

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



Being Eloise

Mark Bastable

Kim rolled out of bed and hurried to the computer. Though she lived in a shabby duplex on the wrong side of Boston, Kim felt most at home when she was logged into www.algies_perch.com, the site for fans of Eloise Callum – novelist, visionary and owner of a parrot named Algernon Swinburne.

She opened a chat-window. *Two members on-line*, the room-list told her. The other was Marilyn – a relative newbie, but one who sure knew her Callum. Kim tapped at the keyboard.

gr8 2 c u. how r u?

“I’m very well. How are you?”

Marilyn never used the abbreviated jargon of cyberspace, which intimidated Kim slightly. She immediately fell into conventional prose.

“I’m excited about Philly. Only two weeks now!”

“Wish I could go. But it’s not possible.”

“Shame. I can’t wait to meet people face to face at last!”

“I know.” There was a pause. “Can I ask you something?”

“Do.”

Kim loved being asked questions. They were implicit acknowledgement of her position as the most fervent, the best informed, the trusted authority on Eloise. If anyone knew more about the books of Eloise Callum, it could only be the author herself.

“What do you think EC looks like?” Marilyn asked.

This was the subject of recurrent speculation amongst Callum devotees. The writer’s picture had never appeared on a book jacket. She’d never made a personal appearance. The most anyone knew of Eloise was that she was fortyish, a native of Connecticut and, of course, that she owned a parrot – a photo of which did, in fact, appear on the books.

“I’ve no idea,” Kim said. “I always imagine her looking a bit like me. Projection, right?”

“And what do you look like?”

“Haha.” She thought for a moment. “You know Herman’s niece in *The Munsters*? The blonde? I look like her, but twenty years older.”

“Perfect.”

“Um... Thanks.”

“Sorry. Perfect for what I have in mind.” There was another long pause. Then Marilyn said, “I’m Eloise Callum. And I need your help.”

Kim was momentarily wordless.

“You’re kidding me,” she said eventually.

“I’m really not. Do you know the phone number of Eloise’s publisher?”

“I can find it.”

“Call and ask for Otis Keller.”

Intrigued and a little spooked, Kim surfed to the publisher’s webpage. She dialed and was put through to the Senior Editor immediately.

“Good morning,” said Otis Keller. His voice was as warm and enfolding as a bear-hug. “I’ve been expecting your call. Can you tell me your screen-name, please?”

“Ptarmigan. Like Lorelei Ptarmigan from the books.”

“Okay. Eloise wants me to say that the next thing you see on your computer screen will be the opening sentence of *Belladonna Jenkins*.”

He hung up.

Kim looked at the chatroom window and the line appeared immediately.

“In the hands of a witch any substance can be a poison, given time enough to act.”

Kim knew the passage by heart. *“Milk was the toxin that killed my first husband, but it took a while,”* she muttered.

“Convinced?”

“Oh my God,” Kim said. “It really is you, right here in the chatroom.”

“It is,” Eloise said. “I’m me and I’m here. But I need you to be me in Philadelphia.”

*

The longest-running thread on the Perch board was entitled *What Do We Know of EC from Her Work?*

For Liam Howe the answer was simple: *I know she is my soulmate.*

Not that he had posted that response. He realized it would make him look like some kind of weirdo stalker – which he wasn’t. He was a perfectly well-adjusted, happy guy with a great job and a busy social life. Not obsessive, not convinced that he and Eloise were fated to be friends or even to meet. But from reading the novels he could see that his understanding of the world – his sense of humor, his priorities, his dislikes, his cultural references – were precisely those of the author. Dammit, he and Eloise even seemed to be attracted to the same kind of guy.

“It’s just a question of statistics,” he told Boris the cat as he packed his suitcase for Philly. “Somewhere out there there’s a kitty who shares your exact attitude to rubber balls, mackerel, skim milk and apple trees. She’s the only kitty in the world for you, Boris. And she probably lives in Tahiti.” He opened the window and shoveled the cat out onto the sundeck. “With me, it’s a reclusive author of the wrong sex – those are the breaks.”

He checked his pocket for the badge he’d printed from Ptarmigan’s mail. *Liam Howe*, it said, *Screen name: Larkspur.*

“Vanessa downstairs will feed you,” Liam told Boris, who was trying to muscle back in through the window. “I’ll be home Monday.”

He was apprehensive about meeting his fellow EC devotees – especially Ptarmigan, with whom he’d had a few barely-friendly exchanges. Admittedly she was an infallible expert on the text of Eloise’s books, but she lacked feel. She didn’t get it like he got it. No one did.

A taxi drew up outside and Liam left the apartment. He thought he was going to Reno airport and from there to Pennsylvania, but actually he was heading for his own personal Tahiti.

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Although she'd resisted at first, Kim had known that she'd agree to Eloise's proposition.

"Sales of the last couple of books have been disappointing," the writer said. "The publisher insists that I do some promotional appearances. Sign books, shake hands – that sort of thing."

"Then why don't you?"

"I'm agoraphobic. I haven't left my home for five years. Just can't do it."

That made sense to Kim. Eloise's stories were always set in enclosed, defined spaces. Castles, old houses, surreal chambers. The entire action of *Slightly Foxed* took place in a small Cape Cod library.

"There's a problem. Everyone at the Perch knows me already," Kim said.

"They'll be surprised to discover that you're Eloise, but they'll believe it. I'm sure they will. And if you can fool them, you can fool anyone else."

"Anyone else?"

"It's a trial run. If this works, I'll pay you to be me. You can do book tours and signings; talks and interviews. I want you to be my public face."

That prospect clinched it for Kim. Since Joseph had left for college, she'd been at a loose end. It was fun to spend five hours a night on the Net, but she wanted more from her middle years than that.

"I'll do it. It scares me to death, but I'll do it."

On the day of the meet, Otis Keller hooked up with Kim at a coffee shop near the Conference Center. He was an imposing man – one beside whom James Earl Jones would have looked rather thin and unwell.

"I'll introduce you. I'll say that you've chosen your friends at Algie's Perch as the first audience to whom to reveal yourself. There'll be questions, of course. But you can handle the stuff about the books, and I'll field anything to do with the publishing side."

Kim nodded. "Is this outfit okay?" She'd decided on a swirling green skirt and simple cream blouse – a compromise, she thought, between artsy-creative and successful professional.

"It's fine. I've seen Eloise in a very similar get-up. Are you nervous?"

“God, yes.”

“Don’t be.” Otis checked his watch. “We’d better get going.”

*

The Convention Center was vast, and Liam got lost. By the time he found the conference room, he was twenty minutes late.

Rows of chairs faced a podium at the front, but no one was sitting in them. People stood around, chatting, drinking sodas. Liam loitered near the door, unsure of whom to approach and how. He’d conducted cyber-conversations with every one of these twenty-five or thirty people, but he felt like the neighborhood new kid at a teenage party. He fingered his badge and made for the table where the sodas were.

“Larkspur!” A small woman – round and colorful, like a finch – was pointing at his lapel. “I’m Kirsty.” She tapped her own badge. “Better known as CrimsonElf.” She handed him a Coke. “Well, you’re much cuter than I envisioned you, for sure.” She paused, and then leaned up towards his ear. “Er, honey – that’s where you say the same about me.”

“Oh.”

“I’m kidding. I know I couldn’t possibly be cuter than I come across in cyber.”

“Sorry I’m late. I got lost.”

“You’re not the only one. Ptarmigan hasn’t shown up yet either. Can’t start without the organizer, right?”

At that point the door opened and a regal, broad black guy ushered in a petite fortyish blonde. He led her to the podium and, as if he were a feared principal, everyone took a seat and fell silent.

“Good afternoon,” he said – and it was all Liam could do not to reply, “Good afternoon, sir,” like a dutiful eighth-grader. Had he done so, it would have been his last utterance for quite some time. He – like every other member of Algie’s Perch – was rendered speechless by what followed.

Otis spoke and Liam listened in a daze. He could hardly believe it. This slight, smiling woman who looked like Doris Day’s less-worldly sister – she was the visionary who’d invented Lorelei Ptarmigan. She’d built the gothic cathedrals of Pel-Na-Ray and she’d created the hilarious Mullet Faeries. Her small, fragile fingers had typed words that had inspired, amused and moved Liam. Those denim-blue eyes had observed quirks and habits, oddities and absurdities that he would have sworn were noticed by no one but himself.

She was right there in the room with him – his soulmate. His cosmic twin.

And – what was so strange – he’d been chatting to her on-line for months. He’d discussed the novels with her. He’d shared his interpretations. He’d – suddenly he felt cold with embarrassment – he’d argued with her over the meaning of certain disputed passages. Oh, God – now he thought of it – he’d told Eloise Callum that when it came to the work of Eloise Callum she didn’t know what she was talking about.

Everyone was asking questions now. Some were laughing. Others looked distinctly pissed, as if they’d been conned.

“This is in-freakin-credible,” Kirsty said, putting her hand on Liam’s arm. “What a trip!”

Liam nodded distractedly. He had to get to speak with Eloise one-on-one. He just needed a chance to connect with her. And he had to apologize. He really had to apologize.

Otis was on his feet again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we must vacate this room soon. But we’ll all get together again for dinner at *L’Alouette* around seven. We’ll see you there.”

He marshaled Eloise from the room and as soon as the door closed the members of the Perch began jabbering all at once.

Amazing! Who’d have guessed? Well, I always suspected, actually. She’s made us all look kind of foolish, hasn’t she? Oh, she’s just precious!

Liam sat in silence, working on a strategy for nabbing the seat next to Eloise at dinner.

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“I could use a drink,” Otis said in the elevator. “How about you?”

He took Kim across the street to an old-fashioned bar with a courtyard out back.

“How did I do?” Kim asked as Otis poured from a pitcher of beer.

“You did great. Guess you’ve read Eloise’s books more than once or twice, huh?”

“Oh, yes. I know every one almost by heart.”

“She said you were pretty *au fait*, but I had my doubts.” He raised his glass. “Good job, ma’am.”

“So tell me about her,” Kim said. “What does she look like? How does she cope with her agoraphobia? What’s she working on now?”

Otis was about to reply when a shadow fell across the table.

“Hey, bud – mind if I sit here?”

A large, unshaven man in his fifties was standing there with a stein of beer in one huge hand and the *World Weekly News* in the other. A silver-dagger earring dangled from his right lobe and he wore a faded blue t-shirt on which the words *The Pope Smokes Dope* were almost illegible.

“Only free seat in the place,” he explained. “Just wanna slurp suds and read some crap. Won’t be no trouble.”

“Sure,” Otis said.

The guy put his drink on the table, lowered himself into one of the two free chairs and opened the paper over his beer-gut.

Kim looked back to Otis. “You were saying?”

“I’m expecting a manuscript any day now. A new Ptarmigan novel. I’ve seen some excerpts and I think it’s her best yet.”

“Oh, I love Lorelei Ptarmigan. I remember exactly where I was when I bought *Ptarmigan Pie*. It was the summer of...”

“Hey,” said the big guy. “You writers?”

Kim bit her lip.

“I’m a publisher,” Otis said.

“Great. Listen – I have this idea for a book. All about when I was a Hell’s Angel. Oughta be a book or a movie or somethin’. Wild times, man.”

“I can imagine,” Otis said.

Kim looked at the pitcher of beer. She wasn’t a quick drinker and even with Otis’s help she reckoned it would be half-an-hour at least before they could escape.

“Randy McCready,” the big guy said, offering a hand to Otis. He turned to Kim. “So you’re the writer, yeah?”

“No,” Kim said.

“Yes,” Otis put in. He glanced at Kim sternly. “She’s being modest. This is Eloise Callum.”

And this, Kim realized, was how it would be. If she were to take on the role, she’d have to learn to handle people like Randy McCready. That was the job.

“Pleased to meet you, Randy,” she said.

“Never heard of you,” he said, shrugging. “But I don’t read much myself.”

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Liam had time to kill before dinner and he was too unnerved to pass the hours with Kirsty, whom he found exhausting. He left the Convention Center and looked around. Across the street he spotted a friendly-looking place that advertised a courtyard out back.

Liam bought a glass of wine from the bar and made his way to the courtyard. He spotted Eloise immediately, sitting at a table with Otis from the publishing house and another guy who looked like a trucker. There was a spare seat too. He walked over.

“Ptarmigan? I mean – Eloise?” He smiled. “What should I call you?”

He indicated his badge.

“Larkspur!” She seemed delighted to see him. “Join us! You can call me Eloise if I can call you Liam.”

“I’d be honored,” Liam said. He introduced himself to Otis and offered his hand to the big guy with the earring.

“You a writer too?” Randy asked.

“Liam and I are members of the same fan club,” Kim said.

“Your fan club,” Liam said.

Eloise laughed. “Right. I’m a member of my own fan club.”

Liam picked up a feeling of nervousness from Eloise. A sort of trying-hard cheerfulness that grated a little. He was disappointed. He’d expected her to be calm and slightly mysterious.

The conversation turned to early careers. What, Liam asked, had Eloise done before she became a writer? Oh – this and that. You know. Nothing much. Otis cut in, saying that he’d been a bass player when he was younger. He mentioned his band, and Randy said he recalled seeing them in Buffalo. He told a story about riding up from New York in the snow, stoned. It was a simple anecdote but very funny. Eloise – to Liam’s surprise – wasn’t amused by it at all. She didn’t appear even to understand it.

“Hey – let’s get some more drinks,” Randy said. “My round.” He turned to Liam. “A glass of faggot wine for you?”

“Yes, please.” Somehow the offer wasn’t at all offensive. It was friendly and almost teasing.
“The faggier the better.”

“We have to be going,” Eloise said. “Don’t we, Otis?”

Otis nodded and got to his feet. “Nice to have met you, Randy. See you at dinner, Liam.”

“Liam, my man – you’ll stick around for a drink though, eh?” Randy said.

Liam did. He stuck around for a few.

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“I can’t do it, Otis. I’m sorry.”

They were in Kim’s hotel room. Her dress for the evening was hanging on a hook behind the door and her elegant shoes were still in their box.

“But you did so well at the meeting.”

Kim shook her head. “That was with Eloise’s fans. People like me. Literate people. Intelligent people who understand writing. That was easy.”

Otis went to the mini-bar and took out two sodas. He offered one to Kim but she waved it away.

“So where’s the problem?”

“That awful Randy guy. If I’m Eloise, I’ll have to meet people like that, won’t I? I’ll have to be nice to them and sit there smiling while they talk trash and scratch their bellies.”

“Oh – he wasn’t so bad.”

“He was!” Kim slapped her hand down on the bed. “He was vulgar and loud. He belched! Did you hear him belch? Right there in public! And when he was reading his newspaper I swear to God his lips were moving.”

“You don’t think you’re being a little...” Otis shrugged apologetically. “...snobby?”

Kim stood up and paced, arms folded. “Snobby? Is it snobby to prefer good manners? Is it snobby to like things nice?” She stopped and stared out of the window. “I’ll tell you what I love about Eloise’s books. They take me away from the real world. I live in a dirty, run-down neighbourhood. The only color is the graffiti on the walls and the police sirens wail all night. I raised a kid there on my own because it’s the best I could afford.”

“That’s to your credit,” Otis said, swigging his Coke.

“Yes, it sure is. But what got me through was being able to escape to Eloise’s world – the castles, the magic davenport, the elfin folk, Lorelei’s kaleidoscopic cloak. That world is real to me, and it’s a lot more pleasant than the one I live in.” She looked over her shoulder at Otis. “There are plenty of Randy McCreadys where I come from, and I do my best to avoid them.”

Otis dropped the soda can into the trash. “You do know, don’t you, that the elves and the magic are all satire? Eloise’s world is a complex and brilliant joke. The books are actually about – well – the real world.”

Kim clucked her tongue. “Now you sound like Larkspur, reading too much into it, trying to be clever.” She walked back to the bed and sat down. “All I know is that the world I have to live in was created by low-lives like Randy McCready, and I want no part of it. I’m not going to be Eloise if it means I have to be around that type of crude, uneducated scum.”

“Well, I’m not going to argue with you,” Otis said. “I’ll go to the dinner and tell them that Eloise was taken ill. I can’t see what else there is to do.”

He turned at the door.

“What will you do about Algie’s Perch? I mean, when you go back on-line?”

Kim shrugged. “I don’t know. Join again under a different name, I guess. In cyberspace you can be whoever you want.”

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In the lobby of the hotel Otis made a call on his cellphone.

“She bailed out. Yeah, totally. And we only get one shot at that idea, right? Look, I have to go to *L’Alouette* for a while at least. I’ll meet you at the Plough and Stars around eight and we’ll think again. Yeah. Later.”

Otis slipped the phone into his jacket pocket and went out onto the street to find a cab. He had bad news to deliver to the members of Algie’s Perch and he wasn’t looking forward to it.

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Liam checked his watch.

“Christ – it’s nearly seven-thirty. I have to rush.”

“Where you going?” Randy asked. “Hot date?”

They were on their fourth bottle of faggot wine, Randy having admitted to a taste for the stuff.

“I wish. No, it’s a dinner for Eloise – the writer who was here earlier.”

“So you like her books, huh?” Randy said.

“Very much.”

“Personally I thought she was an uptight asshole.”

“So did I. She wasn’t anything like I expected.”

“So why do you want to have dinner with her?”

“I don’t – not now.” He sipped his wine. “I guess it’s dumb to have expectations about writers. Especially about Eloise – just because she’s so mysterious.” He knew he was burbling drunkenly, and he was probably boring Randy to death. “I’m sorry. Kinda talking through my sense of anti-climax,” he said.

Randy poured out the last of the wine and knocked it back. “They say you should never meet your heroes, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

There was a pause during which Liam searched for the next sentence. He wanted to suggest that he and Randy might get together some other time to hang out, without it coming across like a desperate proposition.

“Listen, I know this is kind of a weird thing to say, but I’ve had a really good time this afternoon. I mean – that sounds so queer, but...just wanted to say it.”

“Me too. And don’t worry about sounding queer. You *are* queer.”

“True,” Liam said with a smile. “And you’re not.”

“Also true.” Randy got to his feet, hitching his jeans up under his belly. “I’m going to meet a buddy of mine. Why not come along?”

“You wouldn’t mind?” Liam said. He stood up a little shakily. “That’d be great.”

“We’ll have to drop by my place to collect some stuff, okay?”

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

Randy grinned. “And while we’re there, I’ll introduce you to my parrot.”