

Stitch

by Terry Dowling



Soon Bella would find the nerve to go upstairs. Soon she would be able to excuse herself from her uncle and aunt and climb the familiar old stairs, counting every one, enter the toilet in the alcove of the upstairs bathroom, and confront Mr Stitch.

She couldn't leave without seeing him. Not this time. It was Auntie Inga's birthday, occasion enough, yes, but this time Mr Stitch *was* the reason for being here. Bella had always tried to see him once or twice a year, just to make sure he was still there, shut tight behind the glass, locked in his frame. This time it had to be more.

"Your boyfriend couldn't make it, Bel?" Auntie Inga asked, but gently, in case there was a point of delicacy involved.

"Roger? No. He had to work, like I said." Bella knew she had said. It had been the third or fourth line out of her mouth when she arrived. "Sends his best wishes though. 'Manniest happiest returns' – quote, unquote. His exact words." What he would have said anyway. "He has to work every second Saturday."

Bluff and hearty as ever, but it's what you often had to do where Roger was concerned. Maybe it would have been better if he *were* here. Having someone to be with her through it. Through this. Bella couldn't remember feeling such dread. But this time she had to be alone. This time she wanted more.

"This photo of your mom was always my favourite," Auntie Inga said, returning to the page in the old album, going through them as she always did when Bella visited. Possibly when anyone visited.

Bella ignored the mention of her mother, concentrated instead on what Uncle Sal was doing. He smiled kindly at them both and poured more coffee. Bella couldn't remember him any other way. It was as if at some point in his life he had discovered the word 'avuncular' and had resolved to be precisely that for the rest of his days. With Mr Stitch upstairs, it made him seem positively sinister, a gleefully distracting conspirator. An avuncular usher, Bella thought, then was reminded of the old witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel. And witch rhymed with stitch, so back she went, into the panic loop again, with both hands steadying her coffee cup, her heart hammering and her feet flexing inside her shoes, itching to run. If only Roger *could* have been here, could have at least made an effort to understand what this meant. Stayed close. That would have made all the difference.

Though alone, alone. Some things had to be done alone. And today had to be different. Today she had to change it all.

“Auntie Inga, do you still have that old sampler on the wall in the upstairs toilet? The one with the two Dutch children in the street?” Bright voice. Light voice. Smiling all the while. No big deal. As if she hadn’t been up there in years, hadn’t *made* herself go up and see it on each and every one of those terrifying visits.

“What’s that dear?” Auntie Inga said. “Dutch children?”
Summoned by name, the rosy-cheeked sixty-seven-year-old came tracking across the years from where the photographs had taken her. Smile for smile, here she was: Auntie Inga, always Hansel and Gretel witch (stitch!) friendly. She’d never been any different. But forgetful today. Mentioning her mother.

What *was* the female form of avuncular?, Bella wondered. Because here it was, tidied up, presented and displayed: more in terms of velour and Hush Puppies than gingham and gingerbread, but just as real.

“The sampler?” her aunt added, as if only a few words ever got through at a time, drip-feed fashion. “That old thing! Of course. Been there forever.”

This was the moment. “Of all your cross-stitch pieces, that’s my favourite.” Bold and direct. Tell a big enough lie and people will believe. Could she pull it off?

“Really, Bel? I would have done that when I was thirty-one. Just before you were born. Landscapes. Street scenes. I suppose they are Dutch children when I think of it. I did so many. Gave them as gifts too.” She considered the framed pieces on the walls of the cosy living-room. “I did a lot of these pieces then.”

Bella dutifully let herself be seen to be admiring the embroideries. Yes, and both you and Uncle Sal are so like the smarmy, neighbourly, *avuncular* people in them. Made up of so many tiny squares, a neat and orderly mosaic. Four stitches in the aida backing to give a really good square. Four to make each black square of Mr Stitch. But, yes, neat and tidy like that, Inga and Sal. Chock full of smarm. Terminal avuncular.

Though one of the cliched pieces did charm Bella, she had to admit: the road leading off from the open door towards a sunset, with words set in the doorway, picked out vividly against the light.

Westering home,
And a song in the air,
Light in the eye,
And it’s good-bye to care;
Laughter o’Love,
And a welcoming there;
Isle of my heart,
My own one!

The door, the setting sun, the sentiments, the sheer belonging: such precious things. It brought her parents’ faces, always did, but she was skilled at pushing those aside. She’d dealt with that, and so could almost let herself go there, through that door. But no bidding care good-bye today. And that door, pulled right back, inviting in, inviting out, showing the road and the setting sun, was the absolute opposite of her own dark green front door, always locked these past ten, fifteen years. Double

locked. Triple locked. Because of Stitch. Mr Stitch. Because of all that her life had ended up being.

Even as Bella pulled back, accepting how the world was, there was Auntie Inga. A new thought, *that* thought, had occurred to her.

“Funny that you like it now. You were frightened of it as a girl.”

Frightened. An understatement in the ratio of Hitler being misguided, or the atomic bomb at Hiroshima causing collateral damage.

“Oh?” Said calmly enough. Interested. This was the part Bella had to get through.

Auntie Inga was looking off up the stairs, as if a part of herself had been sent off to check the piece or, better yet, was running replays of a tinier, younger Bella Dillon sobbing, yelling, refusing to use *that* bathroom, *that* toilet. “You hated going into that bathroom. Lise – your mother – we always noticed it. That cross-stitch upset you. Two little kids in a street and you’d run away screaming.”

Her mother again. Aunt Inga *was* forgetting.

Can't stop. Can't stop. Can't stop now. Bella pretended to be easy. Pretended to remember. “They were facing away, looking off up the street,” Bella said, feet wanting to run. *Don't mention Mr Stitch.*

“It wasn't that I couldn't do faces,” Auntie Inga insisted, some old point of pique and a welcome show of larger humanity, a blemish on the sugar rose. “It's how the picture came in the kit. I liked doing faces. Look at *The Man in the Golden Helmet* there.”

Bella glanced briefly, dutifully, but stayed on track. “Well, I'm very fond of it now. Just being sentimental, I guess. That one in the bathroom.” Bella added the last remark to keep Auntie Inga on the piece upstairs. Even Uncle Sal stayed with her. He was nodding: Uncle Sal on Avuncular Setting #3.

“You're welcome to go up and see,” he said. “It's still there.”

At one level, Bella would never need to see it again. She knew it intimately. Two children holding hands seen from behind, looking off up a street. The boy in long-sleeved blue top and white pants, long brown hair, a brown Dutch or Flemish hat – soft, shaped like a bucket, definitely a hat worn by boys from another time and place; the little girl in a dark red dress with a white lace collar, long blonde hair. Two houses foreshortened, leading off up the street, then a wall and a tree beyond; an old-style lamp-post in the middle distance on the footpath just at the edge of the road.

And the face of a woman, probably their mother, looking down at them from a partly opened leadlight window as if reminding them what to get at the village shop, possibly warning them to beware of strangers.

And that had been the crux of it.

For along that foreshortened street, off in its tidy, converging cross-stitch distances near where the wall met the tree, was just such a stranger. A pedestrian on the sidewalk, stylised, minimalist, no doubt meant to be a token figure to fill out the scene, sketched in, stitched in with exactly seventy and a half black cross-stitch squares. Small, yet large enough, exactly seventy and a half squares big in fact, each set of four making a bold black larger square, squares set oddly so he was jagged and jigsawed down one side. A jigsaw man.

Bella could never forget that figure beyond the lamp-post, beyond the houses, small and sketchy, jagged with distance. Give her a pen and she could draw him, could tell his bits like marking squares in a hopscotch rhyme. It had been the mantra of her years.

Four in a true square
Then eight more in two lines
Four in another square
And four for shoulders fine
Six in a body line
Then six to get it right
Five more make it odd one out
Like someone took a bite.
Six more in a body line
Then six to keep it strong
Five again is odd one out
Like someone got it wrong
Three begins to give him legs
Then three and a half – it's true!
Four in a line is almost there
But not like me and you.
One and a half – space – a half and one
One and a half – space – a half and one
Now Mr Stitch can run run run!

It was all in *how* they were set together. A man in a thick-brimmed black hat (or with a hideously deformed head), with two bites out of his left side, ruining his body, a third snipped out of his legs. A lopsided, jigsaw man.

And here was Bella about to confront him again. The figure who stood behind her days, who determined things like the extra locks on her big green front door, on the inner doors as well, the green Keep Away doors, because she'd read somewhere that dark green kept demons and devils at bay.

"I will go up and take a look, if you don't mind," Bella said. "Guess I'm sentimental like you, Aunty Inga."

"Sentimental is good, dear," her aunt said. "Too much nastiness in the world. Too many bad people. Old values are best."

"Why don't I keep you company, Bel?" Uncle Sal said, totally unexpected. "I have to get something upstairs. Inga, we could sure use some of that new Darjeeling you bought. I'm sure Bella would."

Bella was surprised, pleased, shocked all in an instant. When had Uncle Sal ever initiated anything? When had he shown such strategic thinking too, any kind of thinking that put him at odds with the Inga and Sal show?

There had to be a reason.

And before Inga could veto it, ask him to help with the tea – it was her birthday, after all – Sal was out of his chair and leading the way.

Another first.

Bella was after him in a flash, ready for that climb to that landing and that bathroom. But there had to be a reason.

"Uncle Sal," she said at the foot of the stairs. "You really don't have to."

"Nonsense, Bel. When do I ever get to do anything for myself?"

Again he'd surprised her. So why now? Why this? Bella decided to be direct.

“So why this time?” Sharp and hard, considering, and he blinked at her as she took the first few steps ahead of him.

“Just wanted to see you were okay,” he said, following her up the staircase. “That cross-stitch bothers me too.”

Bella could have stumbled and fallen in amazement. What had he said?

“What’s that, Uncle Sal?” She heard the tremble in her voice.

“Bothers me. Bothers you,” he said from behind. “Always hated it. Figure in the distance. Small and wrong.”

Exactly! Exactly that! Small and wrong. Jagged and incomplete.

They were halfway to the landing when Bella slowed, hearing his breathing, laboured, agitated somehow.

For it had dawned on her.

He’s serving me up. Making sure I get there. They’re in collusion.

Bella stopped on the stairs.

It made terrible sense. The *new* Uncle Sal, the odd behaviour.

Bring her to me!

Bella turned, pressed her back hard against the wall.

“Don’t think I will,” she said.

“What, Bel? What is it?”

“This.” *You.* “I can’t do this today.” *You’re different.*

“Bel, I’m being brave. I’m doing it right. Should have done it years ago.”

“What?” She gasped the word and so said it again. “What?”

“Should have told you. Said something about Benny.”

“Benny? What’s Benny got to do with anything?”

But it was all there in the instant. Benny in his stupid blue plaid shirt. Benny eight years older, surprising her in the bathroom. In the toilet. Benny and Stitch.

Time was frozen on the stairs: Bella against the wall, Uncle Sal two steps lower, back to the rail, Aunt Inga lost in the impossibly far reaches of the kitchen.

“We know what he did, Bel. Your aunt won’t have it. A mother can’t. But we know. I know.”

Part of Bella stayed on the old safe track.

What’s he going on about? They haven’t seen Benny in years. Benny went from their lives. Upped and went, just like that. Just like anyone can.

Part of Bella was in the other fork of that eternal moment. Benny against her. The smell of his blue plaid shirt. The hand over her mouth. And Stitch. Mr Stitch urging him on. Stitch behind it all, looming on the wall, waiting off along the street, there but not all there. Jagged. Dark man-thing in a funny thick hat or with a big cross-shaped hammer head. Benny breathing hard. “My word against yours! No-one believes a kid!” Hard against her. Then inspired, worried, improvising. “That’s Stitch! Mr Stitch! He’ll get you. It was his idea. He’s coming for you, see! He’ll get you if you tell!”

Both tracks running, playing out on the stairs, Uncle Sal’s eyes catching hers at last, pulling her back, but the walls pounding, drumming, thundering with the mighty secret heartbeat of the house.

“You’re safe now, Bel. We’re all safe. You can go see.”

Bella was back with him, five steps from the top. Blue-plaid Benny was gone and Uncle Sal was here and Bella was back and doing what she still had to do, always had to do.

“Thanks for knowing,” she said.

“You can’t go home again. Had to be said.”

“I can do it alone.”

“Never doubted it. I’ll be outside.”

“Th-Thanks.”

And into the bathroom she went. The door to the toilet was ajar. She couldn’t see the back wall, of course, just the strip of dim blue wall through the crack.

You can’t go home again.

The truth in those words.

But I keep trying. Keep coming here.

She couldn’t see the back wall, or the frame, or the children.

A warning to the Dutch children. *You can’t go home again! You’ll never see your mother!*

That word.

Bella had closed the bathroom door behind her. Old habit. But she hadn’t locked it. Hadn’t locked it then, hadn’t now.

Put on your blue-plaid shirt, Sal, and bring her to me!

But she could lock the toilet door. Lock it this time. Just in case. Though that would be locking her in. And Benny, something of Benny, might be off in the cross-stitch distance. Two of them now, along that terrible, too tidy street.

She had to know. Had to act. Now or never.

She grabbed the door-knob and pushed back the door.

There was the old patterned lino, so well known, the old toilet and cistern, the air freshener in its container, the two frosted window panes on the right, the pale blue walls. There – letting her gaze move up – was the frame, brown wood, the neatly braided world forming, the children and the street, the lamp-post in the middle distance, the wall and the tree.

The black ragged form.

Hello, Bella.

“Bastard!” She said it quietly.

Sal’s putting on his blue-plaid shirt.

“Bastard! Bastard!”

Like father, like son. He’s bigger. Older but bigger.

“Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!”

Put your hands on the cistern like before. There’s a good girl.

“Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!”

You could ask for me. Take me home. Get me through your Green Door.

Reading her mind. “Bastard!”

Language, Bel. Get a needle and thread then. Make me complete.

Tears were hot and brimming, running down her cheeks.

“Bastard! Bastard!”

Mr Stitch was moving in her tears. Her tears were making him run.

You like me jagged. Ragged. Here I come!

Bella wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, freed herself from him. Steadied herself. Her hands were on the cistern.

“Bastard! Bastard!”

She snatched them away.

You want it! You were ready!

“No! No! Bastard!”

Scaredy cat! Ready cat!

“Bastard!”

And Sal was pushing at the toilet door. “Bella! What’s wrong? What is it?”

She hadn’t locked it! Meant to. Thought to. Hadn’t.

Says it all, Bel!

Stitch was running in her tears. Jigging. Jagging. Running.

“Bel, what’s wrong?”

Sal pushing at the door. Stitch running.

One hand was on the cistern, but to steady her, so she could turn. Nothing like before.

“You bastard!”

“What, Bel? What is it?” Sal’s voice.

And the door was finally open far enough and Sal was there and no blue-plaid shirt.

Bella stole a final glance. Stitch was back along the street, back by the wall and the tree. The children were safe. *All* the children were safe.

“Oh, Uncle Sal! I thought – for a moment, I just thought – it’s all right. It’s fine now!”

“What happened?”

“You know. Old memories. Dealing with old memories. Would Aunt Inga let me have this?”

Yes! Take me home!

Sal, bless him, understood.

“Bel, just take it. Sneak it out. I’ll distract her.”

It was beyond all expectation, Uncle Sal saying this.

“But – ”

“You mightn’t have noticed, but your aunt – she’s getting forgetful. Repeating herself, things like that. We can say she gave it to you. I’ll put another one in here. She won’t remember, won’t – be certain.”

“Uncle Sal, it’s not – you know?”

“Can’t be sure yet. But Alzheimer’s is a possibility, the doctor says. The thing is, she doesn’t come in here much. She uses the en suite. So take it. She’s got so many. It’s never been a favourite.”

Yes! Bella thought, so relieved, so grateful, then hesitated.

Too easy. Too easy. What if Sal were an accomplice after all?

Get me through the Green Door, Stitch had said.

And was quiet now, down by the tree all jagged and waiting. With not a word.

It was what she wanted too – crazily, what they both wanted. Unless this impulse came from Stitch via her mind, via Sal’s. Stitch using them all.

He never said a word. Just stood off in the real, never-real, cross-stitch world, just seventy and a half stitches himself, but trying to be more, embroidering back.

How could she know? How could she be sure of anything now?

“Probably shouldn’t,” she said.

“Your choice, hon,” Sal said.

They stood in the bathroom, Bella staring in at the piece in its frame, waiting for some reply. Stitch would be thwarted if she went without him. Furious. Bella laughed at

the word-play. *Cross Stitch*. But he would still be *here*, in this blue-plaid, hands-on-the-cistern place. And she'd be back again and again because of it.

Her need was as great as his, that's what it came down to. And this was her chance to be free of it. To move it along. Stop it being something here and now. Now and then.

"Sal, why don't you bring it over tomorrow? Tell Aunty Inga she promised it. See if she goes along with it.

"Bel, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"You mom and dad – "

"Uncle Sal, let it go, please!"

"Has to be said, darlin'. Now that we're talking, just let me – "

"No!"

"Bel, you've managed this much. Go the rest of the way. They weren't to blame. They couldn't protect you – "

"Listen, Uncle Sal – "

"It wasn't their fault. None of it. What happened on *Sea Spray*. The explosion. Of course you feel responsible – "

No! No! No! No! No!

Bella actually had her hands over her ears. "Uncle Sal!"

"It was an accident! If we'd found their bodies, maybe that would've made a difference. They didn't leave you with this! Didn't desert you!"

Stitch hadn't said a word.

"You promised, Uncle Sal! You promised!"

Stitch was out there, up there, back there, listening.

"Okay. Okay. Enough. But it had to be said. I'm sorry!"

Bastard, bastard, Uncle Sal.

Or Stitch was putting his words in Sal's mouth. Had a thin, jagged, cross-stitch arm up Sal's back, working Sal's jaws.

But Bella saw the resignation in the eyes, the strain on the old face.

This wasn't Stitch. This was Sal, torn loose from avuncular, reinventing himself second by second for this desperate task, with only a few known aces up his sleeve. Known cards every one.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Sal," she said into the silence, the terrible end-time silence of these haunted upstairs.

Stitch was nowhere to be found. Back on the wall. Back in his frame. Seventy and a half meagre twists of black. Barely made.

"It's just – hon, you couldn't do anything. They didn't fail you."

Again. Bella added the word. *Get it right, Uncle Sal. You meant to say didn't fail me again.*

"We'll play it your way," Sal said then, saving what he could. "We'll come over tomorrow. I'll tell your aunt we promised. We'll bring the cross-stitch." Better. Much better.

"Can't guarantee that your aunt – you know – won't mention certain things. Won't – "

"Listen, Uncle Sal, let's take it over now! You said Auntie Inga forgets things. Let's just do it! Tell her we arranged it. A special outing for her birthday. It's a surprise! I'll

take you over in my car, bring you back. You said Auntie Inga's always wanted to see – mom's place again. What I've done with it. This is her birthday treat!"

"I don't know, hon. It's so sudden. Your aunt –"

"I'll have you back inside the hour, two at the most. Say it's important to me. Important that she sees where I'm going to hang it! We can do it, Sal!"

Panic was driving her, determination to do it before her courage failed, before Stitch came back.

"I'll go see, okay?" Sal turned towards the stairs.

"We can do it, Uncle Sal. It'll really help."

He looked back, smiled his old safe smile. "Anything for closure, they say."

Stitch was too quiet. It had been too long.

"Anything. Look, I'll come down with you now. Tell her I've got a birthday cake or something. We can get one on the way."

#

Pride, vanity and panic of another kind helped. Auntie Inga wasn't about to admit that she had forgotten their outing, or that she couldn't remember promising the cross-stitch. Bella felt a stab of guilt and shame at the duplicity, using such a desperate condition against the person suffering from it, but her own need was greater. Having the person who had created Stitch carry him across the threshold, through the green door; now that was perfect. Suddenly important. Closure, Sal had said. This would do it.

They left the pot of new Darjeeling cooling on the kitchen bench. While Bella jollied Aunt Inga along, helped her into the front passenger seat of the Lexus, got the seatbelt done up, Sal fetched Stitch, brought him down swathed in an old towel and put him in the back.

Bella could never have done it. She felt a giddiness, an intense, irrational joy, a sudden certainty. This was right in every sense. Inga doing the honours. Inga bringing Stitch. All so perfect.

Bella couldn't remember what she said as she drove, just that she was babbling happily all the while, going on about a special birthday treat and how important it all was. Aunt Inga blossomed under the attention. This was her day, her outing. Bella was being, well, avuncular.

Stitch never said a word.

He was there in the back next to Sal, hidden under his towel. This was what he wanted too, no doubt, staying close like this, but at least he was out of the upstairs bathroom, *that* place.

They stopped for a birthday cake as Sal and she had agreed: a store-bought mudcake with *Happy Birthday* in white looping letters. Then, in another two minutes, they were at Eltham Street, tree-lined and shady, and there was the big white house with the green door.

"It looks wonderful, dear," Aunt Inga said. "Your mother liked the white with the green trimming. It's nice that you've kept it. She'd be very proud, Bel."

Bella endured it, forced herself to say thanks, again half-expecting a refrain from Stitch: *She'd be very proud*. But nothing came. Again nothing. Perhaps he thought he could still win. Perhaps he was saving his best till last. Perhaps – it suddenly occurred

to her – being out in a *real* day on a *real* street was simply too much. Either way, she'd prepared. She was ready for him.

Bella swung into the sheltered driveway, opened the garage with the remote and drove in. A wink and a smile at Sal in the rear-view mirror, then more fussing over Auntie Inga, helping her out, drawing her attention to the marigolds and geraniums in the big planters while Sal hauled Stitch out after him. Who would have thought that it could go so smoothly?

Then they were through the first green door and in the hall, then through the second and in the sitting room at last.

Inga and Sal never expected it. Even as their noses twitched at the odd smell, even as their eyes widened, making sense of what they saw, Bella had the stiletto off the sideboard and into Inga's throat. Had it in before her aunt knew it had happened, before her little shard of a scream died in a gurgle. Then Bella had the blade out and into Sal's neck at the exact moment he dropped the shrouded frame and managed: "Bella, what on earth –?"

But he saw what it was and had to know. His eyes were wide as they glazed, as the light in them died. He'd know. He had seen the figures – Bella's mother and father, and Benny and Roger – sitting upright in their chairs, had seen them totally stitched over with black, head to toe, every surface covered with precious dark thread, protected forever from the jagged man.

Bella closed and locked the door, old instinct, old habit, then reached down and removed the towel from the frame with its broken glass and tiny helpless figure. She wiped the stiletto clean, then sat cross-legged on the floor and began the unpicking. Seventy and a half stitches, then they would be safe. All the children.

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