

Cooper's Promise

a story

by
Susan Gibb



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Cooper scowled as he studied the computer screen. He nervously pulled at his mustache which he color-combed because, before any hair on his head, it had grown in mostly grey. Another bad day on the stock market, and the website in front of him revealed his portfolio getting pounded again. He slowly scrolled to the bottom of the screen, his stomach riding like an elevator down with it. Then he clicked over and checked the list of stock winners and losers for the day and found three of his holdings were right up there on the losers' list. He noticed TOWI had gained 17%, and grunted in disgust. Last year Cooper had made a choice to sell one of two rapidly falling stocks and he had dumped TOWI. What he held onto instead was now 97% down. He squeezed his eyes shut, his jaw tense, his face a painful grimace as his head slowly fell against the back of his chair. "Ummph," came out in an involuntary whisper as he hit the vinyl cushioning and he sprang back open-eyed and staring at the screen. His expression now was flat. His fingers drummed a quickening beat on his desk, not the satisfying tone depth of oak or cherry like the furniture in the offices upstairs, but the phony clunk-clunk-clunk of Formica. He stopped, his heart loudly outpacing the sound. "Damn it," he muttered, "why can't just one of my companies do well?"

The answer came to him immediately. It was because God knew what was in his portfolio. Too bad for other stockholders; God had it in for Cooper alone and the day's loss to them wouldn't stop Him from using an opportunity.

At forty-six, Cooper was feeling the need to plan for the future. He was aghast to find that he would do just fine on his 401K and social security if he managed to die within two years after retirement. All his life he had worked hard, because things didn't come easy to Cooper. With gallons of coffee instead of the beer his roommates drank non-stop, he held onto a B average throughout college. For a while he scuttled between jobs when it seemed that every company he worked for felt the need to downsize before he had been there long enough to get fully vested. His house had doubled in value, true, but he had re-mortgaged it so many times that he was sure he had already paid that and more. Even now, although he'd been at Hi-Tech for four years, there were rumblings of layoffs and Cooper wasn't fool enough to feel secure.

He shook his head in disbelief at the refreshed computer screen that now showed the Dow at a loss of 270 points. His left leg bounced and jerked with nerves. He'd been slow to get into the stock market, his normally conservative nature fairly bristling at the urging of both his family and friends who were all making a bundle as techs hit their highs. He should have known better, but he plunged in anyway, thinking that maybe God was too busy watching over more important goings-on in the Middle East to worry now about Cooper's future.

"Lunch?" Melanie stood at the open door of his office. He looked up at her, his thoughts pulling themselves out of a dark hole that had been digging itself through the core of his mind all his life. Each time he fell into it, it seemed

to take longer to find his way out. He reached the surface just as he registered her presence and what she was asking. She was a strikingly beautiful woman and now she raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows in a silent repeat of the question.

“Yeah...no.” Cooper said. His insides twisted and balked at the thought of a great greasy hamburger or the rabbit forage that passed for salad at the cafeteria downstairs. His ulcer panged a warning. “Thanks, but I’m just not hungry today.” Even a half-smile he gave her felt out of place.

“Whatever,” Melanie answered. She turned and left in a swirl of skirt. Cooper remained fixed on the empty doorway. Poor Melanie, he thought; she was the new girl, young and ambitious, most likely resentful of that status because the office social structure negated her newly earned business degree. She still had to offer to bring up lunch for five others in their department. She wouldn’t be in that lowly position long, Cooper knew. The skirts and long legs and unbuttoned blouse tops still held some clout in this place. And the perfume that brought up images of bonfires and late blooming roses and dark gypsy eyes. God help him, he fell for it too. It’d been over two years since Gina took the kids and left him. His attempts at dating were horrible failures. Melanie’s presence in the office was another thorn in his side because she was just out of his reach like a ripening plum. His face flushed as he recalled asking her out for a drink after work; her surprise fading into a light smile, her rejection. She’d handled it with a certain amount of class, *“Well, I’m sort of in a relationship right now, but if I weren’t...”* It stung at the time and his chest tightened now at the memory. What had he been thinking? She was in her mid-twenties, could have anyone she wanted, while he’d never gotten used to the fact that he was a middle-aged man. He must

have been nuts. She must have thought he was nuts. He wiped his palms on his thighs and loosened his tie. She'd be promoted through the ranks with little resistance, he thought. Unless she, too, had God on her ass.

Cooper discovered God's personal dislike of him only a few months ago. He used to blame himself for the divorce, his slow ascent up the corporate ladder, the decaying house he had bought in the real estate heyday. He'd been so morose since the divorce that his friends worried about him. "God's got it in for me," or, "God doesn't want me to be rich," he'd say, and it seemed to make him feel better. Until one of them asked him why God would bother doing that. He had laughed along with him at the time, but then Cooper gave it some serious thought.

It took him a long time, and he even made himself think like a Catholic, which he couldn't really call himself anymore. While he never received an official letter of excommunication from the Pope, Cooper was pretty sure that his lack of attendance at Sunday Masses and failure to follow up on the Sacraments annually fully established the fact, just as he'd been taught by the Sisters of Nazareth through grade school. But it still didn't answer why God would pick on him in particular—there were so many people doing bad things to each other these days, that Cooper looked like a saint in comparison, or so he thought.

Then he remembered something, and it became real clear to him why he was in his predicament. Cooper had reneged on a promise he had made to God when he was in the fourth grade. Cooper had promised that if he wasn't married by the time he was twenty-one, he would become a martyr.

Now surely it would seem that God wouldn't hold him to a promise he had made as a chubby ten-year old, heavily influenced by Sister Margarethe in her

religious fervor to whip her pre-Communion *enfants terrible* into pious cherubs worthy of receiving the Holy Body of Christ into their souls. Sister Margarethe had filled their young Christian heads with wondrous stories of the host of saints who had graciously and most willingly died for their faith in God; St. John, St. Boniface, and Sebastian who was beaten to death. Sister's face glowed with rapture as she described the torture of St. Agatha, lain naked on live coals intermingled with glass. She made a perfunctory reference to St. Joan d'Arc, but she personally disapproved of such a show of feminism. She successfully taught her class to learn by heart four new songs for the big event along with the Act of Contrition, and reverently took them on dry-runs in the confessional between April and May, and made it clear that they were to come up with some sins to report at their first confession so as not to take up Father Whelan's time for no good reason. It was after he finally received his First Holy Communion, kneeling on the church pew alongside his classmates, the little boys crispy clean in white shirts and bowties; the girls like angels—especially blond and blue-eyed Amy McCoran—in their white dresses and veils that caught the colors streaming in through the long stained glass windows lining the walls of the old church, that Cooper got caught up in the beauty of it all and made his promise.

Within the year, he had forgotten about it. It didn't even come to mind when, ending a happy run of bachelorhood at age thirty-three, he'd married Gina at the same church in which he'd been baptized, made his First Communion, and of course, promised God he would become a martyr.

What bothered Cooper now was that he wasn't sure *which* God he had made the promise to. He knew he never had spent much time talking with the

Holy Spirit, and God the Son, Jesus (who in truth had actually been sent down as the ultimate martyr and a fine example at that), was the most forgiving of the holy triumvirate, but it seemed more likely that he had gone directly to the top—God the Father, the Old Testament tyrannical God that the nuns had pushed the most for His fear factor effect. God the Father was the all-seeing, all-knowing, eye-for-an-eye type, which convinced Cooper that He indeed was the one with whom Cooper had made his deal. And now, it was payback time.

The phone on his desk rang with a loud brrrrrng that made him jump. He sighed and picked it up. “Cooper,” he said.

“Hey, did you send the check yet?” It was Gina. No greeting—just greed, he thought.

“Yesterday. I sent it out yesterday. How’re the kids?” he asked.

“They’re fine. They’ll be better if they have some shoes and new clothes for school,” she said. “Really, Ken, I wish you’d try harder to get it to me by the first of the month. I’ve got bills to pay, you know.”

Cooper bit back the words that had nearly slipped onto his tongue. “I know. I will. Sorry. Tell the kids I said hi and I’ll see them this weekend.”

“No, not this weekend, remember? I told you we were taking them to the lake this weekend. It’s their last vacation before school starts.”

She’d said “we.” The boyfriend. Hadn’t taken her long at all. After he hung up the phone, Cooper drew several deep breaths and his ex-wife and the guy she was screwing left his mind as he exhaled them away. He looked back at the screen, the red numbers glowing in their negativity. Not a green gain in the list.

Cooper's spirits followed the Nasdaq in its steady decline for the last eighteen months. He grew fearful after a year, and about three months after that he began to wonder to himself why investors hadn't started jumping out of buildings as they had in the 1929 crash. His savings were devastated, but he knew that he wasn't alone in his financial decimation. Gina had waived rights to his pension plan but she had taken the lion's share of their savings, and with assistance from a good (although not fair, Cooper felt) lawyer and her boyfriend's realty partner, had made sure that Cooper paid yet again for the damn house.

Right now he took a breather from the lists of figures on his desk, and swiveled his fake leather padded chair around to gaze out the window of his office on the twenty-third floor of one of the oldest buildings in lower Manhattan. Unconsciously his fingers played with his shirt collar, crisply starched by the same lady who cleaned his house weekly, and who was costing him almost as much as his ex-wife ever did. He was hoping the bright blue sky over the city's sharply defined horizon would help mellow his worries. The sight was awesome, and Cooper was overcome by what he could almost describe as the power of God in the beauty of the scene. Puffs of sun-glowing white strode slowly over the city. Like lions circling an arena.

"You lucky stiff," Jerry wandered in, disturbing his thoughts, "you have the best view of all of us."

"Yes, I suppose I do," Cooper replied, still affected by the grandness of the panorama he faced. "Did you need something, Jerry?"

"Not really," Jerry answered absentmindedly, for he was also looking out the window beyond. "Didn't know if you knew the market rallied a little an hour

ago, but dropped back down to hit a new five-year low just now. Somebody's going to have to do *something*. Or else we're going to have another depression in this country."

Cooper didn't respond immediately and when he turned around, Jerry had already left. But it started him thinking. *Somebody's going to have to do something*, Jerry had said. It came to Cooper that he could do something. He could play a major role in the financial drama they all were facing, and keep the promise he had made to God so very long ago, maybe redeeming his own soul.

When the phone rang again it took Cooper a few seconds to reach over and pick up the receiver. He cleared his throat. "Cooper," he said.

"Hi, Ken, it's Margo. Mr. Joplin would like to see you in his office this afternoon at two." Cooper nodded blankly, then realized that she couldn't see him. "Okay," he said. He swiveled back to face the bright day outside his office.

Cooper got up off his seat and walked over to the corner window where the sun was high in the eastern sky, its light warming his whole body. He felt a calmness that slowly covered him like a veil. He stood there several minutes until he was certain. "Bless me, Father," he whispered, as he pushed open the window and leaned too far out.