

## The writers' room

Eda Gunaydin<sup>1</sup>

Sally's so fucking mad at Chelsea she can barely breathe. The cigarette helps regulate her breathing – she inhales deeply and then breathes out for too long, until she feels light-headed, unable to distinguish the exhaled smoke from her breath fogging on the winter air. When she discards the stub, letting it fall to the wet ground outside the HiddenLight Productions office, a middle-aged man passing her by on his bicycle bares his teeth in disapproval, looking at her like she is a bad person, which is exactly what she already feels she is. She would have liked to have been a reformed granola-type by the time she was forty, like the gentleman in the spandex who had passed her by, but she was working within certain confines, like that she has never made more than 25,000 pounds a year in her life – impossible to live on in London, especially with the amount her colleagues spend on coke and expect her to spend on coke – and that she thinks that, of late, her therapist has been screening her calls.

Chelsea had made the position of *script advisor* sound glamorous but it really appeared not to be amounting to much more than extensively tabbing her copy of Lilith Rose's *Girls Who Fight Evil Men*, determining into which chapters they could write scenes that feature the studio's male lead. The book had been a New York Times bestseller, and Rose had spent enough time embedded with Kurdish militants that it made Sally jealous, but not so much that her life had ever been in any real danger. Sally wants to profile her, and name the piece something like, *From Battle Tank to Think-Tank: Lilith Rose Does It All*, but she's aware she's just being catty, ungenerous. Unfeminist. It's a good book: the female fighters whose journeys Rose has traced seem to like it, anyway; or they seem to think it will help shape American foreign policy on Syria.

Sally isn't sure that it will help shape anything other than Jonathan Romano's career. The contract struck with Netflix requires that they cast the sod, who his gaggle of teenage fans dub JoRo, in a lead role, and Sally is stuck working out something for him to do. Lilith Rose hates her guts – she has written that exact phrase in the last email she sent to Sally, *I hate your guts* – for it, but Sally's arms are tied. She is struck, suddenly, by the knowledge that she has become the type of person who reminds others about how, contractually, Lilith has signed away her IP and that *Girls Who Fight Evil Men* needs to be a hit if it is going to launch the Clintons' banner in the way that they want it to be launched. This means that Jonathan Romano needs to rail or at least stare steamily into the eyes of one or two fighter chicks, most of whom have, in reality, sworn celibacy.

Sally is also responsible for liaising with their contact at the Department of State, who are requiring that certain details documented in the book now be censored: the specifics about

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<sup>1</sup> Eda Gunaydin is a graduate student in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. Her key research interests are in the areas of identity, and post-colonial and post-structuralist discourse theory in international relations. Her research can be found in *International Studies Quarterly* and *The International Feminist Journal of Politics*; [eda.gunaydin@sydney.edu.au](mailto:eda.gunaydin@sydney.edu.au).

weapons the Kurds had been able to get their hands on, the locations and exact numbers of US troop support, details like whose insignia the men had worn on their uniforms during particularly fierce battles. Netflix is on board with these changes too – after all, they want to see the show released in Turkey, in order to maximise their market share in the Middle East. *Good luck*, thinks Sally. She has spoken to the Middle East communications director for Netflix – he hates her guts too. She had read Arendt at Oxford; she thinks about the banality of evil, now, as she steps into the elevator and takes it up to the fourth floor.

By the time Sally has taken off her coat and stepped into the office, she notices that the other screenwriters and script assistants having already assembled around the desk for the morning – they appear even to have had breakfast together, if the empty plastic containers and used coffee cups from Pret are anything to judge by. Sally had missed the memo on the pre-meeting, which tanks her mood further. *Why don't they want to spend time with me?* she wonders. She rarely ever mentions Oxford. Her breath smells pretty normal, as far as she is aware. Smarmy American arseholes. Sally can tell that they're excited today: they're dressed more nicely than usual – not in their typical screenwriters' uniforms of tracksuit bottoms and jumpers with ironic slogans on the front. Emma has brushed her hair for once, and she has neatly laid out in front of her pages of printed text with passages highlighted in yellow. Leaning closer, Sally can see that they are Bruce Billings' *Rolling Stone* profile, alongside transcripts from Billings' podcast, one of those dirtbag left ventures that Sally is too old to pretend to find funny, or too English not to find vulgar, maybe. He is coming in today, she knows, to consult; he'd volunteered with the YPG in 2016, working as a machine gunner on a makeshift tank, helping to recapture Tal Salman. She found him so annoying that she thought it was a wonder his own side hadn't killed him, blown off his head. He reminds her of a younger Bernie Sanders, namely because he is loud and nasal and a socialist, but really she thinks he's just doing it for attention, given the number of interviews he has given in the wake of his time in Syria, and that he has accepted this consulting gig. She opts not to reflect on the fact she has accepted a similar role herself, for a similar fee, choosing instead to stew about feeling duped by Chelsea: in no way is Sally using her Master's degree in International Relations in this job. Not that she is one to bring up Oxford. She grimaces to herself, just as Bruce steps into the room. He's in a leather jacket, a cigarette slotted behind his ear, wearing one of those tiny beanies that leftists and male comedians seem to favour, rolled up on the apex of his head. Emma instantly throws up a raised fist, which he does not reciprocate, so she adds, "It's so cool to finally meet you. We have so much respect for what you did."

He shrugs, slotting into the chair next to Sally and placing his elbows on the desk, then smiles, revealing his off-white and stained teeth – a sort of welcome relief compared to the overly-white smiles of her colleagues, the norm in California and totally garish in any other region of the world.

"Great," he says. "Well, if you respect it so much, then let's make sure we don't fuck this up, huh?"

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They fuck it up nearly instantly. Emma begins by saying, “So, Bruce, is it pronounced anti-fa or antefafa?” and no one can tell if she is joking. Bruce answers, Sally thinks, somewhat generously. He’s lucky he wasn’t looked into more, really – she knows of men like him in his position who have copped prison sentences more recently, or detained for months at the border upon their return. A little wire-tap is nothing by comparison. She decides to intervene – they’re not allowed to use either the word anarchist or communist (which she knows Bruce is about to bring up, any second), anywhere – but Emma cuts her off.

“What I’m most curious to know is,” she says, leaning forward and lowering her voice, conspiratorially, or as if she is conscious – Sally had thought she had no self-awareness to speak of – that she is asking something a little off-bounds, “do the women shave their legs?”

Bruce furrows his brow, so she goes on. “Well, see, I’m just trying to write this scene at the moment where Azadi, the character Azadi, she’s run away from her family because they want her to get married and she doesn’t want to just be a house wife, you know? And I want to write this scene where she – she whips off her headscarf, and she looks in the mirror, and she just says, ‘I’m free’,” Emma pauses to look around meaningfully, “and I guess what I’m wondering is, at the end of this scene, this bathroom scene, does she shave her legs?”

“Um,” says Bruce. “I guess I would say that most of the time we didn’t have consistent plumbing.”

“Okay,” responds Emma, drawing it out as if she doesn’t quite believe his statement. “But in all the pictures, they look so good!” She rifles through the documents in front of her, finally pulling out a few sheafs – clearly having abused her access to free colour printing. “Look at the lips on this one,” she says. “I mean, look at the teeth. You’re telling me she’s not brushing and flossing twice a day? And the eyebrows. My waxing girl can’t even get my eyebrows to look like that.”

Bruce just says, carefully, “I don’t know what to tell you,” but Sally knows that some of these photos that Emma has found were obviously staged, and that there is nothing wrong with this fact, from the perspective of political strategy. Hell, if Billings had experienced any truly life-threatening danger at any point during his stint in Syria, she’d eat her hat. Good PR was good PR. It had worked on Bruce, at any rate, and other volunteers like him. Even Sally can appreciate that there is a kind of romance to imagining life in the mountains, leaving the constraints of her life behind, singing songs and staring through the sight of a rifle with an enemy clearly defined. But instead she’s trapped here. God – she can feel a headache forming behind her eyes, but Chelsea has informed her that if she yells at the writers again she will lose this gig, so she decides to intervene another way.

“Bruce,” she says. “Bruce. I suppose what I’m most curious to know, what I most need to see us getting right here, with this project, is motivation. What motivated you, what motivates them? You hear it said so often that the Middle East cannot seem to find a way to democratise, that its people uniquely resist democracy. Would you say that resonates with your experiences? Were you indeed motivated by a desire to bring democracy to even the darkest reaches of the earth?”

Sally thinks she has done a good job – diverted the discussion to something more serious, but Bruce rounds on her with a similar facial expression to the one he had given Emma. She wonders if his face just *is* that way. Charmless man. She can't see JoRo in Bruce at all, not one bit.

“Sally, right?” Bruce says. “Yeah, nice to meet you in person finally. What you just said is pretty dogshit, actually.” She opens her mouth and then closes it again. “I'm more interested in the fight against imperialism than spreading liberal democracy, actually. And so are the Kurds.”

She doesn't understand what he means, but she's sick of hearing that word, imperialism. It's over-used, that word, and overly pejoratively. Her father always said that the Brits brought education and railways to India, and had abolished slavery to boot. His own father had been a Sergeant of the Imperial Police – Dad was born in Calcutta. He always said he wanted to take her and show her around. But she'd never had the time. And then he had passed.

Emma chimes in again, trying a different tack. “Did you ever have a thing with any of the women?” she says. “I'll bet you were the first white guy they ever met. *Someone* must have had a crush on you.”

Sally can't believe that would be true, but then again, she's no reliable judge of male beauty.

Bruce just says, “No, no,” and laughs uncomfortably, which only causes Emma to lean in further, practically bisecting herself on the edge of the desk. “I can't stress enough just how much sex everyone was not having, dude. You're pretty much on alert all the time, because you think you might get blown up, you know? That, and most of the women have sworn off intimate relationships.”

“Bummer,” says Emma. “You could have cleaned up.”

Sally jumps in again. “Not with the threat of sexual violence lingering in the air,” she speculates. “That must have spurred your protective instinct, Bruce.” She's picturing a scene they could write, JoRo's character saving Azadi from a jihadi, pulling him up by his beard and overcome by a feeling of such rage and vengeance that he slits his throat, failing to take him as a prisoner, his first kill, spurring contemplation as to whether or not he is just as morally bankrupt as his enemies the jihadis.

“No, no,” says Bruce, and she thinks, *Well, fuck you, we're writing it anyway*. “I can't stress enough just how little military training I had. Some of the guys, the vets, they knew what they were doing – but me, no,” he shakes his head. “It was really the women, the female commanders, who were protecting me.”

“With all due respect, then,” Sally snaps, running out of patience, “and in the absence of any useful skill to contribute, what the fuck, may I ask, were you doing there?”

In response, Bruce Billings pulls the cigarette out from behind his ear and slots it into the corner of his mouth. He looks her in the eye, and says, slowly, “Well, gee, I don't know. What would you say it is that you,” he looks around the room, “are doing here? At least I talk *to* the people that I talk about.”

Sally makes to choke out a snatch of a response, along the lines of, *We're raising awareness*, or *this story must be told*, or *art changes hearts and minds*, or something, but Billings has gone, headlong out the door, no doubt to smoke in the exact same spot that Sally had been occupying earlier.