vulnerability to all-things-Bernie, Hannah's decision to drop hints

singles out Blue and relies on particular (unique) character traits: “But then—why had she decided to tell me her Life Story in such a roundabout way? . . . Perhaps Hannah had decided to tell me because she sensed I, out of all the Bluebloods, had the wits to solve the riddle of her life” (449). By the end of the novel, Blue sees previously unrelated comments and events as the straight and logical timeline of Hannah’s “Life Story.” She also unmasks her own father, for after relating her discovery concerning Hannah to him, he takes off with all his belongings during the night, never to return. By so doing, he incriminates himself, and the final pieces that suggest his own involvement with the Nightwatchmen and his affair with Hannah fall into place. Once again, retrospect (a revelatory retrospect achieved by Blue) lifts the enigmatic fog and reveals the nature of that seed (fertile with inevitabilities) that Hospital talks about.

Blue’s discovery appears simultaneously entrepreneurial and plotted, a product of radical free-thinking (like Agent Mulder’s) yet mapped and molded by someone else (both Hannah as a perceptive force and her father as the formative one). The purely self-motivated nature of her discoveries and “decisions” is illusive, but this does not diminish their necessity nor the crucial role of Blue’s unique (“methodical”) mind (Pessl 449). The phantom limb of Blue’s failure, what “could have happened” had she not—against popular opinion and considerable obstacles—taken on and followed through with her personal investigation, suggests that a conscious achievement was made amidst the influences that both helped and hindered her. As Professor Stacy Pies said about the world of *Jacques the Fatalist*, “We don’t have free will, but we have responsibility.” It’s this responsibility, what we do with the influences and parameters we’re offered, that keeps us from lounging in bed all day, paralyzed by the idea of our forced submission to fate. We all have to wake up and choose a path, even if we’re presented only a limited selection or pushed towards a particular point.

“Human nature is boring.” This is how Professor Ross brazenly responded to a student’s repeated referencing of psychological experiments (twins, rats, buttons, Pavlov stuff) during our discussion. “I hate those experiments,” she continued, laughing wildly. We all looked around nervously.

“Well, I mean, you don’t believe that people do the same things over and over again and that our behavior exhibits a certain kind of pattern . . . sometimes?” I asked, thinking of my essay, of Harry, Hamilton, Bernie, the Bluebloods—characters who are simultaneously free and predictable, under

the influence of external others and internal past selves as they navigate the spiraling fingerprint that is their unique Destiny.

“Not really. Times change, people change, people are *complex*.” I’m paraphrasing, but I understood in this moment that Professor Ross had answered my question regarding the tricky, deceptive nature of fate and free will. “Free will, uniqueness, complexity—those are the real ones,” she might have said, declaring the triumph of these characteristics over the generalization of typical, repetitive human behavior. Her statement angered me because I am a lover of science and in no way think we’re too “complex” to dodge certain boundaries and influences, but I agreed on a certain level. Fate is too big, and so is human nature. Concepts that big can’t be trusted—all the generalizing it takes to understand them simplifies them and excludes the mysterious nuances that make us individuals. I’m not a fatalist. Perhaps we’re given things—genes, commands, people that “beat us down,” models, paths, tools—and we create with them what we wish. Sometimes, like Sandy, we create cages around ourselves, and other times, like Barbara, we construct tunnels toward something new—the same factors that “beat down” Harry motivate Barbara to keep fighting. We choose, individually, how to respond to the tug of puppet strings.

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