

# MICK AND THE LOVE

by Greg Stolze

(Trigger warning for themes of violated sexual consent)

Nobody in the coffee shop paid any attention to the man in the booth at all. He'd gotten a flat white and said his name was Thad, and it had cooled on the counter until he realized that no one was picking up the drink labeled 'Chad.'

He sat with his back to the door, because even with the awning outside there was glare. He played a game on his phone, one where numbers were shapes. He got on social media and made a few posts about the new season of *Dirt Bike Hookers*. He waited.

He didn't want to check the time but did. He didn't want to look to the door to see if anyone was coming, and he didn't. His flat white was gone when he saw one of the baristas straighten up and look at the entryway. She elbowed the girl next to her, whose eyes brightened as she licked her lips a little. Thad felt a little pang. Someone had looked at him that way, once upon a time.

"Mr. Peltier!" the bright-eyed counter girl called as the door jingled, and Thad was a little annoyed, they remembered *this one*, they noticed and got his name right, but at the same time, he was pleased and a little astonished. The man, Mick Peltier, was there for him, after all.

Peltier was rangy and tall with messy black hair down to his collar. He had an easy smile, a skeleton tattoo, and jeans covered with mysterious patches that all managed to look very expensive. His black t-shirt had a scorpion embroidered on the back in rich red thread, and slung over his shoulder was a leather satchel that looked exactly like something Indiana Jones would carry. He chatted with the counter girls as they made his drink with great haste and extra whipped cream. Only when it was cradled in his large, bony hands—fingers covered with silver rings and playing card emblems—did he take off his sunglasses and look around.

Hesitantly, Thad raised a hand.

"You must be Thad," the other man said, sliding in across from him with a little wince and taking a big sip from his drink.

"Hi. You're the guy from the podcast, *Other Vibes*?"

"That's me. Heh, you're like the first guy to recognize me from *that*, not Dream Void."

"I never listened to much rock music," Thad said.

"One of our songs was used in a truck commercial."

"Guess I'm outside the target demographic."

Mick's eyes flicked over Thad's polo shirt, eyeglasses and buzzcut. "That tracks," he said, not unpleasantly, but Thad still felt a little embarrassed. Then again, Thad usually felt a little embarrassed.

He was, nonetheless, glad the former rock star hadn't seen his Dockers slacks and his cell phone belt holster.

"I heard your episode on the, uh... the child-battering potato man," Thad said.

"That's one of our most popular. You a big paranormal phenomena buff?"

"I... hadn't thought of myself that way, but probably." Thad gave a little chuckle. "I suppose I don't look like that target demographic either."

Mick gave a guffaw that flipped a little whipped cream into his upper lip stubble, which just extended his amusement as he wiped it off. "I get the impression it takes all kinds."

"I'm surprised you wanted to meet," Thad confessed. "You must get a ton of people wanting to be on *Other Vibes*."

"You'd think, huh? But nah. I mean, a dozen or so on the week after a new episode drops, one or two the rest of the time. And, to be honest, a lot of 'em just want to ask questions about *Canadian Girlfriend*," he said, citing the multi-platinum first album from Dream Void, one of two on which he'd played drums.

"You follow up with everybody?"

"Again, not really. I mean, the rock fans... bless 'em one and all, but they get dismissed out of hand, *Other Vibes* ain't about that. The ones who sound like they're doing a put-on, figure them for five or ten percent. My producer does shit with computers, it's like she can look at their IP address or whatever and tell you where they buy their underpants, so she screens out some jokers."

"You get crazies?"

"Shit my man, it's the twenty-first century. Everybody gets crazies."

Thad smiled again. This man made him feel pleasant, which was weird for him. "But a podcast about reports of the paranormal, you must get more and crazier."

"I try to be cool with 'em," Mick said. "There are a lot of hurt and unhappy people out there in the world, a lot of confused souls who've been kicked around until they break. It sucks. Most of 'em... well, a lot just want someone to listen and not call them stupid crazy pieces of shit. And, too, just 'cause someone's a little high-strung or has trouble making sense... it doesn't mean they didn't see something. I've had experiences man. Stuff with no logic. A lot of people would think I was dropping signals." He tapped his temple with a forefinger. It had a silver ring shaped like a snake wrapped around it.

"Most of it's nonsense though, right?"

"A fair amount *looks* like nonsense, far as I can suss it out," Mick allowed. "But you gotta yank that slot-machine arm a bunch of times before you hit a jackpot. People don't need to be a hundred percent normal to tell an interesting story. And, you know, some things just seem right."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a listener, you've heard me say I got an intuition. You, for example... you felt legit."

Thad shifted in his seat. "I think I'll get another drink," he said. "Maybe decaf this time... y-you want anything?"

"Nah, tell 'em to put it on my tab," Mick said.

Thad noticed that the counter workers were more interested in him now. They got his name right and apologized for being wrong previously. When he returned to the booth, Mick put his phone away and offered up, again, his full attention.

"OK, so, I guess I'm kind of a wizard?" Thad said, and waited.

"You mind if I tape this?"

"...I guess not."

Instead of his phone, Mick got out a small recorder with thumb-sized mics pointing out of it at forty-five degree angles. "Can you say that again?"

"I'm a wizard."

Mick didn't laugh. "OK, so, what kind?"

Thad shrugged and sighed. "The first woman who taught me called it 'thaumaturgy,' which, I think, means 'secret wisdom that causes events'."

"Cool, cool. What can you do with it?"

"Not much, honestly. It's... most of it is just what they'd call chaos magick, where you create symbolic correspondences to help events flow the way you want."

Mick's brow furrowed. "Unpack that for me," he suggested.

"OK, I got my boss fired."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe. I did a ritual, um... put the intention into the world by manipulating emblems of meaning..."

"What emblems?"

"All right, I work in the food processing industry as an assistant operations manager... and your eyes just glazed over. Doesn't matter. I made a little building out of LEGO to indicate the location, to represent the world, and I put a grape into it so it was specifically a building where food was a concern."

"You made a building out of LEGOs," Mick said.

"A model. And the plural is 'LEGO'," Thad replied.

"OK, sure."

"Then I took some of my hair to represent me, and I made a crown out of some wheat to represent her, because her name..." Thad paused, unwilling to say it on tape. "It represented her name. You can alter my voice for this, right?"

"I can't but my producer can if that's what you want."

"It probably doesn't matter."

"Hey, I want you to be comfortable." Mick reached across the table and gave Thad's hand a brief squeeze. Thad blinked. "This stuff, people get judgy or mean about it, and it's not easy to talk about. I get it. Whatever makes this less bad for you, I wanna do that."

Thad was surprised to realize Mick Peltier had deep, warm brown eyes.

"That's very... very kind of you," he said.

They were quiet for a moment while Thad composed himself.

"So you made a toy building and some symbols," Mick said.

"Then I set the hair on top of the crown and kind of... like, grinded down on it? Then I burned the crown."

"Ouch. That got her fired?"

"Well, the reason given was that she decided on a lateral move into packaging and logistics, but the scuttlebutt was, HR kind of encouraged it because there were complaints and decreased productivity."

"Had you complained about her?"

"To HR? God no. But I knew other people who did. Janice and Gretta, she treated them way worse than me, and I had it bad enough."

"Huh."

"*And I know what you're going to say,*" Thad said, as if interrupting, even though Mick wasn't speaking. "You're going to say that maybe she got fired because of the complaints and the magick didn't do a darn thing. Which is possible! It's entirely possible. That's how it works."

"I was not, actually, going to say that."

"But you were thinking it."

"Oh shit dude, did your wizard training teach you to read minds? Stay out of there when I'm on a date, aight? A lot of personal stuff goes on then."

Thad rolled his eyes as Mick laughed at his own joke. "No, I don't read minds, I just... that's what everyone thinks, you know?"

"I mean, maybe? But maybe it's a matter of perspective. *And*, maybe, believing in your ritual had some kind of social effect—made you subtly manipulated her and the people around you because you *believed* she was doomed, with like, micro-expressions and word choice and all that neurolinguistic programming stuff."

"...maybe?"

"Or maybe you tugged on the strands of destiny as the three fates wove them," Mick said, taking a latte slurp.

"Well, that was the biggest thing I did with the symbolic stuff. I did, like, spells to get raises and have my dentist visits be OK but, yeah. It was nothing to convince a skeptic."

"I knew a dude once who said that the side effect of almost every 'working' was to make some guy pop out of nowhere gabbing about 'apophenia' if you described it."

Thad sighed.

"So... OK, how did you get into this? You said you're a manager in Business," Mick said, pronouncing the last word as if it was a country he'd never visited. "How'd you start burning hair crowns et cetera to work your will on the world?"

"Um... well, the job before this one was a really good fit, pay and benefits were great and they even offered a moving stipend, but I was going somewhere I didn't know anybody. So I joined this social group. I don't want to say which one."

"A social group?"

"You know. An organization of people with, um, similar ideas and backgrounds, getting together to just... s-socialize."

"That could describe a church or the Proud Boys or a community of swingers."

Thad laughed. "None of those. It was like the Masons or the Elks or the Oddfellows, you know?"

"So... funny hats, initiation ceremonies, keggers?"

"Also advice on which car mechanic won't rip you off."

"Shit, maybe I should join," Mick muttered. "This group is where you learned your thaumaturgery?"

"Oh no, but... all right, think of the weirdest guy you know."

"Done."

"Now imagine him introducing you to the weirdest guy *he* knows."

"Not following."

"One guy in the group was... everyone else was like, 'Oh Jerry, he's all right, but he's kinda *intense*, you know?' Jerry was more into the ceremonial stuff and wanted everyone to be a little more... solemn, I guess? He wanted people to take it seriously, not just treat it like an excuse to dress up and giggle."

"Secret societies dress up and giggle?"

"Sometimes. It's weird. It's like a paradox, or an overlap... on one hand, this stuff can feel really *stupid* and silly and you enjoy being above it all but... on another level, some little part of you, maybe a naïve part, thinks 'but what if it's real? What if they really *are* going to brand me? What if I really am pledging my soul in defense of these oaths?'"

"They *brand* you?"

"No. Not that one, anyhow. They *had* a brand and said they were going to put it on your shoulder blade, they let you see it heating up, but when you turn your back... they build the whole thing up, they give you a stick to bite on and everything... but they swap out the actually hot brand for one that's been on ice, so it *feels* like you're getting branded, just for a second."

"Oh shit, that's fucked up!" Mick said admiringly.

"I mean, you hear everyone before you scream, and of course you scream, so the guy behind you hears that..."

"Doesn't anyone nope out at that point?"

"I don't think so! By that time, you're so far in to the ceremony, and nobody else has left, and everyone has told you it's going to be all right... yeah, we all just went along."

"Well damn."

Thad was quiet a moment. "So Jerry actually *did* have the brand. I found out later he'd gotten it done special, you know? By a professional."

"Sure." Mick pulled his collar down, revealing a stylized falcon tattooed across his collarbones. "The gal who did this does some scarification stuff too."

"OK."

"Anyhow. Jerry. The weird, intense guy."

"You can see how they appreciated him, but it also set him apart, right? On one hand, he showed us the brand and that really sold the con. But at the same time, for everyone else it got a little less Halloween and a little more Good Friday. If that Christian paradigm makes sense to you."

"No, I get it. You thought Jerry was cool and started hanging with him and he was like 'Oh, those jagoffs are fine for a laugh, but if you want more *hard-core* shit, lemme introduce you to my buddy who's a little bit out there.' Yeah?"

"Basically. His buddy was in a coven, and they took their stuff very seriously indeed."

"Which kind of coven?" Mick asked.

Thad frowned, and the drummer put his hands over his mouth with an embarrassed grimace.

"Oh shit! I didn't even mean to make that pun! You gotta believe me. I meant, was it Wicca or Satanism or some other thing?"

"They called themselves a 'Dark Feminine Arcane Constellation' and were terribly keen on Hecate."

"Sounds like a party."

"Very much not. Humorless, secretive, and utterly opposed to letting men in on their thing."

"Not into black eyeliner, fishnets and Inkubus Sukkubus albums then."

"C'mon."

Mick shrugged.

"Anyhow," Thad continued, "I couldn't get in on their ceremonies and rituals and secrets but, eh, there were some after parties and brunches and I started dating one of them, this woman named... er..."

"Are you making up a pseudonym?"

"Yes?"

"Call her 'Elvira.' That's a good witchy name," Mick suggested.

"If you like. Elvira. It wasn't really intense or... good, actually. And there were politics."

"When are there not politics?" Mick asked, finishing his drink.

"I don't mean right-left stuff, I mean interpersonal stuff."

"I could make a joke about how shocked I am, about that arising in a group that's 100% ladies but, eh, I'm tryin' a be more sensitive."

"...sure. Sure. Well, Elvira had it in for this other woman, let's call her... Gloria?"

"G-L-O-R-I-A, got it. Elvira makes a little LEGO witch-house, burns some of Gloria's hair?"

"No, no, they'd never use their powers for vengeance," Thad said earnestly. "They were always on and on about how any negative energy you summon redounds on you threefold. Or maybe it was sevenfold."

"Multiple folds."

"Elvira got Gloria kicked out, and Gloria... came to me."

"Oh?" Mick cocked an eyebrow. "This sounds kinda *spicy*."

"Not that kind of... well, there's aspects of the situation that... but Gloria mostly wanted to mess with Elvira through me and she had the impression that I was looking for something more. Magickally, I mean."

"Wait, so you were only dating Elvira to get to Hecate?"

Thad laughed uncomfortably and slurped the end of his second drink. "No, I was... hey, can we walk and talk a little? Actually, I'm going to hit the bathroom and we can continue when I get back?"

"I guess," Mick said, without much enthusiasm.

When Thad returned, Mick had settled up and was saying something that made the baristas laugh. He put his sunglasses on and the two of them walked out of the cafe.

"OK, if we're not inside, I should mic you, hold on," Mick said, rummaging in his bag. "We gotta get away from any traffic, too."

"Oh, I hadn't thought about..."

"Don't worry about it. Like I said, I want you to be comfortable talking, y'know?"



"I appreciate that," Thad said quietly.

After attaching small button mics to their collars and explaining that they were wireless, Mick led Thad away from the main streets, strolling into a residential neighborhood of split-level ranch houses in pastel browns and grays.

"Right," Mick said. "Where were we? Elvira and Gloria bickering, Gloria comes to you and does... what?"

"She tells me about Nimue."

"*Nimue.*"

"Names have been changed to protect..."

"Got it," Mick said. "So. Nimue."

"Nimue had gotten kicked out of the coven before I even met them, and Gloria told me Nimue had forgotten more than Elvira ever learned."

"Oh ho. So she's setting this thing up where you get a teacher on the side and Elvira gets jealous?"

"I don't really know. I think Elvira was one of the ones who got Nimue ejected? So yeah, I didn't tell her about it."

"Keeping secrets from your ladyfriend," Mick said ruefully, shaking his head but smiling a little. "It worked out great, didn't it?"

"It kind of did! Remember the thing about finding the weirdest person you know, then meeting the weirdest person *they* know? It was that again. Jerry to D... to Elvira, Elvira to, uh, Gloria, then Gloria to Nimue."

"So we're three weirds in."

"Yeah. Like three turns of the screw. Nimue was the one who had the *old* magick and... um, I think when she figured out it would piss off Elvira, she agreed to show it to me."

"Oh *damn!* So what's 'the old magick' then?"

"Stuff from grimoires and incunabula and old woodcut print books. Spells in Latin and Chaucer-era English. The real eye-of-newt stuff, black candles at midnight on Beltane and whatnot. She had this spell for making something called an 'unspeakable servant' where the instructions were to poke out your own eye!"

"Gnarly," Mick said, glancing at the levels on his recorder. "You didn't do that one?"

Thad sighed. "I was more interested in a love spell."

"Oh dude, no!"

"I... wasn't getting along great with Elvira."

"Clearly."

"And... I mean, she, um... would not have been my first pick from the coven in any event."

Mick winced. "*Dude*," he editorialized.

"Let's call her... uh..." He blinked hard, and Mick frowned as Thad's eyes reddened a little. "Let's call her Angel," he said, voice raw.

"Angel, Nimue, Gloria and Elvira. I'm gonna need a scorecard, playah."

"Angel was the only one who mattered," Thad said.

"What happened when you took your shot?"

Thad sighed. "It didn't... she didn't give me a chance, you know?"

"Mm, and it's scientific fact that every single woman alive owes every single man alive at least one chance," Mick said, with a little lip curl.

"Hey, are you...?"

"I probably am, yeah."

"Well quit it. I was in *love* with her."

"Nothin' bad ever happened after someone decided that," Mick muttered.

"We were right for each other! We *worked*, we made each other happy! I was right and I proved it!"

"OK, that sounds like a fairytale ending. How'd we get there?"

"I asked Nimue about love spells."

"...uh huh."

"And she had one, and it worked."

"How did it work?" Mick asked, voice and face equally skeptical. "Is this another thing where *maybe* the hocus pokery made you confident enough, or where she appreciated the gesture of you doing this weird wizard rite over her, or...?"

"She never knew I did it! I cast the spell and *that night* she showed up at my door! And it was... it was..." Thad's face crumpled up and he turned away.

"Wait, so you used magick to *force* her to love you?" Mick halted beside him and rubbed absently at his hip joint.

"I know that was wrong but it felt right! I didn't... I thought the curse would fall on me. Laur— I mean, N-Nimue, she said anything bad would be on me, not on her!"

"But you see how gross this is, right? I mean, did you watch *Jessica Jones* at all?"

"It wasn't like that! Once the spell was c-cast, she completely changed! She was... was..." He started weeping with great hitching sobs.

"What the hell, dude?"

*"It was all great until she died!"* Thad said.

"Aw shit." Mick rummaged in a side pocket of his satchel and pulled out a clean bandana. Thad blubbered into it a little before noting that it appeared to have a hand-batiked pattern of ginko leaves.

"What happened?" Mick asked.

"She got hit by a drunk driver."

"Aw man, that..." Mick looked away uneasily, as if he wanted to comfort Thad but was also disgusted.

*"And her body was all filled up with spiders!"*

Mick tilted his head. "Wait, what?"

"I was there man! I was watching her out the window when it happened and it was like she just blew up! Just spiders and white webs, and a minute before she was walking and talking and, and k-kissing me goodbye!" Thad was starting to hyperventilate.

"Right, how 'bout you sit your wizard ass down on the curb, put your head between your knees," Mick said firmly. "Deep breath in, *hold it*, OK, try again, deep breath and hold... good... breathe it alllll out, wait a sec, now another deep one, great. Yeah. You under control now?"

"I think so." Thad blew his nose, then apologetically folded the bandana so the goo was inside and handed it back.

"Er... just slide it in the side pocket of the bag there, how 'bout," Mick said, and Thad complied.

Mick sighed, and sat beside him, wincing and immediately straightening one leg.

"All right, so... so tell me about this curse and whatnot. What did 'Nimue' tell you, exactly?"

"She said the spell would enchant A-Angel to love me beyond all reason... but that after that, no one would ever love me unless I put the spell on them."

“Look man, I don’t think that could work.”

Thad turned and looked at him puzzled.

“What do you mean it couldn’t work?”

“Did you listen to my episode about the tooth guy? About how there are unnatural things that used to be people and how others never ever were people, even if they’re, like, man-shaped?”

“Yeah...”

“According to that guy, human will is *it*. It’s the bedrock foundation of, like, everything. What we remember as gods are just reflections of things enough people believed, and when enough of us believe enough the same, we can *destroy the world*. And this... this stacks up with a lot of stuff from my visions.”

“Visions?”

“I don’t get into ‘em on the podcast much,” Mick admitted, “Because it’s stuff you can’t say in words. I’ve tried to do songs that convey it but... I just don’t have the skills.”

“But she *showed up*.”

“Did she? Maybe the spell created some kind of pod person, body snatcher, golem thing.”

“No! She was *real*! I touched her!”

“I touched that tooth dude, and the potato thing slapped the crap out of me *and* a little girl,” Mick said.

“She went to her job, she, she interacted with her family, she went to her coven meetings, nothing changed except... that she loved me.”

“Beyond all reason,” Mick sneered.

“Listen man, maybe it’s easy for rock stars, but I’d pretty much resigned myself to nobody ever loving me *anyhow*, what did I have to lose?”

Mick smacked him. It was a backhand across the mouth, weighted with rings and hard enough that Thad’s teeth clicked together. The self-professed wizard was so surprised he tipped over on his side.

“What was *that* for?!?”

“There are two possibilities, *Thad*. One is that you did the magickal equivalent of a rohypnol rape on this woman you professed to *love*, only worse. The other is that you fucking killed her and replaced her with a walking mass of spiders and goo. Which you then had sex with.”

“What? What? That’s not... it’s not... that can’t...”

“The irony here is, if I’m right, the curse was bullshit *also*. Everything I seen and everything I understand says spells can’t make people choose or love or any of that. It might fool somebody, trick them, make them want something for a while, but it can’t force someone’s hand, like you think you did. I dunno. It’s what I hope, and that’s pretty bleak, because it means I hope you’re a murderer and not a spiritual rape-o.”

“Then how come nobody loves me, smart guy? How come the curse worked if the rest of it was some kind of sick bait and switch?”

Mick shrugged. “Maybe your belief made it a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we’re back to micro-expressions and subtle social cues. Maybe on some level, you believe yourself to be unlovable, and people pick up on that. Or maybe you’re a shitbird who never got the knack of fooling people.” With a grunt, he got to his feet.

“Well you... you’re an *asshole!*” Thad said, struggling until he was also standing. He made sure to stay out of the radius of Mick’s ropy arms. His mouth was bleeding a little bit.

“You could be right, but at least I never went where I wasn’t wanted or invited.”

Thad was beginning to hyperventilate again.

“You can forget using this recording! I withdraw my, my consent, you can’t put it on your podcast!”

“Oh, you withdraw your consent? You’re suddenly a huge consent fan, are you?”

“Shut up, you judgmental prick!” Thad started crossing the street and fast-walking back towards where his car was parked.

“If I’m wrong, *where did the spiders come from?*” Mick shouted at the back of the fleeing thaumaturge. The only reply he got was a barely-audible sob.

“What an asswipe,” Mick said, wincing at his sore hip as he started a slow amble back to his car.

He was inside, driving away, before he blinked hard, punched the steering wheel and said, “And that motherfucker walked off with my bluetooth collar mic!”