

The First Two Pages: “Never Again” by Elizabeth Zelvin
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edited by Elizabeth Zelvin (Level Best Books)

The idea of an anthology of short stories that would give abused and traumatized women and girls a voice came to me after I wrote the first two pages of “Never Again” and realized how hard it would be to place such a tale in a traditional short story market of any kind.

“What I don't understand,” Valerie's friend Helen's little sister said, “is how Santa gets into the house. We don't have a chimney. Do you, Valerie?”

“No,” Valerie said, standing on tiptoes to hang a fragile glass ball high on a fragrant branch of Helen's family's Christmas tree.

They didn't have a real tree at Valerie's house, only a fake table model. Valerie's dad had once thrown it across the room in a rage, and that was the end of fragile glass ornaments in their house. The problem wasn't Santa getting into the house, but her dad coming into her room in the middle of the night. And he didn't come for milk and cookies, either.

I wanted to establish the molestation right away, avoiding both euphemism and prurience. The fact that it happens is shock enough. I made it even more clear in the following paragraph that Valerie's dad has been molesting her since she was four. A fellow writer I esteem highly, a kind and decent man, said he “cringed” when he read it. That was all right. I didn't want to spare the reader. I set it on Christmas Eve to contrast the picture-perfect surface and the friend's “normal” family with the secret hell of Valerie's home life.

I used the rest of the first two pages to let Valerie tell us what it's like to be such a child, surviving from age four to age fourteen in such a home. In the process, I made sure she answered some of the usual questions. For example: Where is her mother while this is going on?

[Dad] beat Stevie [Valerie's little brother] a lot. He could knock Stevie across the room with his big thick hand. He didn't even need to make a fist. Once Stevie hit the wall and got a concussion, and their mom had to take him to the hospital and tell a pack of lies.

Mom was taking a lot of pills by then. She hid them inside the shoes in the back of her closet, but any fool could find them if they looked. Even when Stevie was a baby, half the time she forgot to change his diapers, and Valerie had to do it. Or she'd say she had to take a nap, and Valerie would give Stevie his bottle, bathe him, and put him to bed.

Another question: But what if she tells her mom what's happening?

Once, when she was seven, Valerie tried to tell her mom what her dad was doing to her... Her mom slapped her for telling lies. She said her dad was a good man who worked hard to provide for them all, and she didn't want to hear another word against him out of Valerie's mouth ever again.

A third question: What about someone else, a counselor or a teacher?

She signed her own consent form for sex education class. The teacher tried not to seem embarrassed, but Valerie could tell she was. She used mealy-mouthed words like "inappropriate touching." If it had never happened to you, you wouldn't know what the hell she was talking about... Afterwards, she invited any kids who had "questions about the material" or "issues that troubled them" to come and see her in her office. As if that was going to happen!

My fiction is populated by a number of characters with distinctive voices.

They're anything but shy about speaking up. Male or female, set in the present or

the past, they usually swing right into dialogue on the first page—even when I don't plan it that way. But in the first two pages of “Never Again,” Valerie’s voice emerged as a private narrative. To whom can she speak honestly except herself?

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Elizabeth Zelvin is the author of the Bruce Kohler Mysteries and the Mendoza Family Saga. Her short stories have been nominated three times each for the Derringer and Agatha awards and have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, among others. She has edited two anthologies: *Me Too Short Stories: An Anthology* and *Where Crime Never Sleeps: Murder New York Style 4*. You can learn more at her author website at <http://elizabethzelvin.com> and her Facebook page at <http://facebook.com/elizabeth.zelvin>.