

# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



Kenny Grant was muttering to himself as he slouched out to the garage. A man's gotta right to some peace, he reckoned. Watch the game on the weekend. Down a few beers. Nuthin' wrong with that.

"See, that's the trouble with you," Stacey'd said a few minutes earlier. "You don't stick at somethin'. Never see it through."

Kenny slammed a hand on the table. "What are you over here? My mother?"

"Hey, listen. Your mother warned me right before we got married. I shoulda listened to her, rest her soul." She crossed herself, heading for the door. "You just better finish that court before I come home from my class – that's all I'm sayin'." She turned in the doorway. "Nother thing. I know how many beers are in the cooler so don't you go drinkin' all day." The screen door slammed and she was gone.

The garage was gloomy and stifling - hard to breath in there.

"What's it to her if I drink all day?" Kenny asked the mongrel dog that padded in to watch him lifting cans of paint from the shelf. "It's Sunday, dammit." He picked out a brush that was soaking in an old coffee can. "Can't see why the kid needs a painted court anyways. Never had none when I was a kid. Just a hoop up on the wall. What is this? Madison Square Garden?"

He trudged out to the front yard and surveyed the area, scowling at the three-point line. It was pretty good now he looked at it. Kinda shaky in places but, hey, on your hands and knees with a two-inch brush, whatcha gonna do?

“Dad, where’s the free-throw lane?” Chelsea had demanded, standing on the sidewalk and tipping her skateboard up and down with her foot.

“The what?”

“Kenny, that’s no more’n a yellow semi-circle around the garage door,” Stacey frowned as she came out of the house onto the porch. “Least I *guess* it’s a semi-circle.”

Chelsea nodded. “And there’s gotta be a center circle up here by the fence. You said you’d paint a whole half a court.”

“Okay, okay. It’s getting dark. I’ll finish it tomorrow after work.”

That had been two months back. But – hell – it’s not like Kenny didn’t have other stuff to do. He had plenty to do, okay? And he didn’t need no ‘Kenny don’t stick at nothing’ bull. He could easily believe his mother had told Stacey that. She’d rammed it in to him every freakin’ day of his life. “Got no persistence, Kenny. You’re a quitter, Kenny. Look at Dale! Look at Mikey! They’re gonna be somethin’ - and y’know why? Cause they stick at what they start.”

Sure they did. Dale stuck at making it into the Marines and got his head blown off in Iraq. Mikey banged on doors until he hit a break on Wall Street and dropped dead of a heart-attack at forty-one. Yeah, that’s a great idea, that sticking at somethin’ shit.

Kenny took a penknife from his pocket and knelt down to prize the lid off the can of paint. What kid needs a damn free-throw lane anyhow?

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If you want to focus an audience’s attention, you can’t beat letting a snake loose.

Sara McGleish stood up from behind her table and strode purposefully between the chairs on which potential readers sat with their thighs held to their chests, or stood grasping their skirts above their knees, screeching .

“Pardon me. He’s just under your seat there,” Sara told a preppy blonde who whimpered and craned to squint over her shoulder. She bent and picked up Milton who immediately wrapped himself around her arm. Making her way back to the table, she held him aloft so that everyone in the bookstore could see that he’d been retrieved.

“Now that,” she said as her audience sat back in their seats, “is how good plotting works.” She coiled Milton back into his bag and smiled at the relieved, pale faces looking at her. “You have to come up with something unexpected and grabby. I like to have what I call a snake-moment every thirty pages or so.”

“But, Ms McGleish,” asked the preppy blonde, raising her hand, “where do you get the plot points in the first place?”

“They’re all around you,” Sara said. “The world’s full of stories. Like the snake. Just look down and there he is.” She glanced at the manager of the bookstore who was discreetly tapping his watch. “That just about wraps up my little talk, but I’ll be here to sign copies of *The Venus Quotient* for anyone who’d like to purchase one.”

An hour later she was driving home in what she thought of as the Saramobile. Her royalties had paid for it and it was about all they’d paid for so far. She took off her Sara spectacles and put on her regular pair. She freed her hair from its Sara bun and shook her head so that the curls fell to her shoulders. By the time she pulled up outside the house she was Monica again. She’d resisted when her publisher had first suggested that Monica Sibersky wouldn’t sit well on a book jacket, but now she found she liked having a pseudonym. It had a superhero kind of glamour about it.

“Hey, Mon,” Russell said as she walked into the kitchen. “Glass of wine on the table for you. How’d it go?”

“Good. Sold twenty or so right there in the store. Can you put Milton back in his tank? I need to check my e-mail before dinner.”

“Sure, hon. Thought we’d grill out. It’s shaping up to be a nice evening.”

“Perfect. Give me an hour.”

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Kenny painted a rough circle at the apex of the three-point line. It was damn hot out there in the front yard and the sweat was dribbling from his neck down his back. It was gonna take, what, ten minutes to do the alley to the hoop and another five for the center-circle just short of the sidewalk. Stacey wouldn’t be home for an hour and a half. The hell with it. Time for a beer and catch a piece of the Eagles game.

But whaddya know. The heat. A coupla Millers. Laying full-length on the couch, he fell asleep. Next thing he knows, Stacey’s beating on him with a throw cushion.

“Is that all you’ve done out there, Kenny? One pissant little circle? You never stick at nothin’, you asshole.” Crazy bitch chased him out of the house like he was a puppy who’d messed on the rug. “Just once in your life you’re gonna finish what you start and you’re gonna make it good or you can find someplace else to sleep tonight.”

On all fours just short of the sidewalk, he daubed a center-circle on the ground. Well, it was meant to be a circle but it came out kinda like an egg. Too small too.

Oh, she'd really give him shit for that. He could just hear her letting go on that subject, yeah.

Kenny dipped the brush in the can and painted a bigger circle around the egg. He stood up and checked it out. Dammit, that looked like crap.

"Never finish what you start, Kenny. Always screw up and quit, doncha?" Just like his mom used to say. The Fuck-Up Kid - that's what his mom called him. But he'd had a lotta bad luck. Man, he had the worse luck of anyone in the world. Look at this stupid center-circle. Just naturally fucked up. Weren't no fault of his.

Had to do somethin' about that egg though. Paint it in. Yeah, great idea. Center-circle, center-spot. What diff, right?

He painted it in.

\* \* \* \*

*dear Sara*

*Thanks for your e-mail about yr plot amd characters. It sure helped!!! My tutor said I showed initiative writing to you :-)*

*This week we have to write a creative fiction story and I was wondering where you get yr ideas?? You always have great plots! I guess you got the kind life where exiting things happen all the time. I sure don't! I just live in a regular town, its boring, no sh\*t!*

*If you can tell me how you get great plots "who knows?" one day I could get my stuff published too! You gotta live the dream right ;-)*

*Your NJ fan*

*Stacey G xoxox*

Monica looked out of the window as she lit a cigarette. She scrolled back up the e-mail wondering where to start. It cost nothing to be kind. She laid the cigarette in the ashtray and began to type.

*Dear Stacey,*

*Believe me, I live in the most boring town in the US. I know this for certain because I've visited all the others.*

*But plot is everywhere. Stories are all around us. It's just a question of taking what you see and using your imagination. Look at the embarrassed guy picking out hose in the drugstore. Who's he buying them for? His girl? His mom?*

*Himself? What about the old lady selling perfume at the concession counter? Has she been doing that all her life? What has it done to her sense of smell? Or her husband's?*

*That's all I do, just make stuff up from what I see. I invent lies. I can't tell you any more than that.*

*Good luck with your class, and particularly with your story this week. The only advice I can give you is to look out your window. I guarantee that there's a story waiting for you within fifty yards of where you're sitting now.*

*You go, girl!*

*Sara McGleish*

Monica grimaced as she hit *Send*. She hated condescension, especially when it was herself doing it.

"*You go, girl?*" she muttered. "Jeez, I hope that never makes it on to any blogs."

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"What in hell is that?"

Kenny looked over his shoulder. Stacey was walking from the house towards him.

"What? What's wrong with it?"

"Are you outta your mind? That's one huge piece of crap." She looked down at Kenny who was putting the finishing touches to the center-spot. It had been tough to get it circular so he'd kinda filled it out on this side which had made it, like, eggy again, so he'd tried to balance it out on the other side but it was still weird-lookin'. So... well, what with the balancing and the rounding off, it was, yeah, bigger than he'd planned.

"Kenny – that freakin' thing is four feet across! That's a four-foot yellow spot in our front yard!"

"So what?" Kenny shrugged "You think you can do better? Go ahead – take the brush. You're so fucken' smart with the paintin' over here, you do it."

Stacey shook her head. "Oh, no. I know what you're doin', you sonofabitch. You're tryna to fuck this up so bad I'll let you quit. No way. Nuh-huh." She turned on her heel and stalked back to the house. "I have a thing to write for my class. It's gonna take me all goddam night and that's just fine 'cause you're

gonna be right here, understand? You're gonna be out here stickin' to something for once in your life! You hear me?"

Kenny got to his feet. "You think I can't stick at this? Huh? You think I'm gonna quit?"

"You better not!" Stacey shouted over her shoulder as she disappeared through the front door.

"Damn right I won't!" Kenny yelled, waving the brush, spattering yellow paint across his face. "You wanna see me stick at it? You ready for this?" He turned and went down on his knees, plunging the brush into the paint. He daubed another wide yellow circle that he filled with solid color. He shuffled forward and painted yet another. "You watching this? You watching me not quit?" He was out on the sidewalk now, dragging the can of paint with him, smearing another big yellow disc on the ground. "See, you ball-bustin' bitch? Look at me stickin' here!" Another spot, and another, shuffling along on his knees, slapping out the paint in broad, splashy circles. "You happy now? I'm gonna paint yellow fucken spots all the way to Atlantic City! You think I'm gonna quit? Fuck you! Get out here and watch me stick with it!"

But Stacey didn't come out. She was sitting back at the computer with her fingers in her ears trying to come up with a plot for her assignment.

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"Hey, we gonna eat, or what?"

Monica stubbed out her latest cigarette and exhaled.

"Yeah – sorry, hon. Be right there."

As she was getting to her feet, Monica glanced out of the window. She frowned. There was a guy on his knees across the street painting wide yellow spots on the sidewalk. Behind him he'd left a trail of them - maybe forty yards, way back down to the clapboard houses near the intersection. And he was shouting. Monica opened the window to hear better.

"Think I can't stick, you bitch? Huh? Watch me! Fucken watch me!"

Monica sat down again. She pondered for a moment, and then she opened mail.

*Dear Stacey,*

*I just looked out of my own window and you will not believe what I saw. I'll give you this slice of weirdness for nothing. See what you can make of it...*