

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



Happy Hour at the Algonquin Mark Bastable

The brunette in the red cocktail dress has no panties on. She shifts from cheek to cheek on the stool, suppressing the urge to blurt her thrilling secret to the man who just ordered the third martini of the evening. He's a Brit – a former paratrooper and Olympic skier. He's hot as balls.

“This is my first time in New York,” he says, palming cashews.

“Then it'll be my pleasure to show you the sights.”

“Is that part of the service?”

“I like to earn my cut.”

She's been fantasizing about this encounter for months – since she first read the manuscript that prompted her to sign the guy up. She has never before considered fucking a client. She's excitedly ashamed of herself. The sheer wantonness of it is a giddy turn-on.

Her name, by the way, is Maureen McKee. She was born in Hoboken, NJ. She has been married twice and her daughter Pearl is studying Renaissance art in Paris. Maureen last saw Pearl at Christmas. She will not live to see her again.

It's ten before eight on Wednesday evening, and the Blue Bar of the Algonquin Hotel is filling up. Regulars settle in for the long haul. Tourists hover nervously at the door that leads from the lobby, unsure whether they are permitted to enter. Maureen's new British client is jostled by Edward Spooner, who's in a hurry for a beer. For two beers even.

"And gimme a JD chaser," he tells the barman. He downs the liquor in one, his eyes darting towards the street outside as he tips his head back. Ed's wife Anna will arrive anytime now, and she's worried about how much Ed drinks. She has made him agree to stick to a single draft beer per night. In fact Anna needn't worry about her husband's sclerotic liver because Ed's going to be killed by a percussion injury to the brain.

"You want another?" the young barman asks. His name is Mike – blond, toned, six-five. He's the kind of fresh-faced, discreet, all-American bottle-spinner that drunks confide in.

"Yeah. And a glass of iced water."

"Coming up."

Mike's an amiable guy but he maintains an unwritten list of customers he despises.

"Know what?" Ed Spooner says "Make that shot a double."

Mike gets a fresh glass from beneath the bar. Fresh, but not clean. It is one of a dozen or so that Mike took to the restroom earlier and sluiced out with his urine. Those glasses are reserved for customers on Mike's list, and Ed Spooner's close to the top of it. When Ed's hammered he often expounds his theory that there's nothing wrong with America that couldn't be cured by rounding up the niggers and the yids.

"Fuckin' put 'em on a big-ass ship, tell 'em they're going to fuckin' Africa, and soon as they're over the horizon, torpedo the motherfucker."

Mike's surname is Silverstein. His great-grandfather died in Belsen. Mike will die in New York, soon.

It's dark outside now. Drizzle seems not to fall but simply to hang above the sidewalk, or to tumble ahead of the squalling gusts that shunt along West 44th. The taillights of taxicabs are smeared by rain, and scurrying commuters make momentary silhouettes against bright store-windows.

The doorman at The Iroquois, collar turned up around his ears, yells above the slushy traffic-noise, trying to attract the attention of his opposite number at The Algonquin.

"Hey, Dean!"

"Yeah?"

"You finish at ten?"

"Yeah. Grab a beer?"

“Sure thing.”

Dean’s relieved to have been given an excuse to delay going home. Since Candice threw him out he’s been living in Queens at his mother’s place, and his mother his dying. Dean is afraid he’ll find her laying on the couch, cold, her clouded eyes still fixed on Maury. He’s scared, and he’s embarrassed that he’s scared, and he’s angry that he’s embarrassed – but he figures as long as he can stay away from Queens, he won’t have to think about it.

All this angst is for nothing, because Dean’s mom will live long enough to identify Dean’s body at the morgue.

A cab pulls up and Dean steps forward to open the door. At that very moment, Ed’s wife Anna walks into the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel. Leaning on the bar, Ed Spooner is telling Mike Silverstein that he’d be a Senior Partner by now if it weren’t for the kikes scratching each other’s backs. Mike is only half-listening because out of the corner of his eye he’s watching Maureen McKee fondle her client’s thigh. Her dress has ridden up and Mike caught a glimpse of bush. Maureen knows she’s stumblingly drunk, and she suspects that her client is more appalled than aroused, but she’s high on her own hot-flushed shame and she’s fizzy with anticipation.

At the curbside, Dean opens the door of the cab and Abraham Sooleawa gets out. Abraham is thirty-eight years old. Until recently he was a research scientist at Pfizer. He believes he is in perfect health. That’s not true – but then Abe believes many things that aren’t true

For instance, Abe believes that he is the last surviving pure-blood Manhattan Indian. This is certainly not true. He is one eighth Iroquois - hence his surname - and the rest is mostly Pennsylvania Dutch, which explains his forename.

Abraham believes that he is the rightful sole owner of the island of Manhattan. His imaginary ancestors have assured him that they made a pact with King George to retain the island in perpetuity. The City of New York, run by a cabal of Aryan Nazis, has not honored that promise.

Abraham also believes that King George is held captive in the Algonquin Hotel, which is a site sacred to the Manhattan Indians. King George knows Abraham is coming. King George knows everything. Abraham is convinced that if he can rescue King George from the Nazi oppressors, a centuries-old injustice will be put right.

Abraham has an undiagnosed tumor on his brain, and it’s the tumor, of course, that causes Abraham to believe all this. Before the tumor, Abe held conventional beliefs and expressed them in unremarkable ways; his interest in his Native American forbears was an on-and-off hobby. But over a few months the tumor has warped and scorched and corrupted important parts of Abraham’s brain, so, in a way, it’s not Abe who gets out of the cab, dressed in army fatigues, face smeared with soot and red clay, muttering in an invented language that he believes to be the tongue of the Manhattan Indians. It’s not Abe, exactly; it’s the tumor.

Abraham doesn’t know about the tumor, and neither does Dean the doorman. All Dean knows is that some guy with a painted face and ragged army gear is pushing past him out of the cab, and the cab driver’s shouting, “Hey, buddy – twenty-eight bucks!”

Dean grabs the guy's arm and the guy swings round, his hand coming up from his belt. Abraham shoots Dean twice in the stomach with a semi-automatic pistol, and Dean is dead even before what's left of his spine smacks against the door of the cab.

Abe's plan was to walk into the Algonquin Hotel and demand the release of King George. The gun was intended for self-defense only. But Abe can see now that the Fascist City of New York has no interest in pursuing a peaceful resolution to the matter. They want to conclude the genocide of the Manhattan tribe. So be it, Abraham thinks. You have made your choice.

At the bar, Ed Spooner sees his wife walk through from the lobby. She stands there for a moment, scanning the room. Ed ducks down behind the British writer. He pushes the empty shot glasses along the bar a little, and he picks up the glass of iced water. He lifts his head again, ready to wave at Anna, but over her shoulder he sees a guy in some kinda half-ass costume-party Rambo deal, waving a toy gun around like he's expecting gooks to pop up out of the peanut-bowls.

Anna sees Ed. Ed smiles. The toy gun goes crack and Anna's face explodes.

Ed is not so much horrified as confused. "What the fuck?" he shouts – which brings him to Abraham's manically determined attention. The bullet that hits Ed in the shoulder doesn't kill him, but it slams him backwards so hard that he fractures his skull against the bar as he goes down, sustaining fatal damage to the brain.

Abraham's brain, in contrast, is still working flat-out - diligently if not well. Abraham believes he is surrounded by grinning, cackling ghouls summoned by a treacherous Crow shaman in the pay of the Aryan white man. These malevolent spectres bare their teeth at him; they reach toward him with their poisonous talons. When he shoots at them, they sprout crimson wings and swoop away through the windows into the night sky. Abraham keeps shooting.

Maureen McKee is hit as she scrambles over the bar, intending to take cover back there with the barman. She's halfway across the bar on all fours when a bullet catches her in the wrist, flipping her on to her back. The British author attempts to shove her over the edge and out of sight, but he succeeds only in scooting her further along the bar, skirt up round her waist, legs all over.

"Oh, my God," Maureen slurs, befuddled by gin and lust and vermouth and pain. She fumbles to tug her dress down. "I could just die."

Three seconds later, she does precisely that – finished by a bullet to the throat.

The British writer spins around and faces Abraham.

"For God's sake, man - drop that firearm!" he bellows.

Abraham's overheated and damaged brain processes the information transmitted by his ears. It places the accent. It makes a connection. Abraham's brain tells Abraham's arm to relax to his side. It instructs Abraham's mouth to speak.

“Your Majesty,” Abraham says to the British writer. He bows slightly. The room is silent but for the soft sobs of the wounded and dying. “I am here, as you knew I would be.”

Huddled behind the bar, Mike Silverstein listens to the sudden quiet. He didn’t see much before he ducked down – just a guy with war paint and a handgun – but there’s a spray of blood on the mirrored wall behind him, and that’s enough to convince him he should keep his head low and wait it out.

“What’s your name, my friend?”

A British accent – very calm, very much in charge. Mike knows it’s the guy who was standing at the bar – the tall guy with the straight back and the perfect nails.

“Abraham, Your Majesty.”

A pause. Then the Brit says, gently, cautiously, “And what’s my name?”

“King George,” comes the immediate answer.

Another pause. Mike wonders whether he should risk crawling towards the door and out to the lobby. He wishes he knew where the wacko was standing now.

Eventually the Brit speaks again. “And what can I do for you, Abraham?”

“You know.”

“Of course. But I want to hear it from you.”

“You are the only hope for my people,” says the gunman. He sounds on the verge of tears. “We are the victims of centuries of genocide and oppression.”

“Your people?”

“My tribe. Driven off our land. Hounded from our holy places. Rounded up and slaughtered.”

Mike bites his lip. There’s no reason why the gunman shouldn’t just start shooting again. Maybe the Brit can keep him talking for a while, but so what? At some point something has to happen, and Mike can’t see any way it’ll be good. Bad, actually, is what it’s likely to be.

“How can I help you, Abraham?”

Mike considers the options. Stay put, get shot. Make a break, get shot. Not much of a choice, he reckons. He needs to think of something, and soon.

He can hear crying. The gunman is weeping openly.

“The Nazis,” Abraham says, choked. “They have killed all of us. All my tribe. I am the last child of my forefathers.”

Mike frowns. He concentrates hard, trying to make sense of what he’s hearing. Abraham,

genocide, the Nazis, an oppressed tribe driven from the homeland. Mike tips his head back, and puffs his cheeks silently, astonished.

That's a fucking Jew out there, he thinks. That's some insane fucking Jew who thinks he's the last insane fucking Jew on the planet.

"You're not alone, Abraham, I promise you," says the Brit.

"I am. I wish I wasn't, but I am. I'm so alone."

A lonely, crazy, alienated Jew looking for a friend. Man - is that all he wants? Someone on his side?

Mike is very willing to be on the gunman's side. Even a crazy person doesn't shoot his own team members.

"You're not alone," the Brit insists.

"I am. I am the last. The Aryan devils have murdered my people."

Mike stands up from behind the bar, arms spread wide. He beams at the gunman. "That's not true!" he says. "Shalom!"

Abraham is startled. He merely invoked the evil of the Nazis and this giant, blond Viking appears, looming over King George, leering malevolently, boldly denying the atrocities perpetrated by his kind.

Abe raises the pistol and blows the top of the Nazi's head off. He drops like a wet towel, gone.

The King is beside Abraham all of a sudden, calmly taking the gun from his hand.

"May I?" he says.

"You're free now," Abraham tells King George.

"Thank you," the King says. "I am forever in your debt. Let's sit down."

"You knew I would come for you, didn't you?" Abraham asks the King.

"I've been waiting, yes. I knew you would come. Sit down here."

Abraham looks out of the window and he sees mythical creatures gathering on West 44th Street, illuminated in lightning flashes of red and blue, hooting and cawing their celebration of his triumph. Beyond them, ancient giant trees push up through the sidewalk and burst into leaf. Elk and bison graze in herds on the Avenues, and a hundred million passenger pigeons cloud the moonlit Manhattan sky.

"You know everything," Abraham says. "You know what I've been through."

“I do. And I know that everything is going to be fine now. There’s nothing to worry about.”

The tumor in Abraham’s brain is telling him lies – and so is the British writer. It doesn’t matter. Abraham no longer has any use for the truth, and the British writer – who doesn’t even know how to get back to his own hotel – at least knows that.