

New Fiction: “East New York, After the War” by Gregory Brereton



I miss the fragrance of Polish women. I have not encountered anything quite like it. This tender unwashed grassy odor. Part stench, part hymn, evoking mysteries, bygone days, some kind of particle enigma. American women smell of chemical flowers. False lavender, concocted rose. In the hallway of the row house, my cousin's wife leaves this botanical wash in her wake as she passes, as I press myself to the crumbling walls and bow my head at her coming.

I am distracting myself trying to recall the scent of Polish women, to recall what my Monika was wearing the last time I saw her and the dizzying lovely reek she gave off that's gone now twenty years along with the rest of her. Cousin Johnny at the wheel of the moving truck won't stop telling me to let it go, let it go, we turn around now and it's over, all the way through the Flatlands down to a spot I know off the Belt Parkway with a trail to the water that can't be seen from the road. He has to talk loud over the strange gargling sounds coming from the rear of the truck, Roman Wszniewski all bug-eyed with the rag stuffed in his mouth.

The war is over, Cousin Johnny says. Think of our plans. Think of what you're throwing away.

He is cautious in that American style, always thinking of some bright future about to turn our way. I tried to be like this once but there is no counterfeit for it. There is only the past.

I am police these days. Before that I was only an exile but the difference is not as great as you might expect. Either way, you learn things. For instance:

They say Murder Incorporated never held the same sway over East New York after the cops threw Kid Twist out a window of the Half Moon Hotel and scattered his brains all over the Coney Island boardwalk but they also say that Jew gangsters hunt ex-Nazis with the apple pie aliases to this day through the rowhomes off Pitkin Avenue, Wyona, New Lots, Bradford, down through the python darkness beneath the elevated tracks over Livonia Avenue and out beyond toward Bushwick, Brownsville, Ridgewood and further still to the slinking green hush of the suburbs where nobody has a past worth remembering anyway, twenty years on from the war's end and that taste for revenge still whetted like a fresh blade.

I believe it all, every last word, mostly because in America, in New York, things surpassing belief occur as regular as the morning papers. When there is blood involved, they are a matter of routine.

My cousin Johnny and his wife Sophie are laughing in the next room. One could all but reach through the walls of these cramped quarters. It is not merely sounds that pass through them – intimate, furious, the farcical bodily outbursts. Or the accompanying odors, though these are legion. The cheap plaster of these row house walls seem to be pliable and thin as memory itself. Resentments, treacheries, longings all come leaching through. Eventually it becomes difficult to know where your own share of these things end and the invisible incursions of your fellow lodgers take up.

If she has not already, I suspect my cousin's wife Sophie of thoughts toward another man. I can't yet say who it might be. My suspicions arise in part from a soft disarray, a mild

turbulence, to her thoughts and ways broadcast through the walls. Through a spot just below the portrait of the Black Madonna, clear as a radio speaker, so that the wall like a murmuring heart itself seems to pulse with these things, the sounds of a restlessness come. Pacing footfalls, clattering dishes, a vase of flowers filled and emptied and filled again in quick succession. I suspect her as well because it has happened that I myself seem to have fallen at least a little bit in love with my cousin's wife Sophie, and so I am keen on her moods and feel these odd inner shufflings at her ordinary arrivals and departures. These have been erratic of late. I have too this sense of a far-off despair, abstract as though it were a story I heard once the details of which are dim to me now, to think of her feeling some powerful emotion for another man. In part, this is loyalty to my cousin Johnny. In part, this is the hateful ache of unrequited longing. Most of all, I suspect her because I suspect all women. I have it in me to know I would never act on these feelings or even look too long or too deeply at the feelings themselves. Perhaps, as is usually the case, it is not love at all but simply a masquerade of solitude, a thrown-voice howl of desire in protest against a condition of life so unnatural as mine. I rise in the afternoons and walk my beat, in the borough of Manhattan, way uptown. I return before dawn, tired and free. My only contact with another occurs along the wrists of criminals as I bind them in metal cuffs or the colored women who sell their companionship in my precinct. But if I have gained nothing else from that chaotic and transient past of mine, even as it too recedes to a sort of impersonal fable, it is the absolute omnipotence over every act, beginning with a control of the breath beneath floorboards creaking heavy under Gestapo boots all the way up to the approach signals of something as absurd and perilous as love.

Most days, we listen to baseball and drink beer and my cousin speaks of his dreams to someday own a tavern and I let him believe that his dreams are my dreams as well. I have no

resolve for dreams of my own. I want simply to forget. He grants me this, in his indirect way. He doesn't care to hear about the war. He was on a mine-sweeper in the great Chesapeake Bay in the state of Virginia for the war's duration and to him it was all something distant and strange. The war was a thing the Americans went over to and beat the Germans at and then came home singing. They don't care to hear about the camps, the incinerations. They don't care to hear tales of eating children in the ruins of cities.

This is all I want. To be free of memory in the American style.

Life will proceed as it has been planned, because our plans are modest. I will work to full pension and Johnny will sell the moving truck and we will open a tavern somewhere out beyond Brooklyn and be each a friend to mankind. And Johnny and Sophie will grow old together and I will slip easy into my fate of the mad drunken uncle from the old country, with each passing year growing more adept at folding up old longings and tucking them away back in the darkness where the disastrous ends of past longings are cast unremembered. I will grow so adept at this that eventually doing anything else will seem unnatural and perverse.

I am police now but it makes no difference. A bullet is a bullet, whatever the uniform. The bullet meant for me has been travelling twenty years now, ever since it passed clean through the pale cool forehead of my Monika, beloved and doomed, and continued through the darkness beyond where all she felt and desired and fought for lay earthen still and out again to cross the continent of Europe in ruins beneath the tailwinds of a billion spent bullets and on across that cold gray ocean vast beyond myth or reason, whistling low as it gathers strength to someday trace me clear to this room, to this open window at which I sit, top floor of the row house on

Bradford Street, East New York, cleaning my service revolver to the sounds of transistor rock 'n roll. It is coming for me.

I've found that the condition of the exile is excellent training for police work, for the policeman is a kind of local exile. People are wary and they speak at him reluctantly, always with careful deliberation. They keep things from him. They want to be away from him as quickly as possible.

So when we rouse this Yid body boy from a policy bank off Lenox Avenue and he asks me about my accent and inevitably he reveals we were all but brothers in the old country, I know that things are catching up to me.

These things proceed as always. You must ask every question but the one you want answers to. He hears my accent and dips into Polish and in a few deft phrases we are back on Florianska Street in Krakow, piano music tumbling up from the bricky catacomb taverns there behind the cathedral. We are arm in arm along Paulinska Street beneath the lindens nodding over the old rectory walls at the edge of Kazmierz. Past the Skalka sanctuary to that park on the river where the girls would pass with bare knees in the summer.

English, I say. You must speak English here. I don't know anything about all that.

He tells me he knows my name. Knows my people out in East New York.

I know friends of yours, he says.

I have no friends here, I say.

He goes reeling off names, half of East New York, half of Brownsville, half of Brooklyn. Long dead, half-remembered crooks. He is talking now to save himself. There is nobody in Brooklyn beyond his knowing in service to that kind of salvation. Says he knew Abe Reles aka Kid Twist before he got

his brains dashed all over the boardwalk. Says he drove for Pittsburgh Phil. Says he shook hands with Lepke Buchalter in Rose Gold's candy store on Livonia Avenue once during the war.

They never really gone away, he says.

You want what? My thinking is you'd likely keep your mouth shut, I say. If any of it were true. Names in the papers. That's all you know.

They're still around. Not what they once were. Not like that, of course. But there are killers out there. Friends of you and me. They got a hit squad out for ex-Nazis to this day. Them ones we brought over through the ratlines. The ones who slipped through secret. Camp guards, SS men, if you will, may they drink dog's blood and get cholera. You simply can't outrun fate, officer. Especially when fate is dressed like an old Jew gangster.

I've heard this tale before.

Me? I'm some schmuck trying to make a living. What can I tell you?

Enough fairy tales, brother.

It's all true, take it or leave it. Check your records.

There are no Jews left in East New York, brother. It's all going to the coloreds now.

They'll burn the place down, he says.

I don't tell him how I much respect the coloreds. The colossal remembering in them, the perseverance against such wrongs. I never saw a colored until they posted me uptown and now I think they are the finest of the lot. Deserving better, anyway, than the habitual swindle of policy bankers. He goes on naming names but it's not until he gets to the name Roman Wzniewski that I stop him.

I don't talk about how I came to America, to New York. I learned a strategic ignorance as I moved across borders with the imploring silence of the refugee. I was admitted because in 1912 my father had a sister who left for work in a candle factory in Hamburg and when the first war broke out she couldn't go home. Go west, go west. Now my cousin her son owns half a rowhome in Brooklyn on Bradford Street near the elevated train and I tell anyone who asks I got my English from him. He got his English at the church school of St. John Cantius on New Jersey Avenue. His children got theirs from the cradle and only know enough Polish to curse and say the rosary and their children in turn will only know the curses, which is enough, God help us.

But the name Wzniewski calls back to me through the despair of all those intervening years. We were Home Army during the war. Then the war ended and the Nazis went away and the Soviets came and there was hope for a brief instant and then that too went away. But Roman was nothing if not shrewd, merciless shrewd, and saw with great clarity the smallness and cruelty of the coming regime. Small, cruel acts were to be the new currency, exchanged against the grand annihilations of the past six years. He gave them my name and the names of a half dozen others – friends, comrades in arms, men he had fought and bled beside in the underground. Versions vary. In one, he blurted it all out only after the temple screws touched bone in the Palace of Miracles, the big house on Rakowiecka Street. In another, he went direct to the NKVD and spilled like a fishwife. He gave us up to secure certain things for himself inside the new regime. He gave them my name but when they came for me I was somewhere west of Salzburg, moving steadily on, my name and the life over which it had hung like a shingle or Damoclean sword all relinquished eastward where the bloody past went on repeating itself. They found my darling Monika instead.

Unrevealed days of wandering across the ruins of Europe followed. Eventually, I washed up here, where we all end up eventually. Brooklyn must be a sort of afterlife for the beleaguered Pole and the hunted Jew and the gypsy of the every bloodstrain braided loose in exile. Maybe there is the kind of heaven they evoke Sundays in the mother tongue at St. John Cantius. Where my thoughts slip back into the language of my birth as into healing waters. But if you kill a Polack like me, the kind with more killings to his name than he can recall, he gets sent express to Brooklyn. If I am fortunate in anything, it is in that name which I surrendered back in the old country, back when my comrade gave it up to the man from the NKVD. This was part of their mission to liquidate partisans and they came for me and found my Monika instead and did to her what they had planned all along. The squeezed trigger, the flash bang and soot in the air all appear when that old name returns to me in the silence of my thoughts there in the pews of St. John Cantius. I plead with God for mercy for that man I was. For that name I have surrendered. They killed me once already, in the war. We all rise again, say the priests. Some of us sooner than others. Maybe the trouble is that we don't get to choose the time or place of resurrection. Or whatever precedes it. I beg that if there is a heaven, that Monika is there and her sadness has been taken from her along with the life itself. I clasp my hands and bow my head, my thoughts washed with that soft sibilance of the mother tongue, and beg God to grant me the chance to forget it all. I never dared pray for a chance at revenge. But most people pray too modestly. God is many things but modest is not one of them.

When it comes, it happens in the way of all things in this city. A bit of rumor, a stray thought, some overheard snatch of nothing talk that goes unraveling out and slithers from subject to subject. A Yid body boy from a policy bank off

Lenox Avenue with a loose mouth and too many friends and his own skin to save.

Roman Wzniewski. Sure, you must know him. Though he dropped that rather unwieldy moniker soon as he stepped off the boat no disrespect. He goes by Ray Wisdom, you believe that?

Where does he live?

I can see it in you, my friend. The blood rising. It comes right to the rim of your eyes. Not such a good thing I think. Information like this maybe. Maybe I've said too much.

What do you want?

I want what any man wants, he says. To run a legitimate business in peace. What can I do?

Tell me where this man lives and you are free to go. Or keep it to yourself and I will visit you every single day from now until the revelation, keep my boot in the ass of your whole operation until you're begging nickels on the subway. These are the only choices available to you now.

What can I do, he says again but the tone has turned and the light has dropped from him.

Lights are strung across Bradford Street. We've been drinking all afternoon. There is a predictability to a city like New York. No matter where he might be, what borough or neighborhood, I am nearly certain that Roman is sitting at an open window, in a small room, hearing the same things over the radio, looking out over crowds in the street, thinking perhaps as I do now how very little the particulars of a man's biography amount to in a city like this.

I ought to let it go. Let the past lie. But that name in my ears after so long has me remembering.

Nights, I clean my gun by this open window to radio music and

ballgames. I am five years from full pension. Johnny hauls davenport and dining sets up the narrow stairwells. There is an old tavern out at the edge of Queens with a down payment in reach, where I picture myself drinking away the remaining days. An exquisite stupor, then a solitary corpse wrung dry. I only became police several years after arriving here in New York, after pushing brooms in schoolhouses and hauling furniture down tenement halls, after working for the city spearing trash on the end of a little stick in the dark eerie calm of the parks of Manhattan. I held court with my thoughts there below the hissing streetlamps and the rats the size of puppies and the brown-skinned teenagers who menaced me occasionally with knives or sticks. Sometimes they merely glanced up from their work painting odd names and phrases on the rocky outcroppings or restroom walls. When I became police and donned that crisp blue uniform, it was the response to my appearance that took some getting used to.

Winter, summer, winter, summer, as my mother would say. Twenty years go by and whoever you happen to be is the life you've made for yourself. I am some cop with an accent, living in a small room in a house full of drinkers, somewhere in Brooklyn. Trying half-heartedly to forget.

I am never lonely. I have not spent a single lonely night since I arrived in America. There are paid women in my precinct and I visit them from time to time. They'll let police have a go for free but that feels wrong to me. Payment feels somehow more honest. These are colored women. It is all dark people in my precinct. They are clamoring for something now. Preacher types with that righteous fire. Dr. King. Malcolm X and him they gunned him down February last on stage at the Audubon Ballroom, two precincts over from mine. I thought of Kid Twist, of the efficient ways this city has of ridding itself of inconvenient men. The coloreds who are beaten like dogs in the street. Who remember every wrong. But vengeance is mine, the Lord says.

I don't bother asking if he remembers me, remembers my face or name or what we lived through together. Cousin Johnny brings the furniture truck around from the warehouse on Liberty Avenue. Cousin Johnny who tells me to let it pass. We have plans. We have this life we've built. Cousin Johnny with his beautiful wife and his half a rowhome and what have I got? Cousin Johnny brings the truck around when I ask at least, I will say that much for him. I myself did not know how it would play out until I set eyes on him. I thought of Monika then. I wondered not for the first time what had passed through her panicked mind when the betrayal was laid bare. Roman W. walking along Pitkin Avenue like any other man in any other city.

We go up to his apartment on Starr Street and I press myself to the wall while Johnny knocks, holds an old bill of lading up to the peephole and says delivery for Mr. Wisdom. The reply comes fuck off in a voice I last heard in dying echoes in the sewer below Warsaw. Johnny says it again and there is the jangle of undone chains. I move Johnny aside and step into the doorway and the look on the man's face as the door swings away is almost worth all the years and the troubled sleep and the remembering.

There is a trace of wonder in it. There is a certainty. There is the faintest shadow of relief. After all he has seen and done and lived through, when the prospect of dying was as near to him minute by minute as the drum of blood in his ears, he meets his revelation here in deepest Brooklyn. To know at last must have seemed a somber kind of mercy.

I myself did not know how it would play out until I set eyes on him. I thought of Monika then. I wondered not for the first time what had passed through her panicked mind when the betrayal was laid bare.

In the back of Johnny's truck, I cuff him to the door handle. We don't speak at first. My brother in the underground. I take in his face, the marks left by the passing years. Something close to affection returns even now. Something else, some complicated feeling of anguish overlaid with a numb confusion, makes me reach for the pint of rye under the passenger seat. I take a pull and hand it to him and as he drinks I slip my service revolver from my waist and rest it on my knee. He swallows and breathes deep and it all comes back up over the wood slats of the truck bed. He takes a second, modest nip of rye and begins to speak.

We could use someone like you, he says.

You already have, brother, I say.

We are engaged in a holy mission.

I know all about it. You go by the name Ray Wisdom. Nazi killer. Avenger of the Jewish race. All that ended long ago, brother.

It goes on still, brother.

That's not what I'm here for.

You remember things funny, brother, he says. You talk like a man who has been wronged. But I was there too, brother.

How could I forget, I say.

Maybe it's been too long. You have it backwards. I was the hunted man, brother. I was the one who had to flee for my life. Maybe Monika has been in the ground so long you remember her like she was someone else.

All that is over now, I say.

Do you have a wife, he says.

That's neither here nor there, I say.

Not you, Roman says. I'm not talking to you.

Cousin Johnny looks at me, looks back at Roman.

None of your fucking business, Johnny says. How's that?

You would do well to keep an eye on her, Roman says. With this man around.

He starts to laugh in a low, dry way and I slip the gun from my waist, turn and jam it up his right nostril and the laughter goes on, his whole face distorted with this mad glee.

Down along the rim of the parkway, the tidal flats crammed with refuse, we pick our way between the truck tires and animal bones and broken bottles upturned in the mud like jagged flowers. Roman doesn't struggle. When I cuff his wrists I can see his eyes brimming with tears in the moonlight. All his deceptions have brought him to the edge of this stinking estuary, this particular moonlight. The cool scent of salt water in the breeze.

In the end, we had to flee Warsaw by way of the sewers. On a fathomless slow-moving Nile of shit we made our getaway. You might expect some altered character to the waste of a populace starving, terrorized, insentient with worry, futureless. Bowels clenched with dread, inert, sustained on nothing very much, down to vermin, shoe leather, sawdust, could hardly be expected to metabolize in the customary way. Yet life at the level of bestial necessity seemed to go on in much the same way, if anything more fulsome in keeping with the animal savagery taking place up above.

This is what I remember of those days. We stop at the water's edge, Cousin Johnny restless. Roman who had come all this way, across an ocean by way of a river of shit, only to receive that same bullet roving now twenty years. Let it go. You too

might hesitate. Then I see a pair of jade-colored eyes with that sadness to their cast that recalls Monika for a moment. That kind of soft sadness in her looks to make the bearer believable in all things. And how she knew this. How it made her so effective in her deceptions.

She died weeping, he says. Pleading for them to take you instead. Since you seem determined to make an end of things, there ought to be no illusions between us any longer.

I have none. Never have.

There is something else.

He is telling tales now, the beloved rat standards and ancient heartless singsong of the traitor. He tells me it was for my protection. He tells me it was for my own good. It is always somehow for the good of the dead when the living are made to explain their crimes. He asks me to remember. He says do not forget about your beautiful Monika. She possessed secrets of her own.

This I should believe, I ask. A man two minutes from death?

And were you so pure, he says, near tears. Were you so good and holy?

The end is already here, my friend. This is no time for excavations. Tell me something true.

I tried to save you, my friend. Monika, my friend. She was the one. You must have asked yourself why she stayed behind. You must have wondered about the lives she carried in her. She would not have made it out of Warsaw. She was being watched at all times. Which means you were too. You must have known.

I know nothing. I remember nothing, I say. Only a name.

You must understand, he said. She was my wife. I loved her. More than you can know.

I would have liked to know if he was being truthful or if it was only a ruse to prolong his life by way of my confusion. The difficulty in this arose from that sort of crazed, breathless smile he gave me as he said it and the bullet I placed as close to the center of that smile as I could manage in the darkness.

I cannot see the blood against the black water. His open eyes gather the moonlight in and I would swear I saw cloud shadows pass across their dazzled whiteness. He moves gently away over the little lapping swells coming up the sea channel, those last futile gestures of some distant oceanic furor coming to rest at last broken on this unknown shore.

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