

PAUL PARK

GET A GRIP

So far as we know, Paul Park is the author of delightfully baroque and rich novels such as *Celestis*, *The Gospel of Corax*, and the *Starbridge* chronicles. An e-mail we received from him notes that this story appeared first electronically in February in *Omni Online*, but you'll forgive us if we wonder about the veracity of all these facts once you read this brief report.

Here's how I found out: I was in a bar called Dave's on East 14th Street. It wasn't my usual place. I had been dating a woman in Stuyvesant Town. One night after I left her place, I still wasn't eager to go home. So on my way I stopped into Dave's.

I used to spend a lot of time in bars, though I don't smoke or drink. But I like the secondhand stuff. And the conversations you could have with strangers -- you could tell them anything. "Ottawa is a fine city," you could say. "My brother lives in Ottawa," I could say, though in fact I'm an only child. But people would nod their heads.

This kind of storytelling used to drive my ex-wife crazy. "It's so pointless. It's not like you're pretending you're an astronaut or a circus clown. That I could see. But a Canadian?"

"It's a subtle thrill," I conceded.

"Why not tell the truth?" Barbara would say. "That you're a successful lawyer with a beautiful wife you don't deserve. Is that so terrible?"

Not terrible so much as difficult to believe. It sounded pretty thin, even before I found out. And of course none of it turned out to be true at all.

Anyway, that night I was listening to someone else. Someone was claiming he had seen Reggie Jackson's last game on TV. I nodded, but all the time I was looking past him toward a corner of the bar, where a man was sitting at a table by himself. He was smoking cigarettes and drinking, and I recognized him.

But I didn't know from where. I stared at him for a few minutes. What was different -- had he shaved his beard? Then suddenly I realized he was in the wrong country. It was Boris Bezugly. It truly was.

I took my club soda over to join him. We had parted on such good terms. "Friends, friends!" he had shouted drunkenly on the platform of Petersburg Station, saliva dripping from his lips. Now he was drunk again. He sat picking at the wax of the red candle. When he looked up at me, I saw nothing in his face, just bleared eyes and a provisional smile.

We had met two years before, when a partner in the firm was scouting the possibility of a branch office in Moscow. Even in Russia he was the drunkest man I ever met. When we were introduced, he had passed out and fallen on his back as we were still shaking hands. Maybe it was his drunkenness that kept him from recognizing me now, I thought. After all, it had taken me a moment.

But we were in New York. Surely running into me was not as strange as me running into him. And why hadn't he told me he was coming? "Sdravsvuytse," I said, grinning. "Can I buy you a drink?"

What passed over his face was an expression of such horror and rage, it made me put up my hand. But then his face went blank and he turned away from me, huddling around his candle and his drink.

He had lost weight, and his black beard was gone. In Russia he had worn a hilarious mismatch of plaid clothes, surmounted by an old fur cap. Now he wore a tweed suit, a denim shirt open at the neck. The cap was gone.

"Boris," I said.

In Russia his English had been absurd. I used to tell him he sounded like a hit man in a cold war novel, and he had laughed aloud. Now he spoke quickly and softly in a mid-Atlantic accent: "I think you're making a mistake."

And I would have thought so, too, except for the strange expression I had seen. So I persevered. I pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. "What are you doing?" he cried. "My God, if they find us. If they see us here."

These words gave me what I thought was a glimmer of understanding. In Moscow, in the kitchen of his tiny apartment, Boris once had put away enough vodka to let him pass through drunkenness into another stage, a kind of clarity and grim sobriety. Then he had told me what his life was like under the Communists -- the lies that no one had believed. The interrogations. When he was a student in the sixties after Brezhnev first came in, he had spent two years in protective custody.

Now maybe he was remembering those times. "My friend," I said, "it's all right. You're in America."

These words seemed to fill him with another gust of fury. He tried to get up, and I could see he was very drunk. "I don't know you, I've never met you," he muttered, grinding out his cigarette butt. But then the cocktail waitress was there.

"I'll take a club soda," I said. "And my friend will have a Smirnoff's."

"No," he snarled, "that was the problem with that job. Get me a bourbon," he told the waitress. Then to me: "I hate vodka."

Which surprised me more than anything he'd said so far. In Moscow he had recited

poetry about vodka. "Yeah," he told me now, smiling in spite of himself. "Tastes change."

Apparently he had reassured himself that no one was watching us. But he waited until the waitress had come and gone before he spoke again. "Boris," I said, and he interrupted me.

"Don't call me that. It was just a job, a two-week job. I barely remember it."

"What are you talking about?"

He smiled. "You don't know, do you? You really don't know. Get a grip," he said. "It's like candy from a baby."

I saw such a mix of passions in his face. Envy, frustration, anger, fear. And then a kind of malignant grin that was so far from my perception of his character that I stared at him, fascinated.

"You never went to Russia," he said. "You've never met a single Russian. You were in a theme park they built outside Helsinki, surrounded by people like me. They were paying us to guzzle vodka and wear false beards and act like clowns. 'Sdravsvuytse,' my ass?"

He was crazy. "My poor friend," I said. "Who was paying you? The KGB?"

He knocked his heavy-bottomed glass against the table, spilling bourbon on the polyurethaned wood. "Not the KGB," he hissed. "The KGB never existed. None of it existed. None of this." He waved his hand around the room. He was in the middle of a paranoid breakdown of some sort. I could see that. And yet the moment I heard him, I felt instinctively that what he said was true.

"They never would have taken you to Russia," he went on. "Not to the real Russia." As he spoke I brought back my own memories -- the grime, the cold, the sullen old babushkas with rags around their heads. The concrete apartment blocks. The horrible food.

He put down his empty glass. "Thanks for the drink. And now I'm definitely getting out of here before somebody sees us. Because this is definitely against the rules."

Then he was gone, and I walked home. And maybe I wouldn't have thought much about it, only the next day I was walking up Fifth Avenue on my lunch hour, and I passed the offices for Aeroflot. I went in and sat down with the people who were waiting to be helped. We were in a row of armchairs next to the window.

This is ridiculous, I thought. And I was about to get up and go, when I found myself staring at a travel poster. One of the agents was talking on the phone, and there was a framed poster of Red Square above her desk. And was that Boris Bezugly in the middle of a group of smiling Russians in front of St. Basil's? The beard, the hat, the absurd plaid?

The Aeroflot agent was a dark-haired, heavy-chested woman, dressed in black pumps, beige tights, and a black mini-skirt. A parody of a Russian vamp. And what was that language she was speaking on the phone? The more I listened, the more improbable it sounded.

I asked the woman sitting next to me. She frowned. "Russian, of course," she said. How could she be so sure? Made-up gobbledygook, but of course once you let yourself start thinking like that, the whole world starts to fall apart. Not immediately, but gradually. I took the woman from Stuyvesant Town to a musical on Broadway. Critics had pretended to like it, though it was obviously bad. Audience members had applauded, laughed -- who were they trying to fool?

At work sometimes I found it hard to concentrate. I was representing the plaintiff in a civil suit. Yet no actual client could have been so petty, so vindictive. In my office I sat staring at the man, watching his lips move, waiting for him to give himself away.

And of course I spent more of my time at Dave's. I would go there every evening after work, and in time I was drinking more than just club sodas. But it was weeks before I saw Boris again. He came in out of a freezing rain and made his way directly toward me, where I was sitting at a table by myself.

He sat down without asking and leaned forward, rubbing his hands over the tiny candle flame. "Listen," he said, "I'm in trouble," and he looked it. He needed a shave. His eyes were bloodshot. He wasn't wearing a coat.

"Listen, I can't do it anymore. All that lying and pretending. I've screwed up two more jobs and now they're on to me. I can't go home. Please, can you give me some money? I've got to get away."

"I'll pay you fifty dollars for some information," I said. I took the bills from my pocket, but he interrupted me.

"No, I mean your watch or something. I can't use that bogus currency." He pulled some coins out of the pocket of his pants, big, shiny, aluminum coins like Mardi Gras doubloons. In fact as I looked closely, I saw that's what they were. The purple one in his palm was stamped with the head of Pete Fountain playing the clarinet.

"I don't even have enough here for a drink," he said.

"I'll get you one." I raised my hand for the waitress. But then I saw her at the corner of the bar, talking with the bartender. As I watched, she pointed over at us.

"Oh my God," said my Russian friend. His voice was grim and strange. "Give me the watch."

I stripped it off, though it was an expensive Seiko. "Thanks," he said, looking

at the face, the sweep of the second hand. "And in return I'll answer one minute's worth of questions. Go."

"Who are you?" I asked.

But he shrugged irritably. "No, it's not important. My name is Nathan --so what? What about you?"

"I know about myself," I said uncertainly.

"Do you? Paul Park, Esq. Yale, 1981. But what makes you think you were smart enough to go to the real Yale? Do you think they let just anybody in?"

Actually, I had always kind of wondered about that. So his words gave me a painful kind of pleasure. Then he went on: "Twenty seconds. What about your marriage? What was that all about?"

"I'm divorced."

"Of course you are. The woman who was playing your wife landed another job. It was never supposed to be more than a two-year contract with an option, which she chose not to renew. Last I heard, she was doing Medea, Blanche Dubois, and Lady Macbeth for some repertory company up in Canada."

Again, this sounded so hideously plausible that I said nothing.

"Forty seconds."

"Fifty seconds."

"Wait," I said, but he was gone out the door. He left only his Pete Fountain doubloon, which I slid into my pocket.

Then in a little while the police were there. A man in a white raincoat sat opposite me, asking me questions. "Did he say where he was going? Did he give you anything?"

"No," I said. "No. Nothing."

But then when I was watching TV later that night, I saw that Nathan Rose, a performance artist wanted in connection with several outstanding warrants, had been arrested. There was a photograph, and a brief description of his accomplishments. Nathan Rose had been a promising young man, recipient of several grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. The newscaster's voice was sad and apologetic, and she seemed to look out of the television directly at me. She made no mention of the crime he'd been accused of. What was it -- impersonating a Russian?

That night was the beginning of a quick decline for me, because success in life depends on not asking too many questions. The patterns of illusion that made up

the modern world require a kind of faith, a suspension of disbelief. The revenge on skeptics is quick and sure, and I soon found myself hustled out of what I'd thought was my real world as rudely as I might have been thrown out of a magic show, if I had stood up in the audience and explained the tricks while the performance was in progress.

But of course at that time I could only guess at the real truth. I conceived the idea that the government had hired an enormous troupe of actors, administered and paid for by the NEA, to create and sustain an illusion of reality for certain people. At first I played with the idea that I might be the only one, but no. That was too grandiose, too desperate a fantasy. So much money, so much effort, just to make a fool out of a single citizen. The Republicans never would have stood for it. Providing jobs for actors just wasn't that important, even in New York.

I lost my job, my friends, and my apartment. I refused to work long hours for play money. And no one could tolerate me. People I knew, I kept trying to catch them in small lies and inconsistencies. I would ask them questions. "If this is just a job for you, why aren't you nicer to me? Surely we'd enjoy it more. How can we turn this into a comedy? A farce? A musical?"

By the middle of December I was living by the train tracks, inside the tunnel under Riverside Park. Maybe it wasn't necessary for me to have gone that far. But at a certain point, I thought I'd try to penetrate down below the level of deception. Because I imagined that the illusions were rarer and more elaborate the higher up you went, which is why so many rich people are crazy. Wherever they go, part of their brain is mumbling to the other part, "Surely the actual Plaza Hotel isn't such a dump. Surely an authentic Mercedes comes better than this. Surely a genuine production of Hamlet isn't quite so dull. Surely the real Alps are higher and more picturesque."

But that night in my tarpaulin tent next to the train tracks, wrapped in my blankets, it was hard for me to think that the real Riverside Park was even darker, even colder, even more miserable. I was dressed in a dinner jacket I had kept from my apartment. I was gluttonous with hors d'oeuvres, drunk on chablis, because New York provides many opportunities to a man in black tie, especially around Christmas time. I had attended office parties and openings all the way from midtown, pretending all the way. I had been an architect, an actor, a designer, a literary agent. In each place as I grew drunker, the lies I told grew more outrageous, yet people still smiled and nodded. Why not? They were being paid good Mardi Gras doubloons to pretend to believe me.

In my tent, I slid my hand down into my pocket and clasped my hand around my own Pete Fountain coin, perhaps, I thought, the only genuine thing I'd ever owned. Drunk and despairing, I let the cold come into me, let it calm me until I wasn't sure if I could move even if I'd wanted to. My hands and legs were stiff and strange. I looked up the tunnel into the dark and imagined how the world was changing outside, how in the morning I would climb out through the grate into a new world of heat and light and honesty.

As the hours passed, the walls of the tunnel seemed to close around me. But yes, there was some light down toward the tunnel's mouth, too bright, too soft for dawn. Yes, it seemed to fill the hole, to chase away the darkness, and it was as if I had left my body and was drifting toward it, suspended over the tracks. There was heat, too, beyond my fingertips, and as I drifted down the tunnel I felt it penetrate my body and my soul. I imagined faces in the tunnel with me, people standing along the rails, smiling and murmuring. As I passed them I reached out, especially to the ones I recognized: my mother, my grandparents, my childhood friends, and even Barbara, my ex-wife. Yes, I thought, this is the truth.

It couldn't last forever. I was sprawled over the tracks, and the light was coming toward me. I listened to the muffled voices and the creak of the wheels, and the light was all around me. It was so bright, I had to close my eyes. As I did so, I heard somebody say, "That's it. That's a wrap."

When I sat up, I was in a crowd of people and machines. The big lamp had gone out, replaced by a yellow fluorescent line along the middle of the vault.

By its light I could see much that had been hidden from me. For one thing, the entire tunnel was only about twenty-five yards long. I could see the brick ends of it now, cunningly painted to look like train tracks disappearing in both directions.

In front of me there was a lamp rigged to a platform, which ran on wheels along the rails. Now that the lamp was out, I could see the movie camera beneath it, the camera man stripping off his gloves and his coat; they had turned off the refrigeration machines. There was a whole line of them along the wall, and I guess they had been making quite a racket, because now I could hear all kinds of talking from the crew as they finished up.

I threw aside my blanket and sat rubbing my hands. Nobody was paying any attention to me. But then I saw my mother coming toward me through a crowd of technicians, and she squatted down. "Congratulations," she said. "That was great."

"Mother," I stammered, "is it really you?" I admit I was surprised to see her, because she had passed away in the spring of 1978.

She was wearing a silk shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. She was smiling. "Yeah, that's great. I tell you, these last few weeks you've made me proud I ever got to work with you. Proud you're my son, so to speak. The paranoia, the anger, the disgust. It was all so real."

"Mother," I said, "I can't believe it. You look so young."

She winked. "Yeah, sure. You've probably never seen me without makeup. But let's not get carried away. Somewhere along the line you must have guessed. That was the whole point of this game."

She stood up. And now others were helping me to my feet. I recognized a few old faces, and then Barbara was there. "Your suit's a mess," she said.

I was stunned, overwhelmed to see her. Her freckled nose. Her crooked smile. She reached up to touch my damp bow-tie. When I'd known her, her breath had always been a little sour, a symptom of chronic gastric distress. Now she was standing close to me, and I caught a whiff of the mints she used -- the same old brand. At least that was for real, I thought.

Her little head was close to my lapel. Packed with brains. I'd always said that was the reason she so easily outwitted me. The space inside her skull was so small that her thoughts never had more than an inch or so to travel, to make connections. Her ideas moved faster, like molecules in a gas when it's condensed.

And at the moment when I smelled her breath, I felt a little surge of hope. Even if there was no place for me in her old life, maybe now there might be some new way for us to be together in this new world. Cleverer than me, maybe she had already had the same idea, because I felt her arms around me, her head against my cheek as I bent down. "I'm sorry I was so mean," she whispered. "But I had to. It was the script. Sometimes it broke my heart, the things I had to do to you. I'm not normally so promiscuous."

Mother and the rest had disappeared, and we were surrounded by technicians packing up equipment. "I just wanted to tell you right away," she said. "Before anybody else talks to you. Sex and betrayal are the only things that keep the yuppie games alive. The only reason anybody wants to play. So I had to. That thing where you caught me with your boss's wife -- I actually protested to the writers. I cried for days when we were finished."

Then she took my hand and led me outside. It was early morning. We walked through a park that seemed all of a sudden only twenty-five yards wide, and it was rapidly disappearing as people rolled up the astroturf and wheeled away the papier-mache balustrades.

The night before, I had come down to the park the way I always did, along West 98th Street. Now as we approached Riverside Drive, I could see as if from a slightly different angle the painted plywood facades of the buildings, all just a few inches thick. On 98th Street itself there was a huge crew striking the set, so instead of going back that way, Barbara led me north, uptown, and soon we were lost among streets I didn't recognize, although I'd lived on the Upper West Side my whole life.

"Where are we?" I asked faintly.

"Toronto. They always use it for the New York shoots. The real New York is so expensive. It's like American actors -- no one can afford them anymore. We use Canadians for everything."

"So what was this?" I asked. "A movie or a game?"



"Both. It's interactive TV. A few hired professionals like me and your mom, and then tons of paying customers. They do most of the minor characters, the extras and what-not. Then the whole thing is broadcast live, with your thoughts picked up on an internal mike as a kind of voiceover. That's what made the show--you were so innocent, so clueless. The show started when you were fifteen, which meant it took you twenty-two years to figure out what was going on. It's a new record. And in the end we had to give you massive hints."

"When I was fifteen?"

"Sure. All the rest was just recovered-memory syndrome. Who wants to make a show about a kid? I mean except for all the shows within the show. Beaver Cleaver and so forth."

"Beaver Cleaver?"

"No expense was spared," said Barbara. "It's the information superhighway. But you have to understand -- this was a huge deal."

She was right. By the time we hit Yonge Street a crowd had gathered. Old ladies, teenagers, men, women, all wanting to shake my hand and get my autograph. I was a celebrity, like O.J. Simpson or Woody Allen, except of course I really existed. I was a real person, and not just a collection of computer-generated film clips.

"Mr. Park," somebody shouted. "When did you know for sure?"

"Show us the doubloon!" demanded another, and when I took it from my pocket, everyone laughed and clapped.

An old man grasped my hand. I recognized him as the super of the building next to mine. "I just wanted to say you've given my wife and me such pleasure over the years. Most of the shows should be banned from the airwaves, if it was up to me. But you never even raised your voice. No violence at all. Not that you weren't tempted," he said, giving Barbara a severe look.

Then the limo arrived, small and sleek. Inside I could hear a small hum, as if from a computer. No one was driving. We pulled out slowly into the wide street, and then we were heading downtown. "So what was the show's name?" I asked.

"It was called Get a Grip," said Barbara. And when she saw my face, she grinned. "Oh come on, don't take it like that. Sure, you were kind of a wimp, but the guy is right. It was a wholesome show. Every day we found new ways to humiliate you, but you just soldiered on. Most of the time you didn't even notice. I mean sure, you were a total moron, but that was all right. It was your dignity that people loved."

We drove on through the unfamiliar streets. "I guess it didn't keep me from being canceled," I said.

"Well, to tell the truth it was all a little dated. And you needed a good female lead. That fat tart in Stuyvesant Town just wasn't doing it. People seemed to find your life less interesting as soon as I bailed out."

"I guess I felt the same way."

Barbara patted my hand. "But you were still popular among retirees. You have no idea how bad most of the competition is. Like the guy said, they gave over most of the twentieth century to war games. Vietnam, KKK, Holocaust, Cold War, Hiroshima. Those are all the American shows.

Kids love them, even the minorities. But I can't stand them."

"Hiroshima?" I asked.

She smiled. "Meanwhile, we thought it was a stroke of genius to work all that into the background of Get a Grip. To show what life in America might have been like if it had all really happened. Of course we had to change the footage and the point of view -- reshoot a lot of it. Most of those shows are ridiculously patriotic."

"Ingenious," I murmured.

"But that's how we got into trouble. ABC claimed it was copyright infringement, and the American ambassador protested. But Get a Grip was a satire, for God's sake. Even the U.S. courts ruled in our favor."

After a little while I said, "So what did really happen?"

"Well, that's what I'm telling you. The Americans were furious for years. So ABC finally made a hostile bid for Ottawa Communication, which produced your show. The deal went through last week, and Get a Grip was canceled. But there had been rumors for months, which was why the writers brought back all that Russian stuff last fall. They wanted to take the show to its own end."

"No. I mean, what really happened? In the world."

She squeezed my arm. "Don't worry. You'll soon catch up. Besides, we're here."

We pulled up in front of a hotel. "You'll love it," she said. "Czar Nicholas III stayed here last time he was in town."

So I got out and followed her up the steps. In through the revolving doors. The lobby was all ormolu and velvet and gilt mantelpieces. The elevator ran in a cage up through the middle of the spiral staircase. "What am I doing now?" I asked as we got in.

"Goddamn it, Pogo, don't be such a dope." I hated when she called me "Pogo." It was a nickname left over from my earliest childhood, and she only used it to

annoy me. But as I rode up in the elevator, it occurred to me that maybe no one had ever really called me that. Maybe all those painful memories had been induced when I was fifteen. Maybe they had all been covered in a flashback, when Get a Grip first went on the air.

My eyes filled with tears. "What's the matter now?" said Barbara. "Honest to God, you'd think you were being boiled over a slow fire. It's the best hotel in town. I thought you might want to rest for a few hours, take a shower, change your clothes before the reception at the president's house tonight. The Russian ambassador will be there -- I tell you you're a star. A symbol of Canadian pride. Come on, is that so terrible?"

Then when we were alone together in the jewel-box room, she said, "Besides, I've missed you."

But I wasn't listening. I was looking at my face in the mirror above the dresser. The same curly hair and gullible eyes, as if nothing had happened. "My whole life has been a parody," I said, watching my lips move. But then I had to smile, because it was exactly what I might have said back in America, back during the salad days of Get a Grip.

Barbara was behind me. In the mirror I saw her undo the first few buttons of her blouse, and then slip it off her shoulders. "Let me make it okay for you," she said. Then it was like a dream come true, because she was leading me to the bed and pulling off my clothes. I had thought about this moment so many times since we split up, directing us as if we were the actors in a scene. In my mind, sometimes she was harsh and fast, sometimes passive and accommodating. Sometimes it took hours, and sometimes it was over tight away. But none of my fantasizing prepared me for this moment, which was not sublime so much as strange. During two years of marriage, I thought I had got to know her well. But I had never done any of the things she required of me in that hotel room; I had never heard of anybody doing them. But, "Things are different here," she whispered. "Let me teach you how to make it in the real world," she said, before I lost consciousness.

Then I came to, and I was lying on the bed. Barbara was in the shower. I could hear the water running. I sat naked on the side of the bed, staring at the television. It was in a lacquer cabinet on top of a marble table, and the remote was on the floor near my foot. There were hundreds of buttons on it.

Then suddenly I was seized with a new suspicion, and I flicked it on. I flicked through several channels, seeing nothing but football games. But there I was on channel 599xtc, buck naked, staring at myself. Behind me the hotel room, the tipped sheets and soggy pillows. And on the bottom corner of the screen, a blinking panel that said:

PRESS ANY KEY TO CONTINUE.

Then Barbara was there, toweling her neck, looking over my shoulder. "Okay, so it's not quite over yet," she said. "There are still some things you ought to

know."