

The First Two Pages: “The Best Laid Plans”

By Holly West

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“The Best Laid Plans,” which appears in the upcoming *Florida Happens* Bouchercon anthology edited by Greg Herren, is the first unsolicited story I’ve written in years. While I always strive to write the best story I can, it was important to me that this story be selected for the anthology, so I wrote it—or, I should say, *revised it*—with that goal in mind. Revised, because “The Best Laid Plans” began its life as a novel. Though the story itself changed significantly in the conversion to a short, the first lines of it did not, although I did change the tense from past to present.

Before I begin this essay in earnest, I must admit to being less calculated in the writing of the story than the analysis that follows suggests. Many of my choices were instinctual and the reasons I made them only became clear as I began thinking about them in the context of this post. So, with that in mind, let’s take a look at the first paragraphs.

June 1948

Bev Marshall waits anxiously behind the wheel of the Buick, watching for the rest of the crew to emerge from the house. It seems they’ve been gone at least an hour, but her watch shows it’s only 10:45 p.m. Less than ten minutes since they went in. The boys work fast, but not that fast.

There are four of them in the crew. Joe Scullion is their boss and Bev's boyfriend. Alex McGovern is the brawn, and Sean Cregan is a master lock picker. Bev's their driver. They earn their living burgling wealthy neighborhoods all over the Eastern Seaboard, coming home to Philly with thousands in cash and valuables. Five years working together and not a single arrest, not that the coppers haven't tried.

It's been a good run, but after tonight, Bev will be done with all of them.

This is the first time I've ever used present tense in a story or novel, and I did it both as an experiment and because I wanted to convey a sense of urgency. The story is set seventy years in the past, but I wanted it to immerse the reader into the time period more fully, as though it were happening now. In my opinion, using the present tense accomplishes this more effectively than using the past tense.

I dropped right into the action, weaving most of the backstory into the narrative of first two pages. Usually, I'm a little less heavy-handed with it, but in this case, I wanted to dispense with it quickly so I could get on with the story.

She thinks she sees movement out of the corner of her eye and snaps her head toward it. Is it them? She squints into the darkness, her hand resting lightly on the key in the ignition. Everything is still and she concedes it must've been her imagination. Wrecked by nerves, she quashes the urge to chew a fingernail and slips her hand into her purse in search of cigarettes. Her fingers brush the thick envelope containing every cent she has—nearly five thousand dollars. Along with whatever money she's able to get for tonight's haul, it's enough to keep her going for a year, maybe more if she lives modestly.

She lights a cigarette and pulls the smoke deeply into her lungs, thinking about Richie O'Neill. She'll miss him when this is done. He runs a hockshop on Vine Street and fences most of the loot they steal. Over the years, he's become her trusted friend, so when he let it slip

recently that Joe had his eye out for a new driver, she believed him. Turns out Joe had fallen hard for some dame he'd met in Atlantic City and he wants to marry her, maybe have some kids.

Richie's words cut her deeply. She'd been waiting for Joe to pop the question nearly ten years and he always put her off, saying their love didn't need the government's stamp of approval.

By the end of page two, we know who Bev is and why she's on her chosen path. Unlike my novels, which are traditional whodunits, my short stories are usually straightforward crime tales, with no red herrings or surprises as to who the culprit is. "The Best Laid Plans" is a slight exception, and the first clue there might be a twist in store appears in the paragraphs above. It's subtle, however, as are the hints that crop up elsewhere in the story. Writing crime and mystery stories sometimes feels like harrowing balancing act, during which I'm constantly trying to determine just the right amount of information to impart at just the right time.

Like this story, much of the fiction I've published is historical. With historical fiction, and perhaps in general, there's a temptation to show all the bright, shiny research I did to get the details right, but that's an obvious no-no. These facts live in my head as I write, to be used sparingly to give flavor to the setting.

Above all, Bev's character is key to "The Best Laid Plans." She's a career criminal who's driven this getaway car a dozen times and has never gotten caught. This time, she's nervous, vulnerable, and unsure of herself. But fear doesn't stop

her from envisioning a different future for herself, and for acting on it. In spite of her crimes, I hope this courage allows the reader to root for her.

Will she succeed in escaping Joe Scullion? He's a worthy foe. But Bev is a woman scorned, which might make her worthier. You'll have to wait until the *Florida Happens* anthology is released on September 4 to find out.

Holly West is the Anthony Award-nominated author of the Mistress of Fortune historical mystery series. Her debut, *Mistress of Fortune*, was nominated for the Left Coast Crime Rosebud Award for Best First Novel. Her short fiction has appeared online and in numerous anthologies. She's the editor of the forthcoming *Murder-A-Go-Go's*, a crime fiction anthology inspired by the music of The Go-Go's (available March 2019 from Down & Out Books). Visit hollywest.com.