

The First Two Pages: “Chasing the Straight” by Trey R. Barker
From *The Eyes Of Texas: Private Eyes From The Panhandle To The Piney Woods*,
edited by Michael Bracken (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Trey R. Barker

First... a shout to Michael Bracken. Any discussion of “Chasing the Straight” *has* to start with him. The editor seeks private eye stories that represent the diversity of the Lone Star State. That single word, *diversity*, was the lynchpin in this story, and it gave me a chance to play with something I’d been thinking about for a while: an autistic PI. Well, once I decided that, the entire project was just a straight-up gas.

For the opening section, there were a number of foundational things I needed to hit:

- Our boy Derrick’s job as a PI
- The initial piece of the larger plot arc—the burglary
- The metaphor of darkness that runs the whole piece regardless of time of day
- Derrick’s desire to jump into the shit and help
- No *femme-fatale*-coming-to-the-office trope
- The actual banality of a PI’s job
- A smidge of humor

Okay, so first up is Derrick’s job. Generally, I don’t lay things like that out in black and white. I prefer to give a few clues first before I casually state it. In this

case, the second sentence of the story gives us a taste: Derrick Kruse, walking the two blocks to his car after snapping a few pics of a client's spouse...

Mentioning pictures of a client's spouse also hits the banality of a PI's job, so that's a two-fer.

In a later paragraph, I lay it out more clearly: Derrick was a quiet PI, not an earth-shaking cop, belt aflame with OC spray and cuffs and a baton. Yeah, he was licensed concealed carry but rarely was he have-gun-will-travel; his bread and butter was cheating spouses in shitty bars or clandestine lunches or late-night love pads, not going hands-on with real criminals.

This chunk also sprinkles a bit more banality dust over Derrick's job.

I've always loved when shit jumps off in the wee hours of the morning. My best professional stories all happened at night, so there was exactly no chance the opening would be any time other than middle of the night. That also gets us where I am so frequently in my fiction: nighttime dark when shadows are deepest. Darkness is my standard, all-encompassing metaphor: someone fighting an encroaching darkness of the soul or seeing a pinpoint of light in the darkness but unsure of how to grab it.

Years ago, when the world and I were young, I was a journalist. My early editors were aficionados of an almost violent brevity in prose and so I tend to write short and punchy and use a single sentence to hit multiple foundational points. The

opening sentence is exactly like that: “The guy was hidden in the darkness of 2:30 a.m.” Nothing good comes from a guy hiding in the darkness in the wee hours so we’re off and running from the first moment. The next sentence drops us deeper in and I’ve barely used any word count at all: “He cut out the window screen and then, using the knife as a pry bar, he opened the window.” Boom! Dump the reader immediately into it. My newspaper editors would have loved it.

Derrick’s character is that of a fixer. He sees the guy trying to break in and, without thought or hesitation, tries to help. There is a larger history as to why he jumps right in, and that comes throughout the story, but from the first moment, I wanted to show the reader, in a visceral way, Derrick’s character. So I make him chase the burglar.

And no, it’s not lost on me that while he thinks about how boring his job is, how hackneyed and even trite, as he’s chasing a burglar. Come on, that’s just funny.

Next up...the woman. The standard trope, and one I’ve used myself, is that a beautiful woman who might be innocent, might be a victim, but who also might be the destruction of the PI, comes slithering into the office. In this story, I already knew who Derrick’s client would ultimately be: a broken woman whose abuse was sexual, physical, and financial...and total. But rather than playing that woman against the grain of the stereotype at the beginning, I simply chose to leave her off-

stage. When we do finally see her, she is locked behind walls and doors and windows, her house itself both prison and protection.

As for the smidge of humor?

Running up, Derrick put a knee in the man's back just in case he wasn't unconscious and pulled out his cell as the driver freaked out. "Man, I ain't never killed nobody. I deliver pizzas, for God's sake."

"I don't think he's dead. Police? Yeah, I need to report an attempted burglary." Anxious, Derrick looked at the driver. "Pepperoni?"

I know, I know, not funny to anyone but me. And I laughed for 20 minutes.

Now, what I find most interesting about the first section is what *isn't* there. I chose to put Derrick on the spectrum, part of my answer to Michael's challenge to give him diversity. Throughout the story I have all kinds of instances of Derrick's autistic behavior but exactly none of that is in the opening section. The title comes from his need to pull an inside straight while playing cards (inspired by Ray Wylie Hubbard's song "Mississippi Flush"), while the line-up at the police station is where he complains about the suspects not being in the right order of birthdates. Derrick's spectrum issue is numbers. There are numbers all over the story, including in the solution of where he'll find what he and his client are looking for. There just aren't any in the opening sequence. That was neither planned nor realized until the story was finished and on its way to Michael.

Understand, too, that almost none of what I just discussed were pre-story thoughts. I wanted a spectrum PI, I wanted the opening at night, and I wanted the bad guy to be part of an abusive husband's larger plot. Those were my initial thoughts. The rest came as I wrote, nuances that the story showed me in rough and which I cut and polished as best I could once I discovered them.

I'm an organic writer and I usually just jump in. The journey of discovery is what I get off on, not the journey of long, lethargic outlines that dictate every twist and turn.

So having taken apart the opening sequence and tasted it in small bites, let's devour the whole thing and see how it sits in the gut.

Enjoy! And make sure you read every story in this anthology, they are amazing.

The First Two Pages of "Chasing the Straight"

The guy was hidden in the darkness of 2:30 a.m. He cut out the window screen and then, using the knife as a pry bar, he opened the window.

Derrick Kruse, walking the two blocks to his car after snapping a few pics of a client's spouse, saw the guy from the sidewalk in a dim spill of light. "Hey! The hell are you doing?"

"Shit."

Panicked, the man threw his knife at Derrick and blasted into the darkness. Derrick yelped—

"Fucking weak link. Don't be such a pussy."

—but the knife thudded harmlessly into the dirt. Trying to keep the burglar in sight, Derrick ran after him. "Stop, asshole."

The bad guy took a hard left between two houses, ran through the unfenced backyards toward the alley. Derrick shot into those backyards and saw—

“Well, hell.”

Not a damned thing. The yards were empty, at least as far as Derrick could tell and he wasn't about to go poking around in the shadows. Truthfully, now that he had time to think about it, it was probably better the guy had slipped away. Derrick was a quiet PI, not an earth-shaking cop, belt aflame with OC spray and cuffs, with a baton. Yeah, he was licensed concealed carry but rarely was he have gun will travel; his bread and butter was cheating spouses in shitty bars or clandestine lunches or late-night love pads, not going hands on with real criminals.

Squealing tires sliced the air and Derrick looked toward the side street. The burglar's head banged against the passenger window of a suddenly-stopped car and he hit the ground in a hard heap.

Running up, Derrick put a knee in the man's back just in case he wasn't unconscious and pulled out his cell as the driver freaked out. “Man, I ain't never killed nobody. I deliver pizzas, for God's sake.”

“I don't think he's dead. Police? Yeah, I need to report an attempted burglary.” Anxious, Derrick looked at the driver. “Pepperoni?”

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Trey R. Barker is the author of the Jace Salome novels, as well as the Barefield Trilogy. He also wrote *The Unknowing*, *No Harder Prison*, *The Cancer Chronicles*, and *Hostage*, as well as hundreds of short stories spanning every genre from horror to crime. Once a journalist, Barker is now a patrol sergeant with the Bureau County Sheriff's Office in north-central Illinois.