

## *Mike's Fiction*



### **Welcome to the Global Community**

Marble patio tiles. White table cloths. Spode china. Not the kind of outdoor café where a character like this walks up and takes a table—just two north of yours. Early twenties, maybe, Middle East descent, in need of a shave, and given the grimy green military pants and shabby flannel shirt, no doubt a bath. There is also a canvas gym bag with a soccer ball patch hanging at half-mast. Quite the look. One that would even attract attention at Burger King.

These are the kinds of thoughts Herb and Jasmine Wharton consider with half of their brains while the other halves are busy harping at each other about the Patriot Act and the trampling of civil liberties in America. In truth, the Whartons are simply loathe to face LaGuardia security tonight, knowing it will be a de-humanizing end to their Manhattan holiday.

Though Jasmine is past the age when flirting is acceptable, her green eyes meet the dusky boy-man's and she flashes a toothy smile. The hard-edged stare returned is as startling as ice water on sunburned skin. While her job as a fund-raiser for Cleveland's John Carroll University has caused her to grow tolerant of activists—even sullen young activists—this one frightens her, because he looks and acts too much like something else.

Herb, a corpulent civil rights attorney, will still stubbornly defend Clinton's legacy as president if fed a few martinis, but secretly he is appalled by the man's lack of personal discipline. Those who know Herb have learned not to speak disparagingly of the Palestinian cause.

As the dark young man nudges his gym bag under the table, Herb turns to him, and says, "Go to college around here? Columbia?"

Hooded dark eyes blink like a crocodile's, then focus on Herb. "What I do, I do for Allah."

Herb nods, pretending he's heard the same reply dozens of times. But his guts are roiling as his synapses struggle to find a reason why a fundamentalist young Muslim, dressed too warm for a sunny August afternoon and dragging around a ratty gym bag, decides to patronize a swank outdoor cafe on Fifth Avenue. He refuses to consider the obvious—terrorism—because that would be pandering to a stereotype, and Herb abhors stereo-typers. He leans closer to Jasmine, and says softly, "At the office the other day we were talking about the way young people dress, how a guy in torn jeans could be a six-figure engineer for Microsoft." He shrugs his shoulders. "You can never tell."

Mahmoud's eyes are busy examining his hands, which are folded on the table. He is trying hard not to smirk, all too aware of the effect he has on rich Americans. As his favorite waiter approaches—the Italian—he prepares to start his little game. He will order tea, and nothing else, then tip one dime. Though the tea costs too much, the insult is his small way of protesting the discrimination and repressive capitalistic system in this country. Perhaps, he thinks, next time he should pick an American waiter.

As the two converse, Herb and Jasmine strain to hear, but cannot decipher the exchange. But judging from the waiter's posture—hands on hips—and the way he tosses his head back and stomps off, they surmise it's unpleasant. When she notices perspiration beading on the Muslim's forehead, Jasmine's imagination is prompted to queue up stark snapshots of the sinister young man stuffing clay bricks into a gym bag, then inserting a fuse. At first, she can't remember what the explosive is called, but then comes up with it—C-4. She imagines him molding more to his body and taping it underneath his shirt, which looks just like that dreadful black and white head-wrap Yasser Arafat wore.

"Herb," Jasmine whispers. "I think we should leave."

Opening his mouth to protest, Herb thinks better of it, deciding that extra caution might be prudent. As hungry gray clouds consume the sun, he swivels around to find their waiter, but he gasps at what he sees instead. A second dark complexioned man is heading toward a table next to the first Muslim. This one is dressed wrong too, in jeans and a tattered tan field jacket over a black sweatshirt. Worse, he starts to un-strap an overstuffed backpack festooned with the visage of Big Bird sporting a big yellow grin.

"Just throw some cash down, for Christ's sake," Jasmine snaps.

Herb gropes for his billfold as the Italian waiter strides by again. Barely slowing, he clatters a cup and saucer of what might be tea on the first man's table.

The two Muslims nod, then pay no further attention to each other. Mahmoud sips tea and the other stares at Herb, who between thumb and forefinger, pinches a twenty dollar bill, writhing like a distress flag in the stiffening breeze.

“Herb—*please*,” rasps his wife.

But Herb is lost amid a sea of confused speculation. He thinks that maybe there’s a Mosque nearby, and their youth come here for tea. *Right—at eight bucks a clip!* Or a library, and they’re both simply carrying books. His analysis is cut short as he’s distracted by an elderly couple who abruptly stand and scurry off, abandoning their still steaming coffees.

Perhaps the Whartons, if they knew, might take comfort from the occupation of the single gentleman seated behind them sipping a triple latte. While the sagging sweatpants, drooping eyelids, and salt and pepper stubble on his face fail to inspire confidence, he is, nevertheless, an off-duty metro vice cop.

Though Officer Hendry is pre-occupied with how to catch up on child support, and is nursing the mother of all hangovers, the foregoing developments have not escaped his attention. He is irritated at leaving his cell phone in the kitchen, but thanks God—the Christian God—that his backup weapon, a .45 caliber Glock 21, is nestled in a holster at the small of his back.

“Ow,” Herb cries, as the sharp toe of a Bruno Magli burrows into his calf.

“Don’t you watch CNN?” Jasmine hisses. “Don’t you know they’re using multiple suicide bombers now?”

“They? Who are *they*?”

Jasmine rolls her eyes and stands up. But Herb yanks on her sleeve like an it’s an emergency brake, and she collapses back into her chair. “We can’t leave,” he whispers. “What about these other people?”

She glares at Herb, as if considering whether he is an impediment worthy of her time. Then her hand plunges into her purse and emerges with a silver cell phone, which she drops unceremoniously on the table.

Herb picks up the phone, but is startled by a sudden rumbling in the sky, followed by a gruff voice from behind.

“Just dial 911. Then hand the phone to me.”

Turning, Herb sees a man sitting at a table palming a badge in a leather billfold. He bobs his head excitedly and punches in 9-1-1, then hands Officer Hendry the phone,

unaware that he has failed to depress *Send*. As Hendry waits futile seconds for the connection, a commotion breaks out at the second suspect's table.

"You cannot bring your junk in here like this," shouts the Italian waiter, pointing at the backpack on the table.

Suddenly, Mahmoud jumps to his feet, waggles a finger at the waiter and yells, "Infidel!" Then he squats and starts to pull his gym bag from under his table.

A chair screeches, scraped backward by Jasmine as she lurches to her feet, and screams, "A bomb! That man has a bomb!"

Hendry springs from his seat, draws his Glock and assumes a shooter's stance. His voice cuts through the cacophony like a machete. "NYPD. Freeze—now!"

But young Mahmoud is still fuming over the waiter's impudence, fed up with the constant contempt shown his people, and pays no attention to Jasmine or Officer Hendry. Intent on leaving, he continues to pull at the bag.

The twin puffs of air that buffet Herb's cheek make him blink, but are not unpleasant. A millisecond later, deafening sound waves from two sharp explosions cascade off the marble tiles, and Herb ducks down, but not before he sees Mahmoud hurled off his haunches onto his back. He sucks in his breath and mewls.

As real claps of thunder upstage the Glock, Jasmine slaps a hand over her gaping mouth, aghast at the dark viscous fluid pooling around Mahmoud's black hair.

"What the fuck? What the fuck?" the waiter blurts, crouching, his hands flattened over his ears.

For Hendry's part, he is surprised—no—pleased at how fast he reacted. He doesn't even remember drawing his weapon. It must be the training, he thinks, procedures honed to instinct. A month earlier, he attended a seminar taught by the Jerusalem police, a small gesture by the Israeli's in return for billions in U.S. aid. He was so impressed by their tactical experience that he went to the gun range and practiced what they taught. The Israeli tactic of dealing with suicide bombers is elegant in its simplicity: no negotiations, no mincing of words whatsoever. Just headshots—fast, clean, for keeps—the only chance to prevent detonation of the bomb and thwart the terrorist's dream of ascending to Allah.

The Glock is locked like a laser on the terrorist's forehead, and Hendry is so pumped that at first it doesn't register when the man's hand reaches for the backpack and unzips it.

"Whoa," he says. "Don't even think about it, Ayatollah. Step away from the table."

But the man does not back away, but stands there, legs trembling, head swiveling between Mahmoud's body and his backpack. In it is his Koran. And he wants it, wants it badly. He needs to hold it. He knows it is the only thing that will make the shaking stop.

The Italian waiter jumps in front of Hendry, pointing at Mahmoud's body. "Columbia—he goes to school there. Student. Just a student." Then he gestures at the second man, but keeps his eyes on Hendry. "He—He is student too, I think. But somewhere else."

"Right," Hendry says, as he steps to his right. *Fat chance*. But the seed of uncertainty is planted and sprouts in his mind like an ugly weed, slowing the surge of adrenaline that fuels his confidence.

Waving his arms, the waiter moves in front of him again. "It's ok. The backpack is ok. I yell sometimes when he scratches the table. But it's ok—ok."

With his left hand, Hendry grabs a lapel and yanks the waiter out of the way. But the whole time, fresh thoughts are thrashing through the thickening fog in his mind. Did I fuck up here? IAD investigations always follow shootings. He schmoozed them once over winging a wino who felt up a prostitute on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. But this time, there'll be no room for schmoozing—this time it's headlines, the nightly news, sound bites from the mayor, the whole goddamn she-bang.

Hendry rolls his shoulders, reminds himself that America is at war, for Christ's sake. These people can't just march over here and blow up whatever they want. Not on his watch, they can't. What he's doing is righteous.

As Hendry's mind twists and turns, the young Muslim sees in his eyes what he saw in Beirut as a child, what his father saw, and his father's father—the infidels' hatred, hatred and loathing fueled by two thousand years of persecution. The force of it makes him gasp and step backward.

"That's a good Ay-rab. Back away—farther," says Hendry. Then, in a louder voice, "Someone call 911. Tell them a suspect is down and an officer needs back up. DO IT NOW."

Nobody moves, except for Herb, who spins around to retrieve the cell phone. But Hendry has pocketed it.

As the sky ruptures, buckets of rain jolt Jasmine out of her shock. She grabs Herb by the elbow and drags him toward the sidewalk. Ignoring the soaking rain, they flee to a corner to find a cab, wanting more than anything to reach the safety of La Guardia security.

The young Muslim's legs are vibrating like bamboo in a gale. His black hair is matted; rain seeps into his eyes. He must touch the source of his strength. And he must

also show the policeman who he is. They are well trained, he knows, and certainly this one has realized his mistake by now. “I just need to—” he says, and jerks in the direction of his backpack.

The single copper-jacketed slug mushrooms to more than twice its size in his skull, rupturing it like an overripe mango. He drops to the tiled floor, knocking over the table and his backpack.

Still crouched, arms extended, clutching the Glock in a death-grip, Officer Hendry knows how it feels to be a hero for the first time in his life. His hangover, now vanquished along with the last vestige of self-doubt, he’s riding so high that he almost blows on the barrel of his pistol before re-seating it in its holster.

There is nobody on the café’s patio, not even that crazy waiter, and that disappoints him. Walking toward the two bodies to check for pulses, he notices that the contents of the second terrorist’s backpack have spilled. Careful not to touch evidence, he squats down and sees what looks like a bible and a sheet of paper, maybe a form of some kind, because it’s filled out. Hendry twists his head to get a better look and moans when he sees the blue and gold NYPD logo on the police academy application.

THE END