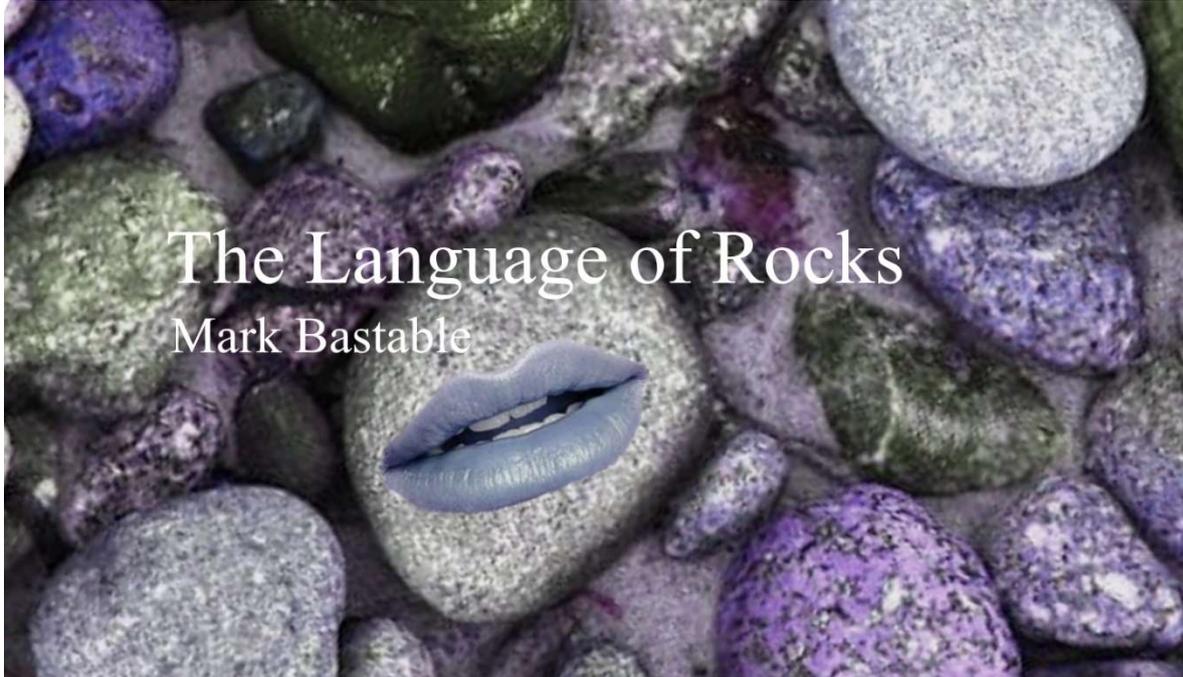


# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



Only Allah knew what became of his wife – she was never found. They found his daughter though, and he wished they hadn't.

His son Mahmud – 'Michael' as he now called himself – said they were lucky to have escaped. "This is America. We can start again here."

Well – when a man is thirty-five and strong, yes, he can start again. But at seventy, what would one start that might ever be achieved? What pleasure would it give? No – an old man savors only those delicacies to which he's accustomed.

"We can do well here. The warehouse is profitable. I've a contact who'll get us into wholesale at the shore."

Just the same as at home – Mahmud looking for a deal. He acted like nothing had happened at all. It was as if they had chosen to come to this unfamiliar place simply because the market was better.

Sadiq Khalid stood on the boardwalk and looked out at the ocean, disinterestedly eating the fries that his son had bought him. They were bland and lukewarm – barely edible – but they provided a distraction while Mahmud conducted business with the pale fat fellow in the souvenir shop. His voice – recognizable, of course, even in a foreign language – bubbled with enthusiasm and good cheer. Mahmud had his mother's gift for banter, but Sadiq had never

been much of a conversationalist himself. His talents lay in his arms and legs, his muscle and bone. Or, at least, they had once.

“Daddi-ji,” Mahmud said, coming to the old man’s side.

Sadiq turned. “Finished?”

“No – sorry. I’m going to be here for a little while yet. Do you want to wait in the car or...?”

Business to attend to. Of course.

“I think I’ll go down to the beach.”

“All right. I’ll meet you back here. Don’t get lost.”

Sadiq made his way along the boardwalk until he found steps leading to the shore. He walked unsteadily across the pebbles and stopped at the water’s edge. His robe flapped in the breeze as the ocean rolled in and sucked back, making white noise of the dragged stones.

Everything was white noise here. Music, language, television, culture, politics, weather – just a jumbled, atonal cacophony. In America nothing signified anything. Only inside himself could Sadiq find a recognizable resonance, and he listened to it constantly. The sustained, high-pitched hum of lonely grief.

The old man bent to pick up a flat rock, hefting it in his hand, remembering. There had been many flat rocks.

“Sadiq! Sadiq!”

The cry came from across the beach where the houses were. From across the beach and two oceans and fifty years.

He looked over his shoulder to see Basheera running from the dunes, waving an envelope in her hand, the palm trees splayed against the blue-glass sky behind her.

“It’s arrived! The letter! It’s here!” She almost stumbled as she reached him, tripping over her sari. “Open it, open it,” she said.

He tore the envelope apart and read the page inside.

“I’m in,” he said quietly. “I’m in the team.”

“Sadiq!”

“I’m in the team!”

He turned and span the flat rock out across the calm sapphire water with all the javelin-hurling strength of a man who, five months later, would win his country’s first Olympic gold medal; a man who would be a national hero; a man who would marry and have children and build a business, skipping true and swift across the surface of life, never considering the

possibility of the waves closing over him, pulling him under as he sank, traceless, into an alien element.

On the ragged, blustery edge of America, beneath the tarnished gray sky, Sadiq lifted his arm, feeling the weight of the flat rock in his hand. He drew it back, leaning to make a shallow angle across the restless ocean. But he hesitated, straightened up, dropped the stone where he'd found it and turned to trudge along the line of the scummy surf. He had nowhere in particular to go. He just walked, listening to the crunch and clatter of pebbles beneath his feet, the wind tugging at his beard.

“Hello? Hello?”

A young man – a boy, really – was sitting on the pebbles at the water's edge, cross-legged with a cloth bag in front of him. He was wearing a garish combination of clothes – pink t-shirt, purple pants, a yellow baseball cap – and also sunglasses, despite the overcast sky. His back was to Sadiq but he was twisting his head to peer over one shoulder.

“Excuse me. Hello?”

Sadiq stopped. He was wary of American teenagers. He'd heard stories. Though he'd never been assaulted himself, he had been jostled on the streets of the neighborhood and jeered at by the youths sitting on the stoops of houses between Mahmud's apartment and the mosque. One didn't need to understand the language to get the message expressed by curled lips and obscene gestures.

“Sorry no English,” Sadiq said. “No English.”

And he trudged on.

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“Oh, great,” Jerry thought. “No English.” He could hear the man behind him walking away. “Wait!”

The footsteps stopped. Jerry got to his feet and turned.

“Wait,” he said again. “Look. Blind.” He waved his hand in front of his face. “I'm blind. Do you understand?”

The man said something in an incomprehensible language – but the tone conveyed immediate comprehension.

“Okay,” Jerry said, smiling. “You got that, right? Pity the poor blind boy and all that shit?” He heard the foreign guy walk towards him and he smelled spices. Cumin. Cardamom. “Hi. I'm Jerry.” He put out his hand. Nothing. He pointed to himself and offered the hand again. “Me. Jerry.”

The hand that took his was strong – small, but strong – and dry.

“Sadiq,” came the reply. He sounded like an old guy, and kinda guarded.

“Listen, pal,” Jerry said. “I’m the one who should be nervous. I’m standing here on a beach I don’t know, totally disoriented, and I’m trusting a stranger not to take my billfold and hightail it – so relax.”

The man spoke again – he was asking a question.

Jerry nodded. “I need you to take me to the steps.” He pointed in the direction of the boardwalk, and moved one flat hand over the other, left then right, climbing, like a jive. “Steps – okay?”

“Okay.”

Jerry laughed. “Yeah – okay! Good English, Sadiq, my man!”

The stranger took his hand and placed it in the crook of his own arm. Jerry was impressed. Not one in a hundred people did that. Usually they tried to drag you by the bicep.

“Thank you,” Jerry said. “Do you know someone blind? I dunno why I’m jabbering like this. You have no clue what I’m saying.”

Then the arm was pulled away, and the foreigner spoke.

Jerry nodded. “Oh, yeah. My bag. Thanks, Sadiq.” He heard the stranger pick the bag up. “Here – I’ll take it. It’s heavy.”

Sadiq spoke again – another question.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jerry said. “A bag full of rocks. I know it looks weird.” He held out his hand for the bag, but Sadiq was looking inside, inspecting the contents. Jerry could hear him moving the pebbles around.

“Listen,” he said. “Are you too old and frail to sit down? I mean, are we both going to be stranded if we park our asses?” He shrugged. “What the hell.” And he sat down, holding his hand out for the bag. “I’ll show you.”

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The blind boy sat down again, eyes invisible behind the dark glasses, and he patted the ground, inviting Sadiq to sit. Sadiq did so, pulling his legs in, facing the young American who reached into the bag and searched. He pulled out a rock and offered it to Sadiq, who took it. The boy moved his hands over Sadiq’s own, pressing his fingers. It was a pitted, brown, unremarkable pebble, dull and cratered. Sadiq allowed his fingertips to be moved over its surface.

The boy reached up and put his hand over Sadiq’s eyes. Ah – he wanted him to close them. Sadiq shut his eyes.

Again, Jerry made him feel the stone with his fingertips – and then he lifted Sadiq’s hand and put it to his own ear, and pressed the fingers in gently.

Sadiq, eyes still shut, suddenly understood. The hollow in the stone, whorled and knobbly, felt exactly like the cavity of an ear. He fingered the stone again. The coincidence of shape and form was funny and strange – oddly satisfying. He laughed, and Jerry laughed too, knowing he'd got it.

Another rock. Sadiq closed his eyes. It was flat, but there was a jutting edge, narrow and angular. It didn't mean anything to him. He looked at Jerry.

“No understand,” he said in English. It shamed him – for the first time since he'd been in America – that he couldn't express himself more eloquently than that.

Jerry nodded. He raised his hand – index finger extended, flicking down and then, the hand turned over, flicking up. A light switch. Sadiq closed his eyes and felt the rock again. It was a light switch.

“Okay,” he said, smiling.

More rocks followed, each explained by Jerry's mimes: the profile of a face in miniature; a mouse, ossified; a brinjal; a walnut; and, when Jerry had dipped the split pebble into the salt water of the ocean, the smooth groove of a yoni.

Sadiq laughed and Jerry laughed with him. They sat and felt the rocks as darkness descended over the shoreline and the neon came alive along the boardwalk – about which Sadiq didn't care, and Jerry didn't know.

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“Where have you been? I was worried sick.” Mahmud was standing by the car, smoking a cigarette. He dropped it on the ground and walked forward to embrace his father. “Don't ever do that to me again. Promise.”

There was the catch of tears in his voice.

“I'm sorry. You're right.”

“I thought I'd lost you.”

Poor Mahmud. He felt the loss of his mother and sister – of course he did – as keenly as Sadiq. The boy's jagged cheerfulness, his relentless activity, his frantic optimism – they were his way of reassuring himself. Blinded by grief, Mahmud sought out stones that seemed to offer familiar shapes, shapes he could handle - and he clung to what he found.

In the car, Sadiq said, “I should learn English. I need to be able to talk to these people.”

Mahmud smiled. “Yes – you should. I can help you.”

Sadiq put his hand into his pocket and ran his fingers around the contours of the stone that was an ear. He planned to come to the shore again, and close his eyes, and search for a stone that was a mouth.

A man needed both.

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In the lobby of the hotel, Jerry heard his name.

“Where you been, man? Out looking for rocks again?”

“Yeah. Got some good ones.”

“You missed a great show at the Pink Kitty. The babes were pushing their asses right in our faces.”

“We can go again tomorrow, before the bus. That’d be cool.”

“Collecting rocks. Man, you are so out of your mind.”

Jerry hefted the bag onto his shoulder. “Elevator’s to the right, yeah?”

In his room he felt his way to the desk. He put his hands on the keyboard of the laptop and found the ridged J.

“Word,” he said and the laptop pinged back to let him know he’d opened a document.

The guy today – fascinating. In that coupla hours sitting on the shore Jerry had gotten such a spark from him. Something was on fire in that old guy, and the heat of it ignited Jerry’s imagination. He loved when that happened.

Jerry sat there for a few moments, thinking. Then he began to type.

*Only Allah knew what became of his wife – she was never found. They found his daughter though...*

Jerry didn’t collect rocks. He collected people.