

THE **BROOKLYN** STORIES



A Rousing Collection From New York's Most Colorful Borough

ANDREW BERNSTEIN

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To Aline Bernstein,
Who loves the stories,
And to Penelope Joy,
The love of my life.

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The Clock Strikes

News of Julian LePort's terminal illness thrilled me with pleasure. The lecherous bastard was barely sixty—but the cancer would finish him before the end of the summer. Justice, I thought grimly, was often not pretty. I briefly considered a mini-celebration to commemorate the event, but it was more than two years since our irrevocable split and much of the simmering rage had dissipated.

It was the beginning of the summer term at Brooklyn University, and the May breeze wafted rain-laden, scented air across the tree-lined quad. The cool temperature veiled the humidity and temporarily obscured from view the steamy months inevitably to follow.

I sat in my office in the Philosophy Department in Covington Hall when Barbara Stenmark entered without knocking to tell me the “heartbreaking” news regarding her celebrated colleague in the English program.

“Julian is dying.” She spoke without preamble, her dark brown eyes puffy around the edges.

My head jerked up from my lecture notes. “Good,” I said firmly, holding no desire to dissemble.

“Jack,” she said softly, more sympathy than reproof in her tone. “It was a long time ago.”

“Not so long that I either forget or forgive.”

She stared into my implacable gaze, shook her head, and quietly withdrew.

I had only a few peaceful minutes alone with my notes, then came a soft tapping at my door.

“Jack!” a familiar male voice called.

“Come in,” I said, unable to resist a smile, even though I knew the plea that would follow.

Ted Werner had been Dean of Humanities for as long as I’d been at Brooklyn. He was a genial guy with flaxen hair and a wind-blown look even when the air was still. He dressed nattily in pin-striped blue suits and colorful ties and the only thing warmer than the city’s summer weather was his smile. His own background was in literature and he had long striven, within school guidelines, to free up my time and Julian’s for the work we had all deemed so important.

He’d been in my office many times over the years but, always harried, had never sat down. This time, he made an exception. Though lean and fit from daily workouts, he sat slowly, heavily down.

“You heard?” he asked, coming directly to the point.

I nodded.

His eyes looked as they would if the news concerned a close family member, which, in a way, for him, it did. There was a long silence. He finally broke it. “I just spoke to my sister.”

“Yeah? What does she think?” Deborah Werner, whom I had met several times, was an accomplished oncologist who consulted at Memorial Thorpe Kennedy Cancer Center, a top New York hospital for cancer treatment.

“Those symptoms? Probably not long.”

There seemed nothing else to say. I could not match his sense of loss and was too brutally honest to try.

“Any chance of re-considering?” he asked, trying to manufacture a grain of hope in his voice.

I took a moment before answering. “Professor Werner,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “Not even for you. No.”

He nodded his understanding. “I know it was shattering,” he said for possibly the hundredth time in the past two years.

“And final,” I stressed, utterly sick of the whole affair and ready to fill my life with work. I turned quickly from him and shoved my nose back into my notes. I barely heard the sound of the door closing softly behind him.

It was less than a week later. I sat at the computer in my walk-in apartment on East 16th Street near Avenue W. The stacks of books overflowing my wraparound bookshelves represented my complete library and explained the bareness of my office at work. Papers covered with scribbled notes littered my desk and necessary reference texts were piled on the floor at my feet, near to hand. The superabundance of writer's materials over brimmed my tiny apartment, making it—despite a mere few sticks of battered furniture and a toy-sized TV rarely switched on—a congested fire hazard through which I navigated happily, a man in his element.

My book on “Aristotelian Thought and Human Civilization” took form. But it was a massive undertaking, tracking the rise, the loss, and the re-discovery of Aristotle's writings—and their profoundly positive impact on the development of advanced culture. I had been poring over the screen for hours, when a sharp tapping—although somehow deferential—was heard at my unlocked door, as if the visitor had stood there indecisively but then willed himself to overcome all trepidation and proceed to fulfill his purpose.

“Come in!” I snapped.

I was focused on the role of Aristotle's writings in promoting the medieval renaissance—but I knew who it was before I heard the voice or saw the face. My subconscious immediately registered the confident rat-a-tat clicking of high heels on the hallway tiles and the barely perceptible fragrance of fresh cut flowers, wafting subtly from an unforgettable perfume. I willed my stare to focus exclusively on the computer screen for several moments as I fought to control my breathing. Then I looked up into the face of Victoria Scaffidi.

It had changed little since I'd last seen her over two years ago. She had the same reddish-brown hair curving gracefully to her shoulders; the same green eyes gazing forthrightly forward—exhibiting now the pacific serenity of the sea at calm, with only a hint of the tempest that could mount suddenly under the wrong atmospheric conditions. My unslackening avoidance of her at school had, after all this time, become habitual. But now, I no longer feared looking at everything I had lost, every facet that had been seized from me on a day so maleficent it had left me crumpled on the underside of despair: the exposed skin of her neck, cheeks, and wrists—the fair complexion so bursting with animal vitality that her white skin seemed

almost red from its network of glowing capillaries; the hips, thighs, and breasts of her full figure—spreading now in her mid-forties—but stretching the clinging fabric of her sky blue cotton dress in a manner calculated to torment one who could never again have her but who could never be reconciled to his loss.

“Hello, Jack,” she said, the musical quality of her voice that had dazzled students for fifteen years once again tinkling in the narrow confines of my apartment. Her gaze was level and I looked up from my chair and met it squarely.

“We had dinner,” she said gently, as if in answer to a question that had never been asked. “At a French restaurant near his apartment on Third Avenue. I asked him, actually—part of my research on Dostoyevsky. I knew right away. I fought it for months, but I knew right away. I tried to tell you...but you didn’t...want to hear it.” She drew herself up to her full height in an unconscious way she had of facing painful truths. “I didn’t betray your trust for something casual.”

The diamond on the ring finger of her left hand was not the one I had placed there—and the gold band that bracketed it attested to her claim. They’d been married quietly barely a month after our breakup and she had moved into his famous duplex on the Upper East Side. He had been a superstar for a full three decades, since he had burst on the scene just two years out of graduate school with a brilliant critical examination contrasting the writing styles of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Since then, he had demonstrated his virtuosity by writing incisively on Milton, Goethe, and Hugo, showcasing his fluency in four languages—and in the universal language of art. He lectured all over the world, was a visiting professor at Columbia, taught as many classes at Princeton as he did at Brooklyn, and transformed his residence into the most sophisticated literary salon that New York’s intelligentsia had witnessed in many decades.

But he had never married, preferring, in his flamboyant style, to conduct front page affairs with sundry socialites, Broadway actresses, and network news analysts. The marriage of the world-renowned intellectual to the beautiful Brooklyn University professor, although a small, private affair, had attracted significant press attention, including a cover story in *The City Magazine* entitled: New York’s most intelligent couple? On the morning of the wedding, I took a northbound local to the outlying station of Breakneck

Ridge and spent the day hiking alone the tangled green labyrinth of trails clustered in the remote hills along the river.

She stood before me now, making no pretense at being defended. Her hands were empty at her sides, her arms slack, with only a leather bag slung over her right shoulder. Her posture was straight, both her shoulders thrown back, and her open face looked ready to receive any blow, including the vilest insults a man could hurl at a woman, in order to complete her mission. She took a step forward, as if by approaching nearer she could reach out more effectively to me.

“He’s the most complete, self-sufficient, monolithically self-absorbed man I’ve ever known,” she said woodenly, as if anticipating my response but dutifully stating what had to be said. “He’s more like a work of art than a human being—no inner contradictions, flawlessly consistent, even in his failings.”

Now I knew what was coming. I sat like a statue, a hardened slab of marble beyond a capacity to feel, and awaited the inevitable plea. She hesitated, and I could read in the eyes I knew so well the reluctance to beg; the pride of stiff-backed spines and of driven, accomplished souls—both hers and her husband’s—that bristled against assuming the kneeling posture of a mendicant. But she set her jaw and almost palpably pushed away all crippling doubt.

“You know what he wants. You above all. You were the one he worked with, had so much in common with, depended on...” Her voice trailed off, slipping down the treacherous slope toward the black abyss of despair. “Jack.” Her voice was husky, desperate. “He has but months to live, not a second to waste.” When she received nothing from me but a face immobile as a stone, her voice finally broke. “He feels that he has wasted his life!”

I let the reverberations of her cry ring off the walls of my studio until it seemed like the echoes of despair could be heard all the way to the Upper East Side. After moments of silence, she wheeled and headed for the door. At the entrance to the hallway, she stopped and turned back. Her thick, tousled hair was as wild as after a bout of lovemaking and her eyes colored with incipient redness. But her voice was low, controlled.

“Loathe me for the rest of your life. But don’t take your hateful revenge on a dying man whose only crime was to love the same woman you did.”

I had turned back to the computer screen and was re-reading my last paragraph before the click was heard of the outside door pulled shut. I felt an inner satisfied calm, a closure regarding a painful and unfulfilled part of my life. But it was peculiar to observe the pens rattling on the desk from my hands resting quietly on the keyboard.

It was Friday before the Memorial Day weekend and the campus dozed lazily in the afternoon sun, as if conserving energy for the panting marathon to come. I had no class that day, but had spent the morning ensconced at the library and the early afternoon in my office collating research notes. I was just contemplating lunch when I heard a slow, heavy shuffling of feet in the hallway accompanied by a low murmur of voices. I pushed aside my papers and waited. There came a sharp peremptory knock at the door, which opened immediately without invitation.

Julian LePort looked like he would not last the summer. He'd been heavy for the three years we had worked together, with a paunchy red face and thinning white hair. But his brilliant eyes, so dark they could be mistaken for black, had flared over every direction of the compass with a personality as large as his intellect. He involuntarily monopolized every conversation, spouting trenchant observations interlaced with terms from four languages and an inexhaustible supply of dead-on spontaneous witticisms—not from a neurotic need to dominate, but from an irrepressible creative energy that no living power could quell.

But cancer was not living. And I, more than anyone, knew that the magnum opus of his career was incomplete. He shambled in painfully, leaning on the arm of a pale skinny young man, and for an instant a stab of pain slashed my viscera at the sight of greatness reduced to the verge of collapse. But I smiled at the presence of the young man—presumably a graduate student—who in pre-Victoria days would have undoubtedly been female.

He sat uninvited in my visitor's chair and waved his assistant out with a gesture imperiously dismissive but somehow indescribably gracious, like a cultured, clement monarch politely bored by the ceaseless veneration of commoners. He faced me with the look of a man incurably ill but, simultaneously, irrevocably unabashed. He stared at me, his pasty cheeks now gaunt, his brown suede sports jacket already two sizes too big, but his

dark eyes glaring as if some tameless beast had been galvanized by an injection of genius. He took his time. I held his gaze but felt myself once again, inexorably, drawn toward his massive orbit. I gripped the edge of my desk and held on.

“Jack, Jack,” he said, looking at me in his earnest way that made any conversationalist feel he stood at the center of the great man’s universe. “How did we lose everything we once had?” There was no denying the genuineness of his tone. I leaned across the desk toward him.

“Perhaps your theft of my fiancée had a dampening effect on our relationship. You think?”

“Of course,” he said, with only the slightest twinge of sarcasm in his voice. “Victoria is a wallet to be stolen from you by any thief. She makes no more choices than a purloined wrist watch.”

I knew better than to remonstrate with him. I held my fire, sensing an ultimate victory so sweet it might assuage two years of still undischarged gall.

His next words came with no trace of arrogance or a gloating sneer, only with the quiet certitude of conviction.

“Maybe you should just acknowledge that the better man won.” His look was that of a man staring at the simple severity of a scientific law.

The unqualified effrontery, never unexpected from him, but stated with such guileless innocence, was experienced like a blindside left to the jaw. It stunned me. Throw him out, some stern inner voice iterated. Before it’s too late, throw the supercilious bastard out. But I didn’t. I just sat and stared, attracted by the audacity of this prelude to a pitch for help—and by the rare sight of undiluted self-confidence that animated it.

“You think I’m going to help you?” I said, my voice sounding hoarse even to me.

His smile had once been described by a *Sunday New York Times* writer as “that rare occasion on which a sublime miscreant swung ajar the gate to his radiant soul.” It opened briefly as, even now, his devitalized smile flooded my cramped work space.

“Not me,” he said pleasantly, with the calm knowledge of one who clutched a fistful of high cards. “Yourself.”

I pushed back my chair from the desk and scowled.

He laughed. “Going to write on Aristotle all your life?” he mocked. “Like I wrote on Dostoyevsky and Goethe?”

His needle drilled close to home, as he knew it would.

“Aristotle was...” I began, but he cut me off.

“I know, I know. Just as Dostoyevsky was.”

He looked at me, marshalling himself—and for several agonizing moments we stared, as if the meaning of two men’s lives could hang suspended on a glance like so many cotton pajamas on a clothesline.

“How old are you now—forty-one?” he didn’t wait for an answer. “Jack Witkin,” he jeered. “Came out of the NYU Philosophy Department nine years ago—a budding megastar from a world class program with a blinding intellect and a style so brilliant that its like had not been witnessed in philosophy since the prime of William James a century before. Great things were expected, and he turned down Ivy League schools to stay in his native Brooklyn—right on the cusp of New York City’s intellectual culture. And he has delivered—articles and books analyzing several of philosophy’s perennial issues.”

He paused, his preface complete, his punch line looming at the back of his throat, ready to be spat forward at the hard but brittle wall of the face opposing him.

“But he nursed a secret dream, didn’t he? One he shared with few—because it seemed grandiose, exalted, unattainable. But he found a kindred soul—older, advanced, aspiring—and, together, they spent years planning, researching, outlining. But never actually producing. Never even starting the real work, always delaying its inception, feeling at some visceral level that procrastination was justified, because the older you get, the wiser—right? The more life experience you accumulate, the better prepared for the life’s work—do it at sixty-five, at seventy even, because we’re not ballplayers, we don’t burn out at forty, we get more qualified as we age—yes?”

He slammed his huge fist on my desk and made no effort to dam the spurt of liquid around his eyes.

“But life has other plans, Jack!” he roared. “Whatever unholy power rules this world of crawling pathogens—it has other ideas,” he whispered. “And it comes for you on its schedule, not yours, this dark wall of oblivion—not to be reasoned with or deterred or cheated—only a blind force devoid

of intent or conscious will that rolls inexorably forward and tramples every poor little doll's house we erect in its path."

I looked at the crumbling mass sitting before me and fought to maintain a hard edge. But it was slipping away.

"And the great novel never gets written," he concluded tonelessly, ladling each word carefully, as though spooned from a measuring cup nearing its dregs. "We dissipate our brief span explicating the creations of others—like servile handmaidens truckling before the queen—but never ourselves dare approach such rarefied heights." He looked at me as one who shared a love deeper than Victoria. "Art, Jack," he said reverently, his husky voice barely audible. "What else justifies our pustulant existences?" When I did not respond, he finished the thought himself. "Luther was wrong. Art and art alone justifies mankind."

It was impossible to forget the years we had worked together, creating independently, critiquing each other's work—ripping it with savage glee—but improving, publishing effectual short stories in artsy literary magazines, planning, encouraging, outlining plots for the grand-scale novels surely to come. And this dream we had shared—so integral to each it was impossible now to remember who had originally conceived it—to show the death of the Greek spirit we both revered, by telling the story of a brilliant Athenian philosopher at the time when Justinian I closed all the pagan schools of philosophy—a conflict not merely of men or even of civilizations but of visions, Greek versus Christian, pagan versus monotheist, rationalist versus irrationalist—and of the last men of reason clinging desperately to the fading light in the final moments before the plunge into the sunless abyss. "Like Lawrence and Lee, Jack," he had boomed exultantly in a time period seemingly eons ago. "An *Inherit the Wind* for our century...and... perhaps...for many centuries."

And, after our break, Julian seeking to complete the vast undertaking alone, but not self-sufficient in this case—needing greater knowledge of Greek and of philosophy, especially classical thought, with a specific emphasis on the naturalistic spirit of the Aristotelian school.

Needing me.

Needing the aid of a man whose heart he had ripped from between its ribs and callously flung aside as if some valueless scrap of drifting flotsam.

The victim for whom the depth of his passion measured the depth of the betrayer's guilt.

Even now I felt the pull. A secret dream, had he called it? Or one slowly becoming a guilty one? Were all men faithless to their heart, I wondered. Did they permit the diminishing of their grand plans, one droplet at a time, inexorably worn down by the trifling cavils of a daily grind, like sweeping peaks leveled by millennia of remorseless erosion? Was there ever a time I had wanted to be anything but a novelist? I reflected back on the life of the young man I had been, examining it, knowing the answer to the question, cringing at the realization but drawn irresistibly to it, like an acrophobic standing at elevation and unable to avert his vision from the precipice he dreads.

Taking a breath, I stared impersonally at the truth. That youth more than two decades ago had studied English in college, befitting a man whose primary love was literature. But he'd wanted to write serious books, not trendy mind candy instantly forgettable, and had migrated to philosophy in graduate school, investigating the timeless issues of men's lives, preparing his intellectual foundations. He would support himself as a professor—but fiction would be his career.

And then came a job—and maturation of student loans—and scholarly requirements, first for tenure and then for promotion—and the incessant never-ending agony, like root canal projected over the course of a lifetime, of grading plebian papers hurriedly scrawled by lumpen illiterates. He had known from the first that Victoria would be unique and irreplaceable, and had made ample room in his life for her. And that had left tidbits of time—stolen hours working with Julian, like a torrid affair conducted furtively, consigned perpetually to the shadows and to the rare conscious moments between midnight and bed. And then: cataclysm.

Could he read my thoughts in my eyes or on my face? He stared at me calmly, as if probing for the right moment.

“You tried, didn't you, after our split?” he said. “Tried to write a different novel on your own terms. But you gave it up—why? Because it didn't measure up to your standards, did it?” He waited, knowing no answer was forthcoming, but needing none. “Because this is the book your heart is set on—your mind, your subconscious, your soul. You think I don't know you? Think your former lover doesn't understand you? This is your first

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