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One event can set off a chain reaction of effects that make a person's character slowly deteriorate and make their entire life fall apart. Literature and the arts exist to tell stories of emotional collapse on a more personal level (one which the reader can relate to). Chris Cleave introduces the audience to the main character in the beginning of *Incendiary* and as the novel progresses, the reader begins to realize that she is on her way to her emotional downfall. Cleave keeps the audience in a web of events and allows them to make their own connections in order to better understand the emotional struggles of the main character. His novel *Incendiary* is a literary roller coaster that is a letter from a woman who is an emotional victim of a terrorist attack in London to Osama bin Laden. The unnamed narrator's letter contains a series of events that preceded and followed the bombing (that was ordered by Osama bin Laden) which killed her husband and her four-year-old son. The narrator of *Incendiary* struggled with anxiety and it caused her to form new relationships with influential people that led her to a state of emotional confusion and instability.

The narrator struggles with anxiety and desperation at the beginning of the book. As she is writing her letter to Osama bin Laden, she mentions that her husband works in bomb disposal, a very risky job that requires her husband to leave whenever he is called. Her husband's job causes the narrator to be full of anxiety, and she is constantly fearing that he will cut the wrong

wire one day and not return. Every time her husband leaves, she finds something to do in order to distract herself, whether it is cleaning or “watching the telly and hoping it would stay boring” (Cleave 7). All she can do is wait (sometimes a whole night) to see if her husband comes back, and the oblivion eats away at her and she is “half mental with worry all the time” (Cleave 23). Sometimes, she lets the anxiety and fear overtake her and this causes her to do irrational things, such as leaving her four-year-old son alone in her flat so she could go to a nearby bar. Sometimes, these simple actions are not enough for her, and the narrator’s coping mechanisms lead her to new relationships with people that bring her closer to her downfall.

In order to relieve stress, the narrator seeks comfort and reassurance in men that are not her husband. She believes that “sex is not a beautiful and perfect thing” (Cleave 9), but that “it is a condition caused by the nerves” (Cleave 9). The narrator is easily affected by any sort of stress, and she becomes a nervous wreck. She needs something to help her forget about all the evil in the world, and that is sexual interaction with men besides her husband. The affairs that she has are her only oases in which she finds small moments of peace and comfort. In one specific instance, the narrator was waiting for her husband, and she was watching a show on the television in which a group of politicians started rambling and arguing. The talk show was off-putting for her and she tried to take her mind off of it by tidying up her house, but it wasn’t working for her, so she went down to a local pub (Cleave 11). The narrator was very vulnerable and anxious and she found a new source of assuagement: a man named Jasper Black. A few days after her first sexual encounter with him, she let herself be swayed by him again. Her husband and her son were at an Arsenal football game, and she was all alone at home. She had invited Jasper over to her flat to watch the match on the television, but both of them knew that they

would not be watching the game. In the middle of their encounter, the television went black and it took them a few moments to realize that the football stadium that her husband and son were in had just been blown up. Jasper and the narrator stopped what they were doing and rushed to the scene immediately. She was dazed and confused, but all she wanted to do was find her husband and son, so she ran into the stadium like a madwoman (Cleave 31-48). After a brave but useless attempt to find her family among the rubble in the football stadium that was blown up, the narrator is severely injured and has to spend weeks in a hospital, where she realizes that it is her duty to be an active member of her society.

After going through what seemed like a lifetime of suffering and pain, the narrator is released from the hospital and she goes out into the new London: a city that has been wounded by the May Day bombing. One of the first things she does when she leaves the hospital is make a visit to her husband's old office, where she speaks to Terence Butcher, the chief superintendent. She seeks more information about the fates of her husband and her boy, but instead receives a lecture about the war against terrorism. She is convinced by Terence and decides that she wants to fight against terrorism too, so she asks for a job at the police station (Cleave 86-96). Her anxiety and unstable emotions lead to the development of a strong relationship with Terence Butcher because he is the only one who helps her cope with her stress. She convinces him to have an "official" affair with her and even thinks about restarting her life with him, until Terence trusts her enough to reveal something to her on one of their secret dates that causes her to go insane: the government "knew about May Day... 2 hours before it happened" (Cleave 184) and did nothing to stop it. At first, the narrator refuses to believe him, but then she becomes full of hatred and decides to reveal this secret to Petra Sutherland (Jasper Black's girlfriend), who is a

journalist and who has become a close acquaintance of hers. She provides video evidence for the article and waits alone in a hotel until the Sunday that it is supposed to be published, but she realizes that Petra has betrayed her and that her story was not published. She calls Jasper Black to ask about what happened, and he is almost as frustrated as she is, but he decides to take it one step further. Jasper plans to “threaten to set off [a] nasty little bomb” (Cleave 213) to get attention from the press, but what he actually causes is much more chaotic. Turmoil overtakes London once more and the city is drowned in the fear of a new bomb threat. The narrator completely loses her sanity after having a near-death experience and the government finds out that she tried to sell classified secrets to the press. Everything that she owns is taken away from her and she tries to kill Petra Sutherland, but in the end, she just gives up because there is nothing left to live for. She accepts her emotionally unstable fate and finishes her letter to Osama bin Laden with the same hope that she had when she started it: to stop the terrorist attacks and love one another.

At the end of the novel, the narrator of *Incendiary* became emotionally confused and unstable after meeting three significant individuals that helped her cope with her anxiety. The effects that lead to the main character’s downfall in *Incendiary* are a prime example of the relationship between a novel and real life. Chris Cleave chose a very realistic character to portray a story that a reader can relate to. It is important to appreciate literature and the arts because they are a form of personal communication and reflection that may lead to a better understanding of human issues. Cleave’s final statement in his novel is one that leaves the audience thinking about how they can apply what they learned in the novel to their own lives, and it demonstrates how someone can be greatly affected by a chain of events. One seemingly insignificant event can

cause a huge effect on someone's character and emotional stability and can completely change a person's life.

Works Cited

Cleave, Chris. *Incendiary*. New York, NY: Knopf, 2005. 256. Print.