



*Here Be Dragons*

*(Hier sind Drachen)*

By Husch Josten

Translated by Amy Bojang

“For, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of that limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).”

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*)

The airport ceiling was slowly sinking. Unstoppably. Steadily. It silently sank inch by inch, engulfing the cloud-white canopy, the mirrored wall panels on the top floor of the terminal building, the advertising hoardings for trench coats, perfume and insurance companies, as well as the silver railings, and then the heads and bodies of the passengers wandering around on the first floor. The ceiling kept creeping lower and lower, crushing the terminal to the height of a shoe box, and Caren stood by and watched. This had been happening to her for months. At home, in hotels, on the train, in the editorial office, and at the airport like now. She would be sitting somewhere or lying down on her bed, thinking about something or nothing, and suddenly the ceiling would sink. Well, she had said to herself in the first few weeks, she was just going through a strange phase of sinking ceilings wherever she happened to be. It would pass. She had tried meditation, after all, she had initially thought, sinking ceilings call for some kind of meaningful response. But Caren couldn't concentrate on her breathing for even two minutes. Her thoughts immediately started wandering, meandering through her mind, distracting her from inhaling and exhaling, demanding her attention. And whenever she closed her eyes, brushed her blonde bob out of her face and turned her thoughts to breathing, when she tried to concentrate on it, she felt like she was hyperventilating and would swiftly distract herself by writing shopping lists, Hoovering, catching up on calls, anything that meant she could just breathe away and forget the stressful matter of inhaling and exhaling.

Confusion when it had happened for the first time: in Paris, on her hotel bed, ten months before. She had blinked, pinching her arm, had wanted to stand up and grab her mobile, but wasn't able to. She had been bewildered and at the same time so enthralled that she couldn't

move and could hardly breathe. Obviously, she'd thought at the time, obviously this is connected to *Charlie*, the attack she had been covering. Obviously it was a reaction, it had to be a hysterical reaction to the events of the seventh of January, events that had unsettled her more than any of the other terror attacks she had written about in the past. At first, on the metro in Paris, Caren had had to force herself not to be afraid, not to look around for suspicious faces (whatever they look like!), for people carrying large bags, possibly transporting bombs, weapons, hand grenades and not simply papers or washing back from the launderette. She hadn't felt like that before. Not after New York. Not after Boston. Both times she had escaped with her life. Unharmed. Both times it was only happy coincidence that she had missed the planes and the explosions. Back then, on that September morning in New York. Then, years later on Patriots' Day in Boston. Pure coincidence that during her internship at WABC TV she had stepped in at the last minute to courier an envelope from the 110th floor to the concierge and after that, because the weather had been so nice, she had picked up some breakfast bagels for her and her colleagues, whilst the plane had been hurtling towards the North tower. Fate, that she had arranged to meet the friends she was running the Boston marathon with not at the finish line, but instead a few blocks away, far from the chaos. That's how she had seen it all of these years. But then Paris. No more imminent danger for her, no being in the thick of it, just a regular assignment. *Soak up the atmosphere a bit, tell us how Paris feels on the ground.* The murdered police officer's blood still on the pavement. Ahmed Merabet. Caren had stood and looked at the brownish red stain. The footage, put online by an eyewitness accidentally, as he later claimed, was so real in her head, it was as if she had been there. The way he's lying there injured, pleading for his life, dying. She had seen him die. She *had* been there. Once again.

The moment of surrender. When the ceiling had sunk for the first time, she had been lying on her bed in The Pavillon des Lettres. The tiny ramshackle hotel in the eighth arrondissement where she used to stay when it was still called The Élysée and yellowed floral wallpaper hung behind creaky brass bedsteads, where she stayed once her family no longer lived in Paris. And she'd thought to herself: if I'm going to die now, right this minute, then there's nothing anybody can do about it. If it was an aneurysm, a heart attack or a stroke, at least it was happening peacefully. Once the initial shock had passed, there had been nothing threatening about the sinking ceiling and the spinning room. What she had felt had been warm and gentle, and so comforting that she had actually felt a sense of regret when it was all over five or fifteen minutes later (she had lost all sense of time). The sinking ceiling a cosy quilt protecting her and her sense of being left over. For Caren was left over. Guilty. Not guilty. Who knew what she was. In any case, left over. Her family and friends, absolutely everyone had spoken about luck and guardian angels, and said all the usual things that people say when things like this happen. Colleagues had wanted to write about her, invited her to appear on chat shows. Caren had refused, although as a journalist she could clearly see the story and understand how extraordinary it all was. To escape. Twice. But her story was unfounded, a version of reality that deserved silence because she couldn't possibly comprehend what had happened to the others, what had really happened. She was just left over. The first time as a twenty-one-year-old. And then again, just two years ago, at thirty-three.

Caren hadn't seen it like that until the seventh of January in Paris. For her, both times had been pure coincidence. But *Charlie* replaced fatalism with doubt. Misgivings. The certainty that some things just happened had turned to dust. She couldn't explain why this specific attack, that hadn't directly affected her, that she hadn't actually escaped, was plaguing her like it was, and casting new, stark light on the past. But she, who had been relentlessly teased as a child for being soppy because of her soft-heartedness and weakness

for waifs and strays, who had put up protective barriers and eventually adopted a defensive, wary distance from everything, suddenly felt like the lone survivor of an inferno nobody should have survived. Should have been allowed to survive. *Actually.*

It was mostly her bedroom ceiling that sank. It was square and had full-length south-facing windows, in front of which stood two beech trees with waxy, shiny leaves. When autumn came, the deep green was transformed, the sunlight made the trees blaze like fire. A warming, crackling, flaming bough just for her, Caren prized the tree with a sense of wonder and reverence. As she lived on the first floor of a small block of flats in London's Brook Green, in a flat that her boyfriend Ben described as a poky matchbox, the autumnal fire in the garden wasn't exactly a show just for her – it was also for Mr Russell from the second floor and Mr and Mrs Liman from the ground floor. In any case, Caren found it unlikely that her fellow tenants shared her vision of the flaming bough. They were personable, pragmatic, decent, bank employees, taxi owners, and physiotherapists, concerned with the management of the communal areas and sweeping the chimney, not with the magic of nature. They collected Caren's post when she was away, watered her plants – an orchid and two spider plants – and Caren returned the favour, but rarely, as the others weren't away nearly as much as her. For years the neighbours had got together one evening every summer at the Liman's barbecue, when they hung lanterns on the branches of the beech trees. That may seem to suggest that the other tenants did have a connection to the trees in their garden, but definitely not such a deep connection as Caren, who spoke to them, experienced the seasons with them, and at the August barbecue was already looking forward to the colours and fire of autumn. The enigmatic end to summer, a theatrical adieu to time. The year before, Mr Liman, a pensioner, had commented that he'd recently been wondering how many summers he, and the rest of the people in the house, actually had left. He said it without any sense of pathos or apparent reason, at least nobody knew of any urgent or pressing reason. He said it to himself,

whilst establishing whether the coals were properly alight or the wind was unfavourable. He didn't seem to think anything of starting to count the rings of time from a particular point. All the guests froze in shock for a moment, asking themselves if they'd missed something or should have noticed something. But nothing occurred to them, so they swiftly skirted around the serious issue by serving the food and making all manner of comments about the weather. Tim Russell's new girlfriend, an outspoken hefty brunette, was putting bits of haddock and courgette onto a skewer and talking about her job as a costume designer at the *Royal Court*, young Miss Leigh from across the way was giving a militant lecture on racism in the American police force – bloody pigs, she shouted, uncivilised rabble, they've learnt nothing since the Civil War –, Russell was putting ice cubes into an ice bucket, loudly and laboriously reading out wine labels (shar-duh-nay), while Jack Liman poked at the coals on the barbecue. He was miles away, it had just been a thought, an abstract question, after all it didn't achieve anything, anything at all, counting the years and getting all melancholy. Images and moments like these came into Caren's mind when she was sitting somewhere, like now at the airport, or when she was lying on her bed and the ceiling sank. She saw Liman and his taxis and the charcoal, forest fires, stage sets, racism, street fights, snow storms, lanterns, post boxes and other unconnected things. She saw people disappear under the ceiling and wasn't afraid. She was sure the sinking ceiling wasn't a sign of a serious illness, it wasn't a neurological warning sign, instead it had a meaning. Reduction. Narrowing. Focussing. Only, on what?

And so it was that Heathrow's Terminal 2 disappeared. Nothing but the white of enchanting immovability. No wonder, thought Caren, that it's happening now of all times, since she was on her way back to Paris again to report on the attacks. Ten months later. This time it was bars, restaurants, a football stadium, a concert venue. Her experiences of multiple attacks had left her numb and the consequences seemed increasingly familiar: state of emergency, the

military, borders closed, calls for revenge. And off she went at full pelt again, on autopilot, the discussion about the war of cultures (did terrorists have a culture? And if they did, what sort?) about the religious war (did anyone believe it was about religion any more?), about the failures of the West and young people's loss of perspective (oh God, yes, building blocks in the desperate search for reasons). But, obviously, and of this Caren was sure, it was about outdoing what had gone before. The aftermath of every attack was only a precursor to the next, worse attack. Ever escalating horror. Terror as a media contest.

What about their mothers?, she had asked her editor in chief.

She and Dan Lieberman had spent the night in the editorial office in front of the television and their computers, shaken, outraged, drained. News came in thick and fast, each report more nightmarish than the last, and still they kept coming. Dan had initially responded to her question with baffled silence.

When their sons carry Kalashnikovs, Caren went on, when they kiss each other goodbye, set off, to indiscriminately shoot people and then blow themselves up – which isn't to say that a targeted attack would make the situation any better: What about the mothers these men have just had lunch with or chatted on the phone with, talking about this and that and even just discussing the weather?

That's so typical of you, anthropologist through and through!, Dan had answered with a grin, resting the neck of his beer bottle on his chin. How am I supposed to know how they feel? Maybe they're proud and praising Allah, maybe they have no idea what their sons are up to, maybe they lost control of their sons long ago, maybe the parents don't care or the other way round: the children don't care what their parents, who see them as traitors, think of them. Didn't an Islamist recently shoot his mother in a market place because she was begging him to reject the religious war? Actually, he paused for a long while making a disillusioned gesture at the screen, actually, it's totally irrelevant anyway.

It is not, Caren had argued. I saw a video a little while ago, about looting in Syria. A group of young people raided a shop, beat up the owner, looted the shop. And then all of a sudden in this video you see a woman dragging one of the boys out of the chaos by his neck, slapping him. You could tell by his face, he could hardly believe what was happening to him. He was being reprimanded and humiliated in front of his mates. But off he went, off he went with his mother.

Dan had looked at her mockingly. Then that was maybe the one exception. Do you honestly think so? I don't believe that the mother of a fanatical fighter would stand any chance of still getting through to them. But find one, he said wearily, find one of these mothers and ask them. You've got an early flight tomorrow morning anyway.

Heathrow's terminal building slowly reappeared, the ceiling clearing the way. It was always like this. Reality returned as unexpectedly as everything had sunk. Caren took a deep breath. The digital clock on the wall oblivious. The time flashed a lurid orange, 9:46am. Images of the previous night flashed tirelessly across the mute TV screens. Bullet holes in the windows of The Carillon bar. People's faces distorted with fear on the pitch at the Stade de France. A fireball at the rear exit of the Bataclan. Images of celebrities' Facebook profiles, the whole lot of them covered with the French flag overnight. And intermittently, again and again: heavily armed soldiers. Police in bulletproof vests. Flashing blue lights. In front of Caren, a man was lying on the greyish-white stone floor of the airport, wearing blue jogging bottoms and a striped polo shirt, barefoot, his head resting on his rucksack, his shirt had ridden up in his sleep exposing his white underwear and pasty back. Star-shaped angry zits erupting on his back ruined Caren's appetite for the tuna sandwich she had in her bag. She looked away. The terminal was still brand new. Unused, pristine, gleaming. A luminous neon Hackney cab, just its outline, immediately recognisable, as a sculpture in the middle. Coffee shops, restaurants,



souvenir shops, perfume shops. A branch of Harrods with green tea caddies, a branch of Hamleys where you could purchase a battery-powered pig or a cuddly befeater in the last-minute dash for a present to take back. A caviar merchant and luggage shops. Lots of the shops had the Tricolore hanging in their windows, a black ribbon in the middle of each one. Black ribbon. Trivial solidarity. Candles in front of a French shop selling leather goods. Obtrusively proper. Hundreds of people in the middle of it all, looking like they were just there for decoration, waiting in front of the departure boards, hurrying to their gates, killing time, carrying on. Endless streams of people travelling at all times of the day and night. You'd have thought you had the streets to yourself at three or four in the morning, you'd think the rest of the population had better things to do at this hour, but thousands were hurtling along the motorways in the darkness. No peace any more. Anywhere. The whirr of suitcase wheels on the greyish-white stone, a rumbling melody, interrupted by the chorus, that luggage should not be left unattended, and that the plane to Zurich, according to a screeching voice on the loudspeaker announcement, was ready for boarding. A huge light installation in the middle of the ceiling – glistening, spiralling snakes of silver, sent a bluish light shooting over and over again from top to bottom, you could hardly look away, counting the seconds until it started over again. Caren's plane should have been here ages ago, but the stand out in the rain at the end of the passenger foot bridge was just as empty now as it had been before. She shivered and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. Sometimes you just knew these things intuitively: her journey on this November morning was not going to go to plan. A storm. A technical fault with the plane. A missing co-pilot. Problems at the airport in Paris. A terrorism alert. Something would delay her, this much Caren was suddenly sure of, in fact it would have been far more astonishing if, after the events of last night, a plane to Paris had taken off and arrived according to plan. She couldn't even get a train. Standstill for days. The employees on both sides of the Channel were on strike due to increased security

measures caused by bomb threats, as well as migrants with nothing to lose from crisis zones in all corners of the world – exodus – wanting to run through the tunnel to a better life. Not enough people to oversee the whole area and still be able to do the day-to-day processing of passengers, with handbag searches and suitcase scanning. At Heathrow they had immediately responded to the strike. For several days, a budget airline had been offering extra flights to Paris, which is why Caren was sitting in terminal 2 and not in 4 or 5, where the Air France and British Airways planes normally took off from. What a joke, thought Caren, that her newspaper always booked the cheapest flights. Outside of the terminal ground-handlers and engineers were continually marshalling other aircraft, restocking, refuelling, they waited, their high-vis jackets heavy with rain, water dripping from their helmets. And then finally, and as expected, the announcement appeared on the A17 departure board: *Delayed*. Caren accepted it, she would have put money on it. It didn't say how long the delay was expected to be (a bad sign), nobody offered any explanations, nobody complained and the brunette stewardess sitting behind the counter for boarding, now suddenly surplus to requirements, typed purposefully on her computer, examined her deep-red fingernails, muttered now and then into her noisy radio and ignored the waiting passengers with quiet disdain. The passengers accepted it like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Stoic. Amenable. Used to misery. People flicked through newspapers and magazines, made phone calls, straightened headphones, bit into apples, drank from plastic bottles and paper cups, stared into space. They had all known that a plane to Paris this morning wouldn't leave without a hitch. If it left at all.

The man sitting opposite Caren was reading Wittgenstein. She hadn't noticed him before now. Late fifties, maybe mid-sixties. A very high brow. Furrowed. Greying black hair.

Bushy, arched eyebrows. He was wearing faded jeans, a black shirt and an equally black jacket. Eyes as light blue as bath water, translucent, clever, confident.

The world is determined by the facts, he quietly mumbled the words he was reading, what is the case, the fact, is the existence of atomic facts, an atomic fact is a combination of objects, and objects are simple. Atomic, not compound. He said it as if he were trying to learn it off by heart. To the floor, to his bag, to the sleeping man in the blue jogging bottoms. Noticing Caren's looks he apologised and held out the book so that she could read the title. Forgive me, he said, it's a long time since I've read it. Even so, I should still have the beginning, the simple bit, down pat...

No problem, she replied, Wittgenstein was the one with the language theories, wasn't he?

He nodded: and the one you can always call upon because he keeps things so beautifully vague.

So, what's your reality right now?, asked Caren. To distract herself from the wait. Not out of interest.

The man looked at her. She knew she looked tired. Bags under her dark brown eyes. Too much work, lack of sleep. And then this sense of unease she couldn't shake. Although she normally looked younger than her age, for months she had felt much older, and apparently he could tell. Caren saw the man's eyes wander. Not in an uncomfortable way. Not judgmentally or leeringly. More out of friendly curiosity. To her blonde bob, its soft waves tucked behind her ears. A bit like in the 1920s, Ben had said. To her grey turtleneck jumper, her black trousers, the newspaper lying on them, the features section face up. She could see him deciphering the headline, which for him was upside down. *Attack on our way of life.*

An announcement by the stewardess, who in the meantime had been dealing with the security personnel, interrupted him as he began to answer. The voice called for patience – unfortunately – no further information about the flight could be given. The man furrowed his brow, whilst voices were raised, phone calls were made, and a queue formed in front of the stewardess at the counter.

Very simple, he said in response to Caren's question, without taking his eyes off the stewardess and the counter: that you are asking me that at this moment, is the existence of an atomic fact, that furthermore is the connection of objects – our connection, which was not composite before.

And now you're going to say, responded Caren, that the connection of objects is nothing but coincidence.

The man opposite leant back in the matt black plastic seat. He sat there like a mountain, laid the book down on his broad thighs, looked at Caren, took a packet of cigarettes out of his jacket and lit up. With a forbearing look that seemed to say he knew what she was getting at (she wasn't getting at anything), he responded:

Interesting that you talk about coincidence... Take the investment banker, who on the 10th September 2001 clears his office on the umpteenth floor of the South tower of the World Trade Centre, because after years he has finally decided to start his own business and go self-employed. His decision saves his life. A month later, in his new role as a financial advisor, he takes the early American Airlines flight to San Domingo, flight number 587. It's the plane that straight after take-off from New York crashed into the Queens neighbourhood, with no survivors. Coincidence or the mysterious workings of a higher power? Or take the women in their gardens in Queens, fatally injured by falling plane parts. Three women – three! – whose husbands, all firemen, died in the rubble of the towers during their shift on September 11th. Do eerie events like this reveal a deeper meaning, do they follow a plan, or is the universe a

singular, meaningless chaos of events? Coincidence is trivial, isn't it? It's better to make connections between life's events, because then they could mean something. That's why people piece everything that happens to them together to build a story, about their life, about their identity.

And you don't think much of piecing things together, Caren summed up, at the same time amazed by the examples he had chosen.

She tried to hide it, but felt as if he'd read her like a book, almost as if she'd been caught out. Then she thought: How highly unlikely was it that he had chosen this precise event, an undeniable connection. An event that had been monumental, that everybody knew about, that, you could argue, had changed the world.

You're absolutely right, he responded, I don't think anything of this desperate search for meaning. Apart from that, Wittgenstein wouldn't think much of your belief in fate and preordination.

And with that the matter was closed for him. He picked his book up again, took another drag on his cigarette, which nobody complained about as they were all busy with more important matters than a rebel smoker, and then he stubbed it out with his shoe and continued reading whilst steps approached with a threatening rhythm, disrupting the suitcase symphony and drowning out the announcements. Barrier tapes whizzed out of silver posts, and before the waiting crowd knew what was happening, A17, their gate, was cordoned off and surrounded by police. The stewardess behind the counter bit her bottom lip.

Caren wasn't surprised. Her whole body tensed up. She knew this feeling well: the signs of a developing story, they sharpened her senses. Ask your father, she heard her mother say, like before, when she didn't know the answer to something. Ask your dad! As if that would be helpful in this situation. All around her a vague sense of unease spread. Coffee cups were put down, headphones taken off, newspapers put to one side. Passengers outside of the

barriers, on their way to other planes, neither cordoned off nor diverted, slowed down, curious to see what was happening at A17. The digital clock flashed 10.32. And for the moment, nothing else happened.

Caren grabbed her mobile phone, it was like a reflex. *Problem at Heathrow*, she wrote to Dan Lieberman in the editorial office: *Flight delayed indefinitely, my gate in Terminal 2 cordoned off and surrounded by police. Have you got anything on it?* The man opposite carried on reading Wittgenstein, oblivious. Amongst the other passengers, already on high alert because of the events of the previous night, quiet panic had taken hold. An older woman marched resolutely up to a police officer at the barrier and was sent straight back. A young man in a baseball cap slipped further down into his seat and studied the barrier tape as if it held a hidden message. A stressed mother in jeans and trainers, carrying her screaming child in her arms, rushed decisively towards the stewardess, who was still awkwardly biting her bottom lip. The father, a lanky, tall bloke, pale and bleary-eyed, powerless to stop her, stayed in his seat holding a half-eaten panini. A sunburnt woman, mid-forties, her hair combed tightly back, in baggy light blue trousers and a white blazer, was sitting bolt upright as if this would give her a better view, whilst the guy next to her stretched with a tired side glance at the police officer and then calmly started re-plaiting his pony tail. Four young men in pin-striped suits, looking like bankers or lawyers, consulted with each other and then closed their laptops one after the other, as if it were a choreographed routine, a ballet. The fat man in his mid-sixties behind them, in a bright silk shirt and a brown cord jacket, stood up clumsily to make his way to the toilet, delayed at the checkpoint while a police officer was called to accompany him. About one hundred and sixty passengers, Caren estimated. Fourteen security personnel. Their officer-in-charge must be the man next to the stewardess. Dark suit, leather gun holster under his jacket, short brown hair with a parting, calm look, serious eyes. Mr Smart & Handsome. He was speaking to two men with intense looks on their faces in front of the counter – one of them seemed dissatisfied, the other curious. Caren trawled the portals of

a variety of new services on her phone. Nothing, no updates, no news tickers were reporting on unusual events at Heathrow. Anyway, she thought, anyway, all of this – last night in Paris, the unsettling happenings this morning – reason enough to get in touch with Julien after ten long months. To finally get in touch with Julien. Julien...