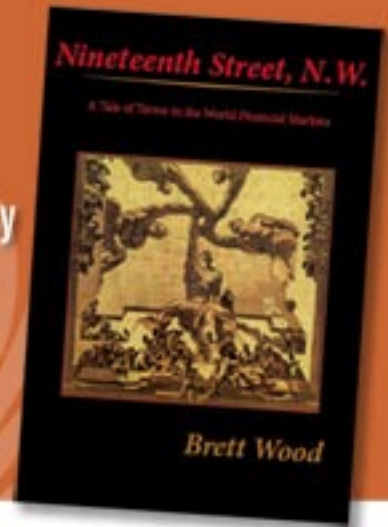


Nineteenth Street Northwest by Brett Wood

Murder, intrigue, and the high-stakes world of currency speculation meet in Brett Wood's latest thriller that lays bare the all-too-real risk of a modern-day financial crash.



Nineteenth Street, N.W. by Brett Wood

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As Sophia returned to her magazine, immersing herself in the horoscope section, she felt a gentle tug at her sleeve. It was a little girl, perhaps eight or nine, with a face so angelic it made Sophia suspicious at once of the mischief it must conceal. Sophia reached into her bag and pulled out a roll of toffees. The girl smiled and took one, and after a moment's hesitation, took a second and popped it into her pocket. Then, like two grandees exchanging gifts, she proffered Sophia a scruffy pad of paper on which she'd drawn a noughts and crosses grid, but the child's mother spotted her and drew her back with an apologetic smile. Sophia wanted to protest, to say, *No, it's all right. I'd like to play*, but she was suddenly assailed by nausea, feeling at once hot and cold, her forehead clammy to the touch.

She was filled with revulsion at what was going to happen. People—real people—were going to die when the bomb exploded. People like the couple beside her, the businessman with his pathetic leering stares, the pert air hostess squeezing down the aisle, the little girl, now back in her own seat, playing happily with her mother.

Unbidden, unwanted, a memory hit Sophia with a jolt. It was the photo of an airline crash she'd once seen many years ago on the cover of *Paris Match*. Every detail of the image was carved into her mind: the carcass of the plane lying incongruously in a golden field, its belly ripped open as though savaged by some great beast, its metallic bones strewn indifferently across the countryside. There had been a fire, and the burnt bodies of the passengers lay around the wreckage. A doll had remained miraculously intact, its skin horribly pink against the seared flesh of its owner.

Glancing back at the little girl through the cracks between the seats, Sophia shuddered at the thought of this child being handled by the salvage crew with rubber gloves, stuffed into a body bag like some obscene biological specimen. *Oh, dear God, how did I get into this?*

But she knew.

It had all started innocently enough, some seven years ago, in the drafty drawing room of a Sussex country house. Sophia was dining with her boyfriend Simon and his parents. It was the first time she'd met them, and the last. As the evening progressed from bad to worse, Sophia couldn't decide which was more painful: the forced joviality of Simon's father or the frigid politeness of his mother. One thing was clear, though. Ten years of boarding school in England and an accent sculpted to perfection still hadn't made

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Sophia “English” enough to fit into their tidy little society. Simon had tried to shrug it off as Mother being her usual difficult self, but Sophia, deeply hurt, ended the relationship abruptly.

And yet, Sophia mused, peering at the inky sky through the cabin window, perhaps she should have known all along the futility of trying to fit in, for that night at Simon’s had marked the end of her attempts at assimilation, not the beginning of her alienation. That had started earlier—much earlier. Twenty years ago? Twenty-five? Sophia couldn’t have been more than eight or nine, packed off to boarding school in England, mistrusted because she was foreign, pitied because she was an orphan. Or close enough. Daddy had died a couple of years before, and her stepmother had been too busy in Paris or Geneva or Monte Carlo to claim Sophia for half-term breaks. How she dreaded those breaks—hanging about while the headmistress phoned up parents trying to place Sophia with someone, anyone, even girls whom she detested. How she despised the other girls at school; how she longed to be one of them, too.

All through her school years, Sophia had struggled to fit in, to be one of the girls, to deny her alien roots and heritage. Then, in the pain of rejection by Simon’s family, she became equally determined to know her native country, abandoned those many years ago. She went on a reading binge, ploughing through everything she could find about her people, her history, her country, even digging up old United Nations reports from the nineteen-eighties that chronicled the human rights abuses already taking place.

The troubles in her country had started soon after Independence. At first, the government was too bristling with post-colonial pride to pay attention to anything a small ethnic minority in the north-east corner of the country said or did. But then they started discovering the ores and heavy metals in the region; there were lucrative foreign mining contracts to be awarded, fortunes to be made. Gradually, all this nonsense about autonomy and self-determination and—most egregious of all—separate statehood for the ethnic minority began to matter, and matter very much.

With sovereign brutality, the government clamped down. The Sedition Law (1977), the Proclamation of Territorial Integrity (1979), the Anti-terrorism Act (1984, amended 2002), and a dozen other laws and decrees mandated a single language, a single religion, a single country. Anyone daring to suggest otherwise or questioning the Republic or, God forbid, insulting the President, found himself thrown in jail for terms stretching two to twenty years.

In those days, the country was a front-line state in the War Against Communism, the President a stalwart ally of the West. In return, Western governments were willing to sell him the latest military toys and to overlook any oppression, any abuse, as long as they could operate their airbases and early warning stations from the northern territories. After the Cold War the regime had fallen into disfavour with the West, and there was hope that international pressure might force it to mend its ways. The President had shown the good sense to keep a low profile, throwing the occasional bone to foreign journalists and human rights organizations—release of a long-time prisoner of conscience, promise of electoral reforms—while denying entry visas to the more meddlesome ones.

Now it was a different era. The President had handed day-to-day control of the country to his nephew—his own son he’d had murdered years ago for attempting an early power play—and the West’s new cause was the War Against Terrorism. With canny prescience, the regime had signed on at once, eager to show it was willing to do its part. Not that there were any terrorists within the country—certainly none of global reach or with the remotest link to the Trade Center attacks—just a handful of freedom fighters calling for an end to the oppression and the beginning of a true democracy. But it gave the government the perfect pretext for renewing its clampdowns. Students, trade union leaders, political opponents—anyone could be

rounded up and in the name of security. And the Americans, good natured but simplistic, always viewing the world in black and white, good and evil, cowboys and Indians, “with us or against us,” had swallowed the act, declaring the regime a force for freedom and a staunch ally in the global War on Terror.

Sophia was sickened to read of schoolteachers risking not just their livelihoods but their very lives for the sake of muttering a few words before class in the hope of keeping alive the culture, the history, the language of their proud and ancient people. At the time, Sophia was working on her doctorate at the London School of Economics. Before long she found herself embroiled in the debates and discussions of the various radical groups decrying the aborted birth of her nation, the President and “first family” pillaging the country’s wealth, the silencing of any opposition, the complicity of the civilized world.

But her disillusion with them soon set in, as the Marxist-Leninists battled the Leninist-Marxists over the finer points of dialectical materialism. The radical students were all of a kind: unwashed and unkempt, with greasy skin and woolly sweaters, carrying about them the languor of late nights and the smell of stale smoke. Sophia soon came to realize she had nothing in common with them or their barren bombast.

It was only when she visited her homeland that she really understood. The little things, not the political mumbo-jumbo, struck her. Children playing with sticks and old tires in festering slums. Rotten heaps on which dogs foraged for food, their ribs protruding, snouts pinched and vicious with hunger. The dusty shops selling smelly old clothes and broken hardware and all the assorted rubble that only the poor will buy. The mixture of reverence and resentment in peoples’ eyes as the armoured Mercedes sped by, shuttling the rich and powerful from one presidential palace to another. The grim-faced guards and dull-eyed women, and always and everywhere, the stench of refuse and corruption.

Sophia had returned to London filled with horror and disgust, ashamed of her relief at having escaped growing up under this oppression, and loathing the regime that had made it possible. Melamed, a veteran freedom fighter who’d been in the struggle for democracy ever since his own student days, spotted her at one of those meetings at the LSE. It was from Melamed that she finally learned the truth about her father – and what she could do about it.

Sophia’s father had been a jurist of international renown, called to the Bar in London, and a prominent lawyer in his own country. Although students could be thrown in jail, dissidents made to disappear, a man of his standing could not be disposed of so readily. When he began defending dissidents and documenting disappearances, the regime resolved to silence him.

There was a small photograph in the newspapers the day he died – Sophia had gone to the British Library, finding it among the other obscure foreign newspapers of twenty years ago. She studied the picture through a magnifying glass, coveting every pixel, as if searching for some hidden truth. The body lay prostrate on the dusty road, distended in anguish. The car had broken his spine, his arms were flung forward, his head tilted back unnaturally. Sophia could almost hear the awful snap, the agonizing howl the instant before he died.

Anger had been her only solace, and taking refuge in it now she glared at the couple beside her. Their faces were filled with plump complacency, their greatest worry whether to visit the Tower of London or Madame Tussauds. The wife was eating peanuts, stuffing her mouth a handful at a time. She drank her beer in great gulps, her double chin wobbling with the effort. The husband was picking at his nose with determined digs of his fingernail. Sophia looked at them with revulsion. Western governments were willing to support the regime, to tolerate any injustice and every misery in her country, so that people like these could continue their smug, inane existence.

Yet even that was an illusion, for the crackdowns in her country in no way impinged on them, in no way made them safer, in no way brought them justice for the attacks America had endured. And these people, Sophia thought, surveying the cabin—the couple beside her, the businessman with his bevy of pick-up lines, the young woman studiously ignoring him—in whose name, and for whose sake, their governments had propped up the President and his cronies for thirty years or more, would never bother to learn the facts, study the history, discover the truths about her country or its suffering. To them it was an obscure and distant land of little import and less concern. What did they care if regime used the War on Terror to promote its program of ethnic cleansing and political suppression with the connivance of their own governments? All they wanted was to feel safe, regardless of the price others might pay for their sense of security.

In their indifference lay their guilt, Sophia told herself, echoing Melamed's favourite refrain. Well, no longer. From tomorrow Western governments would learn that expediency exacted a price, that if they continued to prop up oppressive regimes so that they could buy their support and count on a few friendly votes at the UN for their latest crusade—be it against Communism or against Terrorism—then it would cost them dearly.

In just a few hours the computer's clock would generate a tiny electric current, disproportionate to its effect. The explosion would not be large, but enough to break the pressure seal of a cargo bay. Sophia wondered what would happen then. Would the plane plunge at once into the icy waters below? Would the oxygen masks pop down, as promised in those announcements to which no one ever listens? Would the passengers be plucked out in tidy rows of three, helplessly clutching the arms of their seats? How many lives would be lost? A hundred, perhaps. But against them must be weighed thirty years of oppression against her people and the systematic murder, over the years, of thousands of men, women, and children. As Melamed liked to say, innocent people die all the time; they might as well die for a reason. And how can there be innocence when there is injustice?

The gin was doing its work, dulling her mind. Dinner came, followed by the movie. Here and there in the dimness of the cabin were little oases from the overhead lights. One was shining in the row behind Sophia. The little girl's mother was reading her a story. Sophia peered back at them again. The girl might easily have been Sophia twenty years ago, the woman her stepmother. Only her stepmother would not have been reading to her; she would have plonked a pile of comic books in front of Sophia and become engrossed in a cheap thriller.

The girl spotted Sophia watching them and smiled. And with that simple smile, she unravelled the cocoon of self-protection Sophia had woven herself, mocking her calculus of justice and justification.

Sophia turned away abruptly and closed her eyes, trying to shut out the kaleidoscope of images haunting her mind: the little girl beside her mother, the device nestling in the suitcase, her father's body prostrate on the ground, the doll buried in the rubble.