

The First Two Pages: “Getting Away”

By Alan Orloff

From *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*

Beginnings are important to readers. How many times have you picked up a book or story, read the first few lines, and put it aside? And because beginnings are important to readers, they're important to writers, too. If a reader isn't engaged from the beginning, it's too easy to lose them. There are plenty of compelling books and stories out there, so there's no good reason for anyone to read something they don't enjoy (*Moby-Dick* excepted).

Therefore, as a writer, my goal is clear, if not always easy. Engage the reader as quickly as possible. It doesn't have to be something outrageous (although it could be). It doesn't have to be something overtly exciting (although it could be). It just has to be something that will compel the reader to read on. Sometimes it's as basic as raising a few questions in the readers' minds. What's going on here? What's all this leading to?

Getting Away

The man previously known as Eddie “Light Touch” Elkins leaned forward and picked up the passport I'd just given him. Opened it. Read the name next to his picture.

“Jonathan Wells. Jonathan Wells. Jonathan Wells.” He rolled the name along his tongue and swished it around in his mouth.
“Jonathan Freaking Wells. I like it. I really do.”

I nodded, smiling.

Elkins/Wells held the passport up to his face and squinted, turning it this way and that, examining it from every angle, as if evaluating one of the diamonds he'd just stolen. After intense scrutiny, he closed his eyes and hefted it a few times, his hands acting like a very delicate scale.

His eyes popped open. "Perfect. Just perfect."

My smile grew. Another satisfied customer. I provided unique travel and relocation services to a niche clientele. Wealthy criminals looking to hide, for life.

I use the first few paragraphs to establish the main character (unnamed narrator, later identified as Lloyd Birnbaum) and the unique service he provides to a "niche clientele." Because he's providing a fake passport to a jewel thief, the reader concludes, correctly, that Lloyd is on the wrong side of the law, as well. Also, because I don't like to "waste" anything in a short story, we'll hear mention of Eddie "Light Touch" Elkins again. I'd like the reader to begin wondering: What is the narrator up to? How will his line of work factor into the story?

"Here's the rest." I slid a driver's license across the desk, along with a social security card, some credit cards, birth certificate—all belonging to the newly-born Jonathan Wells. He picked up those documents and admired them, too. As he inspected each one, his grin grew wider, until it seemed to cover half of his doughy face. "You do great work. My buddy was right."

"Thank you." Although I didn't actually do the document work myself—I farmed it out to a highly-skilled forger—it was nice to be appreciated just the same, especially since my business was generated exclusively through word-of-mouth.

His eyes narrowed. "They look great. But will they work?"

"I've been doing this for more than twenty years. No complaints." I sat a little taller in my chair. "In addition to the documents themselves, I've created some personal history for Mr.

Wells, a paper and electronic trail. Credit card purchases, cable installation, voter registration, bank accounts, gmail account, and the like. I've used a series of post office boxes and dummy addresses that I keep expressly for this purpose. If anyone looks into Jonathan Wells's past, they'll find something that indicates you weren't just born ... today."

Lloyd takes pride in his work, in both quality (smiling as he satisfies another customer) and longevity (been doing it for twenty years). He explains some of the nitty-gritty of his operation, describing how he "creates" a new identity which the client can assume with little worry of his real identity being discovered. This lays some groundwork for events at the end of the story.

"Sounds thorough."

"It is." At any time, I might have eight or ten phony identities "living" phony lives in cyberspace. I didn't make their fake bios too elaborate, leaving just enough of a footprint to get my clients out of the country with a minimum of risk, should someone check into their past. In my business, details were the difference between life and death.

Some foreshadowing here: "... *details were the difference between life and death.*" Is it possible that someone is going to die in this story? Taking care of details really is so important...

I handed Wells an empty manila envelope, and he stuffed the documents inside. "So what's the plan?" he asked. "Italy? France? Spain?"

Wells had requested refuge in Europe, and I didn't have any trouble obliging him. "Italy. Tuscany, to be exact. Through my

contacts, I've arranged a very nice, very secluded villa. Eight million dollars goes a long way." The bigger the budget, the easier to satisfy a client's wish, but I had to be careful not to go overboard. Too much glitz brought unwanted attention.

"Terrific. I've always wanted to retire in Italy. I've heard Italian women are very ... affectionate."

Here we learn that Lloyd's customers have a lot of money. Life-changing money. More than enough money to get a guy killed. Hopefully, more questions arise in the readers' minds. Who's going to get killed? Why?

"Your dream is now a reality. Many people would kill to live there, myself included."

Sometimes comments like these should be taken figuratively. Other times, literally. By the end of the story, the reader will know how this line was intended!

I filled him in on all the details, answered his questions, and told him not to worry, everything would go like clockwork. It always did. "Remember, if you have any problems, get in touch with my contact in Tuscany, Aldo. He's very well-connected and extremely loyal. He'll fix whatever needs fixing."

More foreshadowing. "... everything would go like clockwork. It always did."

For Lloyd, anyway. At least for the moment.

#

I met Bonnie Stevens when she moderated the very first panel I was on at the Malice Domestic mystery convention. We saw each other at conventions and writer's events, and I always enjoyed spending time with her. Such knowledge! Such generosity! Such a wickedly subtle sense of humor! About two years ago, we both contributed stories to *Jewish Noir*, and Bonnie hosted a number of the contributing authors on this blog, myself included. Her absence will be felt far and wide in the mystery community. Thanks to Art for continuing this fine blog series.

#

Alan Orloff's debut mystery, *Diamonds for the Dead*, was an Agatha Award finalist, and his seventh novel, *Running from the Past*, was an Amazon Kindle Scout selection.

His short fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including *Jewish Noir*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Chesapeake Crimes: Storm Warning*, *Mystery Weekly*, *Noir At The Salad Bar*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, and *Windward: Best New England Crime Stories 2016*. His latest story, "Rule Number One," appears in *Snowbound: Best New England Crime Stories 2017*, to be released this month from Level Best Books.

Alan lives in Northern Virginia and teaches fiction writing at The Writer's Center in Bethesda, MD. He loves cake and arugula, but not together.