

# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



“Phil’s was a life of happiness and heartbreak, of achievement and disappointment, of friends and family. It was a life well-lived. And that’s enough.”

Adam stepped down from the lectern and approached the coffin. He reached into the pocket of his olive sports jacket and took out a rolled-up first issue of Marvel’s Fantastic Four.

“As most of you know, Phil loved American comic books. He once told me that the biggest disappointment of his life was that nothing happened when he said ‘Flame on!’”

Adam laid the magazine on the casket and patted it flat. He glanced towards the sliding doors beyond the casket.

“About time, eh, Phil?”

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Phil’s friends agreed that the deceased would have been delighted to know that his wake was held at a theatre-dinner place called The Final Curtain. A table at the end of the room bore pictures and treasured objects, and there was a book in which guests were encouraged to write anecdotes about Phil. Above the table was a poster-size picture of a cheerful, shaggy-headed man in his fifties, wearing a purple paisley shirt.

Adam, a glass of wine in his hand, stood and looked at the portrait for several minutes, remembering where it was taken – at a school reunion, three years ago. It was Adam himself, out of shot, that Phil was smiling at. The picture had been taken by the third member of their lifelong gang, Bryan.

“Nice send-off. In a general sense.”

Adam turned, smiling. “Thanks, Bry. Have you got a drink?” As they slid onto stools at the bar, Adam said, “Did you wear your dog-collar just to piss off the Godless and the damned?”

The priest accepted a beer. “I’m always working, mate. You never know who might see the light, even at a humanist funeral. Cheers.”

They chatted about Phil, and about football, and eventually about Adam’s rise to celebrity.

“So, you’re all over the newspapers, I see, outraging simple Christian folk with your atheistic propaganda.”

Adam shrugged. “To be fair, I’m also outraging Muslims, Hindus and Jews. Satanists too, if they read the book closely. Are you sure you should be seen with me?”

“I consider you a leper in need of succour.”

Adam laughed, leaning back on the barstool. Had he not moved at that moment, his brain would have been pulverised. Instead, the bullet skimmed his neck, opening the jugular. The gunman ran back out onto the street, lost immediately in the West End crowds.

Amidst screams and panic, the mourners laid Adam on the bar, still conscious but losing blood fast. Bryan leaned over him, muttering, as an ambulance was called and someone pressed wadded napkins against the wound in Adam’s neck.

“You’d better not be giving me the last rites,” Adam whispered.

“God forbid.”

Adam attempted a grin. “Even now, you provoke me.”

“Christ, I can’t stop the blood,” said the woman with the French linen compress. “I can’t stop it.”

“Stay with me, Adam,” the priest said. “Keep looking at me.”

Adam swallowed, eyes losing focus.

“That’s all, folks,” he murmured. And his heart was still.

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“Adam. Adam. Do you know where you are?”

Adam opened his eyes.

Window looking out to plane trees in leaf. Clean sheets. Father Bryan smiling, and behind him an Indian woman in a pristine white pinafore dress and blue blouse.

“I’m...”

His throat was dry. Bryan handed him a glass of water.

Adam tried again. “I guess UCH? Maybe St Thomas’s?”

“Ah, no,” Bryan said. “Though you did come here from Tom’s, as you mention it.”

“Am I okay?”

“You’re excellent. In the best health you’ve ever enjoyed.”

“How long have I been out?”

“In, you mean.”

“What?”

“It’s so good to see you.”

“Likewise. It’s good to see at all.”

Having checked the tubes running to Adam’s arm, the nurse left the room.

“That must have been touch-and-go,” Adam said, hitching himself up in the bed. “You definitely thought I was on the way out.”

“I never had any doubt you’d make it,” the priest said.

“Oh, you did.” Adam reached for the glass of water. “So where am I?”

“Good question.” The priest steepled his fingers and bounced the steeple on his pursed lips. “In simple terms, you are in Limbo.”

Adam chuckled. “You never tire of winding me up, do you, Bryan?”

“And I’m not Bryan. Bryan, unlike you, is still alive. I’m just using his form to make this easier for you.”

Adam tapped the tube running into his arm. “Is this stuff available over the counter?”

The priest smiled. “There’s someone here to see you.”

“Why not?” Adam said. “Is it St Peter?” He turned to plump up the pillow behind him.

The door opened and a voice said, “Well, we got this one totally bloody wrong, didn’t we?”

Adam snapped round to look. At the foot of the bed there stood a cheerful, shaggy-headed man in his fifties, wearing a purple paisley shirt.

“*What?*” said Adam.

And the hospital room dissolved.

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Phil grinned. “Yeah, it’s a bit of a shock, isn’t it? I know how you feel.”

The three of them were sitting on a bench overlooking their school cricket field, and a game was about to start. The fielders were taking their positions.

“It’s a fantastic hallucination,” Adam said. “Caused by loss of blood, I imagine. So I’m not dead yet.”

“Yeah, you are,” Phil said.

Two schoolboys walked out from the pavilion, cricket bats under their arm, pulling on their gloves.

“Hey, Adam,” Phil said. “Look, it’s us – the opening partnership, so this must be ’79.”

Adam turned to Bryan. “So what’s the point of religion then, if we all end up in the afterlife anyway, watching cricket?” he asked.

“This is Limbo,” Bryan said. “A kind of clearing house. Or a sorting office.”

There was a crack of leather on willow, and applause from the pavilion.

“Nice shot, kid,” Phil said. He pointed a loaded-gun finger towards the batsman. “Check me out, boys. I was good then.”

“Sorting office?” Adam said, looking at Bryan. “Sorted for heaven and hell, you mean?”

Phil snorted and leaned back on the bench. “Sorted for heaven and nothing. We were half-right, it turns out.”

“So who goes to heaven?”

“Who do you think?” Bryan said. “The faithful. The believers. Given the literature available on the subject, this should not come as a surprise.”

“Another great shot!” Phil said. “That’s twelve off four balls.” He paused, frowning. “Oh, crap. I remember this game. This does not end well for me.”

“So – wait a second. Me and Phil...”

“You and Phil get what you always said you expected. Can I quote you? ‘Oblivion may seem a bit bleak – but better that than an eternity of harp music.’ Which is very droll, of course.”

There was a shout from the fielders, and Adam saw that the wicket at the pavilion end had fallen. Young Phil was trudging from the field. Adam turned to the older Phil beside him and was shocked to see tears streaming down his face.

“Phil – what’s wrong?”

“I’m out,” Phil sobbed. “That’s it. That’s my lot.”

“Mate...”

Phil jerked a thumb towards Bryan “Ask him why we’re here, you and me,” he said, gulping. “You were right. God’s a malicious bastard.” He turned and stared out across the grass. “Oh, no. Oh, Jesus.”

“What?”

As Adam looked at him, Phil flickered like broken newsreel, and was gone.

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“So that’s it? He was just snuffed out?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Come back here!”

Bryan was striding purposefully along a seemingly endless corridor on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of the Encore Las Vegas. Adam trotted to catch up. “That’s it? Nothing?”

“Where’s the beef, Adam? It’s what you expected.”

“But that was...”

“...that was before you knew there was an alternative?”

At the end of the corridor, the elevator doors pinged open as Bryan approached. Adam followed him in.

“So why bring us here? Why not just end it at death?”

Bryan pressed the button for the lobby. “Again, I’ll quote you. ‘It sort of pisses me off that if we atheists are right, the religious nuts will never know it. But if *they’re* right, they’ll get to say *I told you so.*’”

Adam slammed his hand against the wall of the elevator. "I'm here so you can *gloat*?" he almost screeched.

"It's important that you know what you're missing. Even for a very short time, it's quite hellish to know that."

The doors opened and Bryan walked out into the casino with Adam in tow. He headed for the craps games. A crowd was gathered around the central table, and Bryan beckoned Adam to stay close as he pushed through the throng.

"Come on, seven!" the shooter was urging as Adam made it to the rail. "Gimme seven!"

He flung the dice across the table, and then looked up at Adam. Adam gasped. The crapshooter was Adam. He was exactly Adam, even down to the fresh scar beneath his ear.

"Hello, mate," the shooter said. "Contrary to recent reports, I do play dice."

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"This is very disconcerting," Adam said, as his doppelganger poured the wine. "I mean, talking to oneself like this as if it were a sane thing to do."

"Wasn't that how described prayer?"

"Fair point." He reached for his glass. "Then again, it's quite flattering to find that God is made in specifically my image."

The matronly, red-headed waitress delivered to the table a steaming pepperoni pizza. "Here you go, sweethearts – can I help you with anything else?"

"Could you do me a favour, Mary?" said the doppelganger. "What colour would you say my hair is?"

"Well, honey, it's plain you use the exact same shade that I do – Carolina Sunset. But I won't tell – us ladies of a certain age gotta stick together."

"Okay - neat trick." Adam said, as the waitress walked away. "In everyone's image."

As God took Adam's plate and slid a slice of pizza onto it, Adam said, "So, does every damned soul passing through Limbo get to have lunch with you?"

"No – I can't handle lunch usually. I'll have indigestion all afternoon."

"Why me?"

"Because I liked your book."

"My book arguing the case for atheism."

“Yep. I mean, it’s wrong-headed nonsense, obviously. But very soundly argued, and massively accessible. By Christmas it’ll be a topseller on both sides of the Atlantic.”

“I’m sorry I’ll miss that.”

Father Bryan pulled up a chair and sat down. “Ah, you’ll miss it.” he said. “So you accept that you’re dead then.”

“The thing is,” God said, “You’re a high-profile atheist, and you’re also a man of real integrity. You don’t tell lies. We score this stuff, and I can tell you, you’re in the bottom one-hundredth of one percent on the mendacity scale.”

“For all the good it’s going to do me. I may as well have spent my life lying my head off.”

Father Bryan folded a slice of pizza and took a bite. “Why didn’t you?”

“I tell the truth because it’s right - not in the expectation of salvation.”

“And that’s what I like about you,” said God, sprinkling oregano. “You tell the truth because it’s right. And, of course, now you *know* the truth, don’t you? You’d tell that truth, even if it made everything else you’d done look a bit stupid. That’s a very powerful message.”

“A testimony,” said Father Bryan.

“Yes – a powerful testimony from a witness with nothing to gain. People would be persuaded by that.”

“Lots and lots of people,” agreed Father Bryan. “If they had a chance to hear it. If you were around to spread the word.”

Paused with his wine glass halfway to his mouth, Adam looked from one to the other and back again, blinking.

“Oh, no.” he said, slowly, “Oh, no, no. You can’t have this both ways. You’ve already told me I’m dead.”

God picked up the pizza platter and offered it across the table. “Would you like another slice, Adam?”

\*

Adam and Bryan were in a London cab, cruising along the motorway.

“Where are we going?” Adam asked.

“To the airport, where you’ll catch a plane home” Bryan said. “The symbology’s pretty straightforward.”

Adam looked out at the rolling green fields of Sussex. “What I don’t understand,” he said, “is why the whole thing is such a big secret. Why not simply make it known? Why not give the human race all the information?”

“How much money did you make from your first book?”

“None.”

“And the second?”

“None.”

“Why did you write them then?”

“Because it was something I wanted to achieve.”

“Exactly. You *hoped* you’d get some reward for writing them, but you didn’t *know* whether you would. You were moved to achieve something, regardless of the payoff. That’s what we want.”

“That’s what you always say. I mean, what the real Bryan says. Faith is the truth that needs no proof.”

“The truth that needs no proof. I like that.”

The airport was completely deserted, which was just as well because Adam didn’t have a ticket. He and Bryan strolled through security, past the silent scanners, to the flight side. All the dutyfree shops were open, but unstaffed. Only one departure showed on the screen

*Adam’s Life - Gate100 - Now Boarding*

“So,” Adam said, “the idea is that, following my near-death experience, I recant my atheism, and preach the gospel of faith and the afterlife.”

“You won’t be able to resist it. It’s in your nature.”

They stepped onto the empty traveller that would take them to the gate.

“Except I’m not going to believe this when I wake up, am I? I’ll rationalise it as a hallucination, a coma dream. That too is in my nature. In fact, even now I think that’s what this is.”

“What if there were objective proof of this experience?”

Adam frowned. “How?”

“Father Bryan – the real one, back in the land of the living – will have a vision of all this – everything that has happened to you here, including this conversation. If he’s seen what you’ve experienced, you’ll know it’s not just a hallucination, won’t you? That’ll prove it.”



“He’ll know about this?”

“He will have had a vision. Ask him.” They stepped off the traveller. “This is your gate. Just walk through.”

\*

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Adam opened his eyes.

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“I’m...”

His throat was dry. Bryan handed him a glass of water.

Adam tried again. “I guess UCH? Maybe St Thomas’s?”

“Yes, Tom’s.”

“How long have I been out?”

“Nearly a week. It’s so good to see you.”

“Likewise. It’s good to see at all.”

Having checked the tubes running to Adam’s arm, the nurse left the room.

“That must have been touch-and-go,” Adam said, hitching himself up in the bed. “You definitely thought I was on the way out.”

“I did,” the priest said. “And you were. You were gone for several minutes. And then your heart started again, spontaneously. The doctors really want to find out what happened there.”

Adam sipped the water. He took a deep breath.

“Bryan - I had...well...a really vivid and convincing experience while I was out,” he said. “I mean, a dream – but more like a vision.”

“Did you? Of what?”

Adam looked at Bryan, waiting. All he could see in the priest’s eyes was relief and exhaustion.

“I had a vision of the afterlife. Of God. I met him”

Bryan nodded. “Maybe you ought to think about that. Perhaps there’s something to learn there.”

“Maybe,” Adam said. “Have you had anything like that recently?”

“I’ve barely slept at all. I’ve been here most of the time.”

“Thank you for that.”

Bryan stood up. “Now, I’m going to go home to prepare a room for you. I’ll be back in the morning to see you, okay?”

As Bryan reached the door, Adam said, “Bry – is there anything you want to tell me? Anything that happened while I was out of it?”

Shaking his head, Bryan said, “Nothing I can think of. But something seems to have happened to you, Adam. Whatever it is, I’m happy to talk, if you want to kick it around.”

Adam rested his head back on the pillow. “Yeah. Maybe when I’m stronger. Right now, I don’t know what I think about anything.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” the priest said.

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In the hospital car park, Bryan sat in his car, immobile. He was tired and he was traumatised - and he was furious. He opened the glove compartment and took out a packet of Marlboros that he hadn’t thought of in months.

As he rolled the pack over in his hands, he said aloud, “This isn’t fair, you know. Not on Adam, nor on me.”

He tipped his head back on the headrest, looking out at the blue, infinite sky. “It was nice to see Phil one last time, though,” he said. “Thank you for that at least.”

He watched the dance of the shadows of the plane trees on the hood of his car. “The hell with it,” he muttered.

He wound the window down, then lit a cigarette. Inhaling, he looked up at the sky again.

“He’s a good man, is Adam,” he said. “And he deserves the same deal as everyone else – including the option to make a mistake. So – no.” He blew smoke out over a jutted lip. “Sorry, but no. Faith is the truth that needs no proof, remember? I won’t do it.”

He took another drag and chuckled.

“Also, by the way, you have absolutely no idea how to play dice.”