

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable

Chain Lightning

Mark Bastable

My name is Eleanor Grace. I used to work for a big literary agency, but in my heart I always wanted to be what I am now – a writer. At the moment I’m working on a true crime book. Non-fiction. And I’m in it.

The story starts when I sleep with Alexander – and I still think of him as Alexander – at a Christian Booksellers’ Convention in New York City. I should have gotten a clue about him over coffee, when he changed his tune. He’d been quietly extolling the virtues of the inspirational books sold in his New Leaf chain of stores - but when I confessed to being godless, he laughed and admitted that he was pretty much a practising heathen too. Complete shift of position, you see. At the time I assumed he was relieved to talk honestly after a long day of pious pretence. Pretty funny, in retrospect.

I woke up alone in a room at the Plaza, without my purse, my very expensive jewelry and – weirdly – my shoes. Turns out that there’s no bookstore chain called New Leaf. And there was no-one called Alexander Wright on the list of delegates at the convention. The room at the Plaza had been booked in the name Patrick Malloy – and the cops told me that Mr Malloy was a forty-nine-year-old attorney working out of East Durham. A week or so before, he’d been ripped off by a client. The cops wanted to make a connection, and they asked me for a description of Alexander.

“Thirty-something,” I said, shrugging. “Six feet. Skinny. Untidy blond hair. Long elegant fingers.”

The officer gave me a look that suggested this last detail wasn’t likely to feature in the APB.

“It’s not our guy. The grifter upstate was late forties, kinda bulky. Damn.”

Well, I guess I could have just put the whole mess down as the price of an education. But you know how it is – some little notion starts to bug you, and you let it roll around in your brain. And as it rolls, it picks up sticky bits of theory and fluffy clumps of conjecture and the next thing you know it's grown so big that you just have to unravel the damn thing before your head splits open. Plus, my instincts told me there was a story here – and I'd been looking for a story. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life selling other people's writing. I wanted to write my own stuff. And I knew that a really great story was trundling past me like a travelling circus, and I had to hop on board and see where it pitched up.

So I called Mr Patrick Malloy, and drove up to the Catskills the following weekend.

East Durham trades on the idea that it's a piece of Ireland transported magically across the ocean. It attracts holidaymakers who believe there's a tinge of emerald-green in their halfbaked whitebread blood.

But if the Gaelic pretensions of the tourists were fake, Patrick Malloy was the McCoy. Green eyes; barely-tamed red hair; pale complexion sugared with freckles; a Guinness paunch and a flirtatious grin.

“You know why I got rolled?” he said. “I was flattered. Smalltown office like mine gets to play with the big-city boys? Hell, yeah.” We were sucking suds at a lakeside bar called Sligo's. “His name was Michael Rice, entrepreneur outta Boston. Up here for the summer and he needed legal advice on tap. I liked the guy right away. Same attitudes, same sense of humour. He even looked a little like me. When I invited him home for a cook-out, my wife said we might be taken for brothers.”

I nodded. Alexander had made me feel that way. Like we had known each other for years rather than minutes. I was so relaxed and carefree with him that trust just seemed a natural progression. I guess it's a talent that all conmen develop.

“So, gets to the stage where he's mentioning the groundfloor on this deal he's cutting. Tell the truth, I pushed hard to get in on the action. He was warning me off, saying there were no guarantees.” Malloy laughed. “I near as dammit had to shove fistfuls of bills down his shirt. Man, he was a professional.”

In fact, Malloy raised a banker's draft for fifteen thousand dollars. Two days later, Michael Rice disappeared.

I did some research. Michael Rice came up as a dental surgeon with a practice in one of Boston's wealthier burbs. So that's where I went.

“I fell for a sucker punch,” Rice told me. “I think it was because he was like me – similar aspirations and background. I've always felt that people of color should support each other, and this guy Alvin Moore was offering me a chance to lend a hand to ethnic business and to make an ethical profit.”

Michael Rice the dentist lost twenty-five thousand dollars. But he, like Patrick Malloy, seemed totally devoid of anger. He was rueful and a little amused, but he wasn't furious at the man who'd called himself Alvin Moore. And there was no discernible anger in the real Alvin Moore, an old gentleman in Montpelier, Vermont, who had been taken for twelve

grand by a fellow Korean War veteran called Mattie Shawcross. And Mattie Shawcross, who turned out to be a gawky twenty-something software designer in Trenton, NJ, was sanguine about the sixteen thou he'd handed over to another genius-geek by the name of Amanda Purley.

It had taken me a week to follow the trail to Trenton. I'd called in sick and just winged it. I guess it's difficult to understand, this sudden and reckless obsession. But when a story starts to tug at you, when it whispers in your ear – constantly, insistently – and when you know that you are the only person on the planet who can research it, capture it, write it as it should be written – then you have no choice but to throw yourself on and let it carry you along, tossed and buffeted, clinging to its mane, until you break it and its yours.

I know that sounds fanciful and a little insane. Like I say, only a writer would understand why I walked into a bar in downtown Trenton, called the office and quit my job. Then, feeling light-headed and amazed at myself, I ordered a beer and a Caesar's salad, and I sat down to figure my next move.

It was obvious that there was a highly organised gang of conmen at work here, each targeting victims who could relate – because of ethnic background, aspirations, personal history.

And as I pushed the square coasters around the table-top, fitting them together in checkerboards and diamonds, I realised that there was a link missing at the top of the chain. The way this group of scammers worked, they passed on victims' names. The Korean vet used the name Mattie Shawcross when he suckered Alvin Moore. The black professional used Alvin Moore's name when he scammed Michael Rice, and the burly redhead used Michael Rice's name when he put one over on Pat Malloy.

The room at the Plaza had been booked in the name of Patrick Malloy – but the guy who seduced me called himself Alexander Wright. For the MO to be consistent, a false Patrick Malloy ought to have rolled someone called Alexander Wright – and Alexander Wright's name was then used to roll me. Though maybe that's not the best choice of verb.

My vile seducer had told me that he lived in Tribeca. There was a listing for an Alexander Wright just south of Canal, and as I made my way there, I wondered what the real Alexander would turn out to be like. I'd fallen into this habit as I drove from state to state – trying to envisage the face that would belong to the latest name. I decided, for no real reason, that Alexander Wright would be a Wall Street trader – sharp dark suit and expensive teeth. So I was surprised when, having parked the car, I turned a street-corner and bumped slam-bang into a six-foot, skinny, thirty-something with untidy blond hair and long elegant fingers.

“Alexander!” I exclaimed, bouncing back off his narrow chest.

He looked at me, confused for a moment or two, and then his eyes widened.

“Oh, no,” he said quietly. And he turned and ran.

I ran too. I chased him towards Canal, and then he cut east into Chinatown. I nearly lost him when he dodged around a narrow corner into a street market, but I made it just in time to see him slow down and fall in with the pace of the Hari Krishna people who were emerging from their temple, chanting and banging drums.

And as Alexander walked alongside them, his blond hair receded; his jeans and sweatshirt drooped and sagged, turning orange; his shoulders shrank and his eyes narrowed and his skin tightened over his cheekbones. And Alexander was gone. The clapping, bobbing parade of disciples was a little larger than before – but I couldn't tell which of the saffron-robed monks was new to the order.

I have more to tell, of course. All this happened over a year ago, and since then I have discovered so much – not only about Alexander, but also about his kind. I have uncovered secrets about the United States of America that will shock and astonish the ordinary citizens of my homeland. What Alexander is – what he can do – it goes way to the top.

But there has been a cost to all this. I haven't earned a cent since I quit my job from that payphone in Trenton. My savings are gone, as is my apartment. I have a bare rented room in Brooklyn, and I have my typewriter. It's Tuesday. I last ate on Saturday. I just write and write and write. I have typed 330 pages – I reckon there's a hundred to go.

This is my last sheet of paper. Only a fellow writer would understand why I need paper more than I need food. But I'm totally out of money.

So I'm at your mercy. If you understand – if you are a writer who knows the single-minded imperative of *having* to write – please help me. A ream of paper costs ten dollars. Please contribute anything you can, via Paypal, to eleanor.grace@ymail.com

If you are a writer, I know you will help.