

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



Charlie's Plan Mark Bastable

You know those things kids make out of a square of paper, that you operate with thumbs and forefingers, and you lift a flap to see the message? I just made one, using a sheet of hotel writing paper. I'm delighted with it.

And because I've made this little origami contraption, tonight I shall dare to say something that I have wanted to say for forty years.

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I'm amazed that I remembered how to do the folding. My sister taught me one long-ago summer, sitting at the family dining table – solid oak, enormous, shiny. Warm sunshine streamed in through the French windows that led to the garden. I was twelve, so Jo was fourteen.

“You fold the corners into the middle, see? Turn it over and do it again. Then in half.” She laid it on the table and rummaged through her pencil case for a felt-tip. “Now you write colours on the outside - red...blue...green...yellow.” Jo had beautiful handwriting – script was art to her. “And numbers on the inside.”

Though fascinated by the artisanship, I was nonplussed.

“What's it for?”

“Hang on – I have to write dares under the flaps. Just wait.”

I looked out across the lawn, where Dad was putting up a khaki tent for us to play in.

“Alright – pick a colour,” Jo said. The flat folded paper had magically become a sort of pyramid on her fingers. When I chose ‘green’, Jo spelt the word out loud and the device opened and closed like a sea anemone.

She showed me the inside. “Pick a number.”

“Three.”

“One, two, three. And another number.”

“Four.”

“One, two, three, four. And last number.”

“Four again.”

Jo turned the device towards her, and lifted the flap marked ‘4’.

“Oh! ‘Kiss me!’”

“What? No!”

“You have to, Charlie! That’s the rule.” She offered her cheek.

I humphed and kissed her cheek. After all, a rule’s a rule, as Dad always said.

“Can I try?”

“Here - you can have it. Put your fingers like this...”

*

On the last day of July, I would throw on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, grab a box of Ritz crackers from the larder, then run out into the woods, not to be seen again till September. Well, that was the idea. In fact, I’d eat all the crackers by dusk and be home for dinner. But my instinct was to seek solitude beyond the garden.

“Why don’t you come into town with me and Josephine?” my mother would say. Despite our protests, she only ever used our given names ‘because they’re the names we chose for you – precisely those, not something similar.’

She picked up her handbag. “We can get you some new jeans. Surely you don’t want to spend all summer just dangling your feet in the stream. Oh, that reminds me - school shoes. I must write that down.”

“Dad spends hours by the stream.”

“He’s fishing. That’s how he relaxes.”

“Me too then.”

“Just sitting by the stream – at your age? You’re a strange one.”

Jo smirked, brushing her hair. “Yeah, you’re a strange one, Charlie.”

“Quite,” Mum chuckled. “Come along, Josephine. Let’s go.”

I went to sit with my dad quite often. We didn’t speak much. We just gazed at the water together. I liked the way there’d be a still patch of water right next to a constantly spinning eddy. That’s how I felt in the family – like I was still and Dad was still and Jo and Mum were spinning. It was the way we flowed. Mum and Jo went into town, buying shoes and having coffee and meeting people. Dad and I sat by the water, watching metal-blue dragonflies flitting hither and thither, and the implacable heron motionless on the far bank.

I sat with Dad the afternoon that Jo made me the paper thing. He had one line in the stream, and he was baiting a second.

“Dad, pick a colour.”

He looked up from his hook. “Ha! I haven’t seen one of those in years. Go on then – red.”

“R. E. D. Now pick a number.”

We ended up lifting flap number two.

“Moonwalk!”

“Do what?”

“I don’t know – Jo wrote them.”

Dad looked at his watch. “Nearly six. We’ll have to get back soon. The Clarksons are coming to dinner.”

“All of them?”

“Yes, I think so. And I want you to take part, please, Charlie. No sloping off to your room straight after dessert.”

“No, okay.”

I had no intention of sloping off – not if Annie was coming. My mirror-still little heart erupted in bubbles at the very thought.

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Teaching Sociology at UCLA, I’m often asked about the source of my socio-political ideas.

I think that the division of labour between my parents was crucial. Mum was an architect, and she commuted to London every day – rarely home before eight at night. Dad had been a teacher, but all he really wanted to do was make lasagne and write gumshoe novels. So that was their arrangement, and it never struck us kids as odd. Indeed, I’m told that as a toddler I asked a neighbour’s mother whether she was home because she was sick.

Dad taught me and Jo to cook, to tend the garden, to use a potter’s wheel, to construct an argument on the page. The dextrous stuff was always beyond me, but Jo totally took to it – which is how she ended up producing crockery for a living. Last week I was shopping for wedding presents on Melrose Avenue and I saw a dinner service made by my sister labelled at three thousand dollars. Three thou! I should have paid more attention to Dad.

Then again, I do rustle up a killer lasagne and Jo can’t even make a convincing cheese sandwich. I raised this when she came to the hotel yesterday.

“Rather than a restaurant,” she said, “I thought we could picnic in the park.” She held up a little wicker basket.

“Oh, God, you haven’t made sandwiches, have you?”

“Don’t worry. I bought stuff from M&S.”

We found a spot near the river, just down from the bridge.

“Excited about next Saturday then?” I asked, as she popped a bottle of pink champagne.

“More happy than excited. My first time I was excited and anxious. This time I’m happy and relaxed.” She handed me some bubbly. “Plastic glasses, I’m afraid.”

“Cheers. Look, without getting sappy about it, I’m absolutely thrilled to be giving you away. I mean, I suspect Andy’s family think it’s a bit weird, me doing it.”

“It could only ever be you, Charlie. Family.”

“Yeah - we’re all we’ve got now,” I said, taking a sip. “So who’s at dinner tomorrow?”

“Just you, me and the bridal party – Lucie, Kim and Annie.”

“Great. How are they all?”

Jo grinned. “You’re so transparent. You mean ‘how’s Annie?’”

“Shut up.”

*

Jo knows now, but back then my feelings for Annie were unspoken - as were my feelings about so many things, right into my twenties. For many years, that one summer night in the tent with Annie represented all my confusions, all my secrets. Annie was the first emotional puzzle I ever encountered, and the only one I never resolved.

When I was twelve, she was fifteen. She had eyes as dark and exciting as a path into the forest, and a smile as bright as August sky glimpsed through the canopy of branches. I'd known her all my life, but I'd developed a breath-gulping crush on her only since our two families vacationed together the previous Easter.

Not that I could tell anyone. After all, she was Jo's friend, and I was sure that my sister would disapprove. And she was older. Three whole years. Back then I had no language for my feelings. If I said anything, I'd humiliate myself. No one would understand.

I gazed at her over dinner that night, mooningly impressed by the way she wound spaghetti onto her fork freehand, without using a spoon. Her mother prompted her to tell us all about her part in the school production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

"It's all Charleston and flapper dresses. A total riot!"

I had no idea what a flapper dress was, but I felt I'd pass clean out if ever I were to see her in one.

After dinner, everyone stayed round the table talking, Jo and Annie included in the adults' to-and-fro. I didn't speak – I was concentrating on the task at hand. I had utterances to hang on every word of. I had smiles to memorise.

"We should get going," Annie's dad said, draining his glass. "It's a long walk back."

"Why don't you stay over?" Mum said. "There's plenty of room."

"Oh!" Jo said. "Can we sleep out in the tent? Me and Annie?"

My dad caught my expression – a collage of longing, indignation and dismay, I imagine.

"Charlie too, of course," he said quietly, looking at Jo.

Jo was about to protest – but you didn't argue with Dad when he looked at you like that.

"Of course Charlie too. That's what I meant."

Later – in my teens and twenties – Dad supported me through a lot of very difficult stuff. He didn't ever falter. But I have never in my life been so grateful for his care of me as I was at that moment.

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It was a clear, humid night – too warm for sleeping bags – with a bright full moon. The tent was barely big enough for three of us. I lay between Annie and Jo, and they talked across me. I clasped the paper toy in my hand, but I didn't intend to mention it – not yet. I had a plan.

I won't try to build the tension. It was a terrible plan – ill-conceived, heavily dependent on fortuitous circumstance and unlikely to succeed even if things went well. But I was in love, and blinded by optimism.

Jo would fall asleep. I would chat quietly with Annie, and casually introduce the origami

thing. She'd be very willing to give it a go. She – here's the really shaky part of the scheme – would pick flap 4. I'd reveal that it said 'Kiss me!' And she, surprised but delighted, would do just that.

Yep – I know. That's how smart the whole thing was.

Jo did indeed fall asleep first. And I introduced the origami. And Annie did give it a go. And she chose flap 6.

'Squeak like a piglet.'

She did, and laughed. Then she turned over and went to sleep.

I just lay there, staring at the roof of the tent, gulping back tears and trying to work out where it had all gone wrong. It was a decade or more before it occurred to me that I should have got *her* to operate the device so that *I* could pick the number 4 myself.

What an idiot.

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"She's divorced now," Jo said, repacking the wicker basket. "But you knew that."

"I didn't!"

"Must be three years."

"Any new love interest?"

"You're totally shameless, Charlie."

"Just kidding."

"There's no one serious that I know of. But she has been...umm...experimenting. Broadening her horizons."

"No!"

"Yep. Quite successfully, it seems."

I knocked back the champagne and poured another.

"Do you remember making me that paper thing with the numbers and colours?" I said as I topped up Jo's glass.

"The Dare Machine. Did I make one for you?"

"Yeah. The night of the tent."

"The which of the what?"

“When I get back to the hotel, I’m going to make another one. And I shall write ‘Kiss me’ on every flap.”

“You’ve lost me.”

I pushed my hair off my face, considering how to speak to Annie. “I’ll get it right this time.”

Jo leaned back on the picnic rug, propped on one elbow. She lifted her glass.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said. “But as Mum so often observed, you are a very strange one, Charlie.”

I smiled. “Except she would have said ‘Charlotte’.”

“Yes, she would,” Jo nodded. “Indeed she would.”