

The First Two Pages: “The Patience of Kane” by Bev Vincent

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An Essay by Bev Vincent

When editor Michael Bracken announced an anthology of PI stories set in Texas, it sounded tailor-made for me. I’ve lived in Texas for thirty years, over half my life, and I’ve written numerous PI stories. One of my favorite go-to characters is Benjamin Kane, the elder of two brothers who inherited a Houston-based private detective agency from their ex-cop father. Michael published the first of his adventures over fifteen years ago (“Kane’s Mutiny,” *Fedora III*, 2004). All I needed was a new case for Kane to investigate.

I’m fascinated by the traditional private detective, those cut from the same cloth as Jim Rockford from the TV series *The Rockford Files*. They put in the hours, follow clues and people, eavesdrop, surveil, cut legal corners, and occasionally get in uncomfortable situations. It’s not glamorous work. To coin a phrase, the tedium is the message.

My research turned up a decades-old news article about a private investigator whose patience and persistence allowed him to uncover the cause of a mysterious death. For “The Patience of Kane,” I borrowed one element from that incident and built an entirely new story around it.

I almost always write about Kane in the first person. I like to get inside his

head and see the world through his eyes. He often thinks things that he'd never allow himself to say out loud, so this point of view lets me convey both sides—his inner thoughts and the words he utters. Although he has a solid, percussive name and a tough demeanor to match, he has a soft heart. He's not a lone wolf—I wanted to create a PI who has friends and family.

Private eye stories reveal a lot about the detective, but their motivation in each story is the client. Why would Kane want to put in long, tedious hours unless there was a payoff beyond his fee? Why would he choose to go above and beyond the call of duty? How about a pregnant woman who has suffered a terrible loss for a client? That had the potential to tug at the heartstrings of the detective and readers alike.

Now I was on a roll. The final decision for the opening of “The Patience of Kane” was the setting for their initial meeting. What location would reveal something about both the detective and his client? Instead of having Amanda Treviño come to the world headquarters of Kane Investigations (as Kane likes to describe them to himself), I decided they should meet in public.

Our new client didn't want to come to our office, so I agreed to meet her at a coffee shop in Rice Village. When I asked how I would recognize her, she said I should look for the most pregnant woman in the place.

The establishment was surprisingly low on gravid females when I arrived, so I occupied myself with the menu board. I could have been *that asshole* who pointed out to the teenager behind the counter that “chai tea” was a redundancy, but I refrained. My younger

brother Nate has told me on several occasions that I don't have to correct everything wrong in the world—just the things we get paid to fix.

The first two paragraphs establish lots of information. The main character has an office, a younger brother, an attitude with some self-restraint and a hero complex. The client is a pregnant woman.

In my “other” life, I'm a scientist and I love doing research. I enjoy discovering esoteric details about practically any subject. So, once I put Kane in this upscale establishment, I wondered what drinks might cost the most, since he wants to assess his client's financial situation. A pregnant client would avoid high-caffeine drinks, so I dug into the world of pricey teas. A little research goes a long way, especially in a short story.

I settled on a Gyokuro Imperial green tea. The board said it was grown in the shade for the last two weeks before harvest, which made the leaves darker and mellowed the tea's flavor. It was the most expensive thing on offer, and the client was paying. I wanted to see how she reacted when presented with the check—if she flinched, maybe she'd react similarly when I gave her our investigative bill. Okay, so maybe I'd just found a different way to be an asshole.

There's a bit of self-reflection here, too. Kane is aware of some of his deficiencies. I enjoy exploring his character to every corner. His decisions and thoughts aren't all altruistic or honorable—he's as flawed as any real person—but his self-awareness makes him interesting to me. Yes, he thinks, I've had this bad or

unacceptable thought...what am I going to do with it?

She showed up ten minutes late, by which point I was ready to order a second cup of exorbitant tea. Her enormous belly preceded her by almost a foot as she struggled to maneuver through the door. I debated whether I should get up to assist her. In the current sociopolitical climate, that earns me a rebuke as often as gratitude. I was spared from deciding when someone else in search of a shot of overpriced caffeine arrived behind her and held the door.

Enter the client. Since I'm inside Kane's head, I can reveal and assess his first impressions of her. The fact that she's pregnant is important to the story, and I found it interesting to explore how he would react to her pregnancy, her frank discussion of her condition and its implications.

She was probably thirty years old, average height, with dark hair bunched up into a messy bun at the back of her head. She was wearing a clingy white shirt with shoulder straps that emphasized her basketball-sized belly. She waddled—there was no better word for it—into the café and scanned the room. I gave her a mock salute by way of greeting, and she acknowledged me with a nod before taking her place in line at the counter. A minute or two later, she lowered herself into the chair opposite me, dropping the last several inches with a resounding plop and an audible gasp.

“I'd kill for a double espresso,” she said by way of introduction, “but...” She rubbed her swollen belly. “It'll be awhile, what with breastfeeding and all.”

Kane is a detective, and a good one at that, so it makes sense that he's found out as much as possible about his client. He'd never go into a meeting like this cold. At least one of the pieces of information his brother turned up in their background check will be significant to the story.

“Benjamin Kane,” I said, hoping to get her off the subject of breasts and onto why she needed a private detective. Nate had done our due diligence, but all he’d turned up on Amanda Treviño was where she had gone to school (UT Austin), what she’d studied (marketing), where she worked (one of the big oil companies downtown), and that she was a fairly recent widow.

Kane’s hero complex comes into play. He thinks Amanda sees him as the only person who can solve her problem. In fact, he’s right—his personality and his determination to find the answer to the question that’s haunting her makes him the perfect person for the job.

A teenager delivered her beverage, a Silver Rain white tea only slightly less expensive than what I’d ordered. She picked up the cup and blew across the surface before her first sip. “Thank you for meeting me here, Mr. Kane. I have a doctor’s appointment at two-thirty, but I didn’t want to put this off any longer. It took me long enough to get up the nerve to call you. You’re my last hope.”

No pressure, I thought. The pregnant maiden in distress—or was “maid” or “lady” the proper term?—saw me as her knight in shining armor. I asked a few perfunctory questions about the baby. When it was due? Did she know if it was a boy or girl? I’ve never been one for making polite small talk. Nate says it’s one of my shortcomings. He has a list.

With the formalities out of the way, I cut to the chase. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Treviño?”

And we’re off to the races. Amanda tells her sad tale and Kane is hooked.

Hopefully readers will be, too!

True story: Michael Bracken told me “The Patience of Kane” mad him cry when he read it. I couldn’t have asked for a better reaction to something I wrote.

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Bev Vincent is the author of several books, including *The Road to the Dark Tower* and *The Stephen King Illustrated Companion*, and nearly a hundred short stories that have appeared in the likes of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and two MWA anthologies. His work has been nominated for the Stoker (twice), the Edgar, and the ITW Thriller Awards, and he is the 2010 winner of the Al Blanchard Award. In 2018, he co-edited *Flight or Fright* with Stephen King, an anthology of scary stories about flying that is available in over a dozen languages. Since 2001, he has been a contributing editor with *Cemetery Dance* magazine, where his column *News from the Dead Zone* appears in every issue and online.

Learn more at bevvincent.com or follow him on Twitter (@BevVincent) or Facebook (facebook.com/bev.vincent). His book review blog is OnyxReviews.com and his online Stephen King news site is NewsFromTheDeadZone.com.