

You've Got that Wrong Kind of Brain

by Kevin Hunter

“As we look around, our spectrographs and telescopes reveal, in the dust of exploded suns, that the iron running through our veins, the oxygen in our lungs, and the silicon upon which we stand, came about, as it were, from fusion-based waste products in the hearts of dying stars.”

-- Charles Pellegrino

It had been shown from behind the bar in the café, from a projector and screen. There was no one else in the bar besides Nick, Allan, Betsy, the owner, and Johnny, her husband. This was how it was normally. Betsy and Nick had known each other for some time, they had been alive during the second world war and since she lived above her little café, and since Nick's work normally had him wondering through the streets at early times in the morning, they had decided long ago to meet together, in those free times, and watch what they called, the good films. They loved them. And soon it became a routine. It was inevitable that Johnny would follow Betsy and Nick; and even more inevitable that Betsy would decide simply to open her café in those early mornings, for any other random ghosts wondering the twilight streets. Allan was one such ghost. He started coming in to Betsy's café two weeks prior to watching *La Raffle* with Nick. He and Nick got a long very well, and would speak about things for hours until the morning came; and Betsy would supply them with food and coffee, and clever sayings all the while Johnny watched it all over. Tonight though, they had watched *La Raffle*, and it seemed that things were different.

From behind the counter, Betsy came over to Nick and Allan, who were sitting at the end of the café by the window.

“What'll you have?” she said.

"Is it really that time already?" asked Allan.

"Sun's coming through, ain't it?" said Betsy.

"He means it just seems so early for the special," Nick said. "After that, I don't think I'm all up for it either."

"After what?" asked Betsy.

"The film," said Allan.

"Got to you?" she asked.

"...He's a sentimental type Bets." said Nick.

"I'm not," said Allan. "It's just..."

"Just what?"

"He thinks its weird eating like we do, after that," said Nick. "Like I said... sentimental type."

"Will you cut that out, Nick." said Allan.

"For God's sake, Nick, act your age and stop patronizing the boy," said Betsy.

"I'm acting just right for my age, Bets. Just the way I always do." said Nick.

He sat back and sipped from his cup. He was a tall, skinny, old man with wide shoulders, that were once broad and sturdy, and he had a large golden cross that hung from his neck that he would hold strongly to, from time to time. He also had thick glasses that would fog from the rising coffee steam.

"You asked what'll we have, right?" Nick said.

"You *know* what I asked," Betsy said. "And again, stop bothering the boy. You're always messing with him."

"Hey...you know I don't mess. Just get me the usual...And take your time too. We're not in a rush."

Betsy left the table and walked back behind the bar and through the doors and to the kitchen. The door of the café opened and two men walked in. They sat by the bar, and began to talk amongst themselves. Allan watched.

"You're old enough, aren't you? " Allan asked. "What were you doing during that time?"

"The war?" asked Nick.

"What else?"

“Hey, don't be snarky,” said Nick. “I was just joshing you, you know. Just playin' around. And that was a long time ago...But I wasn't in the war--too young. I stayed in the states.”

“I'd of thought that you were in the war,” said Allan.

“Why's that? Do I really look that age?”

“You just seem like that kind of type.”

“And don't you think I would have told about that by now? If I had?”

“Its not something people talk about,” said Allan.

“People don't talk about things like that.”

“Please. Why wouldn't you? It'd be a badge of honor for me, had I gone,” said Nick. “Had I not the bum leg, and of age, I would have gone...I would have killed some of those little Nazi shits...For the flag, you know.”

Allan stared out the window.

“Well, you seem more like it than me,” he said.

“Like what?” asked Nick.

“Here's your special.” From her tray, Betsy laid down the plate before Nick. He leaned forward and smelled the food, let the scent of the bacon, eggs and hash-browns rise through his nostrils. There were other plates on her tray.

“What?—are you holding out on me, Bets?” he said laughing.

“Don't put your grubby fingers on the food, Nick,” said Betsy. “You know whats yours and whats not.”

“What? Why do you treat me like that? Aren't we old pals?”

“Old pals? I've got a business to run, and two Jewish boys over there that don't want any damn bacon fingers goin' through their food. I don't need the ‘suits.’”

“And how's that supposed to happen, huh?” asked Nick.

“What?” said Betsy fixing the plates on her arm.

“Lawsuits,” said Nick.

“Who knows these days, people are suing for everything. And I can't afford all that. You know how--”

The two men by the bar called out to Betsy. She left, and at the bar she handed them their plates and then went back into the kitchen and out of sight. Johnny was watching the men from his stool at the front of the café by the door, his arms folded. They talked amongst themselves, smiling, laughing at certain moments, and then eating some more. The projector screen had been put up by Johnny, but he had left the projector on, and with that, the title of the movie was left showing on the walls behind the bar. At a point, one of the men at the bar looked up at it.

“You thinking of becoming a Jew?” asked Nick.

“Why do you say that?” asked Allan.

“You're looking at those two over there *a lot*” said Nick.
“...Or...don't tell me you're...”

“I'm what?” said Allan.

“Nothing,” Nick said. “Nothing.”

“You make a lot of assumptions.” said Allan.

“Al, I've just learned it pays to make *a lot* of observations.”

Allan shifted in his seat. The two Jewish men began laughing loudly. Johnny whistled over to them; told them through gestures to be quieter. The men went quiet.

“You think if I had been born back then, you think I would have been like you?” asked Allan.

“What's that mean? ‘Like me’?” asked Nick.

“I want to think that I would have done something, you know. Like I would have done something about the whole thing.”

“But I told you, I wasn't in the war. You're too young to be forgetting so fast, Al.”

“But you would have. If you could've,” said Allan.

“Who knows Al, I was really young. Hindsight comes with old age, you know. I wasn't the same person then that I am now.”

“C'mon, Nick. You would've. I know you would've.”

“Yeah...well...why are you even thinking about it, Al? You weren't even a thought to your mother yet.”

"But I want to *think* that I would have," said Allan.
"That means something. It means something about myself—you know?"

"It don't mean nothing, Al," said Nick, sighing. "It doesn't mean a damn thing."

"I think it does."

"Of course *you* do," Nick said. "You're the sentimental type right?—You know what? I think you would have done something."

"Really?"

"Hey don't get too high," said Nick. "I just mean—I just meant that I think you might have done *some thing*. I didn't say you'd be in the war or anything...But you're the sentimental type, right?...*Over* emotional. I could see you doing something...stupid—probably getting yourself killed."

"You think?" said Allan, smiling.

"Yeah," Nick, laughing. "I guess, why not?"

"I think I'd like that," said Allan. "Dying for something."

"You would?" said Nick.

The two men from the bar had finished and were walking out from the café. They glanced over at Nick and Allan, and Allan waved at them. They waved back and smiled, then opened the door and went out into the bright light. Johnny closed the doors behind them; then went off to clean where they had eaten, and when finished, was off into the kitchen.

"But then again, you don't earn a spot up there with the big guy by being a slouch right." said Nick.

Allan fell silent.

"Jesus." said Nick, holding up the cross around his neck.

"Oh," said Allan. "Yeah, well...If you believe in all that, anyway."

Nick shifted in his seat and leaned up towards Allan.

"...What's that mean?" asked Nick.

"What?" asked Allan.

"Al...How do you think those Jews got out of all that? All that shit, alive?" asked Nick.

"Don't know," said Allan.

"Don't know?"

"No," said Allan.

"What do you think? They got lucky?" asked Nick.

"No." said Allan. "Luck is like how the Knicks squeezed out that win last night."

"That wasn't luck Al, I tell you all the time, they got talent."

"You say that...," said Allan. "But then they lose and you're saying a whole lot of other things."

"Hey, Al, let's not get the Knicks mixed up in all this, alright" said Nick. "I asked you a question."

"...I don't remember it."

"You do, you're not old like me. You can't be forgotten so fast."

Allan said, "It's not important, anyway."

"It is," said Nick.

"Why is it?" asked Allan.

"Because I need to know where you stand," said Nick.

Allan sighed.

"Is that really important?"

"It is," said Nick.

"Well then, I don't know," he said. "I don't know what it was that made them survive. I don't think it matters. They survived because they survived. But I definitely wouldn't call that luck or anything else."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Can I ask you a question?" asked Allan.

"Sure."

"A serious question?"

"I said alright, didn't I?"

“And what about all the other Jews that died, and those other kids that didn't escape. Like that kid in the movie. What about all that?”

“What do you mean?” asked Nick.

“Were they just unlucky?” asked Allan.

“Al I don't know what you mean--”

“Or were they just bad people?”

“What's your point, Al?”

“And do you know how many times, Hitler was almost killed during the war? By other Germans who wanted him dead?”

“Hey, Al, just--” Nick paused, spoke lower and more sternly. “Just get to where you're goin'.”

“He survived *every single time*, by the slightest of ways, like his plane being too cold for the bomb to go off, like it should have.”

“Bombs don't go off all the time, Al.” said Nick.

“It would have saved a lot of people, and no one would have known a thing,” said Allan. “It wouldn't have changed a thing.”

“Bombs don't go off *all the time*,” said Nick.

“Right. They don't. It just—it seems weird, what you said before.”

“What did I say?” asked Nick. “...Hey Al, if I said anything weird, just say it. Why are you being so squirrely all of a sudden?”

“‘How do you think those Jews got out of all that?’ is what you were asking,” Allan said. “You think it was some intervention by god?”

Nick took a sip from his coffee.

“Of course. Who else, or what else was it?”

“I don't know. But I just don't know how you can tell the difference,” said Allan.

“Well,” said Nick. “I never knew that was what you were.”

“That's for sure,” he thought. “Boy I never knew that.”

He adjusted himself deeper into his seat, took a sip of coffee, and mumbled something to himself. His eyes were watching Allan, who began drinking. Betsy just came back from the kitchen and started wiping down the bar. A couple came inside the café, laughing loudly and sat and began talking to Betsy. And there were people walking back and forth past the blinds near Nick and Allan, with the sun now bright, and all the noise and chaos, and the loss of the peace of the passing night. Allan took a sip from his coffee. Neither he nor Nick paid any attention to the loud couple in the café, or those passing by the window.

“But I'm glad, you know.” said Allan, putting down his cup, looking at Nick. “That *you* think I would have done something. It might not mean much to you. But it makes me feel better, you know?”

Nick folded his arms.

“I couldn't live with myself,” continued Allan. “Had I not done something. Had *I* let those people be taken like that. From their homes and what not. I couldn't have lived with myself. ”

“Well, said Nick. “How does anyone live with themselves anyway...”

Nick called Betsy over to the table.

“I want the check, Betsy” said Nick.

“That time already?” said Betsy.

“Yeah,” said Nick, sternly.

“You sure?” asked Allan.

“I'm feeling tired Betsy,” said Nick to Betsy. “I'm not feeling like being around here right now.”

“ 'S'what happens when you stay up so late at your age. I'm surprised you haven't hunched over more often.”

“Hey, Nick,” prodded Allan. “I haven't even eaten yet.”

“You're never eaten, Allan,” said Betsy.

“Check,” said Nick.

“ Alright, sure. Let me clean this up for you, first.”

“Make it quick,” Nick said.

"Sure, boy you're hot all of a sudden," Betsy said.
"What's got you so riled up all of a sudden?"

Looking at Allan, Nick said, "nothing."

"You sure?" said Betsy

"I just really need that check," Nick said.

"Alright," Betsy said. "What have you boys been talking about behind my back, anyway?"

"About the war," said Allan. "About what we would have done had we been in France. Maybe it wouldn't have been like it was."

"Is that so?" She was picking up their plates and mugs.

"Yeah," said Allan. "Nick thinks I would have done something."

"Really? Would you now?" said Betsy.

"Who knows, I guess...But at least Nick thinks so."

Allan was staring at Nick. Nick sat up and began to reach for and put on his coat. His glasses were fogged and he wiped them with his sleeves, and then got up from his seat, and stood near Betsy and over Allan. He towered over them.

"Well," he said. "Who *really* knows what he would have done?"

"Nobody does. You don't know until you're there. Until there's soldiers down your throat with guns, and women and children screaming, and the Nazi's screaming 'heil Hitler', and the all the bad smells, and the blood. You just never know how a person will react to that...Especially not some sentimental from the city who don't believe in a goddamn thing."

"Nick..." said Allan.

"Nick, didn't I tell you to stop messing with the boy." said Betsy. "Maybe he would have helped out. What d'you know? Are you his father?"

"I didn't say he wouldn't. It's just, who really knows about people like him, anyway. You never know what they'll do, those sentimental types. They don't care about nothing."

"Nick, I said to stop it," pleaded Betsy.

"They don't care for nothing but themselves."

"Nick," said Allan.

"They just do what they want. And then die. '*I would like to die*' huh?...For what?"

"For what?" asked Allan.

"Nick calm down," said Betsy.

"For what?" Allan got up.

The couple at the bar was now watching, La Rafle still sprawled across the bar wall.

"For God's sake, Allan," said Betsy, glancing over at the couple. "Stop this," she said whispering.

"No. Let 'em be Bets. Let 'em be. Let 'em have his say," said Nick.

"No, Nick, you need to calm down all of this," said Betsy. "Your gonna scare away the little customers I have."

"I said let 'em have his say." Spit tumbled from Nick's mouth. "I wanna hear his say."

"The people," said Allan.

"What?" asked Nick.

"For all those people!"

"For the people?" said Nick.

"Yes!" said Allan. "Isn't that enough?"

"Enough?" Nick asked.

Betsy stood with plates in her hand, and a rag across her shoulder. The couple had gotten up from their seats, by the bar. They were standing, watching, and whispering amongst themselves. Betsy turned to them, and smiled. They smiled back, awkwardly, and sat back in their seats.

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" said Nick. "From you? Wha'd you care about those people?" pointing at the image of La Rafle on the wall over the bar.

"What do I care?" said Allan. "What's—what's that, Nick?"

"You don't *believe* in all that right?" said Nick.
Betsy interjected.

"All these nights you two come here," said Betsy. "You get along, whats all this Nick? What's all this commotion?"

Nick began to walk out of the café. He wiped his mouth.

"No commotion Bets. You just never really know someone until you know them, I guess. You sit down with 'em, you eat with 'em, you talk with 'em, but you don't really know 'em."

"What are you saying Nick? You're not saying anything that makes sense," said Betsy.

"Let him go, Betsy," said Allan.

"Why? Will somebody tell me what's going on?" asked Betsy.

"Never thought there'd be the day, when my old man made any sense," said Nick. "When he'd finally be right about something."

"Nick, what old man--"

"He's just an old man," said Allan. "He's not adjusted to the times."

"Your both not makin' any sense." said Betsy.

"They're right under your nose; sneering at you from behind the curtains." Nick said.

"And to think, I thought places like these were different," said Allan.

Nick reached the door and paused, holding the doorknob, then looked back at Betsy and briefly at Allan; he shook his head.

"I guess, you never really know," he said, turning the knob.

"So that's the way it is," said Allan sitting back down, Betsy, left standing, her face contorted, the couple now standing, watching, their eyes shifting when they catch Allan's stare, the woman cuddled into the man's arms; Johnny having just come out from the kitchen, asking "what's going on in here, Juliann?" looking at Betsy, his muscles flexing, ready to put an end to it all; and with Nick, still turning the knob, saying, "for the people?" speaking loudly.

“The people? What people? You weren't even a thought in your mother's head.”

And then Nick was gone, limping his way into the bright morning light.

