

# MICK AND THE SPOON BENDER

by Greg Stolze

There was something undefinable about the man at the coffee shop, something that made the barista widen her smile and hold the whipped-cream nozzle a little longer over his latte. The name on the cup was “Mick” and he had tattoos on his hands and neck—eagles, snakes and playing-card suits. He had long greasy hair, and hard-road eyes, and he radiated a kind of casual contempt that made onlookers hopeful it wasn’t for them. He wore canvas work pants that weren’t jeans. They looked like a personal shopper had patiently gone through several thrift stores before finding the most authentically worn and work-stained pair. His jeans jacket had a stylized shark intricately embroidered on the back, under a word written in Balinese. He gave the girl behind the counter an up-chin nod when she called his name and slouched over to completely occupy a four-chair table.

“Mick?”

The woman who came in and said his name was a full head shorter than him, her posture so straight she seemed to vibrate. She had on jeans, Keds and a teal athleisure top, the kind with thumb-holes to keep the sleeves down. Two of her teeth—a canine and the incisor next to it—were whiter than the rest of her mouth.

“You must be Tammy,” he said, standing. She held out a hand for a shake exactly as he stuck out a fist for a bump, and she hastily clenched to awkwardly deliver it.

Seeing them, you might peg this as a Tinder hookup—uptight blonde pixie-cut good girl looking to get her world rocked by a dirtball in harness boots. You would be wrong.

“You want anything?” Mick gestured at the counter like he owned it.

“Nah, I’m good. Let’s go, I’ll take you to him.”

In the parking lot, Mick started towards a jet black Jaguar, but Tammy said “It’s not far, we can walk.”

“Yeah?”

“...honestly? I think he’ll be happier if he sees you coming.”

Mick nodded, his long, disorganized hair swaying in counterpoint. Tammy started marching along the sidewalk, and he ambled beside, his long legs taking two syncopated steps for every three of hers.

“So you really were a...?” she started, and stopped at his flat expression.

“You’ve got Google,” he said.

“Yeah, but that’s the internet and this is everything else,” she said. “It just seems like a strange thing for a rock star to care about.”

“I’m retired,” he said, looking off to his left and scratching his chin. After a few more steps he added, “It’s a personal interest.”

At a crosswalk he gave her that easy, slightly greasy smile and said “What would you think rock stars care about?”

“I don’t know. I’m more of a pop and EDM fan?”

“Last time I saw Miller, he couldn’t shut up about T-notes and diversifying his portfolio.”

“Who’s Miller?”

“Jake Miller? The bass player? Wow, you really don’t know much about Dream Void do you?”

“You did that song about robots, right?”

“Not me,” he said, distant again. “They did.”

Tammy looked down the road at a restaurant and waved. “That’s him.”

“Uh huh. He your uncle or something?”

“No, his son was in my unit in Afghanistan.”

“Aw man,” the ex-rock star said. “You served?”

“Not like, *in the shit*,” she said. But her left thumb flitted up and briefly touched those two odd-colored teeth. Then they were inside the diner, walking up to the man who’d stared, intently, at Tammy and Mick as soon as they got close.

“Mick Peltier!” he said, tone wondering. “Wow.”

“Hey man,” Mick said, with practiced ease.

The older man’s eyes flicked at Tammy, who nodded encouragingly.

“I don’t do names,” he said, sitting. “You can call me the Colonel, I guess.”

“You were a colonel?”

“Oh hell no!” He chuckled and gestured for them to join him. “So Tammy says you’re starting a show about... psychic powers, ghosts, weird stuff in general?”

“In general, yeah,” Mick replied.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Why not?”

“Because you were in Dream Void,” the Colonel said, as if he was having to explain what 2+2 equalled. “I mean... you guys are huge!”

“You a fan?”

“Big fan. Although...” The Colonel bobbed his head from side to side, as if pantomiming embarrassment. “I’m not going to lie to you. My favorite albums are *Chasing the Whisper* and *Saturn’s Baby*.”

“They’re great albums,” Mick said mildly, gesturing for the waitress. “Hi, yeah, can I get a tomato juice? Just a little one. Thanks.”

“What’s wrong with those albums?” Tammy said.

“There’s nothing wrong with them, but they’re more recent. Ever hear ‘Palomino Summer’? Or ‘Up the Stone Tower’?” Mick asked.

“Um... I dunno, sounds familiar?” she said.

“‘Palomino Summer’ was in that movie about the guy and the girl and the other guy, and they wind up polyamorous?” the Colonel said. Tammy shrugged.

“Yeah, it’s been in two movies and four TV shows so far,” Mick said. “It’s about me. Or, I mean, it happened to me. Cole wrote the music and Tina did the lyrics, but the story is my story.”

“Oh. All right?”

“Mick here was the drummer for the *first* two Dream Void albums,” the Colonel said authoritatively. “*Canadian Girlfriend*, which was their big breakout hit, and then *Future Ghosts*, which... ehm...”

“You can say it,” Mick said. “*Future Ghosts* wasn’t very good. Barely charted... honestly, even the fans aren’t nostalgic about it.”

“Then they replaced him with Lauren Ho on drums and suddenly...”

“Lauren had a different approach,” Mick interrupted. “That’s ancient history though. I still get checks from *Canadian Girlfriend*. Every time Dream Void gets a piece of the action on the ‘Dirty Big Truck’ Ford commercial, I get a piece of the piece. The rest of them tour and put out albums and I’m here. That’s what it is.”

“And you want to see me bend a spoon,” the Colonel said, grinning.

“I want to see you bend *this* spoon,” Mick replied, pulling one from his inside jacket pocket and putting it on the table.

The Colonel laughed. It was nearly a cackle. The waitress brought Mick’s tomato juice and the drummer’s veiny, tatted hand pounced on the utensil before anyone else could touch it.

“Thanks miss,” he said, but he didn’t take his eyes off his hand and his teaspoon as she nodded and walked away.

“Not going to let me handle it? Align myself with its energies? Infuse its essence with my psychic aura?” The Colonel was smirking.

“Let’s just say I’ve seen some real dynamite legerdemain,” Mick replied. He pronounced the last word “legger-main.”

“OK, I won’t touch it,” the Colonel said, pushing himself away from the table, pressing his back into the corner of the booth and glancing left, then right. “Could you turn it face down?”

Mick complied, flipping it so that its tip and its base were the lowest points, the body arcing over the table.

He got himself settled and looked at it, not staring, but watching with care.

“You ready?” the Colonel asked.

“Do your th—”

Before the word was complete, the spoon hopped up off the table, twirling an inch in the air before tinkling back down onto the wood, clearly bent thirty degrees. Instead of a normal spoon, it looked like a miniature ladle.

“Holy sh—”

“Hey, hey, be cool, all right?” The Colonel winced, looked around again to check if anyone had seen. And, indeed, a guy at the next table was watching.

“Heck of a trick there!” Tammy said brightly, and the onlooker turned back to scrolling on his cell phone.

“Ugh, hurts like a motherfucker though.” The Colonel looked down and massaged his nose.

“Whoa. Just... like... *whoa*,” Mick said.

“Pretty nifty, eh? Only works on two things,” the older man replied.

“How’d you do that?”

“Focussed my chi-prana through the aether.”

“No, but really,” Mick insisted.

The Colonel sighed. “I dunno.”

“Well, all right, um. You mind if I record an interview with you?”

“Not part of the deal,” the Colonel replied, giving Tammy a sharp glare. “Last thing I need is this getting broadcast and the CIA getting back up my ass again.”

“You were a spoon bender for the CIA?”

The Colonel gave a wintry smile. “You know how I said it only works on two things? The other is the carotid artery.”

“C’mon.”

“Don’t make me show you,” the Colonel said.

“All right, all right.” Mick raised his hands and three silver rings—an eye, a skull and a hamsa—glittered. “But you gotta give me something, right? Why just two things? Were you taught or did you just figure out you could do spoons and throats?”

“This is for a TV show?” the Colonel asked, his head suspiciously tilted.

“Podcast.”

“Like ‘Serial’?”

Mick gave a small sigh. “Sure,” he said. “Like ‘Serial’.”

The Colonel nodded. “OK, yeah, you’re doing a podcast, whatever, take notes but no audio. They got my vo-print, soon as I say boo over the internet all kinds of alarms are gonna go off.”

“For real? What’re you scared the CIA is going to do?”

“The CIA brass thinks I’m in a shallow New Mexico grave, and now that the last of their far-casters is dead, I should be in the clear as long as I stay smart.” He folded his arms. “My middle manager might have a clue, but she also knows me well enough to know what a body-bag shitshow she’d get if she sent people for me.”

“OK. How’d you wind up working for the CIA? Was this part of MK-ULTRA?” Mick asked, citing the agency’s notorious LSD mind-control experiments.

“It grew out of that. Mind expansion, psychic voyaging, all kinds of seventies horse crap. Only, y’know, sometimes it worked.” He glanced moodily out the window.

“You were an experimental subject?”

“I was a Marine. They asked me to volunteer after my physical... I don’t know if they saw something in my blood work or had family history research or what. I mean, there were stories that my grandma came to the US ‘cause some pitchfork mob didn’t like her evil eye. But maybe grandpa just told me that to shut me up and get me to bed, you know? She stroked out before I was born.” His eyebrows rose a little and he conversationally added, “Tell you what, when there’s an old lady in the house who can’t talk, just grunt a little, and half of her face doesn’t move, and one eyelid’s always at half mast, an eight year old’s gonna believe you when you say she has the evil eye.”

“Sure, that makes sense.” Mick had pulled out a notebook and was writing in tiny, cramped letters. The pencil looked absurdly small and fragile, nestled among his bulging knuckles. “So the CIA pulled you out of the Marines. What year was this?”

“It was in 1989. About the time you met Cole Deckard, right?”

“That was 1992, freshman year,” Mick said with a small smile. “So did they dope you up?”

“Psychedelics, yeah. Something they called ‘Sally sauce.’ Never did find out why they called it that or who ‘Sally’ was. Also psych surgery. Check this out,” he said, leaning forward so his forehead nearly touched the table. Behind his right ear was a pair of identical white dots, like a colon typed in keloid scar tissue.

“So like... electroshock?” Mick asked.

“Way more precise. Positive wire in one, negative in the other, jolts a spot right behind and above the nasal cavity. Third eye, like.”

“Did it hurt?”

The Colonel made see-saw hands. “Not unbearably. You ever get a cold and you start, like, draining? And then the part of your sinus and throat that gets ticklish goes real sore? About like that, just deeper.”

“What was it supposed to do?”

“I dunno what they planned, but in my case I got spoons and carotids.”

“That’s weirdly specific.”

“I’m not gonna argue with you,” the Colonel said, nodding. “Me and one of the doctors didn’t get on well, on account of he was a pervy sadist, and after one sesh with a cocktail of high wattage and Sally sauce, I called him a cunt and next thing I knew, he’d collapsed and they were trying to figure out how to restart his brain.”

“So you... just to be clear here, you telekinetically crushed his carotid artery?”

“More held it closed,” the Colonel said coolly, holding Mick’s gaze with his own.

“Geez,” Tammy said.

“Hey, the guy deserved it and... and you know, it didn’t all seem real at all. I was high as a kite.”

“Did he die?” she asked.

“Yeah,” the Colonel said, and her eyes, he did not meet. “Yeah he sure did.”

All three of them were quiet for a moment.

“Where do the spoons come in?”

“After Dr. Kr— ahem, after that first time, they dragged me off to a lockdown cell for about a week, and when I came out, the doctor who’d always been cool to me? She was the new director. And they brought in this new psychologist to work with me. They called her Dr. Pardo. Andrea.” Something warmed his voice as he said that last word. “I’m pretty sure her name wasn’t really Andrea Pardo,” he sighed.

“Yeah? You liked her?” Mick said gently.

“I diiiiid,” the Colonel replied. “I mean, by that point I’d been in the program for a year, they’d put me through every psych test and personality inventory you’ve ever heard of, probably a few made from the ground up just for us.”

“Were there others, then? In the program?”

“Tito and Lance. They got all gayed up, too, and the brass did *not* care for that. But Tito could remote view a little bit, on rainy days when there was enough lightning, so they turned a blind eye.”

“Huh.”

“Hand to Jesus. They tried shit with that poor kid using an arc emitter, y’know, that Tesla gadget? But only natural lightning seemed to work, and that, intermittently. If they’d spent cash

bribing people they probably would have gotten better intel and more of it. But anyway. Andrea. I liked her a lot. I mean, they had access to my whole history, to what I read, what I watched on TV and... you know, looked at. They had me keeping a journal, though you can bet I self censored like crazy.”

“Only sensible.”

“But I’m *pretty sure* they figured out my type, y’know? And Andrea was my type. Just very sweet and patient, and of course a racky blonde.”

Tammy didn’t roll her eyes, but she did turn towards him and frown, as if he’d disappointed her. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Andrea got me started on the spoons. All kinds of positive reinforcement and smiles and praise and, y’know, also the sparks and sauce.”

“You mean the wires in your brain and the... ‘Sally’?”

“Mm hm, you got it. Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“Seems only fair,” Mick replied.

“What’s Cole Deckard really like?”

Mick leaned back, smiling slightly, looking up and to the right as he contemplated his answer. “That’s complicated. We’re cool now, but there were times... backstage at The Alice Bar, he threw a whiskey bottle at my head.”

“He ever punch you?”

“We had... I dunno, four or five fistfights while I was in the band. Just horsing around at first, but the last two... In this parking lot in Oakland, we started out trading punches, wound up rolling on the ground and usually, by the time one of us was on top, he’d give the loser one to grow on and we’d be done. But Deckard was pissed and coked. He punched me over and over until his hand broke.”

“No shit?”

“Hand to Jesus. Had to cancel the show,” Mick said.

“What did you guys fight over?”

“Ahhm... again, complicated? Cole was drugging out and it was affecting everything. I mean, you know this, it was in *Spin* magazine. He knew he needed Tina, they’re writing partners. Miller, God bless him, was a doormat. That left me as a snotty younger member telling him to cut down on stimulants. And...” Mick’s face crinkled up thoughtfully. “I don’t want to blame the drugs. Not exclusively. Cole... it’s like there’s a locked door in his head, you know? Behind it, a lot of bad shit. You can hear it in some of the songs.”

“Deepest Shade,” the Colonel said, leaning forward.

“Yeah, that one took me back. The drugs, they unlocked that door. But so did pressure, failure, and all the time on the road.”

“What about the other bad fight?” Tammy asked. She was, once again, fingering her two odd teeth, which had to be artificial.

“Hotel room in Kansas,” Mick said. “He and I just... got into it, and after the Oakland head-punching incident, I wasn’t holding back. We were... entangled, bouncing off the walls. We knocked over the TV. Smashed out the door onto the balcony. It was one of those sliding glass doors? I was shoving him back over the rail and...”

They were silent for a moment before Tammy said, “And what?”

“Miller and Tina pulled us back.”

“Do you think you really would have thrown him off the balcony?” the Colonel asked.

“I’d like to believe the answer is no,” Mick said, fiddling with his empty tomato juice glass. “Cole’s a big guy, I’m not sure I coulda lifted him, especially with him struggling. I wouldn’t have thrown him if he’d stopped fighting, that’s... I mean, I wouldn’t have *murdered him in cold blood.*”

“No, I get it,” the Colonel said softly.

“And I don’t want you to get the idea that Cole’s some kinda monster, either.” Mick leaned forward, eyes earnest. “His best part is fantastic. He’s got a good voice, good licks, and writes good tunes. Huge, huge stage presence, you know? One time in this shitty New Mexico bar we played—this was back before we recorded anything, we were just playing anywhere we’d get paid—this guy exposed himself to Tina.”

“Like...?” Tammy asked it, but she almost looked like she didn’t want to know.

“Like, this dude flopped out his hog *during the show* and wagged it at her. And she took her Old Fashioned glass, whipped it at him and—I’m not making this up—bullseyed him right in the nose. Blood everywhere. He had to be fifteen, twenty feet from her.”

“No way,” the Colonel breathed.

“I’m not lyin’. In college, she was the starting pitcher on women’s baseball. But anyhow, the point? No one saw her throw it. She was onstage in front of maybe fifty people, threw a glass at a dude and busted his face open, and they were all watching Cole.”

“What happened to him?” Tammy asked. “The guy in the audience, I mean.”

“He didn’t press charges, probably on account of having two prior convictions for indecent exposure,” Mick said. “I think I heard later that he got his third waving it at someone underage.”

“Hopefully, he’s now somewhere he can get the help he needs,” the Colonel said, “By which I mean an ass-kicking on the regular.”

“It... honestly, I don’t want to just throw people away. I mean, yeah, he shouldn’a done that,” Mick said, cutting his glance over at Tammy, “But... I mean, probably some kinda treatment would help more than just violence? I don’t... I feel like whaling on Cole didn’t do him any good, or me.”



“There’s a difference between a guy with a temper and a fuckin’ weenie-waggler,” the Colonel said.

“Still though,” Tammy said. “You can’t just brutalize criminals.”

“Yeah, I can’t. I never get close enough.”

“Anyhow, anyhow,” Mick said, glancing between the two of them, “What Cole really had going for him, it was kinda the same as that vibe that made everyone want to watch him when he was in the spotlight. He was good to work *with*. He did some shitty stuff, but he was never a prima donna. Great guy to throw ideas back and forth with... no, you know what, scratch that. *Best* guy to just, fuckin’, jam tunes with. He had this thing where... when he was fired up for something, *you* could see it like he did, see how great it could be. That’s how we got noticed, because Cole would go into some shitty gig with a bad sound system, audience of ten people with a hundred teeth between them, and... he’d look you in the eye and say ‘We’re going to go out there and *blow their minds*’ and you believed him. And then you’d do it!”

“Wow,” the Colonel said. “Wow, wow wow.”

“Yeah.”

“So what about Lauren Ho?”

Mick sighed.

“I dunno man. Cole didn’t like me ragging on him about his bullshit rockstar excesses, so I think he was looking for my replacement already. Lauren was drumming in Blueshift at the time, and they were off the wall. I mean, some OK songs but just *out there*, you know? She was a good drummer though. And she was his type.” Mick’s tone got a bit bitter. “She had some of that same mojo, where she said ‘this could be *so great*’ and you’d just nod along like a dummy, but the rest of Blueshift was dead weight on her. Which in some ways, she needs. Someone to contain her. And that was Dream Void. I mean, we had chops. We were pretty good when we started—Tina especially—and we just toured our asses off until we could be better than good, even when we were exhausted and playing a shitty venue. Ho didn’t have that and she needed it.”

“So they just kicked you to the curb?” Tammy said.

“Pretty much. But... ugh, this hurts.” Mick clasped his hands and dipped his head to press them to his lips. “This hurts,” he repeated. “But she was good for the band. They kept her from... drifting off like a loose kite, and she elevated them. She had ambition, and after *Future Ghosts* the band needed it. Needed someone who could show them a new path and make them believe it could work. And Cole, Lauren took all the crazy out of his personal life and redirected it into the music. She...” He sighed. “She saved the band,” he said quietly. Then he looked each of them in the eye and said, “Don’t tell anyone I said that though, OK?”

“Totally, totally,” the Colonel said, staring.

“Sure, whatever,” Tammy replied.

Mick exhaled, hard, and sat back, visibly trying to relax. “That got deep, didn’t it? Yeah. All those feelings.”

“What’s ‘Up the Stone Tower’ really about?” the Colonel suddenly asked.

“Why?” Mick squinted.

“You mentioned it earlier, with ‘Palomino Summer’ when you were talking to songs that were, like... uniquely yours. That happened to you. But it’s a deep cut, wasn’t on a single ever. Right?”

“It was a B-side to the Japanese release of ‘Dirty Big Truck,’ but yeah. You’re right. It’s one of my songs. It did happen to me. Not exactly like the song, but I went climbing alone in the Cascades. I was in high school. It wasn’t, you know, *mountaineering*. Tina punched up the effort when she wrote the lyrics but largely it’s what happened to me. Went up in the hills by myself. Everything felt weird and wrong and then I saw something I couldn’t explain. Still can’t.”

“Can you tell me what it was?” the Colonel asked, voice low and eyes intent.

“You want to know? You have to promise to believe me and not laugh.”

“How do you expect us to...?” Tammy asked, even as the Colonel said “Promise.”

Mick nodded, pursed his lips, and then said, “It was a pile of pancakes.”

“Wait, what?” Tammy said. She didn’t laugh or scoff, she just looked confused.

“The ominous thing you saw was breakfast?” the Colonel didn’t sound skeptical. He sounded scared.

“You gotta understand I was alone in the middle of *nowhere*,” Mick said. “It was cold. I hiked to the top of the mountain and there were pancakes, sitting on a rock. No plate or utensils, just a pile of fuckin’ flapjacks.”

“Could someone have... left them?” Tammy asked.

“They were hot! I could see ‘em steaming. The butter on them was only partly melted, you know? Syrup down the sides, and arranged on the top...”

“Raspberries and kiwi slices?” the Colonel asked.

Mick turned pale. Tammy looked between the two men and realized the Colonel looked afraid as well.

“What?” she asked.

“How did you know that?” Mick asked, leaning in.

“Tito,” he said, then rubbed a hand across his mouth. “Tito saw it during a real hard thunderstorm. Described it just like that—not the rock or the mountain, but the pancakes and fruit and syrup and... and he was *freaked out*. He said it was wrong, all wrong. We heard him screaming all down the hall.”

“That stack of pancakes scared the shit out of me,” Mick whispered. “I looked all around, but there was nowhere someone could hide, not if they were hiding a, a *stove* and everything. No one could have left them there, and had them still be hot, and gotten away unseen. No way.”

“After Tito saw the pancakes, they took him away,” the Colonel said. “That was when I started planning how to fake my death and get out of the program.”

“But it’s just pancakes. That’s not scary. Hell, there’s a stack with berries and kiwi right there,” Tammy said, gesturing as their waitress walked past. Sure enough, on her tray was a pile of six golden-brown griddlecakes, garnished with bright fruit.

Mick covered his mouth with his hands. His eyes were wide and his face, pale.

“OK,” the Colonel said, “It’s been great, but I gotta get out of here.” For a man of his age, he bolted out of the booth with remarkable speed and purpose.

“Shit,” Mick said, pulling out his belt-chained wallet and flinging a twenty on the table. Tammy shifted out of his way as he stood, then followed him as he left. The Colonel’s car was already peeling out of the parking lot by the time they reached the door.

“I feel like you don’t get it,” Mick said tensely, as they walked back towards the coffee shop, Tammy nearly jogging to keep up.

“No, I think maybe I do? I’ve seen... stuff that just wasn’t right. Out of place, but more... just, like, vibrating with wrongness.”

Mick slowed down to look at her. “Yeah?”

“Overseas. The Germans call it ‘ungemütlich’.”

“Do they now?”

“It’s like ‘uncomfortable’ but with more weird. More... unearthly.”

“Those Germans. Got a word for everything.” He squinted at her, then gestured at his own teeth. “It have anything to do with...?”

“Oh no, that was... another thing,” she said, looking away.

“Oh.”

They reached his car, and hers.

“So your German weirdness,” he said. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not right now.”

“Cool,” he said. “Cool.”

“You don’t believe all that stuff about him being a CIA assassin, do you?”

“Should I not?”

She sighed. “I know he wasn’t completely honest with you,” she said. “Now, he does get genuinely upset when he talks about the ‘far-casters,’ whatever the hell those are. He says they’re all dead. Says it like he really wants to convince himself. You ever hear of...?”

“Not before today. So you think he’s a sleight-of-hand bullshitter?”

“No,” she said. “No. I know he was lying because I’ve seen him move things that aren’t spoons. Tissues, paper clips. Once, on a bet, he broke a pencil in half from across the room.”

“Oh.”

She shrugged. He nodded.

“I’ll be in touch then,” he said. “You’ve got my real digits?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t spread those around.”

“I would never!”

He started to pull away, then stopped, rolling down his window. “You want a copy of *Canadian Girlfriend?*” he asked.