

**The First Two Pages: “Rage Warehouse—Ire Proof” by Toni L.P. Kelner**  
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An Essay by Toni L.P. Kelner

“Rage Warehouse—Ire Proof” had a ridiculously long gestation period for a 5,500-word short story: over 22 years between the idea and the publication of the re-re-re-written short story.

Here’s the story behind the story. After my Laura Fleming mystery series ended, my agent suggested writing a book of connected short stories. (Art successfully did just that many years later, which I love.) I came up with a story arc that took place over an entire year plus one day—“a year and a day” has some nice historical resonance. Each story would take place in a different month. I was going to use the fictional mill town Byerly, NC, which was the setting for my Laura Fleming series, and I wrote three of the short stories for the proposal.

Unfortunately, the editor who’d bought the Laura Fleming books shot down the idea. Then my agent pointed out that selling a Byerly book to a different publisher might be awkward, so I moved the book to the nearby town of Rocky Shoals. (Which was used in the Laura Fleming books.) But since one of my three stories was definitely set in Byerly, I had to write a new one for the proposal: “Rage Warehouse—Ire Proof.”

My agent shopped the proposal around, but had zero luck, so I gave up the project, but not the stories. I eventually sold the first three I’d written: “An

Unmentionable Crime” to the anthology *Magnolias and Mayhem*, edited by Jeffrey Marks; “Bible Belt” to *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*; and “Old Dog Days” to *A Hot and Sultry Night for Crime*, edited by Jeffery Deaver. But I never tried to sell “Rage Warehouse—Ire Proof” because it just wasn’t right yet. Over the years, I dusted it off and took another look at it more than once, but it wasn’t until early last year that I finally figured out how to fix it—and finally sold it to *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*.

I’m not sure if that’s a tribute to my perseverance or my stubbornness, but it’s mighty satisfying to finally see it in print.

“How much further is it?” I asked my sister Becky.

“We’re nearly there,” she said.

“How did Aunt Peg even find this place?” our cousin Janice asked from the back seat of the car.

“There probably weren’t as many self-storage places around back in the day,” Becky said.

“Or it was cheap,” I added.

“Mama always was careful with her money.” Becky made it sound like a virtue, which I guess it was, but there’d been a whole lot of occasions when I was growing up when I’d wished our mother had been a little less virtuous.

Here I’m introducing my three characters as fast as I can. No, actually four, because Mama is an important part of the story. Her death is the reason the viewpoint character has come to town, and I’m trying to show that their relationship wasn’t the kind they write Hallmark cards about.

When the road made a jog to the left and I finally got a glimpse of the place, I knew it couldn’t have cost much. There was no other

reason to pick such an out-of-the-way monstrosity. I've used self-storage places, but were long, low concrete buildings with roll-up doors, like a row of garages. This was a tall brick structure I suspected had started out life as a hosiery mill, and instead of having a light-up sign, the words *Storage Warehouse—Fire Proof* were painted above the front door. At least they had been until the *Sto* and the *F* wore off.

I've put this storage building in an imaginary town in North Carolina, but the inspiration is in Cambridge, MA. If you drive down Massachusetts Ave. in Cambridge, going from M.I.T. toward Central Square, you pass the Metropolitan Storage Warehouse, which bills itself as fireproof. But at just the right angle, all you can see are the words "RAGE WAREHOUSE" and "IRE PROOF." I'm not the only person to notice this, but it has always amused me. An article about things found in storage buildings over the years fueled into this as well.

Here's a picture of the real building. It's been sold now, and I imagine they'll repaint it, but it'll always be a rage warehouse to me.



“Rage warehouse. Ire proof,” I read. “Must be where you put *stuff* you’re angry about.”

Janice laughed more loudly that it deserved as we turned into the parking lot.

(Janet is kind of obnoxious—I wanted to establish that right away.)

“I just hope it’s air conditioned,” I said. It was North Carolina in August, the kind of hot, humid weather I’d avoided as much as possible since moving away from Rocky Shoals. Just the idea of digging through boxes while dripping with sweat made me tired.

Remember the original book idea of a story per month? Obviously, this was going to be August. And it’s Rocky Shoals—not Byerly.

That leads me to pen names. My current series is being written as Leigh Perry. But since this story is connected to the Laura Fleming books, at least by geography, I wanted to be Toni L.P. Kelner for it. I admit this is confusing, but it felt right.

“We should wait until tomorrow,” Janice said. “There’s a storm coming tonight, and that’ll cool things off.”

“Gail’s leaving in the morning,” Becky reminded her, then gave me a look. “Unless she could change her flight and stay a little longer?”

“Sorry, but I’ve got work,” I said, which was half true. Yes, I had a job to get back to, but my boss had told me I could take as much time as I needed after my mother’s death. I just didn’t feel like I needed more. I’d come for the visitation on Monday, the funeral on Tuesday morning, and the reception at Becky’s house Tuesday afternoon. I’d helped clean out Mama’s room at the nursing home, and I’d written thank-you notes for the funeral flowers and food left at the house because Becky thought my handwriting was prettier than hers. That fulfilled all my obligations. I’d loved my mother, but we hadn’t had what anybody would call a warm relationship. Honestly, I didn’t think any of Mama’s relationships had been all that warm.

This is where I really lay out Gail's ambivalence about her mother, and her hometown, and honestly, her whole upbringing. But I want it to be plain that despite those mixed feelings, she does the right things for her mother: writing thank-you notes and so on. (This last part is a bit of wish fulfillment on my part. My sisters have much prettier handwriting than I do.)

I hope that the reader wants to know why it is Gail and her mother weren't close.

Janice said, "Becky, you and I could come tomorrow or even later this week. Mama would be happy to lend a hand, too."

Yes, another Mama. Most of my relatives in North Carolina call their mothers Mama, and sometimes their grandmothers are Mama, too. My father swears he once heard my Mama say, "Mama, Mama said Big Mama and Little Mama are coming over in a little bit." And all the Mamas involved knew exactly what she meant.

Becky looked at me and rolled her eyes. The last person she'd want around was Aunt Jenny, Mama's sister-in-law. Helping didn't interest that woman nearly as much as nosing around. Janice wasn't quite as bad, but we'd only brought her with us because Aunt Jenny had heard about our expedition via the family grapevine, and she'd volunteered Janice's help. Which is to say that Aunt Jenny was expecting her daughter to provide a detailed report of what we found. I was just as glad Aunt Jenny had had other plans, so she hadn't been able to tag along, too.

Aunt Jenny is probably even more obnoxious than Janice. And don't we all have nosy relatives? They all pop up when there's a death, too. I think part of the

reason I made Janice—and Aunt Jenny—so unlikable was to make my protagonist Gail seem more likable. As in, “Okay, Gail is kind of cold considering that her mother just died, but at least she’s not as bad as Janice.”

I’m also showing a rapport between Gail and Becky. In the earlier draft, the sisters were much more angry at one another, though there was always a Janice sticking her nose in. But somehow that just seemed too easy. Conflict between nice people can be more powerful than conflict between a good person and a bad person.

Janice went on. “If we find the ring, we can mail it to Gail.”

“I wouldn’t trust Mama’s ruby to the mail,” Becky said. “What if it got lost?”

“You could insure it. How much do you suppose it’s worth, anyway?”

Sometimes Janice sounded just like her mother.

Becky scoffed. “You can’t insure sentimental value. That ring has been in the family for generations, and now it’s Gail’s.”

Now we find out why these three are going out to the storage warehouse. A family heirloom has been misplaced. Whether the value is financial or sentimental, nothing causes sparks to fly like messy inheritances.

It’s a bit of a slow start for a mystery, where a body often falls on the first page, if not in the first paragraph, but it seemed to work for this story and this setting. And oddly, I think you can almost get away with a gradual build in a short story more easily than in a novel, though you’d expect the opposite to be true.

Or maybe it’s just that hot August setting, and I can’t imagine anybody moving fast if they don’t have to. Even when death is involved.

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Toni L.P. Kelner/Leigh Perry is two authors in one. As Toni, she wrote eight novels in the Laura Fleming mystery series and three “Where are they now?” mysteries. Toni also co-edited seven urban fantasy anthologies with *New York Times* bestseller Charlaine Harris. As Leigh, she writes the Family Skeleton Mysteries. The sixth, *The Skeleton Stuffs a Stocking*, was released in 2019. Under both names she writes short fiction, including two recent stories in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and a story in the anthology *Shattering Glass*. Kelner has won the Agatha Award and an *Romantic Times* Lifetime Achievement Award and has been nominated multiple times for the Agatha, the Anthony, the Macavity, and the Derringer.