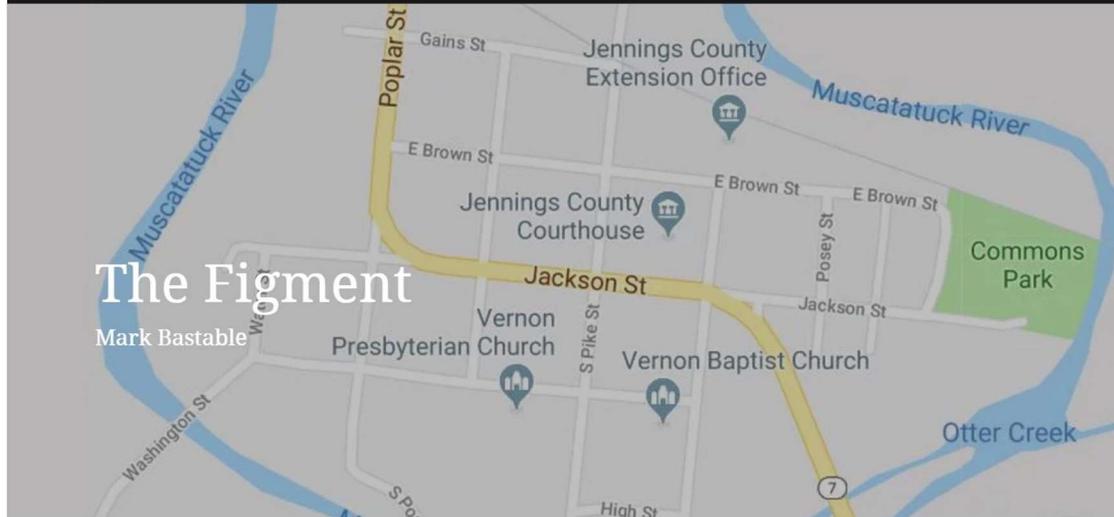


# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



In practical terms he was God – or that was pretty much what he claimed. But the first time Tessa noticed Allan she took him for a pervert.

He'd tracked her through Fresh Fruit and past the Salad Bar. He'd pulled the number after hers in the line for the deli counter. Now he was at the far end of the Canned Goods aisle making like he was searching for a specific flavor of soup. He was staring at her from behind graying hair that fell forward over his right eye – but he turned his head quickly away as soon as she stared back.

“Weirdo,” Tessa muttered.

A store security guy was sauntering past, and Tessa grabbed his arm.

“You see the creep down there in the suede jacket? The tall one? He’s following me.”

The security man glanced dubiously along the aisle. “Only following? Nothing else?”

“I need you to go over and say you have your eye on him, that’s all.”

The stalker slipped away around the corner towards Dairy and at Tessa’s insistence the security guy followed.

“Must’ve gone out the access door behind the bakery,” he said when he returned. “I could check the CCTV maybe?”

“Forget it,” Tessa said. “I just want to pay for my stuff and go home.”

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“Oh, man,” Christine said, “I hate when the menu’s all in French. That’s a check-minus.”

Tessa’s requirements of a best friend were straightforward – the candidate needed to work as a restaurant critic for a lifestyle magazine, and she had to be mostly single. Christine was a shoo-in for the position.

“They only do it to make us feel unworthy,” Tessa said, opening her leather-bound copy of the menu and scanning the text. It was gibberish to her. She ordered by pointing.

Over dinner she mentioned the supermarket stalker.

“What did he look like?” Chris said. “Cute?”

“Hell, no. Tall – but that was the only upside. Forty-plus. Kinda raggedy. A haircut more than a hairstyle. Oh, and white Converse sneakers. No one over twenty-one should wear Converse sneakers.”

“*Bonsoir, mesdemoiselles,*” said the owner of the restaurant as he approached their table. “*Puis-je vous offrir des digestifs? Gratis, bien sur.*”

He was thirty-some, wearing Converse sneakers and he was kinda raggedy with it. But as she returned his greeting Tessa felt – she *knew*, in fact – that this man would be important in her life. He would mean something.

“Sorry – no parlay the French,” Chris told him. “But you go right ahead. It’s a great tune for a Saturday night.”

“*Merci. Je prends un grappa, s’il te plait,*” Tessa said. “*Alors – je te presente ma copine Christine. Et moi, je m’appelle Tessa.*”

In that moment, hearing herself, she registered astonishment at her fluency. But as she looked to Christine for some expression of surprise, she remembered spending two years in Paris as part of her major in Modern Languages – and almost at once, like the mist of breath on a windowpane, her memory of herself as a woman who couldn’t even translate a menu evaporated, and the French language was in her mouth, natural and easy like wine.

“I hope she just asked you to join us,” Chris said to the restaurateur. “But speak English, okay?”

“Thank you. I’m Jean-Pierre.”

As he reached to pull out a chair, his hair fell across his eyes and – briefly – he reminded Tess of the supermarket stalker. But he flicked his head and smiled, and he was just himself again, summoning a waiter like he owned the place.

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“Tell me your story,” JP said to Tess in English. “Or anyway your story to this moment.” He passed her a glass of wine from the nightstand and took a sip of his own. “I don’t think you’re a city girl.”

She laughed. “Is it that obvious? I was born in...”

Vancouver. Vermont. Virginia. Postcards riffled in Tessa’s mind. She didn’t know. *How could she not know?*

“...Vernon, Indiana.”

When she said the words, it was all there. The picnics out near Jennings Bridge. The Railroad Days at the height of summer. Shopping on Jackson Street. Every memory was bright and clear as new, though shot through with contradiction: the urge to leave – just to hit Highway 59 and drive towards the sunrise - and the instinct to stay right there in the shadow of the mountain, where she was safe.

She told Jean-Pierre about her childhood and he listened. She talked and talked until she fell asleep, and then she dreamed of Vernon, Indiana seen from many miles up. As she fell towards it, she could read the names written along the streets and she could see the park, just a primary green rectangle bounded by yellow avenues. She smashed right through it and came to rest in the arms of the supermarket stalker guy who smiled like a toy-maker and carried her out to the sidewalk and left her standing dazed in the hoot and growl of traffic.

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“Each Tuesday I leave the restaurant to the mercies of my staff,” JP said in French late the following afternoon. “Would you like to go to the theater?”

“I’d love to – but my Mom’s coming in to town.”

Tess wrapped her scarf around her neck and JP held up her coat so that she could slip her arms in.

“Well, bring her along.” He opened the door and walked out to press the button for the elevator. “Or perhaps you don’t want me to meet her?”

“I’d love you to,” Tessa said, leaning up to kiss him as the doors of the elevator slid open. “Thank you.” She stepped inside and hit the button for the lobby.

Jean-Pierre grinned and waggled his fingers goodbye.

“Insert something cryptic here,” he said.

“I’m sorry?” Tessa reached for the button that would hold the elevator. “What does that mean? JP?”

But the doors closed and she was carried down to the sidewalk. As she stood dazed in the hoot and growl of traffic, she was unaware that she was being watched from the other side of the street by a tall, raggedy man whose hair fell over his right eye.

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“So? What’s the story so far?” Chris asked.

Tess moved the phone to her other ear and opened the refrigerator.

“What do you want me to say? He’s very sweet, very funny. Very French.”

“That’s not a story,” Christine said. “That’s a conclusion.”

Tess poured a glass of cranberry juice and carried it through to the bedroom.

“I’m not about to give you a minute by minute account of the night, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She sat cross-legged on the bed and sipped her juice, answering Christine’s questions with a mischievous lack of precision. When the glass was empty she set it on the nightstand, and noticed that the top drawer was slightly ajar. She pulled it open and took out a chunky album bound in green denim on which was embossed the word *Photographs*.

“What did he fix for breakfast? World-famous chef, you expect more than Cheerios, I guess.”

Tess hefted the album on to her lap, smiling. “Eggs Benedict.”

She opened the book to the first page – and frowned. There were no photographs beneath the sheet of cellophane. It looked as though it had never been lifted. Tessa turned the page. Nothing. No faded polaroids of her as a child. No blurred and washed-out snapshots of her parents in the yard. She turned another page, and another.

“Do you guys have the next date scheduled? How did you leave it?”

No photographs of her past at all. No pictures to link her with Vernon, Indiana, or even to New York. No record of her graduation, no shots taken on the Liberty Ferry. And she had been on the Liberty Ferry. She knew she had.

“Chris.” Tess spoke slowly and quietly. “Do you remember taking a trip with me to the Statue of Liberty?”

“What kind of a question is that? Can we concentrate on the French connection?”

“Please. Just tell me you remember that trip.”

“Well, of course I do.”

Tess slumped back against the wall, relieved. Whatever was wrong with her – this whole thing about forgetting stuff momentarily – it was okay. Things slipped her mind, yeah. But she got them back when she thought about it. So she'd remember where she'd put her photos.

“Thanks.”

“We went twice, in fact. The first time was when you got the news that your Mom had died.”

“What?” The album slid from Tess's hand and tumbled on to the floor. “Chris – what did you say?”

“Sorry. I thought it was okay to mention it now.”

Tess sat up, glancing fearfully around the room as if some new horrific shock might erupt through the wall. “Chris – help me,” she whispered. “Help me. I'm going insane.”

“Anyway, I have to cut and run,” Christine said cheerfully. “I have an Italian on deck at eight. You and me, we're working through the United Nations, girl. Later.”

“Chris...”

But the phone went dead.

Tess lay in the darkening room trying to picture her mother's face. But she couldn't see it. She couldn't remember her own Mom.

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Tess blinked awake. She stayed perfectly still. There was someone in the room.

She heard him walk around the bed and into her line of sight. She half-closed her eyes.

He was silhouetted against the window as he bent to pick something from the floor – and she could see his hair falling forward over his right eye. She clenched her fists beneath the covers. If she were to roll backwards she might make it to the lounge before he could catch her. She could be out on the street before he reached the front door. Or if he turned away, she could grab the lamp and hit him. She'd hit him real hard, right on the back of the head.

But he was heading for the en-suite. A guy had come in during the week to redecorate, so the key to the bathroom door was on the nightstand. If the stalker went in she'd be across the room like light and lock it. No windows in there. No way to escape. She'd call the cops and wait for them out on the stoop.

The bathroom door clicked shut. Slowly, slowly Tess reached for the key on the nightstand. As soon as she felt it in her palm, she flipped back the comforter and scurried across the room. She slipped the key into the lock and turned it.

“I got you, you sick bastard!” she shouted through the bathroom door. “I’m calling the police!”

Silence.

Tess turned on the light and picked the phone up from the bed, never taking her eyes from the door.

“Who the hell are you anyway?”

She dialled 9 and then 1. Still no sound from beyond the door. She took a step toward the bathroom, listening.

“What are you doing in there, you freak?”

She moved to within inches of the door and stood utterly still, but she couldn’t hear any movement or even any breathing from inside. It was crazy. She had seen the supermarket stalker in her room. She had. And she’d locked him in the bathroom. She definitely had. He was trying to confuse her. He wanted her to think she’d imagined it.

She glanced back towards the bed and she saw the photo album on the floor. A piece of card was poking from between the pages.

She walked over and pulled out the card. It was a cancelled ticket for the Liberty Ferry. It had been marking a page on which there were pictures of Tess and Christine grinning at the camera with the Statue behind them. There was a shot of Tess pointing back toward the Manhattan skyline. There was another of Chris standing with a souvenir torch held aloft.

And earlier in the album were photographs of Tess’s graduation, and of her Dad loading the car to bring her to New York. There were photographs of her hanging at Dean Reynold’s pool-party on the last ever day of High School and a cute shot of Michael Brook, who’d been her date for the Junior Prom. And before that were pictures of her tenth birthday and her ninth and her eighth. Pictures of her brother throwing a Frisbee in the yard of the house on East Apache. Pictures of her Mom and Dad framed against the mountains in their matching red thermal jackets. Pictures of Tess as a baby in Grandma McKenzie’s arms.

And she remembered all that. It was her life, and she remembered it. Hadn’t she thought there were no photos in the album? Maybe. Or...she guessed not. Something evaporated from her mind, but it didn’t matter. The photographs were there. Everything was normal. She’d had a bad dream.

Without thinking at all, she turned to the bathroom door and unlocked it. She brushed her teeth and took a pee, and then she pulled her clothes off and fell into bed, dog-tired but untroubled and happy.

And a figure stepped out of the bathroom into the bedroom. He stood and watched her sleep, knowing that her sleep would be dark and dreamless as chocolate. He simply looked at her for a while and then he left.

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“Her sleep was as dreamless as chocolate.”

Tess was awoken by a voice – it was her own. She had spoken aloud in her sleep.

“Dreamless as chocolate,” she murmured again as she surfaced, blinking in the midday light. “What the hell does that mean?”

She pulled on a robe and staggered to the kitchen for coffee. She turned on the TV. The sports guy was running through Monday night’s results. Tess blinked. Monday night’s results? But it was Monday now.

The telephone rang and she picked it up.

“*Bonjour, ma petite.* Are we still good for tonight?”

“Hey. Tonight?”

“You forgot? I’m destroyed.”

“JP – is it Tuesday? I must have slept right through Monday. I have to call the office.”

“I’ll come for you in a cab at seven – is it good?”

“Sure.” She paused. “Did you get three tickets?”

“No. Why – you need a chaperone?”

“No. I just thought I... Nothing. See you later.”

She put the phone down and went to her computer. She checked the date. It was Tuesday, no getting away from it.

Tess couldn’t believe she’d slept through an entire day and night. But she forced herself to accept it, because prolonged unconsciousness was preferable to the alternative explanation – that she’d passed a normally active, alert Monday, but she’d forgotten it.

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“I’m outside. You ready?”

“I’ll be down in two minutes,” Tessa said. “Tell the guy to keep the engine running.”

She dabbed her lipstick and dropped the Kleenex into the garbage pail. She picked up her jacket from the chair and checked her hair in the mirror. She looked good – really good.

She had to remind herself that this was only a second date. In her heart she felt already that something was established between her and JP, but – wait - it was that kind of attitude that would blow it. Too eager or too complacent; too hot or too cold; too cautious or too spontaneous. The tiniest inclination from the point of balance and the relationship would teeter, lose its footing, tumble off the high-wire. She ought to be anxious about that.

Ought to be – but she wasn’t. As she clattered down the steps of the stoop, smiling at JP who was lounging against the open door of the cab, she realised that she had such confidence in the plumb-line of her feelings, and she was so sure that those feelings were aligned to the heart of this astounding man, that she couldn’t even bring herself to worry about messing it up. It was what it was, and it was unshakeable.

“*Que tu es belle!*” JP said, kissing her. He grinned. “*Tu as bien dormi?*”

They could have headed south on Columbus, but Tessa asked the cab driver to take them through the park. It was a dumb little whim – fall leaves, drizzle in the dusk and breath condensing on a car window. JP understood. She reached for his hand as they gazed at the brazen colours seducing the unsuspecting trees.

“*Ca va?*”

“*Bien. Bien* as can be, believe me.”

They emerged onto Broadway at 59<sup>th</sup> Street, and Tessa glanced to the right as their cab joined the flow of traffic. And there he was, looking back at her from the window of another cab, his hair falling across one eye.

“Oh, Christ,” she breathed.

“There is a problem?” JP said.

The stalker’s cab was driving alongside them now, but its passenger was staring straight ahead, eyes fixed on the road.

“That guy in the cab there – he’s been following me.”

“How long?”

“A few days. He... I think he broke into my apartment.”

“Are you sure this is the man?” JP asked, staring.

The stalker risked a glance at them – and immediately turned away, too quickly, guiltily. It was all but a confession.

“This good for you, bud?” the cab driver asked, pulling to the curb. The stalker’s taxi signalled across the oncoming traffic and stopped on the other side of the street. JP put his hand on the door handle.

“Wait here,” he said. He opened the door a crack, checked to and fro for traffic and got out, striding across the shiny-wet street. The stalker had paid his driver and stepped onto the sidewalk. He looked up to see JP coming toward him and – Tess was watching him closely – he smiled. He smiled like he knew JP and was completely unconcerned by him. It was the smile a toy-maker might direct at a wooden soldier.

And seeing that smile, Tess knew that the tall, scruffy man was dangerous. He was deadly. She scrambled across the seat of the cab and out onto the street.

“JP! Stop!” she yelled against the hoot and growl of traffic. “JP!”

He heard her and turned. He glanced to her left. He looked back at her, pointing at what he’d seen, shouting.

A green truck was there, almost above her, tires screaming as they locked and slid on the wet street. And JP was running toward her – and beyond JP, the tall scruffy man was staring at her, smiling as if he had carved and fitted and painted the green truck, and was testing it, rolling it to and fro along the workbench.

“He knew,” Tessa thought in that flickering instant. “He knew about the truck before I even got out of the cab.”

Now the screech of wheels was so close it was an odour, and Tess was leaping backwards, knowing she was too late, screaming for want of anything else to do with her last breath.

“STO-O-O-P!”

And everything stopped.

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Droplets of rain hung in the air, lit by theater neon and streetlamps. JP was becalmed in the midst of a balletic stride, balanced on one toe, his overcoat ballooning like a cape. The truck was motionless, seemingly glued to the brackets of spray that arc-ed from beneath its wheels.

Tess leaned back against the cab and then slid to the ground, breathless.

The tall stalker approached from across the street, raindrops bursting against his face and jacket as he walked into them. He stood before her.

“I’m sorry about this,” he said in a British accent. He seemed nervous, embarrassed. “I don’t know what happened.”

“I’m insane,” Tess said. “All this is in my crazy brain. Especially you.” She closed her eyes and dropped her head. “I’m not going to talk to you because you’re a figment of my imagination.”

The stalker crouched down on his haunches. “I don’t know what’s going on here,” he said, “but I’m absolutely certain I’m not a figment of your imagination.”

“Well, you would say that,” Tess said, not looking up. “But you are.”

“I’m afraid I can’t be. Because you are a figment of mine.”

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He sat down beside her, leaning against the door of the cab.

His name was Allan Edgeley, and he was a writer. At least, he told himself he was a writer. He was finding it hard to justify the claim these days. He was drafting a story – a novel, he hoped – and he was still kind of feeling his way.

“I’ve been taking a lot of painkillers, and drinking too. Vodka. Wine. I’m losing track of what’s real and what’s imagined. I don’t even know whether I’m awake or asleep.”

He was discovering his characters – where they lived, what past they had, whether, for instance, their parents were alive or not. He tended to throw stuff in and then go back later if it didn’t work. He was riffing, extemporising, putting place-markers where he didn’t have a good line yet.

He was inventing her on the wing.

“This is crap,” Tess said, shaking her head. “I exist. I have memories. I have a life. I may be nuts but I’m real.”

“You have the past I gave you. Like, I needed you to be able to speak a foreign language, so I gave you a linguistics degree.”

“Bullshit. What does that mean, you *needed* me to?”

He sighed. “I needed you to, because *she* could. The person I’m basing you on.”

“What?”

“Her name was Tanya, and she was Italian – from Vaiano. But American sells, so I trawled MapWeb for a hick-town beginning with V. Just to make that small connection.”

“No! I remember Vernon. The picnics out by Jennings Bridge. The old shops on Jackson Street.”

“All lifted from Google. What interstate runs through Vernon?”

“Fifty-nine,” Tess said firmly.

“Fifty. I mistyped it.” He patted his jacket pockets and found a pack of cigarettes.  
“How was your Monday?”

Tess bit her lip. “I...”

He nodded. “I don’t tidy up chronology until the last edit.” He hung a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and looked at her sidelong. “You do look like her. And I haven’t even described you yet.”

“What are you saying? I’m not even me? I’m someone else?”

“Based on someone else. Someone I loved very much, just as JP loves you.” Allan pointed at JP, frozen in an attitude of anguish on the run. “He’s mostly me, of course. But younger and better-looking.”

“Loved?”

The writer struck a match. “She died. Hit by a truck in Rome. She was running across the road to meet me outside a theater.”

Tess turned and looked at him as he took a drag from his cigarette, eyes focussed on the other side of the street. She understood now.

“You’re about to kill me off.”

Waving the match and tossing it aside, he nodded. “That’s how the story goes.”

She scrambled around in front of him on her knees, making him look at her. “You can’t do that. I don’t care what you say I am – I’m real! I am aware of myself! I exist! You can’t kill me just for the sake of your stupid story.”

“Believe me – I don’t want you to die. God, that’s the last thing I want.”

“Then don’t kill me! Write the story of how I survive and have this great life. You can do that story – write that one.”

“Oh, I have,” Allan said, sucking on his cigarette. “I’ve written that one a dozen times. I keep trying to make it happen again, but differently. Man, if I could make it happen again...” He shook his head. “But it’s time to deal with grief now. It’s been ten years and I’m ready to write about loss and regret, pain and defeat. It’s unavoidable.”

“No,” Tess said, grabbing his biceps, “it’s not! You just need an angle.” She thought fast. “What do I do for a living? What did Tanya do?”

“Well, *you* do whatever I decide. And Tanya...”

“I think I’m a writer, like you,” Tessa said. She didn’t know why she said it.

Allan raised his eyebrows.

“She was, wasn’t she?” Tess insisted. “And I am – aren’t I?”

“How do you know that?”

Tess sat back on her knees. “No idea.” She furrowed her brow. “Hey. Maybe I’m writing you.”

The writer chuckled and flicked his cigarette into a glass puddle in the center of the street. “Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I a butterfly who dreams of being a man?”

“It makes sense. I’m stressed out and maybe I’m having some kind of breakdown – but I’m imagining you. I might even be asleep after the day at JP’s.” She laughed. “Hey – I hope I remember this when I wake up.”

“Makes two of us.” Allan said as he got to his feet. “I have work to do. Loss and regret, pain and defeat. That’s what I must write now.”

“Not if I’m writing it,” Tess murmured, her hands in her lap. “I’m not going to be written out of my own story.” As long as JP was real, she’d be happy. Stuff to work through, yeah – but JP to work for.

“You’ve given me an idea for a twist,” Allan said. “Thank you.” He offered her his hand. “Stand up.”

She glanced at him. “Stand up and die? No.”

“In the end, we all have to stand up and die,” Allan said.

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The screech of wheels was so close it was an odour, and Tess was leaping backwards, knowing she was too late, screaming for want of anything else to do with her last breath.

“STO-O-O-P!”

The truck swerved, clipped her and she felt her shoulder-blade snap. As she was flung backwards over the cab she saw JP, frozen in the midst of a balletic stride, reaching toward her in the very moment he was swept away by the fender of the skidding truck, his hair falling over his face like a curtain drawn across the window of a house in mourning.

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“I know it feels like you’ll never be happy,” Chris said, “but you will, believe me.”

Tess leaned her brow against the frame of the window and looked out at Central Park seduced by fall colours. Her breath condensed on the cold glass and evaporated like a memory.

“No – he was the one. My one. I’ll never find that again. I don’t want to. All I can do is imagine futures with him – futures I’ll never see now.”

“Please don’t say things like that,” Chris said, putting her arm around Tessa’s shoulders. “Listen – this is a bad time. The worst. I know it’s no help right now, but I’m telling you.”

Tess pushed her back out of her eyes. “You know what I wish?” She bit her lip. “I wish it had been the other way around. I do. If I could make it happen again, if I was making this up - I’d be the one who died.”