

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



Moving to a new place is always an exhausting hassle, particularly when the move is unexpected. It was the last thing I needed on a busy Saturday.

I'd worked all night on the E-Zee-Kleen campaign and e-mailed a presentation to my boss at daybreak. Then I'd taken the kids to the park, dropped them at their mother's, gone downtown to pick up my new Chevy, wrapped it around a tree and died of multiple head injuries. The whole weekend was very stressful.

I suppose I should have been grateful that I'd wound up in Heaven – frankly, I wouldn't have put money on it – but as I settled into my new apartment on Redemption Avenue, I was too weary to count my blessings. I was heading for my tasteful magnolia bedroom when a sheet of paper slid in under the front door. The script was loopy and old-fashioned – it might have been written with a quill pen.

Dear Piers Goodman,

Welcome! My apologies for imposing on you so soon after your arrival, but I would be honored to receive you at my house forthwith.

An address was given, and a small map provided directions. The note was signed George Washington. I set off at once, looking for a white colonial mansion on Ascension Boulevard.

“I'm leading a new endeavor,” said the first President of the United States of America as he showed me into the library, “and I think you might be able to help.”

I couldn't imagine what help a recently-deceased advertising copywriter could possibly offer George Washington. I'll say that again – George freaking Washington! White wig. Thin smile. Friendly eyes. Spooky, or what? But you adjust real fast. As soon as I got over the surreal feeling that I was talking to money, it was like having a conversation with an uncle who's been overseas for several years.

"I'll do whatever I can, of course. What's the project?"

I settled in a divinely comfortable armchair and the Father of Our Nation explained.

Apparently there was consternation at the top level in Paradise concerning the Cosmic PR Struggle. (Those were George's exact words. His discourse was formal and occasionally antiquated in structure, but he spoke in perfectly fluent twentieth-century English. I was to discover that everyone spoke like that, and I decided not to think about it too much. As Mahatma Gandhi later advised me during a game of volleyball, 'You gotta play 'em like they come down, dude.')

The Devil, George said, not only had the best tunes, he had far and away the best marketing too. So the Ineffable Being had formed a committee to produce some cutting-edge propaganda that would big-up the whole Righteous Life thing.

"It's very important to the Boss that we're professional about this," GW told me, "and that's where you come in. But it's just as vital that we are honest. It's an image issue. As I understand it, your profession is not renowned for its, umm, implacable commitment to leaving the truth unvarnished."

This, it turned out, was why I had been approached. I go easy on the varnish. "You are the most honest advertising man that ever lived," George told me. "I've checked your record."

I preened a little, surprised but rather pleased. George leaned forward and laid a hand on my arm. "Don't get too puffed up, son. It's a bit like being the world's least sleazy pornographer." He smiled and sat back. "But we'd value your input."

"Who's 'we'?" I asked him

George opened a drawer and took out a ring-file, which he handed to me.

"This is an introductory résumé of those on the committee. Every one of them has a reputation for unimpeachable honesty. Our first meeting takes place here at noon tomorrow. A finger buffet will be provided." He winked. "The ambrosia vol-au-vents are to die for."

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The following day I was more than a little nervous. The committee consisted of some serious stiffs, and they were all seated at the table when I arrived. To the right of GW, in a gold-trimmed tunic, there was a slim, sassy-looking chick called Pythia. She'd apparently been the first and most impressive Delphic Oracle. Beside her was Sir Galahad – the purest of King Arthur's posse – who was a broad, open-faced young

guy, but as I watched him attempt to prong a piece of Stilton with his broadsword, I formed the opinion that his had not been the brightest helmet on the Camelot hat-rack. Siddhartha Gautama, known better as the Buddha, came over to say hi, insisting that I call him Sid – and he introduced me to Leo Tolstoy who, according to my notes, was well known for his dedication to the truth, however unpleasant.

“I just skimmed your bio in the hand-out,” Tolstoy whispered to me as we took our seats. “Loved your slogan for Camel Lights. That’s telling ‘em.”

The file quoted my most famous shout-line which, as the Russian mentioned, was for cigarettes. “Go ahead! You wanna live forever?” I’d won five awards for that.

“Well,” George said when we were settled, “I’m not sure how we should start. Any ideas?”

There was a lot of glancing around and blinking. Eventually Galahad spoke up.

“Well, surely we should promote the benefits of a life of chastity, temperance, piety and constant prayer.”

I suppressed the impulse to snort. Next to me, Tolstoy failed to do the same.

“Whose side are you on?” he asked. “Unless the human race has changed dramatically since I was last paying attention, that pitch could cause the Pearly Gates to rust shut through lack of use.”

“Anyway, it’s too complex,” Sid put in. “We need a hook, a slogan. Like – and stop me if you’ve heard this – Be at One with the Universe.”

“Wow,” said Pythia dryly, reaching for a manna sandwich. “Even I’d be embarrassed by a pronouncement that woolly.”

I’d been to meetings like this before, but the current one, I realized, could literally go on forever - and I had other plans for eternity. I raised my hand. George turned to me with a look of undisguised relief.

“Piers?”

I nodded. “Look, I know I’m new here, but I can finger one huge problem right away.”

“Just one?” Sid chuckled.

“Actually, Sid,” I said, looking at him, “you’re part of the problem. According to the patter I got as a kid, you shouldn’t even be here. Neither should you, Pythia. So I think what we’re facing is a case of brand fragmentation.”

A little jargon always impresses the uninformed. Right away I had their full attention. I stood up and strolled around – I improvise best on the move.

“In the short time I’ve been in town,” I said, “I’ve seen turbans, crucifixes, saffron robes and yarmulkes. There’s a mosque two blocks from here, a cathedral across the street and what appears to be an Aztec pyramid on the far side of the lake. To an agnostic lapsed Baptist, it’s all a bit of a shock.”

I told them that we needed to focus on the essential validity of all faiths. Or lack of faiths, given that Tolstoy had got in and he was a screaming atheist. If we could get that across, we’d be opening up the possibility of eventual Paradise to a whole new mortal market.

“I mean, what really are the criteria for admission?” I asked. “It was never clear to me when I was alive and it’s become no more apparent now, to be honest.”

My fellow committee members glanced sheepishly at each other. They fiddled with their fingers. None of them met my eye.

“What?” I demanded. “It’s not something stupid like your star-sign, is it?”

George folded his hands on the table and let out a long sigh. “I cannot tell a lie,” he said. “The fact is – we don’t know.” He shrugged. “The Big Guy has never told us.”

“It’s a sacred secret,” Galahad offered. “An ineluctable mystery. A shrouded...”

“It’s an almighty scam, if you want my opinion,” Tolstoy interrupted. “I’ll be damned if I can see any rhyme or reason to it.”

“Or rather, you won’t be,” Pythia said. “You weren’t. Here we all are - not damned - and we have no idea why.”

Terrific. And I thought the Exxon account was a bitch.

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“Mr Washington...”

“George. Call me George.”

We were alone in the library after the meeting, sharing a very decent bottle or three of something deep red and unquestionably alcoholic.

“George,” I continued. “I have to tell you - we are fu... Umm. We’re in trouble.” I sipped my drink. “We have to come up with a campaign for a product that we’re not allowed to know about. That’s tough. But we also have to be scrupulously honest about it. That’s just impossible.”

“You’re originally from Philadelphia, aren’t you?” the old man said. The pink flush of a glass too many had blossomed on his cheeks, and he hadn’t been listening to me for several minutes. “Oh, I loved Philly. What larks! What conversation! Oh, the plans we made there!”

“George,” I persisted, “we are going to have to get some kind of formal spec from upstairs. We can’t get it right if we don’t know what right is.”

“What news of the Thirteen?” George murmured, gazing not at me but at some remembered past just over my left shoulder. “We don’t get to see what’s going on back home, you know. No dispatches from the old place. I often wonder.”

I bit my lip. I wasn’t sure he would really want to be told about the state of the Union.

“Look,” I said, “I ought to be going. I’m going to have a murderous hangover in the morning.”

George snapped his attention back to me. “No, you won’t, my lad.” he chuckled, slapping me on the bicep. “Wouldn’t be much of a heaven where you got hangovers, would it? One more for the road?”

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One big advantage of my being drafted so peremptorily onto George’s team was that it left me no time to mope over the slightly depressing fact that I was dead. I didn’t miss the kids – and I certainly didn’t register that I wouldn’t be seeing them for quite some time – because I’d fallen into habits that applied whenever I was working away from home. Check in. Meet client. Go back to hotel. Work on the pitch. Read a novel in bed. I was so used to conducting myself according to this routine that as I staggered back from George’s place I was trying to remember what book I’d bought at the airport. Moseying unsteadily along, racking my befuddled brain, I walked slap-bang into a little old lady and knocked her to the ground.

“Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry!” I blustered, bending down to take her arm. “Are you all right?”

Two guys – big guys, no fat – rushed towards us from the other side of the street. A narrow middle-aged woman scurried down the steps of the nearest house.

Wonderful, I thought. Drunken new guy mugs frail spinster. Great debut in the neighborhood, Piers.

“Holy Mother!” the narrow woman exclaimed as she reached us. I was surprised at the choice of words, but actually she wasn’t blaspheming. Pulling the old broad to her feet, I realized that I’d just flattened Mother Teresa of Calcutta. A pas doesn’t come much fauxer than that.

“Perfectly all right,” the Holy Mother said, brushing off her habit. “No harm done.”

“Entirely my fault. I’m such an ass,” I said. The big guys were standing on either side of me and my ears were practically flinching in anticipation of being boxed.

“Well, these things happen,” said Big Guy A.

“They happen to the best of us,” Big Guy B agreed. “Are you all right yourself, friend?”

“Come in and have a sit-down,” the lean woman said to the Holy Mother. She turned to me. “And you too. You must be so embarrassed, you poor thing.”

I declined the offer, saying that I needed to get home.

“You take care now,” said one or other Big Guy. “You know your way, yeah? You going to be okay?”

I thanked everybody in sight and tottered off down the avenue with all my bones intact. Pretty obviously I was not in Manhattan anymore.

When I got home there were books on the shelf in my apartment. They hadn’t been there when I’d left – but I had thought of books, and there they now were. All my favorites. The complete works of Kurt Vonnegut, for instance. And I mean the completely complete works. I noticed a couple there that he hadn’t written yet.

I settled down in bed with a cup of strong coffee which I was willing to bet wouldn’t keep me awake, lit a cigarette that’d probably have a beneficial effect on my cardiovascular system and I opened *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* at page one.

About an hour in, the doorbell rang. I pulled on my robe and loped through to open the door.

“Hello,” Pythia smiled. “So I shouldn’t be here, huh?”

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“When we come up with something,” I said to George before the next meeting, “how will it be delivered? I mean, is His Omniscience going to rent billboards on Broadway and project slogans onto the Taj Mahal?”

“The discovery of ancient scrolls in a Palestinian cave usually works,” George shrugged. “Or a monastery in France. He often uses France. I think He likes the accordions.”

The second meeting was even less successful than the first. Any hope of progress was killed stone dead by GW’s report on our request to the Top Floor for a bit more substance.

“We have all we need, apparently,” George told the committee glumly. “We have to be creative with what we’ve got.”

The members of the committee grumbled - but this wasn’t, to be honest, the worse brief I’ve ever had to work around. At least creativity was allowed. I’ve had clients who took the superstitious and slightly fearful line that creativity was only a brandished femur short of voodoo. But when you’re dealing with a fuzzy concept, you at least need an account team who share a common approach. The bunch I was stuck

with couldn't have shared a pizza if it arrived sliced.

Galahad banged on about devoutness and chastity, which prompted Tolstoy to improvise endless deconstructions of the ambiguity of religious morality and the essential decency of the horny-handed peasant. Sid attempted to pour oil into the whirlpool by suggesting that every disagreement was really a meta-harmony of complementary discords; and Pythia contributed sarcastic one-liners that made me laugh but didn't actually move the project along. And George took minutes. Pages and pages of minutes. Hours.

"And the meeting closes at..." George checked his fob watch. "...twenty past six." He scribbled down the time and drew a line under it. "Shall we adjourn to the parlor for refreshments?"

Pythia glanced at me. "Actually, I have to rush off," she said. "Sorry."

"Me too," I volunteered, perhaps a little too quickly. "Prior engagement, George. Rain check, yeah?"

As I was helping him take the sandwich plates out to the kitchen, George said, "You're finding it all a little ponderous, aren't you?" He smiled. "Don't worry. It was just like this when the boys were drafting the Declaration of Independence. But that came out rather well, eh?"

I piled dishes in the sink. "Well, its tenets are still central to American culture, so I guess that's some kind of tribute to your foresight."

GW beamed. "Yes, yes. We hoped that would be the case. So America has grown tall in the soil of those principles, has it?" His eyes filled with tears. "That's most gratifying."

I nodded a vague affirmation of his assumption. From what I could remember of the Declaration, its stated reasons for the colonies waving bye-bye to the Old Country included imprisonment without trial, the establishment's encouragement of domestic rebellion overseas, restriction of free immigration, the iniquities of trade embargoes – to name just a few injustices that the old man and his buddies had sought to do away with. Looking at George dabbing at his eyes with a cotton kerchief, I was glad that Ascension Boulevard didn't fall within the subscription area of Time magazine.

"Anyhow, I have to hit the road," I said, discomfited. "I'll give the campaign some more thought tonight."

As I turned to go, he put his hand on my arm. "Piers," he said quietly, "it's perhaps not my business to know, but are you becoming involved with Pythia?"

I opened my mouth to say 'No'. No, of course not – I never get it on with co-workers. No, no – we just met. No, no, no – what kind of girl do you think she is? No, George – for goodness' sake, I only died last week.

But I couldn't say that. My biog was right on the money – I'm essentially an honest

man, and I could feel myself becoming more honest by the hour in this place.

“Yes,” I said. “Looks that way.”

George smiled. “Good. I like her and I like you. You go well together.” He led me to the front door. “Have a good time. You’re a long time dead.”

Pythia and I spent a relaxed evening at my place. I opened a bottle of the delicious red stuff and we lounged untidily on the couch. She told me stories about cryptic prophecies she’d delivered to a succession of Greek generals and kings (“...really nice boys, most of them, but absolutely no sense of irony...”), and I read aloud to her from *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater*. I like to read before bed.

Lying awake later, Pythia’s sleeping head on my chest, I looked back over my first two days in Elysium. The place was not the happy-clappy, Stepford-Souls, Pleasant-Valley Dullsville I would have imagined. The residents seemed to experience the usual range of human emotions and they expressed those emotions in the normal mortal way. In the committee meeting alone I’d seen irritation, boredom, sarcasm and frustration as well as laughter, companionship, generosity and sensitivity. Lust was evidently allowed here in Paradise. Smoking and drinking were permitted. And yet, as I’d noted after I caromed into Mother Teresa, this was absolutely not Manhattan. It wasn’t even Carmel. Whatever it might be that made Heaven different to any other town I’d got laid in, it had something to do with the arcane criterion for admission.

But the hour was late. I was tired and somewhat drunk. I dunno, I thought. I adjusted the pillow behind my head. To hell – haha – to hell with it. I’d figure it out tomorrow.

And as I glided towards sleep, I reran the excerpt from *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* that I had read aloud to Pythia. My favorite paragraph in literature – Mr Rosewater’s blessing of a newborn child - would be part of the next installment, and I was looking forward to reciting it for her.

Hello, baby. Welcome to the world. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. You have a hundred years at the outside. There are no rules that I know of, except...

I sat bolt upright, rolling Pythia clumsily onto her stomach. She groaned and pulled the comforter over her head.

“What are you doing?” she said, muffled.

“I’ve got it!” I exclaimed. “I’ve absolutely got it!”

She pushed the covers back and peeked out at me, hair tousled, eyes gleaming.

“What - again? Yummy.”

*

“Couple of weeks back, I was driving through Atlantic City. My car stalled at an

intersection. It was prone to stalling, that car. I held up traffic through two greens and – I tell you – all hell broke loose. Horns honking. People coming up the line to ask me what the fu...what the devil I thought I was doing. I mean, it was obvious that my car had died, but still they felt they had to express their displeasure.”

The committee members looked at me quizzically. They had no idea where I was going with this.

“Maybe a month earlier, my four-year-old kid jumped off the jungle-gym at the park and landed on the foot of a woman who was there with her dog. Man, you’d’ve thought she’d been showered with hot coals. My daughter was a delinquent. I was a lousy father. We must both be on drugs. It was ugly.”

George frowned. “Well, I guess the lady was shocked. Her reaction’s understandable.”

I shook my head. “There you go, Mr Washington. It’s understandable to *you*. That’s the type of person you are. It’s the type of person...” I raked my gaze around the table. “...that you *all* are. That *everybody* here is.”

“What sort of person?” Tolstoy asked.

“Forgiving,” I said. “Reasonable. Unaccusatory. They judge not. What makes this place Heaven is the people in it.” I leaned forward on the table. “And the people are in it because they were that way when they were alive. Doesn’t matter what religion they subscribed to, or what morals they embraced. Their rituals, their gods, their mistakes – all irrelevant. Only one thing counts when it comes to making it through the Pearly Gates. Attitude.”

A muttering conversation rippled around the table. It resolved itself to silence and George looked back to me, shaking his head and grinning.

“That could be it, Piers. That really could be it. But if you’re right, we need to come up with an explanation of it. A document. Some kind of Declaration.”

I was ready for that suggestion. I’ve been to a lot of meetings.

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry, George, but the world has moved on. Our target market has no time for wordy declarations. Leo – we can’t write a novel about this. Sid, Galahad – holy books are not an option.” I met Pythia’s gaze. “No cryptic ambiguities, I’m afraid.” She nodded just slightly and smiled. I straightened up. “We need a straightforward, simple slogan. And I have it.”

I picked up a marker and turned to the white board, and I wrote:

Goddamn it, you've got to be kind.

I tossed the marker aside and looked back at the committee. “That’s it. That’s all we need to say. Carve it on the Pyramids. Burn it across the Alps. Emblazon it on the moon, if you like. But that’s the whole campaign, right there.”

They liked it. They tossed it to and fro; they suggested improvements of phrasing; they tried to weld on elaborations and qualifiers and clarifying sub-clauses. It's what committees do. But in the end they decided it was perfect just as I had written it.

"It's stunning in its candor," Tolstoy said.

"It's a mystic rune," Galahad beamed.

"It's indestructibly fragile – a perfect eternal bubble," Sid chuckled. "I love it."

"The Boss will love it too," George said.

"You're so clever," Pythia murmured, and she took my hand. "Did you think of that last night?"

Man, they were all over me. They thought I was gold. And I could have allowed them to sustain that opinion – but that would have been a lie. I'm not a good liar.

There are no rules that I know of, except - goddamn it, you've got to be kind.

"Actually," I said, "it's not me. It's a twentieth-century writer called Kurt Vonnegut. I stole it."

"Well, it's still wonderful," George said before anyone else could comment on my shameless talent for plagiarism. "We need to take a formal vote on whether to put it forward to the Client."

I held my breath, but the vote was unanimously in favor.

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Pythia suggested that we all go out for a celebratory meal. As the others set off from the house, George gently pulled me back.

"Thank you, Piers," he said. "I think we have wrought something valuable here today, and it's due in the main to your efforts."

I shrugged. "Glad to have helped."

"You know," he said, as he took his tailcoat from its hook, "it makes me proud to think that the nation I helped forge has given rise to the likes of you. Forgive me the conceit, but you are the American I imagined the Union producing. Honest, intelligent, literate, industrious." He chuckled. "And kind, of course."

"Oh, please," I said, embarrassed. I took his coat from him and held it up so that he could slide his arms in.

"What a nation it must be by now," he mused, shrugging on the jacket. "The equality

of all men. The dignity of labor. The process of government tied inextricably to the will of the people. A paradise that anticipates this Paradise of ours, eh?"

"How far is this restaurant?" I asked.

He turned to me and fixed his eye on mine. "Is it how I imagine it, Piers? I really would love to know, and I ask you as an honest man. Tell me true - is the United States of America the heaven on earth that I envisioned, that I fought for, that I strived to manufacture?"

I looked George Washington full in the face and I took a deep breath.

"George," I said. "What can I tell you?" I reached out and adjusted his upturned collar. "You're right on the money."