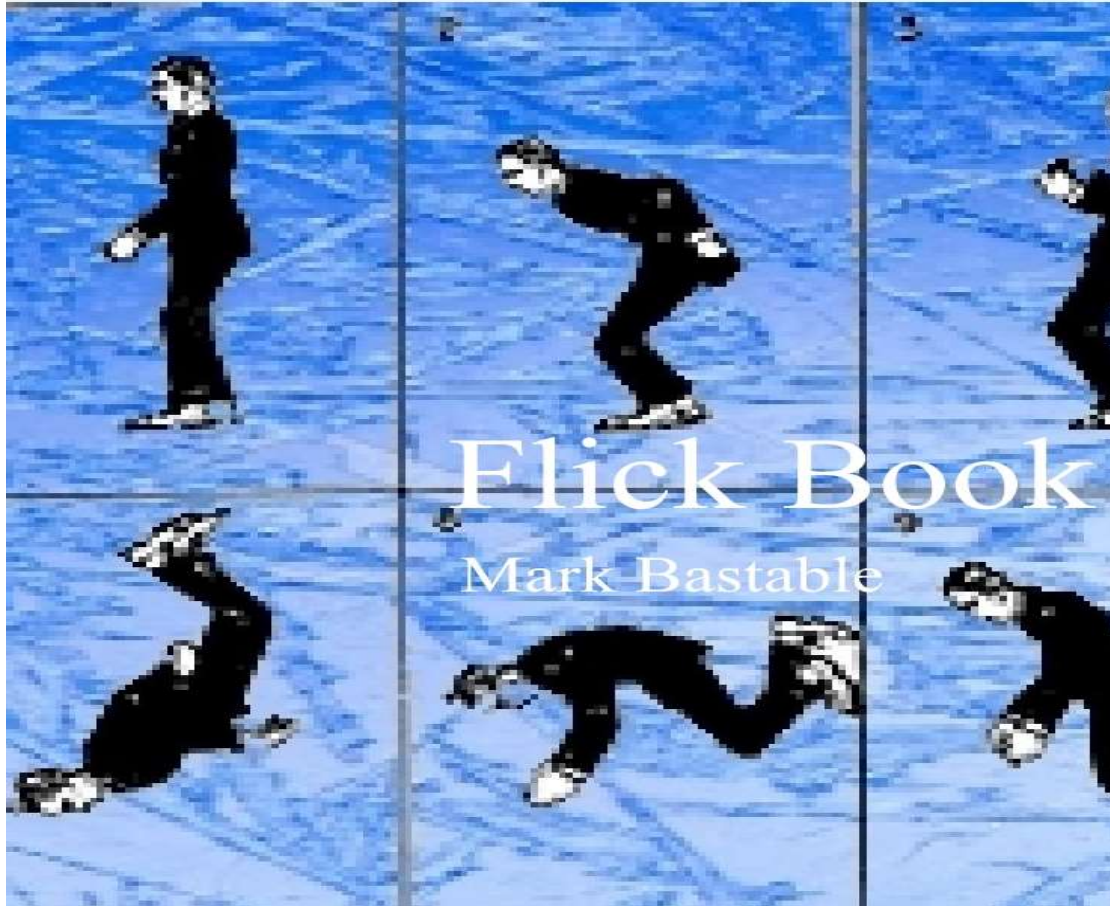


# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



Paggy Robards knew what Friday night was for. Seventeen-year-olds know all there is to know about grabbing girls, drinking illicit beers and doing dope. Even overweight, acne-bright, socially-graceless seventeen-year-olds like Paggy. Because if experience doesn't teach you, then the TV, the net and the movies will.

Experience had not taught Paggy. He'd learned the other way.

He looked out of the window onto Meadow Drive and watched his contemporaries saunter down the street towards a party on the next block. He could hear the music thumping from Alice's house – thrash metal and Chicago rap and Seventies glam. He clocked the guys and girls from school – Slink, Josh, Cool Marie, Elspeth and Bella – as they laughed and strutted past, all snake stomachs and geometric teeth. They could do Friday night. Paggy could not.

“Patrick!”

Paggy's mother was calling from the bottom of the stairs.

“Patrick! Are you gonna come eat?”

Paggy licked from his fingers the mayo and mustard of a MegaWhopper with Cheese.

“Nah – not hungry, Ma,” he called.

“You’ll waste away,” his mother advised, tutting.

“I’ll be fine.”

Paggy swigged soda and fired up the browser that was the gateway to his natural milieu – the chat rooms of the Web.

The rooms were quiet tonight. Paggy exchanged a few sentences with a desperate housewife in Milwaukee. A little later he posed as a mixed-race lesbian, much to the delight of a nymphomaniac waitress in Oregon (‘Yeah, right’, thought Paggy, clicking to another site) – and under his own name, he discussed early-period Asimov with an acquaintance in Yucatan.

It was dark outside. Paggy’s mom and dad had long since gone to bed. The kids from the party were coming back along the street, giggling and murmuring, making out under the streetlights. Paggy schlipped open another Coke and topped it up with a slug of rum from the bottle he kept stashed inside his right-hand stereo speaker.

He stuck his head out into the hall to make sure his parents had turned off their bedroom light. And then he returned to his chair in front of the glowing screen and started in on the porn.

But the porn wasn’t working tonight. Despite the dialogue he ascribed to the downloaded jpegs, Paggy couldn’t force himself to pay attention. He was wondering – as he so often did – whether this was all life had in store for him. Two-for-one MegaWhoppers and cyberfilth. After all, it wasn’t that he didn’t *want* to go to parties or hang out at Joe’s Diner or take trips to the coast like everyone else at Mayfield High. And it wasn’t like he didn’t get invited. He did. He’d been invited to the house party that was breaking up right then.

But he was just so *lame* at those things. He was clumsy - a physical and verbal klutz. He was forever knocking over jugs of lemonade or making ill-advised and unappetising references to dead grannies whilst in conversation with some blameless girl whose grandmother, it turned out, has passed way the previous day. And then there was his laugh. He sounded like a surfacing walrus. He was careful never to laugh in company – which was easily achieved by the flawless strategy of never being in company.

“...but I can’t avoid people forever,” Paggy told himself sighing.

*Ping!*

Paggy clicked the window that had just appeared on his computer screen.

*Vita would like to message you*, it said.

Paggy opened up his chat-history file and scanned the first column. He had never chatted to anyone called Vita.

*hi there*, he typed.

*how r u?* came the response.

*cool. u?* Paggy answered.

*cool2*, Vita told him. *wanna chat?*

At that moment, a whispered shout came from outside the open window.

“Hey, Paggy!” A pause. “Paggy! You sleeping?”

Paggy looked out of the window. Mickey Lownds was standing in the middle of the lawn, and behind him on the street was a sleek coupé into which were crammed four or five guys and girls from school.

“Wanna come for a drive out to the Heights?” Mickey asked, in a deafening whisper.

Paggy glanced back at the computer screen.

*...????* Vita insisted.

Paggy leaned a little further out of the window. “Can’t do it,” he told Mickey. “Workin’ on somethin’.”

Mickey shrugged and grinned. “Yeah, I bet. Don’t know what you’re missing, man.” And he turned to lope across the grass to the car.

*sorry. im here*, Paggy told Vita as the coupe revved away into the night, trailing laughter and squeals of teenagers who had nothing to do but live their lives.

*a/s/l?* Vita asked.

Paggy was always cautious about giving his true age, sex and location because a seventeen-year-old Albuquerque boy was so rarely what his correspondents were looking for. But tonight he couldn’t be bothered to lie.

*17m albqrqe*, he admitted. *u?*

Almost before he’d hit *Enter*, the reply came back, stripped of on-line abbreviations and properly punctuated.

*I’m 56 at this point. In Ireland. Oh, and female. How are you doing, Patrick Robards?*

Paggy sat back in his chair - startled, and a little scared.

*how do u know my name?* he typed

*It's what happens at this point,* Vita replied – again, as swift as speech.

*at this point?* Paggy asked.

*At this point in our lives,* she said. *Don't you ever wonder what's going to happen in the years ahead, Paggy? Wouldn't you like to know what's coming?*

Paggy narrowed his eyes.

*this is benjy, right? quit screwin with me, benjy.*

*Shh. Listen. Listen,* Vita soothed. *I'll explain.*

As Paggy absently sipped his Coke and rum, eyes fixed to the monitor, Vita talked about lifespans, and how any life is defined, bookended, by two unchangeable boundaries. And she pointed out that the journey from birth to death is seen as a toboggan ride – a careering, skimming descent, unstoppable and one-way.

“But it needn't be so, Paggy,” she said. “Although life runs from this point to that, one can travel it as if it were a monorail – back and forth, pausing first here, and then there. Going to and fro to re-visit one's favourite parts, and skipping over the less enjoyable stretches.”

Paggy dispensed with the pretence of the soda and took a swig of rum straight from the bottle.

“She's nuts,” he muttered aloud.

“Nuts? I can see how you might think so,” came the instantaneous message on the screen.

Paggy squealed and pedalled his office chair backwards.

“Look,” Vita said.

The computer monitor went blank – and then the speakers began to hum – a low, throaty cello note – and an orange dot appeared in the middle of the screen. The dot grew to a disc, and the disc cycled through deep tones of purple, azure, emerald, silver and back to orange as the cello note from the speakers rose and swooped like a gull above the Gulf.

“You know those flick books, Patrick?” The voice was close and breathy in Paggy's ear. “The ones where you flick the corners of the pages with your thumb, making movement?”

Paggy nodded, still staring at the revolving disc on the monitor.

“Well, just flick through your life, and stop wherever you please... Flick, Paggy...”

The revolving disc on the screen pulsed and smeared, the hum behind it rising and falling.

“When do you want to go today?” Vita asked. “Ten years, twenty years, thirty years forward? Or back? Right back? When?”

“Ten,” Paggy murmured, unblinking. “Forward.”

“Good. Flick...”

And Paggy felt something assemble inaudibly inside his head, like a crystal of ice forming in stop-frame on a February window-pane – and he pressed his forehead against the pane and saw through the frosty glass a rush of hours, a torrent of tomorrows – and he moved through them, easily and suddenly, as if walking through glass were a trick to be mastered, like riding a bicycle.

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Patrick took a seat at the bar of *Les Trois Etoiles* just off the Boulevard St-Michel. His arms ached from the gym, and his back was still shower-damp against his shirt.

“Hey, Alain – can I have a Stella Artois and some of your famously stale peanuts?” he asked, in fluent Paris-accented French.

“Sure,” said the barman. “Meeting Louise?”

“Yeah – she’s shopping, so it could be a while. How’s business?”

From behind his own eyes, Paggy looked out and caught a reflection in the mirror behind the ranged bottles of whisky and anis. The face that looked back at him was undeniably his – but thinner than it had been ten years back, and a little tan. The hair was shoulder-length and streaked with flattering grey.

“Hey, Patrick,” Alain said as he put a beer on the bar, “have you tried that Chinese restaurant up by the Luxembourg Gardens?”

Paggy understood the question– although, at seventeen, he had known no French at all. He felt around in his own mind, and found a memory of coming to Paris after college – just a three-day stopover on the way to London – and meeting Louise and falling in love and now, seven years later, living on the Left Bank, working in IT... All that detail was just there, known, accepted – a part of his life.

Paggy wondered how he had become this self-confident, urbane young man. He rummaged around in himself to find the clumsy, tongue-tied adolescent he’d been – but there was no trace.

Almost as if it were a physical movement, Paggy pressed the forehead of his consciousness against the imaginary iced windowpane, thinking *Another ten*.

\*

The snow was piling up against the door, and the wind was doing its damndest to break in. Patrick drew the curtains and walked back across the dim study to his computer. He took a slug of red wine and topped up the glass, before laying his hands on the keyboard.

*Offer her \$25,000 as a one-off,* he wrote. *But on the condition that that's an end to it.*

He backspaced and changed the figure 2 to 1.

Paggy watched himself typing. And he knew - because it was there to be known - that Louise was still in Paris, while he was here in Vancouver working too little and drinking too much. And it was *his fault*. Paggy felt a jolt go through him as he touched that realisation, like the sudden and incongruous shock from faulty Christmas tree lights. It was his fault - he'd had an affair. No – two. One in Paris, one here in Vancouver.

...how had his life come to that?

Paggy pressed his forehead against the cold pane.

\*

Across the years, Paggy found success and disappointment, love and betrayal. Two marriages. Three kids – great kids, beautiful, startling children. Several homes – Montreal, Berlin, Santa Fe, New York. He lost his hair in his forties. He became a grandfather in his late fifties. He had a heart-bypass in his sixties and retired with Penny to Cape Cod, to be near their grandchildren.

*Ten*, thought Paggy, leaning into the glass from his sixty-seventh birthday.

And there was only blackness.

Paggy considered.

*Five*, he thought.

More blackness.

*Three?*

And he was sitting in a mezzanine box at the opera, watching *Carmen*. His hands were brown-speckled, and his glasses kept slipping down his nose.

So, Paggy sighed as the toreadors marched, *I die somewhere between seventy and seventy-two.*

He pushed his life forward, month by month, and then day by day – but he lost courage when he still didn't come up against the blackness. He didn't want to know.

He made a grand tour of his life and times. He visited his early childhood, and played in the sand on long summer evenings at the ocean's edge. He ran and re-ran a late adolescent weekend in Vegas, living a debauched evening over and over, until he knew every gasp and snort of it, every subtlety of neon-light fractured across goosebumped hairs, every bubbling dribble of champagne spurted on the bathroom mirror, every tone of the scent of over-generous perfume.

He went to Paris – to just before the point of meeting Louise. He got off the plane, knowing that he would bump into her at the *Sacré Coeur* in three days' time. And he stayed at that *when* from first kiss to last spat, just enjoying it.

Paggy became a tourist in his own existence. And like any tourist, he gradually became familiar with his environs, and blended in. No longer a shadow, skulking behind his consciousness, he became adept at simply merging with himself, experiencing his life directly – being there. But still he couldn't find any event, any moment, any trigger that explained his transformation from the lumpen, shy Paggy of seventeen to the self-possessed adult Patrick in whose life he travelled. He wondered whether the simple process of growing up had imbued him with such self-possession and ease. It didn't seem likely. Something – some epiphany – had changed everything. He could feel it, though he couldn't identify it.

And so he continued his tour of a lifespan – spending a year here, a decade there. The years he had experienced mounted up – over a hundred now, comprised of short excursions, extended stays, the occasional blissful week repeated over and over. Age meant nothing. Paggy was living a bounded immortality. He existed in an eternal Paggy theme park, where all the rides were free, but there was only blackness beyond the gates.

And he began to get bored. He was intimately acquainted with every experience he flicked to, and the excitement of each dulled – because he knew how it would go, who would say what, which emotion would be inspired, what outcome would result. It was all unchangeable. He could run his thumbnail across the corners of the flick-book, and he could stop the animation where he wished, or skip to and fro – but he couldn't change the frames. His life was simply what it was – and all he could do was live it.

Immortality palled.

\*

It was difficult to keep track of which parts of his life Paggy had visited. When he flicked towards the end of his span, he had memories of doing things that he'd hadn't yet been to. It was as if he had read the book, and he knew that a certain chapter was in

there somewhere, but he couldn't find the page. Every so often, he would happen upon some undiscovered event and almost shriek inwardly with joy, like someone in a book store discovering an unsuspected novel by a favourite writer.

He was in his late forties. He was in Albuquerque again. He was attending a High School Reunion.

“Patrick!” yelled Mickey Lownds, striding across the school gymnasium towards him. He was portly and red-faced. “Jesus, man, it must be twenty-five years. Damn – you’re looking good, you bastard.”

“Hiya, Mickey,” Patrick said, grinning. He accepted a glass of punch. “What’s up?”

It was great to see Mickey again. The memories leapt forward in Patrick’s mind as they talked. The trips to the coast. The parties. The girlfriends and the ballgames.

“Hey – you remember that night we painted over all the windows of the school hall?” Mickey asked. “Bright red, right? Man – you had some crazy-ass ideas back then.”

Patrick remembered. He remembered the pranks, the fights, the drunken poker games. He remembered hair-raising adventures in the coupé. And, behind all that, the travelling part of him – the part he still thought of as Paggy – remembered that Mickey Lownds was going to die of a heart attack in two years’ time, and that his kids would stand at his graveside all in black, and weep silently in the bright New Mexico sunshine. But Mickey didn’t know that. He was happy, slightly drunk and completely ignorant.

“They were great days, Patrick,” Mickey grinned wistfully. “Never see ‘em again, huh?”

Paggy couldn’t bear it anymore. He flicked.

\*

The days rushed backwards through him, gibbering and nonsensical – vain light and noise. Knowing everything about his life, living it over and over in spurts, focussing on the thrilling parts – made it all a choreographed, plotless puppetshow. Patrick’s span – unremarkable childhood, awkward adolescence, affairs, marriages, children, globetrotting career, grief, happiness, declining old age – that span was what anyone would call a full life. It wasn’t particularly noteworthy, perhaps, but it was a life with a point. It went somewhere. It progressed.

But only in a line. A life, Paggy realised, is a story with structure. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It’s not a flick-book, a series of frames that can be made to give the illusion of movement.



There was no escape now though, for Paggy. He knew what he knew, and knowing it had emptied his life of any real direction, any tension, any plot. If there was anything left for Paggy to achieve, it was just the solution to that one itchy problem of how he'd been transformed from ugly duckling Paggy into self-possessed, popular Patrick. And he wasn't even sure he wanted to solve that, because then there would be nothing to do at all – except flick, flick, flick and sink deeper into miserable indifference.

\*

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Mickey shrugged and grinned. “Yeah, I bet. Don't know what you're missing, man.” And he turned to lope across the grass to the car.

“Wait!” Paggy shouted.

Ahead of him, he knew, there waited Patrick's life – a life that he had no idea how he would come to achieve, but a life that he nevertheless knew by heart. He couldn't change it – but he wanted to unknow it. He wanted to live it not knowing.

He turned back to the screen.

...???? Vita said again.

The cursor blinked in the message box. Paggy watched it from behind his eyes. Perhaps there was one single thing in his life that he could change. A change that changed nothing. He put his hands on the keyboard.

*sorry. im gone*, he typed.

He switched off the computer. And something melted in his mind, like ice loosening on a windowpane in the spring sunshine, slipping off onto the sill and dripping to the ground. And all the refractions of light through the crystal – the rainbow multiplicities and the mosaic layers – resolved themselves into a single simple view of the day outside, beyond the unyielding glass.

Paggy blinked, hearing Mickey telling him to hurry. He stepped out onto the roof of the porch, and dropped silently, if clumsily, onto the grass. He trotted across to the coupe and levered himself onto the backseat.

“Alright!” said Mickey Lownds. “Let’s hit it! You got that door shut, Paggy?”

“Say, guys,” Paggy said, as he checked the door. “Could you do me a favour? Call me Patrick. It’s my name.”

He didn’t know why he asked – but it seemed important all of a sudden.

“Sure – whatever,” Mickey agreed, as the coupé revved away into the night, trailing the laughter and squeals of teenagers who had nothing to do but live their lives.