

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable

The Watch Mark Bastable



Robin Pride’s girlfriend gave him a watch for his thirty-second birthday. As he’d turned up half-an-hour late at the restaurant, claiming to have been misled by the clock in The Blue Posts, it was an apposite gift.

“It’s a special watch,” Karen told him, as he poured two glasses of Cava. “It’s actuarial.”

“Actually what?” frowned Robin, exhaling cigarette smoke. “Cheers. Here’s to me.”

Karen explained. You programmed in your age, habits, stuff like that, and the watch figured out how long you were statistically likely to live. And then it started counting backwards from your calculated moment of death. It was a laugh.

“Oh, charming,” Robin muttered. “Aren’t you going to finish that g’n’t? Great – give it here.”

The following day at work, between meetings with clients, Robin took the watch from his jacket pocket, and opened the accompanying instruction booklet. He grinned. Give it a go, eh? It took him a while to figure out which button you were supposed to press whilst simultaneously holding down which other button, but pretty soon he was scrolling through the codes on the LCD, and filling in his details.

Single. 32 years old. Height. Weight. Fags per day – well, twenty, give or take. Units of alcohol per week. Fifty. No – fair enough, sixty. Hours of exercise. Where’s the button for bugger-all? Number of sexual partners per annum? Say eight – been a quiet year, hadn’t it?

When he’d finished, he hit the tit and the LCD blinked for a couple of seconds, and then displayed:

19.10.05.04.33

Robin was startled. “Nineteen years, ten months, five days, four hours and thirty-three minutes. Blimey,” he said aloud. “Oops - thirty-two minutes....”

The watch was counting down, blinking every second or two. Robin watched it for a while.

19.10.05.04.32

blink

19.10.05.04.32

blink

19.10.05.04.32

blink

19.10.05.04.31

“Ah, load of old crap,” he muttered. He shoved the watch in his top drawer, and went down to the smoking room for a fag.

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A fortnight later, Robin came down with a very nasty case of flu that turned into bronchitis and then pneumonia. He was off work for five weeks, with Karen coming round every couple of days with soup and milk and little kisses on the forehead. And also Debbie popping in the odd evening, just to keep her hand in, as it were.

When Robin eventually got back to work, there were seven hundred unopened e-mails waiting, a stack of paper like Canary bloody Wharf and yellow Post-Its three deep all over his screen.

“Kin marvellous,” he said, patting the pockets of his jacket for fags. None there, of course. He hadn’t had a cigarette for a month. He opened the drawer for his emergency pack, and saw the watch.

19.08.17.12.08, it read.

Robin looked at it for a few moments, and then picked it up, frowning. He coughed – his chest still wasn’t right. And he mused. Just out of interest... he thought.

He fiddled with the buttons, scrolling through the codes, and changed the fags per day to zero. The watch blinked at him, and then popped up the new calculation.

27.11.12.09.09

“Fuck me,” Robin said aloud. “Better than eight years. Christ.”

“Hey, Robbo! Good to see you back!” It was Davey, from the next cubicle, peering over the partition. He rattled his matches in his hand. “Come and have a coffin-nail, I’ll fill you in on the latest.”

Robin looked up, and wrinkled his nose. “No thanks, mate. Got too much to do. Maybe later, yeah?” He gave Davey a thumbs-up as he turned to go, and then put the watch back in the drawer, and started working through the pile of paper teetering in his in-tray.

There was a gym in the basement of the office block, and the following week, Robin went down to have a look at it. Not to *join*. No, no, not to join. Just to see if there was any useful talent knocking about down there. And there was, as it happens. So he joined. Coupla times a week, couple of hours per time. And definite come-on from a very nice Asian girl called Henna or something. So why not?

Then again, given how he was doing the work, he couldn’t see any reason not to stick it into the watch and see what happened. And what happened was a gain of three years. *Three whole years!* And that was just a few bench-presses. If he were to up his gym visits to, what, every day, say three hours a day – which he did...

35:03:28:08:32, the watch told him.

Blimey. That’d put him at sixty-seven-odd before he finally fell off the perch. Cannot be bad, can it?

After that, the booze went, which put on about three-and-a-half years, and so did the extracurricular birds. Debbie wasn’t too pleased, what with being second in line, sorta thing. But it was worth it - four guaranteed years for monogamy, apparently. His life expectancy was up to the low seventies, and the countdown on the watch had broken the forty year barrier. On top of that, Karen was impressed with his new toned body, and the sex was just fanfuckingtastic.

You had to keep an eye on yourself, of course. Not get too obsessive. One evening, at a restaurant with Kazza, he got served the vegetarian lasagne instead of the beef one. Just for a laugh, he took the watch off – he wore it all the time now – and pressed buttons to tell it that he never ate meat.

“What are you doing?” Karen asked, irritatedly.

“Trying something – hang on.”

“Christ, Rob – I wish I’d never bought you that bloody thing.”

Robin watched the watch think, and then he tutted. “Look,” he said, holding it out to Karen. “A poxy nine months extra for being a veggie. Not worth it, is it? I mean, quality of life and all that.”

“I’m sure,” Karen said, boredly.

In the end, Karen had to go. She was stress, see? Grief. Stress can take years off you. Literally, *years*. What you need, Robin discovered by tinkering, is regular sex but no stress. And that means no permanent girlfriend – just someone casual for the occasional legover, that’s what you want. And *definitely* no kids. Kids are a killer. You might as well smoke, frankly.

Robin had his years-to-go up to forty-five by now – bloody nearly forty-six, in fact. And he wasn’t greedy. That’d do him. No point in getting silly about it, is there?

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“We’re just taxi-ing to the end of the runway now, and we’ll be in the air in about five minutes.”

Robin sipped his orange juice and looked out of the window at Chicago O’Hare. It was his thirty-fifth birthday, and he’d celebrated by reeling in the biggest deal his company had ever secured. He glanced up the aisle of the first-class compartment, and caught the eye of the brunette stewardess who’d greeted him as he’d boarded. She was definitely interested. Definitely. And, as it happened, he had a vacancy in the crumpet department since he’d had to shuck the dress-designer. Getting too clingy, see? Giving stress. But long-haul crew were always good – bugging off for days at a time, never ringing up unexpectedly. You knew where you were with stewardesses. They were low-sodium relationships.

And, hello, here she was weaving down the aisle towards him. Course she was. She was only human.

“Excuse me, sir. Just so I know later – are you the gentleman who ordered the vegetarian meal?”

“That’s me,” Robin said, grinning. “I’m very particular what I put in my mouth.”

“Aren’t we all?” the stewardess replied, archly, turning to go.

Green light, or fucking what? So that was the birthday dinner sorted, anyway.

The engines of the plane wound up with a growl, and the Jumbo started forward. Robin glanced at his watch.

43:01:12:12:08, it told him, reassuringly. And then, suddenly, it blinked rapidly and changed.

24:09:01:17:54

Robin went cold. He gulped and felt panicky. He tapped the face of the watch with his fingertip. What the fuck was it playing at? As the plane climbed into the Chicago sky, Robin

shook his wrist, and smacked the watch with his palm. Twenty-four years? What was all that about?

The cabin speakers pinged, the seatbelt sign went off and the watch blinked again.

43:01:12:12:01, it said, as if nothing had happened.

It must have been the change in pressure, or something, Robin thought. Or a time-zone thing. But he wasn't convinced. He kept glancing at the watch every five minutes, all the way to London. It just kept counting down, regularly and methodically, as it had for the past three years. Blink, blink. Robin felt more relaxed as they began the descent into Heathrow. He did up his seatbelt and stowed his table when asked, and shifted his seat into the upright position. He felt the plane tipping sideways to straighten to the runway, and he looked at his watch again.

29:06:28:18:41

Jesus! What was going on here? Bloody unreliable piece of crap!

This time Robin was really shaken. If he couldn't believe the watch, what was all this health and clean-living and giving things up all about? Like – did he have forty-odd years or not? Why couldn't the damn thing make up its fucking mind?

But, again, as soon as the plane touched down, the watch reverted to its expected prediction, and stayed that way right through Customs and Passport Control, right out to the street, where Robin hooked up with the stewardess, Leila, and hailed a cab to take them into town.

It was Leila, in fact, who gave him the clue. They were talking idly after sex, and he was asking whether she really thought all that malarkey about inflatable vests and blowing your stupid whistle was any good at all – and she said, “No – not really. If you're going to crash, it'll be at take-off or landing. Once you're up there, you're pretty safe.”

And that was it, of course. Take-off and landing are the risky bits. That's when your life-expectancy drops, statistically speaking. And the watch – incredibly fucking clever, when you think about it – reflected those odds.

The following day, Robin did a couple of experiments. He went up to the High Street, and bought a packet of fags. Standing outside the newsagent, he smoked one. It knocked three hours off his life. He grinned. Extra time in the gym would put the hours back – but he'd figured the damn thing out. He was standing by the traffic lights, which were green to the cars. Across the street, the red man was illuminated against pedestrians. Robin looked both ways, and then strolled across the road, looking at the watch. It dropped about fifteen years the second he stepped off the kerb, and then bounced back up again when he reached the other side.

Robin stood outside the baker's and laughed and laughed.

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He found it entertaining at first, seeing the watch calculate every little statistical risk. He liked to play tricks on it. He deliberately inhaled in smoky pubs, and the watch would blink madly and knock a few minutes off. Then he'd jog back up the hill to his house and it'd adjust his time again. He varied his walking speed so that the watch would have to keep rethinking, and the figures would appear to stand still, because he was earning minutes at exactly the same rate he was spending them. Robin imagined its little electronic brain in there, going, "Damn! Wait a sec. I got it...Oh, shit, he's eating white bread now."

But eventually, he stopped noticing, or minding. He'd reached a kind of equilibrium with the watch, and knew that, give or take a few months, he couldn't get much better than an age-at-death of seventy-nine. As long as he was in that region, he was happy.

The years passed. The stewardesses and the personal trainers and the minor TV celebs came and went. Robin got richer, became a bit famous in his field, and stayed fit and healthy. He was nearly forty years old and by anyone's standards, he was doing all right.

And then something happened. He couldn't credit it. He fell in love. Her name was Jacqueline, and she was unbelievable. Yeah – okay – she smoked, she ate steak rare, she put back wine like they were going to ban it, and she even did a fair amount of charlie. But she was so... just...*unbelievable*.

The watch hated her. What with the stress and the passive smoking and the late nights and the occasional shared line, Robin's figures were down to a shaky thirty-three years in about six months. But, to his surprise, he didn't care. Is she worth five years, he asked himself? And he answered, yes. She is. And the watch could fucking lump it.

She wanted to get married, she said one evening. She wanted kids. The watch's read-out whizzed like a train destination board that night. But Robin took it in his stride. If she gave up the fags and the Bolivian, if she cut down on the drink – for the sake of the kids and herself, not for him – then, yeah. Yes. Yes please.

The following morning, leaving her place, Robin felt amazing. He felt like he had something to do, other than just stay alive for the longest time possible. He glanced at the watch, which was showing a sulky twenty-eight years. But – hang on - he was so *happy*. He felt so good and together and optimistic. Didn't that count for something? Surely it did?

And, apparently, it did. Walking towards the tube, he envisaged the years that now lay ahead of him – Jacq and the kids and the family holidays and the Christmases and his parents beaming because they'd have grandchildren at last – and the numbers on the watch began to rise. Twenty-nine years, thirty, thirty-three, thirty-five. The watch was relenting. It was allowing him to live this new and different life.

He took the escalator down to the platform, grinning and humming to himself, and looked at his wrist.

36:05:04:23:11

Thirty-six-years, five months, four days, twenty-three hours and eleven minutes. Oh, hang on – ten minutes. He laughed, and patted the watch's face. He was glad it had come round. He almost felt like thanking it for being so reasonable after all.

He got on the train when it arrived and jostled amongst the other commuters, each with their own lives to lead, each simply living them, in the hope that they'd last. All these people in this carriage speeding into town and none of them with what he had – a guarantee. A certain knowledge of how much time there was, and what could be achieved in that time.

Suddenly, the train juddered and came to a halt in the tunnel. There was silence, punctuated by a few resigned groans of frustration and annoyance. The train was becalmed. A minute or two passed, and then the lights went out. Again, there were muttered curses and tutting.

Then, in the dark, a woman's voice said, "I can smell smoke." There was a pause. "I can! Oh, shit, I can smell smoke!"

There were shrieks, and people stood up. Robin turned, feeling someone pressing against his back - and a scream came from the far end of the carriage. He was shoved hard against the train door, his arm pressed against his face. And in the dim glow of the tunnel-lights, he could read his watch, the green read-out blinking as it calculated, dispassionately.

00:00:00:00:02

blink

00:00:00:00:02

blink

00:00:00:00:02

blink

00:00:00:00:01