

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



This is the true life of Billy Quinn - adventurer, drifter, musician, poet, lumberjack, fisherman, bodyguard, gigolo. It's hardly surprising that he couldn't find time to be my father.

He walked out of the house when I was twelve, which broke my mother's heart. I despised him for that. He reappeared twenty-one years later – some time after my mother died – and I wanted an explanation. During long evenings over several weeks, I taped conversations with my father. He told me about his life, and as he did so I discovered understanding, forgiveness and love.

So this book is for anyone who lost and found their dad – which, one way or another, is just about everyone.

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“You don't remember me, do you, Mr Jones?”

I looked up from the bookstore desk and I recognised her immediately. Rosemary Quinn.

“Of course I do, Rosemary. How are you?”

“Never better, Mr Jones. Will you sign for me?”

“I'd be glad to.”

I took a copy of my first published novel from the stack and opened it to the title page. She leaned forward as I picked up my pen.

“Please write, *To Rosemary, my star pupil, who'll be signing her own book for me one day.*”

“Well – are you a writer now?” I asked as I scribbled.

She reached into her shoulder bag and took out a manuscript, offering it to me. “Oh, yes. Would you like to read it?”

“I’d love to,” I said.

I really hate lying.

*

Opening the front door I heard ice chinking into a tall glass – what Capote called the most welcoming sound in the world.

“How did it go?” Lily said, handing me a vodka and tonic. “Cheers.”

“Really good.” I took a sip. “Though I met another ex-pupil with a manuscript.”

Lily laughed. “I told you this would happen. Woodwork squeaks...”

“Come again?”

“It’s an allusion to a tune written well after the discovery of electricity.”

“Ah, popular beat music. Not my field of interest.”

She grinned. “So tell me about this acolyte. Scarlet lipstick and purple passages? Another lit-smitten flirty-something?”

Lily’s wasted as an agent. She should write. It would take me hours to construct a line like that, and she comes up with the stuff just chatting.

“Not at all. She was a rather bloodless child, and she’s still a bit spectral. But a damn sight more cheerful than when she was twelve.”

Twenty-odd years ago I gave Rosemary Quinn a handkerchief as she wept on the steps of the school. I sat beside her and reassured her that she was better than the taunting bullies.

“They call me a bastard,” she sobbed, blowing her nose.

“Well, that’s not strictly true,” I said. “Your parents are married.” Not a helpful response to a distraught adolescent, admittedly – but, sorry, once an English teacher.

Her father had disappeared. He’d stormed out of the house, saying he was going to the pub, and two months later there was no sign of him. Being fatherless is a commonplace these days, but in a provincial English market town during the early eighties it was a stigma. The people of Elswick freebased gossip, and gear of that potency was transmitted from aproned mothers to grubby-socked daughters like toxins in a food chain.

“The poison collected around Rosemary,” I told my wife.

“Yeah - I know small towns.”

“Her escape was the written word, and I was her audience,” I said. “She produced endless stories of rescued heiresses, gypsy divas, superheroine rebels. She had some talent.”

“So what has she produced now?”

“I haven’t dared look.” I picked up my bag. “Listen – I’m going to get a couple of hours writing in before dinner – okay?”

“Do. I have to pack for Frankfurt. Ben’s going to ask about the synopsis for book two. What shall I say?”

“The synopsis is next on my list,” I said, heading for the stairs.

“I know the story’s flowing and all that, but you have to give him something tangible.”

“I will. I just don’t want to break my stride.”

Second lie in as many hours. It wasn’t getting any easier.

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Charlotte, NC. She was working in a topless place, and Billy Quinn stopped in for a beer. It had been two years since they split up - on the docks a thousand miles away - but he noticed her at once. It was her hair, red made redder by the stage lights. He simply sat there looking at her face silhouetted in the follow-spot. He didn’t speak to her, afraid she would disappear like hot ice. He wasn’t sure he had the right to approach her any more.

The place thinned out in the small hours. Quinn was about to leave too when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Don’t I know your name?” she said.

Her eyes were full of recognition but her expression was blank. It was a game, and they had played it before. They were starting anew.

“Do you?”

“It may come to me.”

At her apartment she lit a burner on the stove and offered him a pipe. Quinn felt like a thief who’d broken into a house only to find it was his own – surprised, a bit foolish, but also relieved.

*

Even when I was teaching fulltime, I wrote prolifically. On my forty-fifth birthday I opened a bottle of champagne and skimmed through my collected unpublished novels. There were eleven of them. Halfway down the second bottle I decided that I'd write one more, push it hard and then – if it didn't find a home – give up. I wrote during the summer break, almost carelessly, certain that the effort was futile. My ex-wife's friend Lily was starting her own literary agency. Within a month she sold *Chalkdust* for the equivalent of twice a headmaster's salary. She says that I'd never have fallen in love with her for less.

It was a two-book deal and now the deadline for the second manuscript was three months away. Despite my protestations to Lily, I hadn't written a word. Well – not quite true. I'd written the first ten thousand words of three novels that were going nowhere. I'd promised Lily that when she got back from the Book Fair I'd give her a sight of the new stuff. But I had no new stuff.

Tuesday after lunch I hauled Lily's suitcase to the taxi and waved her off. Back in the house I made tea and thought about how to structure my five days of solitude to greatest creative effect. I ironed five shirts, because I write best when I'm dressed for work. I invested a couple of hours in a trip to the supermarket so that I wouldn't have to think about food every day. I cleared all my outstanding e-mail correspondence so that it wouldn't tempt me further. I sought out and downloaded some half-remembered Sibelius, listening to which was going to be my reward at nine or ten each evening.

It was nearly midnight by the time I got myself straight - too late to begin writing. But if I went to sleep straight away I could be up and at it by seven, so I hadn't so much lost a short day as gained four long ones.

Just to give myself some winding-down time, I took Rosemary's manuscript to bed with me.

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She was married when they first met, soon to be divorced. Quinn helped her out of a jam, but he always used to say – darkly, intriguingly - that he used a little too much force.

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It was breakfast time on Wednesday when I finished reading. I've tossed aside better-written manuscripts and I've given up on tighter plots, more convincing characters, more inspired themes. But I stuck with Rosemary's two-hundred pages because I was waiting for it to do what I hoped it might. It never did.

Rosemary painted her father as a roguish anti-hero, a maverick soul in a conformist age. Fleeing a suffocating provincial marriage he washed up on the east coast of the US in 1983, and spent twenty years travelling with the wind – a cross between Charles Bukowski and Boxcar Willie. He was an engaging character although his life – like the book itself – lacked real direction. His talent, implicitly, was to become whatever was required of him. Given the possibility of a payoff – food, sex, shelter, the usual fundamentals - he met the expectations of anyone who needed something from him. He would have been easy to dislike, but there was something compelling in Billy Quinn's voice. Although it was the daughter's writing,

you could practically hear the father's words coming straight off tape. He was a character in search of a context.

Lily called at eight.

"I thought you might have worked late," she said "Did I wake you up?"

"No, I was making breakfast. How's Frankfurt? How's the hotel?"

"Fine. You getting a lot done?"

"Masses."

We chatted for a few minutes. I could hear traffic.

"My cab's just arrived at the conference centre," Lily said. "So am I okay to tell Ben we're going to deliver on schedule?"

"I wish you'd stop nagging," I said. "I've been writing like a demon all night."

Procrastination is as addictive as nicotine – and it inspires justifications every bit as insidious. A single cigarette to give me focus, and that'd be the only one today. An hour editing a chapter or two of Rosemary's manuscript, just to get my own engine turning over. It'd be a favour for an ex-pupil and a good warming-up exercise for me. Everybody would benefit.

I found a red pen and a pack of Lights and took the manuscript out to the patio.

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Thursday morning I called Rosemary to offer her lunch in town.

"Did you like my book?" she asked, even before the menus arrived.

"I did. It's rough and unready – but it has something."

She smiled a smile that I haven't seen since I left teaching. It was the smile of a kid whose alibi stood up, or whose test results exceeded expectations. It was a smile of vindication.

"I knew you'd love it," she said. "You always loved my stuff."

We ordered wine.

"I didn't say I loved it. I said I liked it." I tapped out a cigarette. "There's still work to do."

Work I had started doing, in fact. The previous day's breakfast on the patio had lasted well into the evening as I scribbled notes in the margins of Rosemary's manuscript and wrote entire new passages longhand on the backs of her pages. My intention had been merely to give pointers as to where the story might benefit from a little tweaking, but I'd ended up writing what was missing.

I reached into my bag and took out a sheaf of paper. “I devoted some time to your draft,” I said. “Excuse the typos. I was awake at six typing it all up.”

“Typing what?”

“Do you know which character most intrigued me in your father’s life?” I said. “The redhead. She crops up every few years and she and Billy get it together, then it all goes wrong and they split. They’re always connected but they don’t keep in touch. They run from each other but they’re inevitably drawn back. They generate heat but they wilfully refuse to stoke the fire.”

“Yeah – I say they were soul mates.”

I shook my head. “That’s a hollow cliché and it criminally wastes an opportunity. We never see the redhead except through your father. The episodes that involve her just come and go without any development of the relationship.” I struck a match and lit my cigarette. “You don’t even tell us her name.”

“He didn’t tell me her name.”

I laughed. “Okay. Then I’ll tell you. I’ve called her Alex.”

I handed the newly-printed pages across the table. I smoked and drank as Rosemary read my development of her work. I’d overhauled and expanded five or six chapters, putting in place a parallel narrative and introducing elements of plot that gave rise to the need for resolution. I have written enough crap in my time to know that this was pretty impressive stuff. It was the best prose I’d ever produced.

“This is all made up,” Rosemary said at last, frowning. She pushed the pages back across the table. “This is fiction.”

“Of course it is. It has the makings of a great story.” I topped up her glass, took a deep breath and made my pitch. “It has the makings, actually, of a publishable and very successful story. A co-authored novel.”

The word I expected her to balk at in that phrase was ‘co-authored’. I was wrong.

“Novel?” she said, disgustedly. “You want to turn my father into a *character*?” She made it sound like a synonym for *glove-puppet*. “You don’t understand my book at all, do you?”

I’d burned her, though I couldn’t see how. But suddenly the best prose I’d ever produced was hanging over the fire.

“Perhaps I don’t,” I said smoothly. “Explain it to me.”

She reached across the table and took one of my cigarettes. I struck a match for her.

“All right,” she said, exhaling smoke. She sat back in her chair. “When my dad left, the kids at school all made up stories about him. He was in prison. He’d run off with the woman from the baker’s.” She took another drag. “They got this crap from their mums – I knew that.” She flicked at the ashtray. “He’d turned queer. He had another wife and family in Abbeywood.”

“Kids are cruel,” I said. She needed a cue, and that flabby truism was the best I could do.

Rosemary shook her head, rolling the burning tip of her cigarette around the rim of the ashtray as she spoke. “They flayed me with all that made-up tripe, but I knew they were wrong. Even as I was sobbing in the toilets, I knew that my dad was doing something they couldn’t begin to imagine. Their speculations were petty and parochial and dull – like their lives. For Christ’s sake – a bigamous marriage in Abbeywood?” She looked up from the ashtray. “I was sure my dad was more exciting than that. And so it turned out.”

“You’re right. It’s a great story.”

Apparently I blew it again. She slammed her hand down on the table. “No!” My wine glass tottered and I reached out to steady it – a displacement gesture, but safer than speaking.

“No,” she said, more calmly. “It’s not a *story*. It’s true. They have to read it and see it’s true. Not fiction. Not made up. My dad was better than their *stories*. And my book proves it.”

At which point I could have launched into any one of many oft-delivered lectures concerning the emotional and elemental verity of narrative fiction, as opposed to the untidy and unconvincing wholesomeness of narrative fact. But – only one bottle in – I could tell the timing wasn’t right.

Rosemary gazed out of the window. “Look at this place,” she said, nodding at the narrow, traffic-crowded high street outside. “Everything about it’s so paltry. But where Dad went – New Orleans, Delacroix, the Great North Woods...” She laughed. “Even the names are evocative, alluring. *The Great North Woods*. It just makes you want to run full-tilt through the trees screaming at the sky.”

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Screaming at the sky was an option for me too. As I walked home through the park after lunch, the frustration welled up and I had to relieve the pressure by rather spitefully throwing inedible handfuls of gravel to ducks on the pond.

I could see why Rosemary was insistent on framing her book as a biographical memoir. She needed Billy’s missing twenty years to be so irresistible that she could forgive him for choosing escape rather than conscientious fatherhood. She couldn’t permit him to be merely a weak and untrustworthy absconder. He had to be a real-life hero on a mythic adventure.

And that’s what I wanted to make him. In my vision of the thing, he and Alex represented the Classical ideal of a love so strong that its truth was impervious to the corrupting effects of time and separation and even consummation. I could make Billy Quinn simultaneously an authentic unsentimental anti-hero and a timeless romantic archetype.

Strolling out of the park gates onto the street I stopped, struck by a thought. It didn’t have to be Billy Quinn. It could be – what? – Joe Parks. Andy Gates. Johnny Street. And he didn’t need to come from Elswick. He could come from any small northern town.

I quickened my pace as I headed back to the house. Rosemary didn't own the idea of a maverick drifter. In fact it was a hackneyed notion in the first place. The clever part – the *marketable* part – was mine. I didn't need Rosemary at all.

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For the next two days and nights I worked on *The Mighty Quinn*. The title would have to go, of course, which was a pity because I rather liked it. It smacked of legend. But I'd worry about that later when I rewrote Rosemary's parts – which were too intense and neurotic anyway. For the time being I just wanted to copy-type her manuscript into Word and interlace it with my own stuff.

When Lily arrived home on Sunday morning I greeted her with sparkling wine and bleary eyes.

"You look terrible." She kissed me. "Terrible but smug. Has the work progressed well?"

"Brilliantly. Shall we go to bed?"

"You'd be no use to me by the look of you. Go get some sleep and I'll wake you up later with something hot."

It was early evening when I emerged from under the duvet, and I couldn't help noticing that I was still on my own. I trudged downstairs.

"This is wonderful," Lily said. She was sitting in my study scrolling through the document on the screen. "It really is." She paged back to the top. "I love the way you've sustained the contrasting narrative tones – the laconic thing when we're with Alex and the intense, neurotic style for Billy. The juxtaposition is what gives it such a compelling dynamic."

"Ah," I said. "You like that, huh?"

I couldn't have gone through with it anyway. My conscience would never have allowed me to appropriate Rosemary's idea and rewrite her prose. And apparently it would have been a stylistic mistake as well as an ethical transgression. I came clean about my ex-pupil.

"Well, your instincts are accurate," Lily said. "The book needs the fictional counterpoint of Alex's story."

"But she won't let it be published except as memoir."

Lily shrugged. "Your half's fiction. If we sell Billy as real, we have to say Alex is real too. And the lawyers will want to check that." She stretched her arms above her head, fingers locked. "Shall we go out for a romantic dinner? I've missed you."

"Yeah," I said distractedly. "Can I get to the computer? I have an idea."

She stood up and I immediately slid into my writing chair.

"I just need an hour," I said.

“It’ll be more than an hour. It’ll be all night. I can tell.”

“Two hours tops,” I said, scrolling through the document.

“I remember when I first met you,” Lily mused. “Writers, I told myself, are for work, not for fun. Lily, I said, don’t take this one home.”

“We’ll go out tomorrow – any restaurant you choose,” I said, typing.

She picked up three or four used glasses from the windowsill and headed for the door, sighing theatrically.

“Even walking down the aisle I thought, this marriage is going to be a bed of roses – beautiful to look at but a complete bastard to get tangled up in.”

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Blue spring skies followed the snow, and Billy hit the road again. He got a job in the Great North Woods, working as a cook for a spell. He never did like it all that much, but the big plus was that no one was likely to find him out there in the wilds.

<begin insert>

One morning, after preparing and serving breakfast for fifty crew, Billy took a walk into the forest, just to be alone. He sat on a fallen tree trunk under the thick canopy in the green gloom. The shriek of chainsaws seemed miles away, muted and irrelevant. Billy closed his eyes, listening to the call of a jay close by.

“Hey, Billy.”

She sat down beside him and he opened his eyes. Her red hair was up in some kind of fancy do, and she was wearing an emerald green ballgown and long black gloves.

“Still running?” she said, taking two mini-bar bottles of JD from her purse. She twisted the top off one of them and handed it to him.

“Not running. Just stepping out for a breath of air.”

“Hell of a long step. But it’s okay. I need to breathe a little too.”

“I heard you married again,” Billy said, swigging the JD.

“Yep. Nice guy. Well – he was. Not so nice these days. You going to rescue me? I think it’s your turn.”

“Sure. I’ll be back before the snow.”

“Good.”

She kissed his cheek and he closed his eyes. The chainsaws were closer now and the jay was gone. He had to cook lunch for fifty crew.

<end insert>

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It only needed a three or four short insertions – just a few spots in Rosemary’s narrative where I could introduce the redhead under unlikely circumstances.

“Rosemary has Billy on tape with his story, so that's legally watertight. And I’ve blurred Alex so that it’s not clear whether she’s real or imagined. No one else in the book is seriously traceable. So I don’t see why we can’t pitch it as memoir – there's nothing for the lawyers to fret about.”

Lily shrugged. “You could be right. Let’s send it to Ben and see what he thinks.”

“Good. I’ll arrange to see Rosemary again. But I want to finish it first.”

I worked flat out for a week, sixteen, eighteen hours a day. I wove the two narratives together, my fiction and Rosemary’s truth. I knew it was good, and Ben – to whom Lily was feeding instalments daily – agreed with me.

“I’ve had the marketing guys look at it,” he said when he called. “Our only problem is choosing which prizes to put it forward for. Oh, and the New York office wants to plan a US tour for you. Have you ever done TV?”

“I think you might be about to resurrect the art of memoir,” Lily said when I hung up the phone.

I grinned. “I’ll get straight back to work.” At the kitchen door I stopped. “Do you like Rosemary’s title? I think there’s something mythical about it.”

“Yeah, I do. But the fashion for naming books after songs might be over.”

“Song?”

“I vaguely remember it from my childhood. I don’t know who it’s by.”

“Never heard of it. I’ll Google it.”

Back in the study I opened up a browser – something I hadn’t done for nearly a fortnight. I typed in *mighty quinn*.

It was a song by Bob Dylan, apparently. I followed a link to the lyric. The page carried the words to all Dylan’s songs. I wasn’t a fan but I was impressed by the quantity of his output. I scrolled down, down, past reams of lyrics. And one line caught my eye as it zipped up the screen.

She was married when we first met, soon to be divorced.

I scrolled back and found the line again, and read the next one.

*She was married when we first met, soon to be divorced.
I helped her out of a jam, I guess,
But I used a little too much force.*

The song was called *Tangled Up In Blue*. As I read the entire lyric, something cold liquefied inside me. It was all there.

*I had a job in the Great North Woods
Working as a cook for a spell
But I never did like it all that much
And one day the ax just fell.*

The tales that Rosemary had so faithfully reproduced from her taped conversations with her father were all based on this one song. He'd evidently quoted it verbatim at several points.

*She was workin' in a topless place
And I stopped in for a beer,
I just kept lookin' at the side of her face
In the spotlight so clear.
And later on as the crowd thinned out
I's just about to do the same,
She was standing there in back of my chair
Sayin' "Tell me - don't I know your name?"*

I remembered my initial assessment of Billy Quinn – that his talent was to be whoever anyone wanted him to be. His daughter had needed him to be a romantic adventurer, a free spirit – so that's how he'd painted himself, and to do it he'd stolen a past from this song. At the end of his life he'd given Rosemary a father she could love and admire.

But now another question insisted on being asked.

I typed *Billy Quinn* into Google. Nothing came back that seemed relevant. I tried *William Quinn*. And on page five, I found this.

And this year we say goodbye to William Quinn, who joined the sales team as a travelling rep in 1993 and who retires as Regional Sales Manager after twenty years' service.

"When I first started at Milligan Shutters," Bill recalls, "the sales team was just me. Now I'm proud to have a dozen talented salespeople under me. Not bad going for an Elswick boy who left school at fourteen."

Sadly Bill lost his wife Joan two years ago, so he plans to sell up his place in Abbeywood and retire to Cornwall where son Martin – also an ex-Milligan man! – now lives with his young family.

"For Christ's sake," I muttered, slumping in my chair. "A bigamous marriage in Abbeywood?."

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I was early to the restaurant. I wanted to get outside a drink or two before I talked to Rosemary. I wasn't looking forward to it.

"This is fabulous," Lily had said when I called her in to look at what I found on the web about William Quinn. "It completely frees us up to sell it as fiction, and it offers a terrific marketing platform when you and the Rosemary girl trot out the story behind the story. It'll make a fortune."

"Rosemary's not going to like it," I said.

Lily shrugged. "Well, I expect she'll be pissed off with her departed Dad for a while – but so what? A great story's a great story. And this one's going to be a bestseller. Just tell her the truth and let's get on with it."

"Right. Just tell her the truth."

"Hi." Rosemary sat down opposite me and nodded at my glass. "Started without me?"

"How you doing?"

"Terrific. You said you wanted to talk to me about the book?"

"Yeah. Let's order first."

Over pasta I said, "So you know my wife's an agent? Well, I had her look at your book. Well – actually, your book plus my additions. And my editor looked at it too."

"Uhuh."

"They really liked it."

"Of course they did. But I don't care. I'm not having your made-up stuff in there. Only the truth."

"That's what I want to discuss."

"Nothing to discuss. Let's not argue. Look – change of subject. I'll tell you my news."

I felt let off the hook. I decided to allow her to chat for a while and then I'd come back to the point.

"I was thinking about our last conversation – when I was saying how narrow and parochial this place is. And I thought, why stay here and moan about it? Why not just go – like Dad did?" She grinned and reached into her bag, pulling out an envelope. "Air ticket to New Orleans. I leave on Monday."

"Wow. Are you sure?"

“Absolutely. I realised that it wasn’t enough to write Dad’s memoir. I have to have my own stuff. I can’t live through his. I’m going to go to all the places he went, and then – I dunno – the wind can take me wherever it pleases.”

“My God.”

She picked up her glass. “A toast – to Billy Quinn. The man who gave me the genes of an adventurer and the heart of a maverick.”

I stayed still.

“Hey – what’s up? You won’t drink to my dad?”

“I need to talk to you about the book, Rosemary.”

“Look – if your wife can sell my original as a memoir, fine. If not, then I don’t want it published. It’s the truth or nothing - I don’t care.”

“Yeah, but...”

“The truth or nothing. Now pick up your glass.”

I looked at her - excited, self-confident, ready to launch herself into a completely new world – and all on the strength of Billy Quinn’s lies.

“Let me say my piece,” I said. I stubbed out my cigarette and stared my ex-pupil full in the face. “I’m sorry to bring you bad news, Rosemary. They liked the book, but no one’s buying memoirs these days. I’m afraid that the truth in your work is exactly what makes it unpublishable.”

Rosemary frowned. Then she pouted and lifted her glass. “Well, screw the reading public if they can’t stand the truth. You keep feeding people made-up stuff, Mr Jones. I’m off to do something real.”

“I’ll do that,” I nodded, smiling. I raised my glass and touched it to hers. “To Billy Quinn, then,” I said. “A truly mythical guy.”