



GOOD TO BE GOD

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*For Louise*

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GOOD TO BE GOD

You know when you're in trouble. You know you're in trouble when you phone and no one phones back. You know you're in trouble when you get back home, the door's been kicked in, the only thing stolen is the lock (it's the only thing worth stealing) and your burglar has left a note urging you to "pull yourself together".

This isn't funny when it happens to you.

I tried to live my life decently. For a long time. I really did, but it didn't work...



"Well," says Nelson. I haven't seen him for a few years. He's waiting for me in the Chinese restaurant, patiently turning over the menu. With your school friends, you tend to think of them as they were, and it was unnatural to find Nelson there, not just on time, but early.

Nelson was the school friend my parents liked. He mastered manipulation young, and my parents were reassured by the state of the nation when Nelson, his hair immaculately combed, would greet them with excessive courtesy. This opposed to the inevitable grunts of my other associates. My mother was often more pleased to see Nelson than I was.

Only once did my mother have suspicions. One evening, as I walked out to join Nelson in his car, she mused, "He does look too young to be driving." That was probably because Nelson was indeed two years too young to have a driving licence, but since the car was stolen that didn't matter much.

Nelson, Bizzy and I would roll through south London. You'll never be able to enjoy driving as much as when you're fifteen and in a stolen car. We'd stop off and have an expensive meal (prawn cocktail, steak, black forest gâteau) on one of Nelson's stolen credit cards. We did this quite often, and we only had trouble one night, but not from suspicious waiters or the police. Nelson – normally a conscientious driver – accidentally cut up a vanload of heavies, twice our age, size and number. We were chased around for an hour, and it was the only time I saw Nelson scared.

“How you?” asks Nelson. It's a perfectly reasonable, expected question. But it's one I wish I wasn't asked these days.

“Fine,” I say. We both know this isn't true.

Every school has a Nelson: the kid who phones in the bomb threats, who steals teachers' bags and exam papers, who goes off on exotic holidays with complete strangers paying for it or foreign governments arranging for his travel back, under that famed practice of deportation. From the age of about twelve to eighteen I don't think Nelson went a day without committing an incarcerable criminal act. Yet he never spent five minutes in a police station – in England. It seemed to us that he was destined either for the gallows or stardom in international skulduggery. What happened to Nelson? What happened to Nelson was that life kicked the shit out of him.

Married with two kids, Nelson now works as a rep for a company that manufactures handcuffs. The company does some other things, but its staple is handcuffs. Nelson has some piquant stories about his overseas customers who, for example, ask for their money back when blood jams the cuffs and they can't get them off the bodies.

We share the same birthday and this makes him an outlandish

mirror. We reanimate that night we nearly got mashed and other choice japes. To have a really good laugh about them we need each other. Have we seen anyone from the old days? We haven't. Not for years. But even if we had, they wouldn't have evented enough to produce a good anecdote. Nothing much happens when you're forty.

Not that I need reminding, but when I look at Nelson I see how punishing this marathon is. He's not slow or lazy. “I haven't bought so much as a shirt for myself in four years,” he tells me. His daughter wants to be a doctor and he has to save up. We both express horror at the price of everything, especially food. He can barely afford a restrained night-out in a cheap local Chinese restaurant, and I can't afford it at all. That's middle age for men, less hair and more stinginess.

“Why can't they do proper coffee in Chinese restaurants?” he reflects as he pokes his liquid with a spoon. “You know, my wife does my hair.” He makes clipper movements with his hand. Is ageing a reverse process? You get a few moments in your twenties when you wangle some clout, but then it all closes in on you and you're back in a saggy version of childhood where you can't do what you want and someone who doesn't know how to do it is cutting your hair.

Nevertheless, I'm well behind in this game. Nelson may have a huge mortgage, but he's got a mortgage. He has a dire job, but a job. A pension. He has kids. Everyone we know, even the truly dim and unpleasant, has something.

“Let me pay for this,” says Nelson, and I don't even feign protest, just in case he changes his mind.

“So, women?” asks Nelson.

“No.” Nelson anticipates I'll be fleshing out this answer, but I don't.

“You’re not lucky are you?” If you think you’re unlucky, you may or may not be. It’s hard to gauge the bumps, and typically thinking you’re unlucky is self-pity. But when your friends start telling you you’re unlucky, you’re really in trouble.

We’re silent as we wait for the waiter to return Nelson’s card.

“Miami next week,” Nelson sighs.

“What’s the problem there?”

“If I were on holiday, Miami’d be great. What it means for me is a generous helping of road rage, a day on a plane, four days in an air-conditioned box dishing out my cards to members of the law-enforcement profession who’ll be behaving as badly as they can get away with, and who, if they were interested in my stuff would know where to get it anyway. My liver’s shot, so I can’t booze. Then a generous helping of delay at the airport, another day on a plane, a generous topping-up of rage on the drive home to be battered by the wife because I was in Miami and she wasn’t.”

A skeletal Chinese man wanders in with a large shoulder bag. From this he produces a fan of pirate DVDs which he submits to the various diners. He doesn’t utter a word of English and I wonder if he has any idea where he is.

“I’ll happily go for you,” I joke. Nelson studies me.

“Why not?” he says unjokily. “Yeah, be me.”

“I can’t pretend to be you. And I’ve lost my passport.”

“Think about it,” continues Nelson. “Know what I want? I want to sleep. I want to stay in bed until lunchtime, maybe some golf in the afternoon. I want to do that for a week. I was even considering having a sickie to get out of Miami. You. You can go out there, stay in a nice hotel, hand out a few cards, have some fun.”

“What about the passport?”

“Take mine.”

“I don’t look like you,” I say, but I look at Nelson and I realize while we’re not identical twins, we both have shaved heads and porky, defeated features, and whose passport photo looks like them?

The more we chew it over, the sounder it sounds. I use Nelson’s passport and credit card and do enough in Miami to create the impression Nelson went.

“So is it cata, pole or blow?” I ask.

“Strictly cata. We don’t pole or blow.”

Two things will happen to you if you’re a salesman, regardless of what you sell. One: you’ll end up at a trade fair in some awful German town. Two: you’ll end up plying drinkers with drinks. That’s the entry level. After that, it’s a question of company policy. You can restrict yourself to dishing out catalogues (“cata them up a bit”) or you can take prospective clients to pole-dancing clubs (“bird-watching”) or if you’re in the right city, brothels (“pipe-cleaning”). Selling, sad to say, isn’t a sophisticated business. One year my former company hired a string quartet for their stand at the trade fair. They never did it again.

Outside we loiter over goodbye and survey the dingy high street where in the distance a sextet of hooded teenagers lumbers towards us, but then retreats howling about something it deems worth howling about. It’s bracing being on the street with an old friend you can count on: a jokefist, Nelson’s contribution to any fight would be to drain his assailant’s energy by absorbing blows, but he wouldn’t run. He’d never run and leave me. He wouldn’t like it, but he wouldn’t run.

“Look after yourself. And remember,” says Nelson in parting, “you can’t have the commission.”

I go back to my place. It's depressing at the best of times, because a shitty bedsit in a shitty neighbourhood always is. It's always depressing to come back to an empty home. It's not where I want to be. It's not where anyone would want to be.

There's an elderly, prick-puce alky who sits outside all day, clutching a can. He's so purple it defies belief he's alive. The differences between him and me are few (and diminishing). Most importantly, he has the gift of making his money stretch to all-week sipping (I still have a weakness for food). In addition, he's quite happy. Unlike the innumerable winos, junkies and beggars of the neighbourhood who want to be as large as possible in your life, he remains silent and serene. It's extremely annoying. My colour's better, my clothes a little less worn, my day more active, but otherwise I'm his understudy, his successor, as I currently appear to be as employable as His Puceness. Very few things are as destructive as a long dose of unemployment.

I almost didn't call Nelson, because one of the worst aspects of being fucked is having to pretend that you can handle it, because of course you can't. If you have one compartment that's air-tight, you can stay afloat. But when money, marriage, job, home and health go...

I don't give myself airs: I know I don't have a great intellect. I don't know any languages, I don't know the dates of battles or kings and queens. My technical knowledge extends to changing the oil in my car. I can't sing. I can't dance. Eminence at my golf club has eluded me, but... but I always thought I had some smarts, something, a little fox in the box. And of course the question that comes to mind as you return once more to your sweaty mattress in a shitty bedsit, is if you're so clever, how come you've ended up here partnering His Puceness?

I really had no choice about accepting Nelson's suggestion, because I need to do something. If he'd offered me a week cleaning his toilet, I'd have accepted. Doing anything is better than doing nothing. Nelson may have saved my life.



Bulbs belong in the garden. That's what they told me on my first day at work. Lamps. Luminaires. Never bulbs. Otherwise, the secret of selling lighting is rather like sprinting, where a hundredth of a second will win you the medal: just knowing a candle more than the buyer will win you the contract.

I did my job well. Not very well. Not brilliantly, but past okay. You don't grow up wanting to be a lighting salesman, but for fifteen years I visited factories, offices, shops, schools, clambering around taking measurements, and I realized it suited me. Then business boomed enough for the company to need someone else working my territory. I chose the new rep.

Some interviewers relish the process. They get off on the grovelling and pleading. I didn't. I disliked having to interview job-hunters who were mostly decent and desperate for work, because I knew I would disappoint all but one. Clarinda turned up for the interview in a miniskirt so short I couldn't look.

From Singapore, she was the most qualified for the job, she was the most ruthless of the interviewees, and she had a miniskirt. The lighting business is very male, and Clarinda may not have been the only woman in it, but she must have been the most attractive. Then the boom, as booms do, stopped. It's annoying to lose your job because you did your job, and it's annoying to have hired the one who gets your job. Despite my seniority, Clarinda stayed and I went. I don't think

the miniskirt was a decisive force – the clincher, I'd hazard, was her living with a lawyer considered the foremost expert on employment law.



Of course losing your job shouldn't total your life, but it did. You remember how the big, shiny, billion-dollar space shuttle disintegrated because of one titchy bit of foam?

I won't bore you with the story. Highlights include disastrous investment, divorce, fire, an embarrassing medical complaint, lawyers, a substantial selection from the bad-luck catalogue. You turn away for a second and that thing you called your life has gone. You probably don't even need to turn away, it could do it right in front of you even as you're fretting over it. And I came away without any funny hard-luck stories. At the very least bad luck should give you some anecdotal might.



There are places that are waiting for you. You may not have learnt this, but there are.

At immigration, I join the queue manned by a scowling official with a feeble moustache who is suffering a rancour overdose. This becomes clear as he fusses over two Venezuelans, an innocuous mother and daughter. He processes so slowly you can't tell he's processing, holding the Venezuelan passports with his fingertips as if they were rotting.

On my right the queue is run by a jolly, white-haired retiree type with a successful moustache who whisks visitors through every two minutes with a grin and a joke.

After ten minutes I know I've got a bad case of wrong queue. On my right, a bespectacled woman who was loudly discussing her Caribbean cruise and who had been six or seven holidaymakers behind me has now reached the fingerprinting pads.

Change queue? But I guess that the Venezuelan crisis has to be coming to an end soon. When after twenty minutes it hasn't, I decide there's no point moving, because it really can't go on much longer; this is a decision I bitterly regret ten minutes later when the Venezuelans are still struggling to maintain their polite smiles.

It's a simple class in human nature. My misfortune has made me a connoisseur of discontent, but I don't need my bitterness skills here; my prospective interrogator has a grievance stoop. Things are not right at home: his boiler has exploded or he's discovered his wife on a bukkake site, and now as an immigration official, he's in an ideal position to make someone pay.

For another twenty minutes I consider changing queue, but I fear the second I'd switch the grinster on my right would stop work and be replaced by another monster of bureaucracy. After an hour in the queue, after a long flight, I'd happily give up and go back if I could transport myself instantly, even though I have nothing to go back to. That's how much fight I have left.

After a long hour and a half, when I reach the desk I'm apprehensive as I hand over Nelson's passport. Up to now my outlaw file only lists cheeky parking and sundry joints; this is a big step up in the imprisonment stakes. But, immediately, I see there won't be a problem. I've memorized Nelson's passport, all his details, rehearsed the cover story, but I'm not asked one question. A profound satisfaction reigns in the official's eyes; he's had his workout with the Venezuelans, and as all his colleagues

on duty have processed ten or twenty times more visitors, he's probably concerned about his work rate. I'm nearly outraged.

Miami airport is the standard carpet-n'-plastic anywhere. But once you've picked up your luggage and you get out, it's different.

Suddenly the heat. You're force-fed light. I know about light, and I've never seen light like this. It doesn't even look real, it's so white. As the taxi takes me to the hotel, I realize that this city has been waiting for me, this is the place for me, but I was too stupid to find it. Heavy with light, light-heavy Miami.

My hotel is right on Miami Beach. It's clean and cheerful, although I can see from the neighbouring establishments that it's not the most luxurious, but I'm impersonating a handcuffs salesman, not a rock-n'-roll star. I check in and the speed with which Nelson's credit card is seized by the receptionist assures me everything will work. This is a city where they want to take your money.

Crammed with light, my room is perfect. I inspect the balcony and stand in the sun. It purifies me. I have the same problems as when I left home, but I don't care.

I'm not kidding myself, I really don't care. And not caring about your problems is as good as not having them. The light scrapes out the black encrustations at the back of my skull. It's as if I've died and gone to heaven. In pretending to be Nelson, I've been given a new life.

I order a club sandwich and a coconut milkshake from room service. Having expensive food brought to you at someone else's expense is such a kick. Still bright outside when I've finished eating, I have no temptation to venture out to explore. The unexpected bliss has exhausted me. My room is such a fantastic alternative to my previous existence that I'm quite keen to stay in

and enjoy some early unconsciousness. And it is the first decent night's sleep I've had for years. No sweating, no sour dreams, no pre-dawn gut ache: I sleep the sleep of the successful.



In my morning grooming, I surprise myself in the mirror: it's as if Tyndale Corbett has died without leaving a corpse. I'm a different person. What's that line about how travelling won't leave your problems behind? How wrong they are.

Am I nervous about selling something I know nothing about and letting Nelson down? No. Not a bit. I take a healthy appetite to breakfast. The buffet is of that faux-healthy variety (aka cheap). I'm examining with incredulity the minuscule cereal packets and dollhouse bagels when a voice rumbles out:

"They must think we're little tweety birds."

The commentator is so fat he's taking up a whole table. He has a whole tray of some chocolatey sweet, probably tiramisu, in front of him, and when I say tray I do mean tray, as in one of those large objects you see in a display case in a confectioner's. He has worked his way through at least a quarter of it, enough to, say, nauseate the average family. Also, since there's no other tiramisu in sight, it means he's either confiscated the hotel's entire supply or he's brought his own.

"Hey, come on, sell me something or at least gimme a T-shirt. You got extra extra extra extra large?" he urges. I was wearing one of Nelson's company T-shirts. That's how I met Rehab.

I was a little uncomfortable sitting next to him, because I hate chocolate. I can't bear it, the sight or smell of it, but being different in any way puts people off, and though the nakedness of so much chocolate made me queasy, I sat next to Rehab.

Within two minutes of my first day pretending to be a handcuffs salesman I was plugged in.

Rehab was an undercover cop from LA, although how much work he did for his employers was an intriguing topic, since as Rehab was quick to explain he did actually spend a lot of time in rehab. Cocaine was his first addiction, then heroin, then bourbon followed by weed, a habit he only managed to break thanks to crack. His compulsive gambling had lasted for a brief two years, before he had got hooked on tiramisu.

Three hotels had been designated as the “official” hotels of the conference. There were many responsible policefolk at the conference, I’m sure, individuals with so much rectitude that no one in their family had received a parking ticket for a hundred years, but they weren’t the ones who were staying in my hotel, having fun with Rehab.

Every business has its wideboys. My business did. Singer, for example, who, sharing a hotel room with a colleague, famously left him dead in his bed for two days because the prospect of the paperwork and the awkward calls were too much (“I was being sympathetic to a bad hangover” was his excuse).

I’d imagine the efficacious cops would be unlikely to be sent to a conference in Miami. Would you want your top thief-taker carousing for days? The good news about Rehab’s sidekicks was they were all extremely friendly and open to other cultures (particularly their female representatives). There was bad news.

Normal names were out: Pussyfiller, The Pan, Earmuseum, Unibrow, Clingfilm, Shootastic. This might have been for the same reason that criminals have street names, so no one knows the real one. Many of the nicknames were giveaways however: The Pan had a frying pan fixed on the back of his jacket, and Pussyfiller was mostly interested in that.

The only one of Rehab’s circle with a normal name was Larry. Rehab had a massive transparent plastic container next to him, the sort you’d fill up with potato salad for a picnic.

Inside was a large spider. Bigger than my hand. Certainly the largest I’ve ever seen, and I’ve been to a zoo or two. The large spiders I saw there, the tarantulas, were immobile and as exciting to watch as a tired pebble. This spider was drumming forcefully on the sides of the container in arachnid fury.

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Rehab. “You know how they say wild creatures don’t want trouble? They’ll only attack you if they’re threatened? They only want to be left alone? To be wild and do natural shit? Not Larry. He’ll attack you because you’re... there. And if you’re not there... he’ll come looking for you.”

For the next two days I didn’t sleep much. Highlights included heavy cop betting on Larry, as he had a number of fights. Larry vs white mouse. Larry vs rat. Larry vs an especially hefty rat Clingfilm and I spent hours searching for in a drainage ditch. Larry vs boa constrictor (this was much duller than it sounded – the boa was huge, but lifeless, despite encouraging kicks from its owner). Larry vs an insultingly small spider Unibrow found on a plant and bet on simply to annoy Rehab (it was adjudged a draw, although nothing happened and Rehab insisted, “It’s too small for Larry to see.”) Finally, Larry vs a pitbull called Loco. Larry took out the pitbull with one bite and did a runner, several members of the audience getting above head height in palm trees in their ardour to give Larry plenty of clearance.

Three times a day a delivery van would present Rehab with a tray of tiramisu. The whole time I never saw him eat anything else or drink anything but cognac. I did my stuff for Nelson: I spent the float he’d given me. I gave away his catalogues, although we only went to the conference proper for half an