

Blessed Stone

By Sue Yurick

Photo - Brickstone

Second Place (Tie) - Short Story

Walking familiar streets, I came upon the ghost of the old bookshop. All that was left was the outline of where it had abutted its neighbor, a much larger building that had not always been brick. There were traces of arched windows on the brick neighbor, but what tugged at my memory was the clarity of the peaked roof that had sheltered me, hidden me, once when I was young.

M. Bruckstein, bookseller, could have been the pattern for Dumbledore, though I could not have told him that; he was long dead before Rowling created that ultimate mentor. His beard was not so long, but he wore a hat halfway between a yarmulke and a Renaissance printer's cap, richly embroidered, on top of his balding head. He was the oldest person I knew. He told me his name meant "blessed stone", mysterious to me.

My mother would drop me off at Bruckstein Books while she did the daily shopping. On Friday afternoon, always before sundown, she would buy me one picture book as an informal payment for looking after me. Picture books, then bigger books with fewer pictures and smaller print as I grew.

M. Bruckstein gave me free rein in the shelves, with no worries about what might be "appropriate". I spent hours poring over human anatomy, world geography and the encyclopedia letter "D", where dogs and "dress" or costume pages must have been worn thin as I dreamed of having a pet or dressing like the Empress of China.

You may wonder how that refuge became a ghost. It really started on November 7, 1938, when a teenager killed a minor German diplomat in Paris. The kid happened to be a Jew, but the retribution fell on Jews in Germany and Austria, then part of Germany. Why not Paris? Most likely, Hitler wanted to impress and rile up his followers, who rampaged through the night of November 9-10, breaking glass storefronts. People died, nearly one hundred of them. "But wait," you say: M. Bruckstein wasn't in Germany; his shop couldn't have been a victim of Kristallnacht!" You would be correct.

M. Herschel Bruckstein was born in Poland. He emigrated to escape persecution, a sad state, given that Jews had lived in Poland since the Middle Ages. When I think of him, I picture him as old, but he can't have been more than fifty when we first met, his beard retaining some color. Still, the Dumbledore impression sticks in my mind, no doubt because the last time I saw him, the resemblance was unmistakable. It was just before his peaceful death, bowed over a book.

Why had I taken refuge, hiding in the loft of the shop? I was not like Anne Frank, hiding to preserve my life. I was the same age as the kid whose action inspired Kristallnacht. Seventeen year old girls are a special sort of tender, and I, having been nourished on books, having made them my best friends, was more experienced in the odd empathy of the novel reader than in the harsh reality of what we call romance.

I was no fan of bodice-busters, with one man who really loves the feisty heroine and another who just pretends. I had the red hair seen on covers, but not the heaving bosom. What I did have was a

mother who pushed me into dating because it was important to be popular. Pairing up gave girls more identity than the sensible practice of socializing in a pack of kids. She was American.

The only thing she had learned from moving was to shop daily and to take advantage of the kindness of a sweet old man. I was surprised that she didn't take me "home" when my dad left her for another woman. Had he only pretended when I was made? I will never know. I haven't seen him since my twenty-first birthday.

Two boys were interested in me. Raphael was a swoony poet wannabe; link a soccer star. Raphael was dark and wiry, Erik as blond as his name and brawny. Raphael was intrigued by my bookish hangout; Erik was governed by testosterone.

Raphael was the one I leaned toward, even though he was far from popular with the other kids at my school. He was intense, the rare teen boy capable of looking a girl in the eye for more than a few seconds. He wrote poetry full of passion, but never really pressed me for more than hugs and kisses.

Erik was his opposite: popular to the point of worship by most girls in the class and his teammates. He was not stupid, but he was not curious, either. I am sure I bored him to tears, if he could even shed them without ruining his reputation. Our first contact outside of class was tutoring: I tutored him in English twice a week. Soon, however, his chair got closer to mine, and he asked me to come to his soccer match.

Erik was poetry in motion. I know it's a cliché, but he ran so gracefully and scored goals so well, that feelings stirred a few feet lower than my brain. He wanted me to be "his girl", but I was not ready for that; the girls who had that distinction before me warned me he did not like to hear, "No!"

The walk home from the soccer field passed by the bookstore. Erik had no interest in stopping. His appeal was fading, as watching him play and cheering for him wasn't meaningful after a couple of matches. Yes, he was beautiful, but he seemed quite empty apart from soccer stardom.

It was a late spring evening when I decided this was the last match I'd attend. I wanted to spend more time with Raphael, talking about ideas. Erik spent most of the time reliving his plays and goals as we came close to the shop. I was too timid to tell him to take his annoying muscular arm off my shoulder, but I did not expect him to steer me into a dark alley a block before Bruckstein's. He backed me up against the wall, holding me there with brute strength as I started to panic. He reached up under my skirt and pawed at my panties, and I went into full panic mode. If I could get away, he would just chase me down with speedy soccer legs, so I immobilized him in the time-honored way of a knee to the groin. He screamed, "You bitch! When I get my hands on you!" but I was running with all my might to the safe haven of the bookstore.

"Hide me!" I begged M. Bruckstein, "a crazy guy is after me. It's Erik, the guy I was tutoring."

"Well, upstairs with you, then," said Bruckstein, an angry flush creeping up his face. Just as I cleared the top step into the attic, I heard pounding on the bookshop door, and Erik continuing to scream about "showing me that he could not be treated that way." I cowered in the attic, listening as Erik shouted, "Where is she?" and stomped between the shelves of books.

M. Bruckstein said, "Who? Suzanne? I haven't seen her for days."

“You are lying, Jew!” screamed Erik, revealing another reason to get him out of my life.

“You are mistaken, young man. Get out of my shop. It’s closing time.” Erik left, slamming the door and swearing vengeance. He took a loose chunk of concrete curb and threw it through the shop window. I watched as he stormed down the street, kicking anything in his path. M. Bruckstein was sobbing and keening for this reminder of his youth, when so many shop windows fell to violence and hate.

I took my exams and left town to begin my gap year before university, spending a month with my grandparents while monitoring the happenings back home. Erik had gone away to study, on a soccer scholarship. I did not return until M. Bruckstein fell ill, after I had my degree.

“I want to leave you the shop, Suzanne,” he gasped. “Even if you can’t run it, I want to give it to you and your mother. You have always been my best friends here.” “And you have been ours, too,” I said, tears streaking my face, “but I think my mother needs it more than I do.”

After five years, my mother’s lack of business skills and failing health forced her to put the shop up for sale. The person who bought it? Erik’s father, a developer who promptly bulldozed it and made its spot into a parking lot. Will he brick in its silhouette? I suppose obliterating it would count as sweet revenge.