

Mike's Fiction©



WADING IN BROOKLYN

Fair balls are hard to come by on Nostrand Avenue. This one is foul, struck by the stick a millisecond too late, and it careens between a parked Chevy Malibu and a SAAB 9-3, zeroing in on two old men seated at a round steel table in front of Olive's. After bouncing off the restaurant's stonework, it strikes the bottom of the tabletop, producing a sound like a Tibetan gong. Its energy spent, the ball lands on the lap of Jacob Weiss.

His long, thin face never flinches, and without lifting his eyes from the chessboard, he flings the rubber ball backhand to the street. His friend, Marvin, waves an acknowledgement to the thank-you of the tow-headed outfielder.

"Now pay attention, because this is a strategic move," Jacob says, sliding a bishop onto Marvin's side of the board.

The declaration unnerves Marvin and his eyes dart around the board in search of threats to his pieces. He sees plenty, but doesn't know what to do, so he pushes a pawn forward.

Jacob, watching, chin in his hand, just shakes his head.

Weary of his ineptitude, Marvin's attention drifts across the street. He sees two women standing in the doorway of the Laundromat next to Nostrand's Groceries speaking loud Spanish, punctuating their words with sweeping hand gestures, like WW II aces comparing dogfights. The sharp crack of a stick diverts his eyes to a fly ball that strikes a banner spanning the street announcing a July 4th picnic, then lands by the pine racks of produce in front of Nostrand's. The peaches look so ripe to Marvin that he can almost smell

them, even through the exhaust fumes. He closes his eyes and tries to imagine the raspy sound of corn being shucked.

“If you’re through napping, it’s your move.”

Marvin’s eyes pop open.

“Concentration is the key to chess, you know,” Jacob says. “You need to put all distractions aside and focus your whole being on the board.”

Marvin nods. He sees that Jacob has moved a knight. “I wish I had your power of concentration. For me, it’s too much like work.”

“But that’s what dedication is—work. You gotta work at something to be good at it. Take women, for example. Do you think they’re just naturally attracted to me?”

Marvin eyes Jacob’s pressed blue shirt and his full head of white hair. Even at eighty-two, he fits the part of the lifelong bachelor. But he wonders how many Viagra it takes to raise his flag. As for himself, even with a ten-year age advantage, there are better odds of raising the Titanic. “Is it because you’ve got those—what do you call them—phenomenoms?”

“Pheromones. But that’s not it. It’s because I work at it, Marvin. Didn’t you figure that out when you were married?”

“Me?” Marvin shakes his head. “I never married.”

Jacob leans back in his chair. “Didn’t I ask you once, and you gave me a name? Kathy, I think. What about Kathy?”

“Jeez, that was thirty-five years ago. We *almost* married. Maybe that’s what I said.”

“What the hell happened?”

“We broke up.” Marvin really doesn’t want to talk about Kathy.

Grinning, Jacob slaps his knee. “She dumped you, didn’t she?”

“No, I broke it off. Her mother was an invalid. Dementia, or something. I thought Kathy was a saint, the way she took care of her.”

Jacob’s eyebrows rise. “Well, who wants to marry a saint?”

“That wasn’t it.” Marvin frets over whether he should tell him about the day on the way back from Yankee Stadium, the day Kathy was so horny she wanted to stop at his

apartment—never mind about her poor mother who would go hungry with no dinner. And that wasn't the first time Kathy failed to toe the line, either. He decides Jacob won't understand. "It's just that... Well, she turned out *not* to be the woman I thought she was." With that, Marvin leans forward and moves the first pawn he sees.

Jacob studies the part in Marvin's gray hair before he picks up a knight and takes Marvin's pawn. "Where was I? Oh, yeah—you have to work at the right way to strike up a conversation with a lady. Right off, you need to compliment her, so she knows she caught your attention."

Marvin straightens up and blinks. "I can never think fast enough."

"Nonsense. It just takes practice," he says, and squints over Marvin's shoulder. "In fact, here comes Helen now. You can show me your stuff."

Helen is no spring chicken. Where she gets her energy is a local mystery, because she's forever walking her Schnauzer. The pair pauses at Hop Sing's restaurant next door, where the dog snuffles at a sprout of weeds by a no-parking sign.

Marvin tries to compose himself. He's nervous, because he has a crush of sorts on Helen Watson. She walks with a willowy grace, and besides, he admires people who take good care of their pets.

When the Schnauzer has its olfactory fill, it leads Helen to their table, where Jacob unwinds all of his six-feet and proffers a lithe little bow. "Afternoon, Helen. Fine day for a walk."

"Why, so it is, Jake," she says, and pats her bluish coif. "Maybe a little humid, though." She turns to Marvin, who feels the heat of Jacob's glare, and stands too, but slowly, giving his not-so-limber five-foot-nine frame plenty of warning. He grins at Helen and gets most of the way through tipping his hat before it dawns on him that he's hatless. Quickly retrieving his errant hand, he produces a gesture not unlike Zorro carving a big Z with an invisible sword. As his eyes drop in embarrassment, he sees Helen's sneakers, and he is suddenly inspired. "You have good feet," he says.

Helen looks down at her sneakers. "Why, yes. I suppose I do."

Marvin fears she might have misunderstood him. "They're not big or anything. They just look like they, uh, adhere well."

Fortunately, Jacob is there to steady Helen, who totters on her heels, testing to see if her feet are stuck. Then he saves the day for Marvin. "We don't want to keep you, my dear," he says, and deftly steers Helen and her dog down the street. "Of course, we'll see you at the picnic, won't we?"

Marvin doesn't hear her response, but he recognizes the look on Jacob's face as he walks back and sits down; it has *lecture* written all over it. But Jacob surprises him.

"My fault, Marvin. Should have let you observe first."

Marvin is stunned by Jacob's largesse—not rubbing his nose in the mess he made with Helen—and turns almost giddy. They have known each other for less than a year, and there was really no reason for Jacob to befriend Marvin in the first place. The man belongs in a higher social class, one populated by entrepreneurs, property owners, leaders, and providers of opportunity. Marvin knows that Jacob used to operate six newsstands in Brooklyn, including one in this neighborhood. He admires entrepreneurs. His own abilities were more suited to forging brake shoes for thirty years.

He decides it will make Jacob happy if he talks to Helen again, when the time is right. Maybe tomorrow. "It's my move," he says.

Jacob nods. "Right. Best to stick with inanimate objects for awhile."

The remark sails by Marvin, who has re-focused on the game, discovering that Jacob's bishop and knight form a pincer pointing precisely at his king. He starts to search for a way out when a shout distracts him.

"Hey, Joey! Wait up."

Across the Street, they both see a boy chase a squat, overweight man bouncing down the sidewalk toward Nostrand's Groceries. The boy's name is Ronnie something-or-other.

"Joey Beans," says Jacob. "He's fatter every time I see him."

Joey is a kind of local celebrity, an ex-boxer of dubious skill, gone to seed. The story is that Joey knocked Sugar Ray Leonard down in a sparring session. If true, Marvin believes it had to be a sucker punch. Some say the scar tissue over Joey's left eye and his flat nose are the result of Sugar Ray's revenge. Everyone knows Joey Beans is a Made Man now.

They watch the two talk. From the way the kid nods at everything Joey says, it's obvious he idolizes him.

Jacob says, "If Ronnie hangs around that guy long enough, he's bound to get hurt."
"Because Joey's a crook?"

"Naw—not that. Because with heroes, you never get to where you can forgive their faults. You never get close enough. It's kind of like wading in a pool and avoiding the deep end." He turns his chair to get a better look at the two, then claps his hands. "Bang—just like that, you're devastated the first time he disappoints you."

Wow, Marvin thinks. “So, what happens?”

“You ditch the person. You can’t make allowances for an idol.”

Marvin leans back and sighs. He’s not entirely sure what Jacob means, but it sounds pretty profound. If only *he* could be someone’s hero. You wouldn’t catch him disappointing anybody. He’d toe the line.

“I’d watch that king if I were you,”

Marvin blinks. “What?”

“Your king—you’ll lose him if you don’t do something.”

That’s just like Jacob, to care enough to warn him. Marvin doesn’t want his friend to see him mist up, so he shields his eyes with his hand and pretends to study the board.

Maybe he should share more with Jacob, tell him about his dad, the Colonel, how he ran the family like a small squad—his mother the Sergeant and Marvin the Private. If he hadn’t thrown it out, he could show him the Purple Heart the Colonel earned as a doughboy at Ypres, where a mine blew off a chunk of his left calf.

Oh man, were there rules—lots of rules—like no talking at dinner. *Toe the line*, the old man always said. And God help Marvin if he didn’t, or showed any weakness, like the time he whined about a school bully named Tommy Brackus. The Colonel made him pick a fight, show Terrible Tommy who was boss. What did that get him? The Bejesus kicked out of him, that’s what.

The old man was nothing but a hypocrite. After the Sergeant died, all he did was drink. At his wake, Marvin didn’t even feel like crying.

“Catch,” they hear Joey Beans shout, and turn in time to see him toss a coin high in the air. As Ronnie circles under it with his glove, Joey laughs and walks into Nostrand’s.

“End of the month—time to collect protection money,” Jacob says.

“When you ran the newsstands, did you pay?”

“You had to, or they’d burn you out.”

Marvin looks hard at Jacob, but his friend doesn’t seem to notice. Ok, so maybe there was no way to fight them, he thinks. Had there been, he’s sure Jacob would have—
tooth and nail. He wonders if Jacob was in the army in the Second War. Marvin would bet he won the Silver Star.

“Are you going to pick up that king or do you think you can move it with—what’cha call it—telekinesis?”

His king! Marvin had hoped to work out a clever move, one that would impress Jacob by changing the game’s momentum. But he can see now that the only thing to do is get out of harm’s way. He moves his king a space to the left.

“Well now,” says Jacob. “Seems you got your pieces all knotted up back there. Might look like an impenetrable wall, but it won’t protect you—no way to change positions.” He reaches for his queen.

That’s when they hear the clamor across the street and turn to see oranges, apples, and grapefruit wobbling down the sidewalk like drunks tossed out of a dark bar into sunlight. Just ahead of the chaos walks Joey Beans, taking big strides, with his head bent so far forward, it’s a miracle he doesn’t topple over.

“Know what I think?” Jacob says. “I think that Korean fella who bought out old-man Muschetto refused to pay.”

Then they see Ronnie break away from the stickball game. Marvin can’t imagine approaching anyone with such a violent scowl on his face, but the boy charges right up to Joey. The big man doesn’t even slow, and bats the boy with a heavy right arm, launching Ronnie into the air before he lands like a bag of Sakrete at the feet of the two Hispanic women in the Laundromat doorway.

Marvin stands, eyes locked on the boy. He wants Ronnie to get up, so Jacob can call him over.

“What did I tell you, Marvin? The kid just learned an important lesson. If you ask me, he’s lucky to get it this early in life.”

As Ronnie sits up, the women take turns tousling his hair.

Marvin taps his foot. Finally, he turns to Jacob. “What if he doesn’t understand it’s just a lesson? What if he’s hurt bad?”

“Oh, he’s okay. Just landed hard. The *mamacitas* are taking good care of him.”

Marvin is frustrated that Jacob doesn’t understand. Someone has to talk to the boy. “Jacob, call him over here. Tell him what happened—tell him about heroes.”

Jacob looks at Marvin as if he’s an alien just arrived from a galaxy far, far away. “Hell no. I’m not getting mixed up with anything having to do with Joey Beans. No sir.”

Marvin peers across the street, then jerks his head back at Jacob. “You’ve got to. He’s just a kid. He’ll grow up—not knowing—keep repeating the same mistake.” When he gets no response, he pleads, “You gotta do it. Please, Jacob?”

“You wanna tell him so bad, Mr. Bleeding Heart? Be my guest.” With that, the old man waves a hand and glues his eyes to the chessboard.

Marvin’s head swivels back and forth between Jacob and Ronnie, all the time his face growing hotter. How can Jacob turn his back like this? Finally, he decides to talk to the boy himself. But after a single step, he knows he’ll just mess it up. Better to wait, maybe talk to Ronnie tomorrow.

Eventually, the boy stands and brushes himself off, then walks, head lowered, toward a row of gray-stone flats. When he glances back, Marvin waves, but the boy disappears behind a double-parked truck.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets so hard that his trousers almost slide down, Marvin stomps back to the table. He yanks his right hand out of his pocket, and topples his king. It falls off the board and onto his chair.

Jacob looks up, surprised. “Hey—you still got plenty of moves.”

Jacob looks like the Cheshire Cat to Marvin, all puffed up and full of himself. He’s only missing the shit-eating grin. “No,” he says, walking away. “Time to find a new game.”

THE END