

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



Granny Vents

Mark Bastable

People find it amusing that my name is Howard Longfellow. It's a very easy laugh. I'm a scant half-inch under five feet tall – which is not the optimum stature for a thirty-year-old Corporate Accountant with designs on executive status. Over the years I've endured numerous humiliations directly attributable to the fact that, at the age of thirteen, I stopped growing – but there have been few occasions of shame more acute than that instigated by my boss in early December last year.

“Can you spare a minute, Howard?” asked Eveline Murray, closing the door of my office and arranging herself in the guest-chair.

“No, I can't, you condescending old witch,” I said. “Get your skinny, overpaid ass out of here and let me finish the fourth-quarter spreadsheets.”

Okay – I didn't say that. It's precisely what I say when I review the scene in my mind, but in real life I said, “Certainly – what can I do for you?”

“I guess you know I'm Chair of this year's Float Committee,” Eveline said, helping herself to the Lifesavers on my desk.

“Are you? I don't think I was told.”

This was as close as I dared get to insolence. During Finance Meetings for the past eight months I had regularly been stupefied by Eveline's hour-long tangents concerning our company's float in the city's Christmas parade. The theme, apparently, was Festive Music – bells that dingdong merrily, sleighs jing-jing-jingling, angel fanfares heralding the Christ-Child's birth.

“All the costumes have arrived, thank God,” Eveline continued. “Some committee members thought it was OTT to have them made especially, but nothing looks cheaper than an ill-fitting, off-the-peg Mother of God outfit. Frieda from Despatch is just precious in the bespoke one.”

I nodded obligingly. I was prepared to applaud any theatrical costumier who could present Forklift Frieda as a convincing virgin.

“Do the French hens look suitably Gallic?” I asked – not that I cared, but I felt I should contribute something to this fascinating exchange. I refrained from observing that the entire concept – which involved, amongst other anachronisms, two guys from Sales in shepherds' robes and our doddering old post-boy done up in chains and a nightie as Marley's ghost – was an absurd mish-mash of the sacred and the secular aspects of Yuletide. “Has Jack Zliekski slimmed down for his Santa role?”

“Everyone looks absolutely darling, believe me.”

“Good-oh.”

“But we have a problem with Marlys Humber, our Little Drummer Girl.”

“That's Boy, surely?”

Eveline raised an eyebrow so plucked it looked like a fracture in porcelain. “Are you suggesting, in contravention of Section Five of the company's inclusion policies, that women are less capable than men of fulfilling Little Drumming duties?”

I raised my hands. “I wouldn't dream of it. Ship in the Three Wise Women, that's my view.”

“Anyway, when Marlys volunteered late last April, she omitted to mention that she and her hubby were trying for a baby. They succeeded – in early May, by the look of her.”

This was true. Marlys was a Lilliputian waif but she appeared to be carrying an infant of Brobdingnagian proportions.

“It's so snafued,” Eveline continued. “Even if the skirt went around her bump, we can't have a Little Drummer Girl who's so obviously knocked-up. We'd be a laughing stock.”

“It would certainly undermine the project's carefully-orchestrated air of sombre religious observance, yes.”

Eveline leaned forward with her elbows on my desk. “So I thought to myself – who do we have in the company with the same build as Marlys, pre-bump?”

I said nothing. I was hoping – though I knew it was futile – that she actually expected me to suggest someone. Perhaps if I couldn't come up with an answer she'd sigh, get to her feet and leave, requesting that I drop her an e-mail if anything occurred to me.

Then again, perhaps not.

“Howard, I'm asking you as a colleague and friend. This isn't the Eveline who will be conducting your annual review on – have we agreed a date? – January 8th. I'm not here in my capacity as the superior who must recommend to the Board whether or not you should get a raise. I don't want you to take into account any sense of loyalty you may feel towards me as your boss, and I would be hurt – *hurt*, Howard – if you were to agree to do this merely because I signed you off for a week's compassionate leave when your grandfather died last summer. Forget all that. This is just one friend asking another friend for a favor, no more, no less.”

She smiled winsomely and lowered her eyes, looking at me from under her lashes.

I sighed a long, contemplative sigh. “Well, if you put it like that, Eveline – absolutely no chance at all. Not for ready money. Nuh-uh. No.”

The workmanship on Brooks Brothers suits – even the Junior Gent range from which I make my limited choice – is absolutely first-class. A person can be dragged over his desk by the lapels and the stitching doesn't even threaten to split.

“Listen, you short-ass little Limey freak,” Eveline hissed, her face an inch from mine, spraying me with shards of crunched Lifesaver “You're going to be my Little Drummer Girl next Wednesday, and you're going to smile right through like a happy moron, or you'll wind up as stuffing in the St Benedict Mission's goodwill turkey. Is that clear?”

I nodded as convincingly as one can when one's collar is around one's ears.

“Do I have to supply my own drumsticks?” I asked.

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When I got home I found a note attached to my front door with cinnamon gum.

Where are you? I didn't come all this way to spend Christmas in the bar across the street. But that's where I'll be for the next hour or two.

I recognised the handwriting as my grandmother's, which was a shock, because I thought she was at home in Sussex firing ink-pellets at her deceased husband's Siamese.

My grandfather, as Eveline mentioned, had died six months previously. Granny Rose, though upset, was set free by his demise. Before she married my paternal grandfather she had been a ventriloquist with a rather amusing twist: she was the dummy. As the curtain lifted, the audience would see the young Rose Gambon – as she was then – dressed in an Edwardian sailor suit and sitting on the knee of a mannequin that she worked with a lever in his back. Black lines were drawn from the corners of Granny's mouth to her chin, and she moved her

head jerkily from side to side when she spoke, as if the mannequin were an inexpert vent with a pretty but irreverent doll. Family reminiscence has it that the effect was both hilarious and unnerving.

The romance between Granny Rose and my grandfather was one of those Toff and the Showgirl things that seem to have been fashionable in the late sixties. It was made plain to the bride that the Mayfair pied-à-terre, the seventeen-bedroom mansion in the country, the dozen domestic staff and the use of the vintage Bentley were irreconcilable with second-on-the-bill Thursday matinees at the Hackney Empire. Rose's sailor suit, grandfather insisted, must be packed away and was not to reappear except for private command performances within the marital chamber.

Granny could see the sense in that, I suppose, but when she mothballed her costume she also consigned to the closet the adventurous, limelit, unconventional Rose Gambon who had determined at the age of sixteen to go on the road with a seven-foot tailor's dummy and a wig of golden ringlets. Not surprisingly, Grandad's death cued the reanimation of Granny's long-repressed predispositions.

"Hello, Granny," I said. She was playing pool with a trucker, and beating him too, though she had to move a beer crate around the table to reach the balls. One of the things I like about Granny Rose – and there are many – is that I tower over her. She's not a dwarf – no more than I am – she's just really, really tiny. Perfectly proportioned, she looks like a promotional sample of a larger person.

"Hello, squirt," Granny Rose smiled, taking the cue-ball off three rails and pocketing the nine. "My, how you haven't grown."

We dined downtown at a fancy Italian place with a sofa from which they were happy to borrow a couple of cushions for Granny Rose so that she could reach the cutlery. Granny seems totally unabashed about making such demands. Me, I'd rather drag forkfuls of spaghetti over the edge of the plate onto my head than admit I need a boost.

Having chatted about family and home, we turned our thoughts to plans for Christmas, which led, naturally, to my role as the company's Little Drummer Girl - and my lack of enthusiasm for the idea. If I was looking for sympathy from Granny Rose, I was soon disabused of that expectation.

"Oh, what fun!" she giggled. "I do love a parade."

"The whole charade will be humiliating beyond compare," I insisted. "I may be forced to resign before Wednesday."

"Don't be such a grump," Granny twinkled, lobbing a poppyseed roll at my forehead. "Life's too short to sulk." She poured herself another glass of wine, holding the bottle in both tiny hands. "I shall do your make-up for you."

"Oh, goodie," I muttered. "That's all right then."

My trout arrived and I groaned. Nothing was going well today.

“I do wish they wouldn’t leave the head on like this,” I told Granny as I squeezed lemon on the fish. “I hate the way the damn thing looks at you so accusingly.” I poked it with the tip of my knife.

“Yow!” said the trout. “Careful, you oaf!”

I leapt backwards, dropping the cutlery and knocking over my wineglass.

Granny erupted into peals of delighted laughter.

“Once a vent, always a vent,” she tittered.

“Man, that’s one talented little old woman,” remarked the peppermill.

“She’s still got it,” the salt-cellar agreed.

It was going to be a lively Christmas.

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I shall gloss over the details of the parade itself. I record only that the spangled hose, the scarlet skirt and the braided tunic were a disconcertingly perfect fit, and that Granny’s expertise with theatrical make-up did not, as I’d hoped, disguise my identity, but somehow managed to enhance my admittedly delicate and feminine features. I stood on the prow of the float, cringingly conspicuous in my plumed majorette’s bonnet, praying for death and miming paradiddles on my beglittered little drum.

The company had hired a suite of rooms at the Carlton, from the windows of which corporate high-ups and the participants’ families might watch the parade. The cast, as Eveline referred to her press-ganged mummers, congregated there after the event.

“Splendid!” Granny Rose beamed as I tottered in clutching my drumsticks. “Did you see me wave?”

I’d had my eyes shut from the moment that the float left the garage in mid-town until it had stopped on the jetty three hours later – so, no, I’d hadn’t seen her wave.

“Sit down, squirt, and I’ll get you a drink. What do Little Drummer Girls like best?”

I hoiked myself up into an armchair. “A triple vodka will be fine, thank you.”

As Granny beetled away, Eveline slid towards me, grinning like a gator.

“A triumph, Howard! The Board and all our corporate guests are raving about the entire show!” She gulped down a straight brandy in one. “They’re very impressed.”

“Hurrah,” I intoned disinterestedly, kicking the toe of one MaryJane against the heel of the other.

“Susan White is most taken with you. You know Susan? Chief buyer for the Micklewhite chain?”

I did not know Susan, but I knew Micklewhite’s – our biggest client up and down the West Coast.

“Let me get changed and I’ll come over and schmooze,” I said. “Point her out to me.”

“Oh, God, no – don’t change. She just loves the outfit.” Eveline leaned down so that her mouth was close to my ear. “I think that whole get-up makes her feel kind of – shall we say – restless?”

Over Eveline’s shoulder I could see a tall, blonde, solid-looking woman – a Vuitton Valkyrie – winking at me and licking her lips. I felt like a tethered goat.

“As it happens,” Eveline continued, straightening up, “Susan and a few other ladies from the industry are taking dinner at my apartment on the twenty-third. And I thought it would be simply thrilling if you were to come along in your darling get-up. You know – just to serve drinks and generally look pretty. It would be such a fun treat for everyone.”

Need I record the exchange that followed? Suffice it to say that the still-vacant body cavity of the St Benedict Mission’s goodwill turkey was a central element of Eveline’s pitch.

“Five o’clock on the twenty-third, then,” the gator was saying as Granny Rose returned with my drink. “I’ll e-mail you the address.”

“Hello,” Granny said cheerfully. “I’m Rose Longfellow. What’s this about the twenty-third?”

Eveline looked around, puzzled.

“Down here,” Granny said.

“Oh, my God!” Eveline exclaimed, finally locating my ancestor looking up at her from the carpet. “It’s a tiny little woman!”

“I ask,” Granny continued, completely unconcerned, “because I’ve booked for Howard and I to attend the opera. *Carmen*, actually. I had to arm-wrestle a Mafia hitman in the queue at the box-office to get the last two tickets, so I’m determined to attend.”

The combative detail – which, knowing Granny, may well have been true – was a polite way of warning Eveline that no argument would be brooked concerning this clash of commitments. The note of caution was lost on my boss. She went down on her haunches and took Granny’s minuscule hand, which she patted.

“Ah, I’m sorry, sweetie,” she smiled. “Duty calls for little Howard. It’s very important that he does as I ask. It’s all about grown-up things, you see.”

I winced. It wasn’t, I think, that Eveline believed Granny was a child. But there is something about being tiny that makes people treat you as a harmless simpleton. It’s an insensitive and dangerous mistake to make around my grandmother, who is completely inured to jokes about

her height – indeed, she makes very good jokes about it herself – but who draws the line at unflattering assumptions concerning her intelligence.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do to make it up to you,” Eveline continued, still clasping Granny’s hand. “I’ll arrange for a carriage to take you around the city on Christmas Eve. Just you and Howard. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Seeing the horsie and riding around looking at the pretty lights and the big tall buildings? Hm?”

Granny Rose smiled sweetly and said, “Thank you very much, ma’am,” at which point I knew that Eveline was in very deep trouble. Had Granny reacted there and then, her vengeance would have been brief though unpleasant. But her sugary acceptance of Eveline’s ill-judged condescension presaged a terrible and calculated reckoning.

Eveline patted Granny on the head and – oh, God, no – pinched her rosy cheek saying, “You’re just cute as a little button.”

I considered the possibility of a career change. Llama-herding in Peru, maybe.

“Serve drinks? Look pretty?” Granny squealed in the cab home. “Who the hell does that reptilian harpy think she is?”

“She thinks she’s my boss, Granny.”

“Howard, I am disappointed in you. Where’s the self-respect your mother taught you? ‘Like to see the horsie?’ Oh, that madam is going to learn not to patronise me.” She leaned forward to the driver. “Excuse me, my man - is there a theatrical costume store in this town?”

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On the twenty-third I arrived at Eveline’s apartment punctually, pulling an overnight-case-on-wheels and carrying a heart heavy with anticipatory trepidation. My boss opened the door wearing a terry robe, her face covered with some sort of pale pink gunk.

“You’ll have to change in my bedroom,” she said, taking a glug from a large tumbler of brandy. “You have about twenty minutes while I soak in the tub. Then you can put out some glasses and appetisers while I’m dressing.” She knocked back the last of her drink, poured another, bumped into a low table and made her way unsteadily to the bathroom.

“And a very merry Christmas to you too,” I murmured.

The most charitable description of Eveline’s bedroom would be that it was a shrine to her inner child. Done out in nauseous pastels, it was crammed with baleful teddy bears, sullen china dolls, a plush menagerie of cerise chimpanzees, azure elephants, chartreuse lions and candy-striped tigers. Winnie-the-Pooh reclined against the bed-pillows like a honeyed Buddha and the slippers on the rug were fat, red ladybugs with long curled eyelashes. As I changed into my costume, I realised that the infantile design and choreography of the company float made perfect sense. Eveline Murray was no more than an over-indulged, acquisitive little girl in Chanel and Jimmy Choos. I pitied any man who might be expected to sustain amorous intentions in this temple of tawdry juvenilia.

“Are you done in there?” Eveline demanded, rattling the handle.

I zipped up the empty case and wheeled it into a corner before opening the bedroom door. I was carrying Granny’s make-up bag.

“You can do your face in the bathroom,” Eveline said. “I have to dress.”

“Thank you,” I said as she went into the bedroom and closed the door. I walked over to the drinks cabinet and poured myself a vodka. Then I went back to the bedroom door and, very quietly, I locked it with the key I had taken from the inside. Satisfied, I sat on the sofa, put my MaryJaned feet on the coffee table and smiled.

It’s amazing what you can fit into a small overnight case if you pack it right.

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Eveline Murray poured herself another brandy from the bottle stashed in her night-stand and went to the closet. She was still undecided whether to go for the long scarlet or the mid-length midnight-blue. She pondered the options as she put on her underwear and picked out black lace stockings with little Christmas bells along the seams.

“Blue, I thi-*hic* think,” she said aloud, holding the dress against herself and scanning up and down in the mirror.

“Dat vun make your neck look old,” remarked a teddy bear in lederhosen.

“It does not!” Eveline replied indignantly. “I have the neck of a swan. A swan!”

“Neck of a turkey, more like,” a British-bobby doll put in. “What a wattle!” And he sniggered.

It was the snigger, we decided later, that cut through the haze of alcohol to Eveline’s muddled perceptions. She wasn’t used to being sniggered at, and the bobby’s evident lack of respect focussed her on the unusual provenance of the insult. She screamed and fell back on the bed.

“Drunk again?” asked Nurse Barbie solicitously. “Now what have we said about drinking too much, Evie?”

Eveline scrambled off the bed and made for the door, tugging desperately at the handle to very little effect. She was trapped with the censorious toys.

“Sit down on the bed, little girl.”

Trembling, Eveline turned. Lying crookedly on the wide windowsill amongst the lambs and the Raggedy-Annes was a large doll that she could not remember buying. It was dressed in a green elfin tunic and little pointy boots. Its beaky moulded-rubber mask of a face was wrinkled and ancient, topped off with a furred red cap that sported a silver bell. And as Eveline watched, the doll shifted and the silver bell jingled. The doll’s eyes opened and they, unlike the dead latex visage, were alive and blue and twinkling.

“Oh my God,” Eveline breathed.

The elfin doll sat up slowly and then slid feet-first onto the floor where it stood for a few moments, twisting its head from side to side, as if loosening a stiff neck. Then it looked at Eveline.

“Have you been naughty or nice?” it asked in a thin whisper.

“Nice!” Eveline gasped. “Very, very nice!”

The elf raised one hand, the fingers drooping to show long yellow nails.

“No. If you had been nice, I wouldn’t look like this,” it insisted in a sibilant croak. “I’m your personal Christmas elf, Eveline. I am your very own Christmas spirit. Do I look like you’ve been nice?”

Eveline sat down heavily on the bed and raised her glass to her mouth, her eyes fixed on the hideous elf.

“I did the - *hic* - the float,” she said, gulping back tears and brandy. “Everyone loved it! That’s nice!”

The elf took one unsteady, stiff-legged step forward, the cap-bell jingling. “You bullied your co-workers into it, didn’t you? You humiliated them and you took all the credit. Is that nice?”

“It was all for the company!” Eveline sobbed, chewing her lip. “It’s my job!”

“It was for all Eveline,” the elf said. “Everything you do is for Eveline. Listen. Are you listening?”

Eveline nodded, the cut glass tumbler chinking against her teeth as she glugged her brandy.

“When you were a little girl, I was beautiful and sprightly. I was delightful and delighted.” The elf took another teetering step forward. And then another. “I loved Christmas as you loved it – the gifts, the tree, the family feast. Do you remember?”

Again Eveline nodded as she backed away across the bed, unable to take her eyes from the approaching elf.

“It’s good for little girls to enjoy Christmas like that. Taking presents, eating too much, running around in the flickering glow of candles, demanding attention.” The elf was beside the bed now, and its wrinkled, claw hands were resting on the counterpane “But little girls are supposed to grow up, Evie. They are supposed to give gifts. They are supposed to deliver joy. Little girls should become grown-ups and do generous grown-up things.”

Eveline’s back was squashing Winnie-the-Pooh against the bedhead by now. She pulled her knees to her chest, desperate to get away from the relentless, accusing elf that was now pulling itself slowly up onto the comforter by its crooked hands.

“I’m sorry! Really I am! I’m so sorry,” little Evie blubbered. “I didn’t realise!”

“Look at me, Evie,” the elf rasped, crawling slowly on all fours across the bed. “Look at what I have become. Look at what you are inside. Neglected, dried out, made ugly by your childish egotism, your intimidating self-regard.”

“What can I do? What can I do?” Eveline pleaded. “I’ll do anything!”

She shrieked as the elf took her left hand in its own and patted it.

“Be nice. That’s all. Be nice.”

“I will! I’ll be so nice. I promise I will!” Eveline jabbered, shrinking from the hooked nose and the skewer-point eyes of her Christmas spirit.

“I know you will,” breathed the elf. And it raised its hand towards Eveline’s face and pinched her cheek and waggled the flesh. “I know you’ll be just as cute as a little button, Evie. Won’t you?”

But there was no reply. Eveline Murray had passed out cold, her tumbler spilling in her lap, dribbling brandy over her thighs onto the comforter.

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I have no idea what happened about the dinner party with our clients. Granny and I left the apartment door open so that the guests could get in and presumably bring their hostess back to the land of the high-living. By that time we had been to my place, got changed and were taking a small dry sherry before the opera.

But the following morning, Christmas Eve, there was a knock at the door of my place and standing in the hall was Eveline Murray carrying a bottle of champagne and a Santa teddy bear.

“I’ve come to apologise,” she said. “May I step inside?”

“Hello there,” said Granny Rose from the sofa. “Eveline, isn’t it?”

Eveline sat down, accepted a glass of cranberry juice – “I’m off the booze for a while.” – and told me how sorry she was to have humiliated me, bullied me and generally exploited me.

“Not just these last few days,” she said. “Over the whole year. I should have known better.”

I thanked her guardedly. This all seemed much too good to be true. I mean, I know how talented Granny Rose is, and her account of what went on in Eveline’s bedroom certainly came over as a convincing Damascene conversion, but I hadn’t expected champagne and contrition. I would have settled for much less from my boss – say, a complete nervous breakdown and six months in a rest home.

“Here,” Eveline said, offering me the Santa teddy. “A symbolic gift, the Christmas spirit and all that.”

“How sweet,” Granny remarked as I took the bear.

“And I have something for you too, Granny Rose” Eveline said, reaching into her bag. “I was pretty horrible the first time we met, wasn’t I?”

“Well, perhaps you weren’t yourself,” Granny suggested.

“Oh, I was,” Eveline said, offering Granny a gift-wrapped box. “That was the problem. But if I wasn’t myself the first time we met, then you weren’t yourself the second time, were you, Granny?”

From the box Granny took a doll – a Christmas elf doll with a delighted, fresh-faced smile and a furry hat topped off with a little silver bell.

“It’s lovely,” Granny said. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. Really you are.”

Granny held the elf up to face Eveline Murray.

“Happy Christmas, little Evie,” the elf said. “Nice to see you again.”