

Worlds Apart

— AN ESSAY BY —

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East is East, and West is West, and never the two shall meet,” wrote Rudyard Kipling to describe a nineteenth-century clash of cultures. When I began writing *And West Is West* at the beginning of the winter of 2010, America was experiencing a similar disconnect. The euphoria of the revolutionary 2008 election was fading, and the recession was not letting up. We existed in what seemed a permanent state of military conflict. And so, fed by bad news and political expediency, the division between our cultures became a chasm.

Beyond it was the question of where the country was being led. The inherited wars and recession were not the president’s doing, but his decision to rely on drone strikes, more than even the previous administration had, was chilling. And his employment of the same people involved in the financial meltdown to fix it was perplexing. Weren’t drone strikes against alleged terrorists a renewal of America’s old policy of foreign intervention through assassination? And why wasn’t even one of the leaders of the banking institutions that had devastated the world’s economy indicted? What was going on?

Finding no answers to these questions, I sought them out the way I usually do, through writing. Immediately I knew that my characters would not be the movers and shakers of our institutions; they would be neither the high flyers who go to Davos, nor the CEOs, nor the Pentagon generals. They would not even be their lieutenants. They would be the people caught in the lower echelons who do the actual day-to-day work. They would be young and very good at their jobs. They would be happy with their duties, with their place in society, and with the progress of their lives. The glow of youthful promise would be the novel’s starting point.

Gradually, over the initial months of the manuscript’s composition, my principal characters took shape: Jessica Aldridge, an Air Force drone pilot in

Nevada; and Ethan Winter, a computer programmer for a Wall Street bank. To develop them, I was relying greatly on my own experiences and those of the people I'd met while working in gas stations and boatyards, teaching college English, working as an editor for a philanthropic association, writing technical manuals, or coding database-driven websites. To learn about the drone program, I read numerous interviews with pilots and operators, reviewed the public blogs of service members, and studied an invaluable transcript of a drone strike made available through the Freedom of Information Act by the *Los Angeles Times*. There was much to learn.

Studying up about what Ethan might do as a “quant” was more challenging. Unfortunately, the Freedom of Information Act does not apply to corporations, and what goes on in the financial world, just as what happens in Vegas, mainly stays there. No doubt for good reason. In his book *Flash Boys*, Michael Lewis details how high-frequency stock traders exploited the market during the period in which my novel takes place, 2011–14. My own experience with high-speed trading goes back to 1999, when I was copywriting for a client who was developing what would become Wall Street's second largest automated trading platform. My job was to translate terms like *packet-switching* into readable English. For Ethan I invented more interesting work: he would be programming his bank's currency trading computers to take advantage of the second-by-second market volatility caused by terrorist acts.

As my characters' stories came together, *And West Is West* naturally picked up on other themes: the prying of the security state, the destructiveness of secrecy (government and familial), how a bad conscience can eat at the soul but lead to transformation. Abetting the actions that haunt Jessica and Ethan is the technology that we all use for major periods of our day: the screens of our smartphones, tablets, and computers, screens through which we conduct much of our lives and that actually screen us against face-to-face interaction. America's notorious isolationism was caused initially by our country's geography, but our technology has reconfigured it. Now we are isolated within our own small, virtual worlds, and this lets us more freely attack others, whether by posting a comment from our living room or firing a missile remotely from a Nevada trailer. Meanwhile, we are shielded by physical distance from any immediate confrontation with what we have done.

While the book's title touches on distancing, it is also an exasperated shrug at the West's inability to learn from its destructive behavior, and it leads to a central question in the novel: What, beyond shrugging, can any individual here in America do about our system? There is the example of Snowden, but beyond his extreme, are we left only to fret? The corporate-military complex is embedded and seems unstoppable.

The journey of Jessica and Ethan provided me with a partial answer. Though they work through screens, the consequences of their actions lead them into crises of conscience that radically transform their lives. This aspect of *And West Is West* may seem a hopeful dream of resistance, yet I would contend that we win in this world not by destroying our enemies but by enriching our humanity.