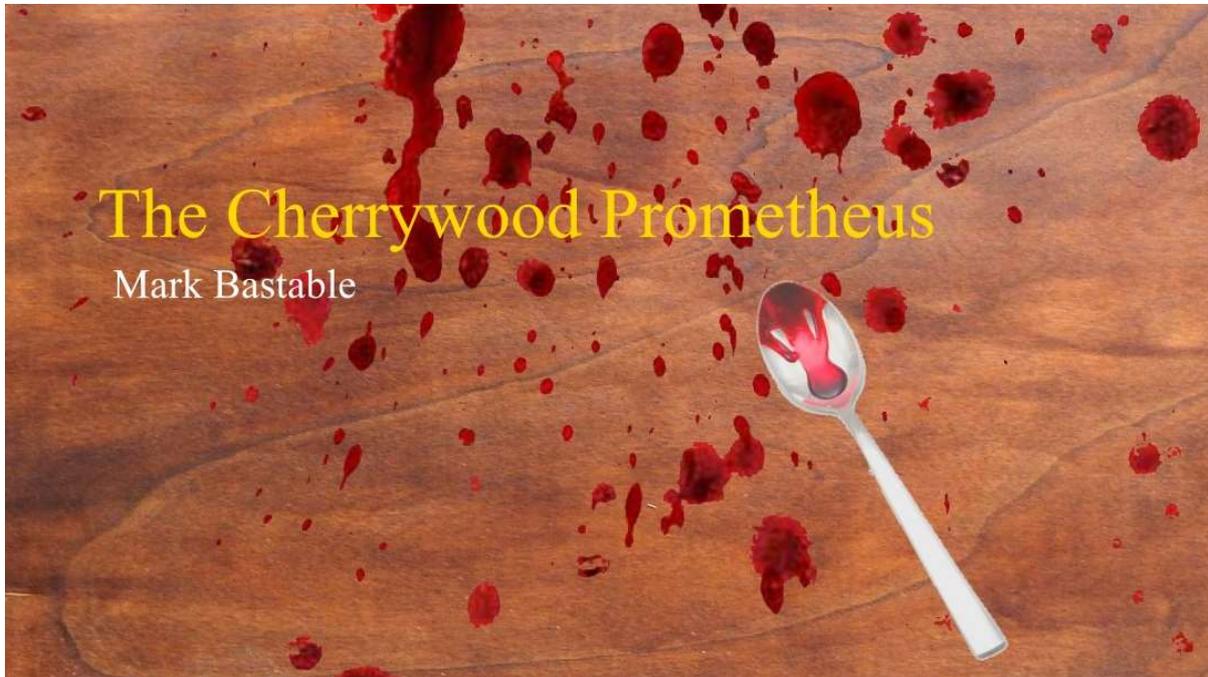


THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



“Immortality.”

“Oh, come on. Play nice.”

“You said anything I wanted. That’s what I want. Immortality.”

The genie rubbed his eyes wearily. “I liked when you guys asked for piles of precious stones or a ten-inch penis.”

“I’m already rich and I’m okay in the other department too, thanks. Immortality’s what I’ve picked out of the catalog. Do your thing.”

“Well, if you insist.” The genie went through a preparatory pantomime of pushing his sleeves up to his elbows and wiggling his fingers. “*Azbah-kaloo, imbar-d’kingal...*”

“Wait, wait.”

“You’ve changed your mind?”

David stood up from his desk and turned to look out at the twinkling lights of New York City. In his hand he turned over a metal spoon from Mo’Joe on Elizabeth Street. Early that morning he’d taken it from the counter intending to stir the tall-skinny he purchased every day on his way to work. It had looked a little dull – like it hadn’t been rinsed after washing –

so he'd breathed on it and rubbed it with the narrow end of his necktie and – *Shazam!* – genie.

“Holy mother of freakin’ God,” David said, stumbling back against the display of muffins. He looked around at the other commuters but they didn’t appear in the least fazed by a twelve-foot high, bearded and turbanned Arab floating above the cap machine.

“They can’t see me,” the genie said. “Not unless you want them to.”

“I really don’t want them to,” David replied. “Can we take this to my office?”

That was twelve hours ago. It had taken the genie a long time to convince David that he wasn’t hallucinating.

“You’re some sort of psychotic hangover,” the mortal said. “I’ve been on a total bender recently, drinking all kinds of exotic crap. That’s what it is. You’re absinthe.”

“No, I’m here.”

It was the joke that clinched it. That and the terms of engagement.

“One wish? One? What happened to three? That’s the standard contract, surely?”

“Hearsay. It’s always been one. Three works better for stories – like, first’s an error, second’s an indulgence, third’s a redemption – but you can’t believe storytellers, bub. This is the real world. One’s all you get.”

David was a bonds trader by profession, and the constraint rang true to him. He opened a bottle of Bollinger, stopped all incoming calls and sat down at his huge cherrywood desk to watch the sun descend into Central Park. He thought his options through.

It was nine in the evening by the time he asked for immortality.

“You want me to go ahead or not?” the genie asked, long fingers frozen in mid-wiggle.

David held up one hand. “Hold that thought. I just want to get a few things straight.” He loosened his silk tie and popped his platinum cufflinks, tossing them onto the desk. “I’ve read the stories, and there’s always a catch. So let me be clear. When I say ‘immortality’ I mean that I live forever. But I don’t want to be floating in space when the world ends – so we’ll define ‘forever’. Until the end of the world.”

The genie nodded. “Understood.”

“No, no. Wait. That’s too risky. It’s a recipe for eternal loneliness – which is a typical genie twist. Let’s make it - until mankind becomes extinct.”

“Gotcha.”

“And I don’t age, okay? I don’t want to be a million years old trying to get around in a specially-adapted spacemobile. I have to be twenty-eight, heart and lungs working just like they are now, good eyesight and perfect hearing. All my senses, actually, in peak condition.”

“It shall be so,” said the genie.

“Okay.” David considered for a moment. He checked the angles. Eventually he said, “Fine. Want to read that back to me?”

The genie counted it off on his fingers as David paced up and down in front of the window that overlooked the Park.

“You want to live until mankind becomes extinct. During that time your heart and lungs – *all* your organs, for the avoidance of doubt – must be in perfect working order. Your five senses will also operate in tiptop form. You will remain at your current age, which is twenty-eight years, five months and ten days.”

“Ah – but time flows as normal, although I stay the same age. No *Groundhog Day* shit, right?”

“You are most perspicacious.”

“I’m what?”

“You’re the man.”

David grinned. “I am. I’m the man. Where do I sign?”

“No signing, no paper, no records,” the genie said. “You may be confusing me with Beelzebub.”

And he snapped his fingers, and was gone.

*

The following day, the comets came. No one knew how – they just appeared in the sky a few hundred thousand miles away, apparently from nowhere. By the time they’d been seen it was too late to do anything about them.

Three of them – each a half a mile across – plummeted through the upper atmosphere and crashed into the Earth. The first plunged into the Pacific north of Easter Island. The impact produced a towering tsunami that spread across the ocean, washing away the coastline of Australia, swallowing Japan, obliterating every living thing between Santiago and British Columbia.

The second hurtled into the Alps, causing an explosion that juddered Europe and raised billowing, hellish clouds of gray dust that would shroud the planet for years.

And the third came down squarely in Philadelphia, PA, atomizing the city and sending out a shockwave that shattered glass as far away as Manhattan. One such shattered pane formed

part of a window that overlooked Central Park. A six-foot sliver spun out of the window frame and penetrated the chest of a man who had been pacing to and fro, considering all that might be done if you had eternity to play with. The force flung him backwards, and the point of the shard protruding from his back skewered him to the cherrywood desk like a cocktail onion.

Blood pumped in gouts from the wound. In hot agony, the man watched the spurting scarlet, horrified, waiting for the faintness that would precede unconsciousness and death. But there was no such fading. The blood just kept coming, the healthy heart kept working, the lungs didn't fill with fluid and fail but inflated and deflated with calm efficiency, regardless. The pain built to a crescendo and David screamed. And his scream seemed to fill the city, which was silent but for the far-off barking of dogs.

*

Death, David realized at last, would not take him. Within hours his wound had healed, fresh pink skin neatly puckered around the glass that pinned him to the desk. When he shifted even slightly he could feel the jagged edge of the shard scraping against his spine, and the pain of it was sickening. Hunger ate at his stomach and thirst closed his throat, but he didn't weaken. His heart, his lungs – all his innards – were in perfect working order.

*

Four weeks. No one came – and he understood that no one would ever come. Mankind was giving up the ghost out there in the cold and frozen dark. David's perfect hearing picked up no human sound – no wailing despair, no squabbling over scarce sustenance. The game was up for *homo sapiens*. Or at least, he hoped it was. Perhaps there were stragglers, obstinately attempting to scrape some kind of living in the sunless ruins – but he prayed to God that they wouldn't make it.

The extinction of mankind was his only prospect of escape.

*

In the third month of his crucifixion, he heard movement outside in the corridor.

“Help me!” he yelled. “Jesus Christ – please help me!”

Silence. And then a black snout appeared through the half-open door, sniffing.

The dog padded into the office, pus-yellow eyes bright, tongue black and slavering, ribs starkly visible through the scant fur on the scarred and scorched skin of the animal's body. It circled the desk, head dropped, snuffing the dried blood on the carpet, trailing saliva. Then with one easy push, it leapt up onto the desk, and straddled the man, studying him. Foul drool dropped onto David's face as the dog inhaled him, breathed on him, assessed him.

And then, as if a decision had been made, the dog bared its teeth and ripped David's throat out – which meant, at least, that he couldn't scream.

*

Every day the dog came to feed, and every night the man healed. Flesh torn from limbs grew back. Tattered vocal chords and shredded muscle reconstituted themselves. The gnawed-open belly - from which lights and liver and bowels had been noisily consumed – closed up, and the organs within budded and blossomed like mythical nocturnal flowers ready to be harvested again in the morning.

And healthy David - heart pumping, lungs inflating and deflating, innards all in perfect working order - wished death upon mankind. In delirious happy dreams he saw the dog – packs of dogs – hunting one last human being across the blasted, broken-toothed landscape of New York. Cornered in the Battery, this final remnant of humanity was pounced upon, throat ripped out, flesh torn from limbs, belly gnawed open... Dead in seconds. And then, just before David could die too, he'd wake up – as his flawless hearing caught the clickety-click of claws in the corridor outside.

He struggled against the shard of plate glass that pinned him to the cherrywood desk, but it was healed into him, part of him, like a fingernail or a quirky tooth, and it scraped against his spine making him shriek.

And the dog would leap up onto the desk, and inspect the man as if checking out a familiar menu in a favorite restaurant. Sometimes it would lick David's face before stripping the flesh from it in ragged strips.

*

“How long has it been?”

“Nearly three years,” said the genie.

“Three years? Is that all?”

The dog was due anytime. The dogs, in fact. There was a pack of them now.

“No time at all, really,” the genie said, as if he were talking about the probable wait at a bus stop.

“How many human beings are left out there?”

David was aware that he was insane – but he believed in the genie without question. The genie, after all, had been there even before, when he was completely and ordinarily in his right mind.

“In the whole world? A handful. Three or four hundred.”

“Are they going to survive?”

The genie shook his head. “No. Disease will get most of them, and predators will pick off the rest.”

“Thank God,” David said, sighing. “Soon?”

“I can’t tell you that,” the genie said. “And anyway, I hear the clickety-click of claws in the corridor. You have visitors.”

“Come back and speak to me, soon.”

“I’ll keep score for you.”

*

A decade passed.

“Seven,” said the genie next time he appeared.

“Did you know this would happen to me? Or did you do this to the world just *because* of me?”

The genie cocked his head, like a dog listening.

“Oh, wait. Six.”

*

Rats had discovered him now. They scurried to the table between the dogs’ visits. Huge, fearless rats. David had got used to them – but however much he tried, he couldn’t become accustomed to the pain. Every morning his healthy twenty-eight-year-old body was torn to pieces by animal teeth, and his perfectly functioning senses told his confused brain all about it in a way that cleared the muddle immediately. Most of David’s days were spent screaming.

*

In rare moments of lucidity, David thought that the last six human beings must be tough bastards, because the genie hadn’t appeared for years.

And then he was there.

“One left,” the genie said.

“Oh, thank Christ.”

David wept for joy, or in frustration, or from pain – he couldn’t tell.

“Kill him,” he asked the genie. “I beg you.”

“You’ve had your wish.”

“Not as a wish – as a favor. Just as an act of humanity.”

“Humanity is all but snuffed out, David.”

“Finish the job.”

“I can’t.”

“You can! Please! He’s going to die anyway – just help him along. Release me. Kill him.”

“Conditions aren’t right.”

David howled, tears rolling down his face as he raised his head to see the genie, who was gliding backwards towards the window. “What does that mean?”

The genie shrugged. “As you once said, there’s always a catch.”

The clickety-click of claws could be heard in the corridor. The scrabbling of rats rustled within the walls.

Now the genie was floating outside the shattered window, fourteen floors up. He pointed a cocked finger at David, impaled on a shard of glass, pinned to the cherrywood desk, crucified.

“You’re the man,” the genie said. “You are the man.”