



HOW TO PROSPER DURING THE COMING BAD YEARS

a short story by MARSHALL BOSWELL

IN THE SUMMER OF 1979, I FELL RUINOUSLY in love with a coltish, athletically robust Greek girl of fifteen named Nicole Liarkos. When I think of her now (which isn't very often), I always imagine her poolside, her creamy caramel skin twice bisected by the triple triangles of her buttercup yellow bikini, her left arm blocking the sun from her eyes. We met in July of that year, on a church youth retreat in Panama City, Florida, and, as fate would have it, I fell for her the exact same week that Bob Dylan accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. I was thirteen years old. I knew next to nothing about sex, death, or God and absolutely everything about rock music.

I was a happy boy, perhaps the last happy boy on earth.

Before going on that trip, I never imagined I could love anything as fervently as I did my record albums, my science-fiction novels, and my paper route. Thanks to the latter — which I inherited from my best friend, who, like so much else that year, would leave me for good at the end of the summer — I had enough disposable income to buy all the records I wanted. I had collected more than a hundred in all, the whole collection prominently displayed in my locked bedroom in alphabetical order: Aerosmith through ZZ Top.

My best friend was named Mark Luthardt. Like Nicole, he was two years my senior; unlike Nicole, he was my emotional equal — or perhaps even a year or two behind me: hard to say. He lived across the street. We took care of each

Photo: James Carroll

other's dogs, split lawn duties, shared the paper route. Mark was an angelically gentle boy, with perfectly straight brown hair cut into a Dutch-boy bowl, a narrow Scandinavian jaw (on which facial hair had already started to sprout), and crooked wire-framed glasses, the left temple screw replaced by a pink bobby pin. In the name of a tighter, safer fit, he wore his glasses outside his hair, thus producing a comical burlesque of sideburns.

Every morning during our final summer together, I trotted across the street to Mark's house and sat, bored to oblivion, in his kitchen while he pored over the silver-and-gold-price index in the morning paper, his pathetic glasses perched on his forehead and his nose pressed against the tiny numbers. At the age of fifteen, he'd amassed more than ten thousand dollars in South African gold Krugerrands. I was the one person in the world to whom he had chosen to reveal the full extent of his wealth. Just before he left that August, Mark had declared himself a full-fledged libertarian, a complete set of heavily annotated Ayn Rand novels carefully sealed in their very own Mayflower box and insured against damages, his weathered briefcase packed to the clasp with multiple copies of Howard J. Ruff's *How to Prosper during the Coming Bad Years* — sort of a cross between *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *The Late, Great Planet Earth* — which he had begun handing out to people who weren't aware of the financial apocalypse just around the corner.

Mark had the paper route first — an afternoon route, as it happened, one of the last of its kind before cable television obliterated evening newspapers — and since he was my best friend (in truth, my only friend), I started helping him out. Because the route covered ten miles of winding suburbia, we both developed Herculean thighs, not to mention a never-ending tolerance for ten-speed-bicycle seats. When we weren't out delivering papers, we were riding our bikes downtown to hobby shops, bookstores, record emporiums, and anywhere else we could think of to spend our hard-earned income.

Little in my subsequent life has compared to the bliss of walking out of a Peaches record store on a hot summer day — my thighs wobbly with fatigue, a twenty-mile ride home still ahead of me — and withdrawing from its thin brown paper bag a new Who or Bruce Springsteen album. With Mark looking on and sharing my contagious excitement, I would stroke the cellophane wrapper, admire the jacket art, and read the song titles, putting off for just a little while longer the moment of truth. In the world of vinyl records, there were many possible extras inside the album. Was this a gatefold cover? Would there be a lyric sheet, or specially designed labels on the record itself? Would the packaging include a poster, decals, order forms for T-shirts and Velcro wallets? Next came the thrilling slide of the thumbnail down the cover's right side, a delicate moment that released, like a genie from a bottle, the faint but unforgettable smell of virgin vinyl. Finally, there was that unrepeatable first look at the smooth, unblemished inner sleeve (lyrics!), at the shiny disc within (specialty labels!), and at the perfectly cut

grooves glistening in the sun, in which lurked a very real genie indeed.

Mark granted me my music, as I granted him his financial obsession. Though I admired Mark's genius, I also understood that I was almost totally alone in recognizing it. Mark had no other friends. Somehow, he had managed the transition from middle school to high school without changing a single thing about his wardrobe (loose-fitting, sans-a-belt slacks, T-shirt or untucked oxford button-down, black soccer sneakers), his grooming habits (wet comb, shave), or his daily schedule. I knew that in high school there were people called seniors who drove automobiles and smoked marijuana, and I knew there were fragrant women with big, billowing hair who cradled their spiral notebooks against their bosoms while they talked to you. Mark was unmoved by all of this. He came straight home every afternoon from school, helped me fold papers, did his half of the route, and spent the remainder of the evening shooting baskets with me or reading his coin magazines while I listened to my albums. Mark never once referred to a single classmate in casual conversation with me. I was it for him: I was his Chosen One.

All of which might explain why Mark was so hostile to my decision — forced upon me by my mother — to spend a week in Panama City with my church youth group.

"The whole thing sounds totally gay to me," he complained, folding a newspaper and shaking his head in disappointment, glasses wobbling down his nose. "I don't believe you can't worm out of it."

Actually, I could have, but for some reason, I chose not to. Before that summer, I had gone to only a few of the Sunday-night meetings, and hadn't enjoyed myself at all: pizza, singing, group activity, a Talk. In our arguments about the trip, Mark was quick to remind me how much I hated the whole concept of Methodist Youth Fellowship, or MYF, for short. "They're going to *brainwash* you," he'd say, waving his fingers over my head and intoning in an ominous voice, "Repent. Date nice girls. Drink more Kool-Aid." He also cited the fact that my going away would occupy a full *week* of summer, and not just any summer but, averting his gaze, "our very last summer before I move away." Pause. "Forever." And he grumbled about having to do the paper route alone.

All of this was true: I granted him the whole list, no caveats. Yet I still decided to go. For a year, my mother had been pestering me to get more involved with the youth group, to ask home some "nice boys" from school, to start dating girls — in short, to do all the things I was resolutely not doing so long as I spent all my time with Mark Luthardt. And I resisted her every step of the way, partly because, like Mark, I harbored a boiling contempt for my peers, most of whom cared only about being *popular*, and partly because I felt she was trying to come between Mark and me. I didn't want to be part of a group. I had Mark and my albums and my paper route: that was enough. I resisted her out of solidarity with Mark and in direct defiance of her shallow, bourgeois hopes for me. And then one day, I stopped resisting.

THE BUS LEFT THE CHURCH PARKING LOT ON

Sunday evening. By driving straight through the night, we would arrive at our cottages, refreshed and ready, early Monday morning, thereby maximizing our allotted time on the beach. I saw an additional, and purely personal, advantage to this arrangement: sleeping on the bus would allow me to put off for a good twelve hours — the length of the drive from Memphis to Florida — all full-scale interaction with my bus-mates. I planned to hunker down in the back and snooze the entire drive, and that is precisely what I tried to do — for about three hours. Then I gave up. The bus was in pandemonium. The cabin lights stayed on, the aisles remained packed with shrieking teenagers, and fifteen different tape players competed for airspace. To top it off, all these smiling, helpful kids kept plopping down beside me and introducing themselves: “Hi, I’m Jenna-Jeff-Holly-Hal-Matt-Michelle-Doug-Donna-Patti-Pat. Whatcha listening to? Whatcha doing? Welcome. Praise Jesus.” There was no place to go, no way to escape their kindness.

Then came the first of the trip’s veritable miracles. At around 2 A.M., while feigning sleep beneath my down sleeping bag, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. I looked up. Sitting primly beside me and extending her hand in greeting was a smiling high-school girl, her perfectly straight teeth brilliant in the murky bus light and her cheeks punctured by two pretty little dimples. “I’m Nicole,” she said, and tilted her head.

“Paul Darby,” I replied, gently squeezing her hand. She was the most spectacular creature I had ever seen. As I would later learn, she had been spending her summer working as an assistant coach for her country club’s swim team, so she was already radiantly tan, which only served to enhance her intrinsic air of calcium-enriched good health. Her glistening black hair, with its metallic blue highlights, was fashioned into an ingenious shag with stylish feathered bangs, the perfect sort of haircut to highlight the perky particulars of her face — the aristocratic cheekbones, the arched eyebrows, the long lashes, those dimples. The one odd note was her mouth, specifically her lips, which were less pink than a pale tan. In 1979, however, this oddity was an advantage, as it made her look as if she’d been born wearing glistening lip gloss.

She waited for me to say something else. When I failed to speak, she said, “I’ve never seen you at MYF, so I thought you’d be a good person to meet. You’re my third.”

“Your third what?”

“Third new person. Of course, it’s easier for me, since I’ve only gone about six times. My mom wanted me to come on this trip, which is fine. How about you? Is this your first time with the group?”

“No,” I told her, my voice quavering, “I’ve been a couple of times.”

“Right. So you shouldn’t have any trouble getting five people. You can count me as one if you’d like.”

“Five people?”

She studied me for a moment. Her eyes were a cool ice green, with a thin black border around the irises; set against the dark Mediterranean glow of her skin, they made her seem

positively lit from within. “You know, the Meet ‘n’ Greet thing?” she said. “On the itinerary sheet? The one we had to sign?”

Actually, I *had* signed a stapled document before boarding the bus, but I hadn’t read it. Since my mom was the one writing the checks and buying the supplies, I’d let her handle the fine print.

“You can look at mine,” Nicole said, and scooted forward in the seat, her knee brushing my thigh. From her back pocket she withdrew a stapled document folded lengthwise. I took the pages in my hand; they were still warm. “Page four,” she explained.

And there it was, just below the supply list: “Group Activity #1: Meet ‘n’ Greet! On the bus ride down, introduce yourself to at least FIVE (5) new people you don’t already know. Ask ‘em where they go to school, what their hobbies are, and where they are in their walk with Christ! We’ll all compare notes on Monday night, and the one with the most names and info JUST MIGHT WIN A PRIZE!”

No wonder all those people had been so eager to introduce themselves to me. “I guess I missed that,” I told her.

“It’s kind of geeky, huh?” She took the sheet back, folded it once, and slid it into her pocket. “But it’s not so bad. I’m almost done. Like I said, you can count me as one.”

I needed four more, so, wearily, I got to work. And that is how I met Laine Blevins, the one figure from the trip whose friendship and influence would outlive the summer. Thin and soft featured, with longish brown hair so straight you could see the lines left in it by the teeth of his comb, Laine had entered his early adolescence in full command of a style best described as “seventies mellow”: *Whatever, man. It’s cool.* The nation would soon shift from mellow to uptight in one Presidential election, and Laine would be expelled from the mainstream and into the school parking lot, where the stoners huddled together beside the open doors of jacked-up Trans Ams and rusty Pintos. But that summer he was still very much a part of the zeitgeist.

“What’s up,” Laine murmured in response to my half-hearted introduction. After giving me a limp handshake, he ran his hand through his hair (perfunctory middle part), which fell back into place as smoothly as a shuffled deck of cards. An expensive pair of Bose headphones wreathed his narrow neck, the coiling cord affixed to a Panasonic portable eight-track player.

“Nice equipment,” I commented, gesturing toward the headphones, to which Laine responded with a faint and dreamy smile, the seventies-mellow gesture of thanks. Then I asked the decisive question: “What’re you listening to?”

Laine looked me over, sizing me up. I knew what he was thinking: I was very likely just another MYF geek; on the other hand, I’d had the good taste to acknowledge his headphones; at the same time, I might just be buttering him up for a Bible assault. “Floyd,” he finally said.

“Pre or post *Dark Side*?”

“Pre.”

“Syd Barrett or Roger Waters?”

“Post Syd, definitely, but still pretty cool.”

“I hear you,” I said. And, despite myself, I smiled, as did Laine. We were both stunned. Verily, there was a God.

For the rest of that bus ride, from Mississippi all the way to the northwestern tip of Florida, which we penetrated in the pale pink of early Monday morning, Laine and I talked music. I learned that he, too, had been pressured to come on this trip by his mother, which put us both in the same boat as Nicole, whose whereabouts on the bus I did not for a single minute cease monitoring. (Three seats back, now two seats ahead, moved to the front of the bus, here she comes again.) In short, life was good. In the space of one hour, I had made a new friend and contracted a voluptuous virus called Nicole Liarkos. For the first time in several years, I completely forgot about Mark Luthardt.

NICOLE LIARKOS WAS TOTALLY OUT OF MY league. I ascertained this little fact early Monday afternoon, sometime after our first group meeting, which was held in the cafeteria, postlunch. (Grilled cheese sandwiches, grape Kool-Aid.) I was in back with Laine. Sitting Indian-style on a table in front of us was a tall blond boy in blue swim trunks who, between singalong numbers, kept extending his long leg in front of him and inserting his big toe into the belt loop of Nicole’s cut-off jeans. Without turning around, she would slap his foot away and resume singing. Laine would then turn to me with a smirk and shake his head in disapproval. *Pansy*, he seemed to be saying. *Playing grab-ass with a bunch of girls*. I nodded, though, in truth, I kind of envied the blond boy. I’d never played grab-ass with girls. I’d never even played patty-cake with girls.

Group meetings were run by Josh McVray, the head counselor and MYF director, a stupefyingly intense twenty-four-year-old divinity student, amateur marathon runner, and all-around motivational life force who, I later learned, had talked my mother into talking *me* into going on this trip. He weighed about 145 pounds, all of it dense muscle, and had a shaggy beard and thinning brown hair, which fell behind his ears and down his long neck. When he talked (which was often), and particularly when he grew ardent about his subject (which was every time he talked), he would stare at his auditors with great intensity and *never blink*. A tiny but tenacious deposit of saliva would palpitate in the corner of his mouth, staining his beard and producing a slight lisp.

“So here we are,” Josh was saying from the front of the room, saliva spraying his beard, his acoustic guitar hanging like a vendor’s tray against his chest, “in Panama City, Florida, a paradise if I’ve ever seen one. Sunshine, palm trees, the ocean. And no school, no studies — who doesn’t think that’s paradise?” Gentle laughter. “But before we all race out to the beach, I want us to turn our thoughts, just for a moment, to our Lord and Savior, Emmanuel. In the fall, we’ll all go back to school and worship at the altar of fact and reason, but for now I want us to try something different. This week, I want you to change your thinking just a little bit. While we’re all

here in paradise, on vacation from school, I want us all to turn off that reasoning part of our brains and try to embrace —” dramatic pause — “*unreason*. That’s right. You heard me. Now, what do I mean by unreason? Well, God says in 1 Corinthians . . .”

“You’re Paul, aren’t you?” someone said in my ear. It was the blond boy. Without my noticing it, he had somehow transported himself from his table to mine and was now sitting just above my shoulder. “I’m Caleb,” he whispered. “I meant to introduce myself on the bus, but I was, you know, sorta busy.” He ran the moist tip of his tongue along his top lip. “Anyway, I was talking with Shelley over there, and she says she *really* wants to meet you. Catholic girl, if you know what I mean.”

He inclined his head forward and winked. Two tables up, the Shelley in question was looking back at me, smiling without a hint of self-consciousness, despite her headgear and braces. Beside her, oblivious, sat Nicole Liarkos, in a t-shirt that bore the wet imprint of her bikini bra.

In response to Shelley’s smile, I did nothing. Not one thing. Girls didn’t normally look at me, not even girls in headgear. Although I thought about girls incessantly — in the abstract, anyway — I rarely talked about them. Mark, to my knowledge, recognized only two female human beings in the world: his sister and his mother, both of whom he dismissed as minor irritants.

Josh continued to talk ardently about unreason. Laine coughed, “Bullshit,” into his fist. Shelley was still smiling in my direction. Caleb poked me in the rib cage. After a tense moment of indecision, I waved.

(end of excerpt)