

**The First Two Pages: *One Night Gone*
by Tara Laskowski (Graydon House)**

In graduate school, one of my professors, Alan Cheuse, took our class through Ernest Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River," line by line, word by word. I want to say it took us a week or more of class time to read closely like this, and I remember at some point just wanting to stab myself with a pencil to make it all end. But even though it was a bit painful at times, I often think about that story and all we talked about and learned from that close of a reading—how a particular object or symbol, introduced early, can come into significant play later, or how careful word choices can hint at a coming tension or challenge or problem.

Looking over the first two pages of my book (not including the prologue), I realize how many little hints and teases I dropped in about what is to come. Now, it certainly would not withstand a microscopic examination such as the one we did in class, but there are many nods to the book's themes and plot that work as a nice set-up for the book.

It starts with the very first line: "You'll feel like a new woman." Allison, my main character, is being encouraged by her sister Annie to say yes to the opportunity to housesit for a wealthy couple in a small beach town. Annie sees this as a chance for Allison to start over, recover from the recent bad hand that life dealt her. But the idea of feeling like a new woman has another meaning as well—

one slightly more literal—as Allison is about to become immersed in the mystery of what happened to another woman many years before.

Annie is very keen on selling Allison on the house-sitting: “It’s a great opportunity to relax, recoup, recover...And the house—oh Allison. It’s divine. You won’t even believe it.”

But even in these reassurances, a quiet tension is already brewing, a sneaking suspicion that this opportunity might not be all dreams come true. Some of this tension lies in the way that Allison views everything—some pretty heavy hints that something’s gone wrong in her life and clouded her vision. She needs to “reinvent” herself. She laments there might never be a happy-ever-after. She’s worried someone might Google her name. She thinks the sun dipping behind a cloud is an omen.

As the novel goes on, readers learn more details about what happened to Allison—and the missing woman Maureen that she becomes obsessed with—but I hope that in these first two pages there’s enough curiosity piqued for a reader to keep turning further.

Allison
September 2015

You’ll feel like a new woman.
That’s what Annie said. The perfect opportunity to reinvent myself.

Annie was raving excitedly, brushing her hair away from her face as we sat outside on the patio of Chez Monsieur, a name that sounded way fancier than the actual restaurant. Perhaps that was why I was skeptical of her enthusiasm—I was uncomfortable, distracted by the sucking sound that came each time I pulled my forearms off the sticky plastic tablecloth. And that loaded term: *new woman*. Was Annie suggesting that I was damaged?

Perhaps I was skeptical of everything. Nothing worked out to be perfect. There was no perfect, no happy-ever-after. No happy *ever*, it seemed.

Still, my younger sister was almost the only thing I had left, so I nodded, sipping my water from a filmy glass with only a few chips of ice still withstanding the late-summer Philadelphia sun.

“The off-season at the beach,” she said wistfully, staring off into our very un-beach-like surroundings as a taxi driver honked his horn and tossed a select finger at another driver trying to back into a space on the narrow street. “It’s a great opportunity to relax, recoup—recover.” She smiled reassuringly. “And the house—oh, Allison. It’s divine. You won’t even believe it.”

I tried not to roll my eyes at my sister’s undying optimism. “And I’m sure these heavenly people are just going to hand me over the keys, right? Without even checking up on my...background?” I asked.

A large cumulus cloud whipped over the sun, dimming the patio and turning the strong wind cold. *An omen*, my mom would say, but quickly dismissed it.

“No, no, no.” Annie leaned forward, and I caught my reflection in her large lenses—a hunched-over, thin waif of a person with hair too long for forty. Ever since I’d gone off-air I’d let it grow past my shoulders, though vainly I still dyed it every five weeks. I could never stand the gray roots.

I sat up straighter, adjusted my chair. Annie was still going. “Like I said, my friend Sharon knows the couple really well. And the town—she grew up right near there. I can vouch for you, no problem. They want someone they can trust—not just someone off the street. Oh, Ally. It’s so perfect for you. A chance to get away from...from all this.”

I thought about making a snide comment along the lines of, *you mean get me out of your apartment*, but that would’ve made her feel self-conscious about Mike, and I didn’t want her to feel guilty for

having a stable relationship. So instead I said, “Do you think I could really ever get away from any of it?” Because, contrary to what Annie believed, despite the protests she was now making at my negativity, I didn’t need to become a new woman—I needed to get back to the old me. The me I was before. Before it all crashed.

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Tara Laskowksi is the award-winning author of two short story collections, *Modern Manners for Your Inner Demons* and *Bystanders*, which was named a Best Book of 2017 by *The Guardian*. She has won an Agatha Award for Best Short Story and for many years was the editor of the online flash fiction journal *SmokeLong Quarterly*. A graduate of Susquehanna University and George Mason University, Tara grew up in Pennsylvania and lives in Virginia.