

The First Two Pages: “The Greatest Secret” By James Blakey
From *Heartbreaks & Half-Truths*
Edited by Judy Penz Sheluk (Superior Shores Press)

An Essay by James Blakey

When Judy Penz Sheluk issued the call for submissions for her *Heartbreaks & Half-Truths* anthology, she provided the solution for two stories I had been struggling with. One story featured misfortunate lovers, and the other was about hidden lies. Neither story was coming together. I combined the best elements of both and the result was “The Greatest Secret.”

Writers agonize over their first lines, attempting to craft a novel sentence that will hook the read and promise an entertaining story. Here’s mine.

August 1962

Yeah, I went with a dateline. And not an interesting one like December 1941 or September 2001.

In early drafts, my POV character, PI Phil Zlotnick, is listening to the radio when the Giants’ Willie McCovey lines out to Yankees’ second baseman Bobby Richardson ending the ’62 World Series. But I felt that reference was too obscure, save for the oldest or most obsessive of baseball fans. I dallied with a news report of John Glenn orbiting the Earth in *Friendship 7* but cut that too. I decided that having Phil listening to the radio slowed down the opening. But I needed to establish the year early on to set expectations for technology and social mores in

the story. The location is less important, but I drop hints that the action is taking place in California. I'm still not sure I made the right choice with the dateline; it feels a little like cheating

Here's the first sentence:

My Fairlane backfires, drawing glares from the foursome of old-timers lining up putts on the ninth green.

Two big decisions in those first three words: person and tense. Choosing first person was the easier of the two. This is Phil's story. He's working the biggest case of his life. In every scene we're so deep in his head it's claustrophobic. Plus, first person seems created for hardboiled.

The choice of tense was more difficult. Of the two stories I combined to create "The Greatest Secret," one was written in present tense and one in past. For the first draft I used past, but it didn't evoke the anxiety that I wanted Phil and readers to experience. Working this particular case for this particular client is a stomach-churning, adrenaline-pumping nightmare. And that discomfort wasn't coming across as strong as I hoped.

Present tense is a tougher sell and sometimes comes off as artificial. But when I rewrote the story in the present tense, I could feel Phil's heart pound and hands tremble. That's when I knew I made the right choice.

As for the rest of the sentence, the Fairlane is a remnant of my attempt to set the year through description. The golfers are playing at the country club, a place Phil doesn't normally find himself.

A blond surfer-type in a red vest looks like he'd rather be out on the water. He raises an eyebrow at my car: unpainted front-left quarter-panel, missing hubcaps, crack in the windshield. The engine continues to sputter, black smoke rising from the tailpipe.

"Don't go drag-racing my ride." I slip a buck into his palm.

He glances at the bill like I handed him a dead rat. I bet he's thinking of abandoning my car at the boneyard.

I climb the set of stone steps to the clubhouse and am met at the entrance by a slender redhead.

"Can I help you?" She frowns at me like I'm crabgrass on the fairway.

I squint at the name embroidered on her blazer. "Hi, Linda. Phil Zlotnick. Here as a guest of Mr. DiMeglio."

She consults her list. "Yes, Mr. DiMeglio is expecting you on the terrace."

"Great. Let's go meet him." I take one step forward.

She slides in front of me, holding up her hand. No ring. Long red nails. "The Club Rules require gentlemen to wear a jacket and tie." *THE CLUB RULES*. The capitalization is clear in her voice.

I shrug. "I don't have a tie, Linda. But we both know Mr. DiMeglio isn't the sort of gentleman who likes to be kept waiting."

She ignores that. "I guess your jacket will do." She gives me a look like she ate a bug. "And we can lend you a tie." From beneath her station she produces a selection.

I wanted to show how out of place Phil is at the country club. He's a small-time PI, just getting by. His car doesn't belong. His wardrobe doesn't belong. And he doesn't belong. He knows it and the staff know it.

My intent with all the snobs looking down on Phil is to get the reader to like him, because who doesn't love the scrappy underdog?

Now we meet Phil's client, a man who shouldn't be kept waiting:

Johnny DiMeglio sits at his table under a giant umbrella. I recognize from him the papers. Big trial last year. Not guilty on all counts. Salt-and-pepper hair. Roman nose. He's reading *The Racing Form*. Open collar and no jacket. Some animals are more equal than others.

Linda says, "Mr. DiMeglio? Your guest, Mr. Zlotnick has arrived."

DiMeglio doesn't stand or offer his hand. "Have a seat, Phil."

I comply. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. DiMeglio." He doesn't suggest I call him Johnny.

I have no idea *why* DiMeglio wants to see me, but it's not a mystery why we're meeting here. My office is little bigger than a shoebox and on the wrong side of the tracks, squeezed between a takeout rib joint and a pawn shop.

The real question is why I'm here at all. I'm a one-man operation. I do missing persons, cheating spouses, insurance investigations. DiMeglio's our city's number one crime lord. His organization is plenty capable of doing anything I can, and plenty I can't or won't. If he needs to go legit, he could hire one of the big firms like Waterbury. I say a silent prayer that I haven't run afoul of DiMeglio's business interests.

Godfather vs. small-time PI. The power imbalance is completely one-sided.

Phil feels even more out of place.

The reference to the investigative firm Waterbury is an homage to *The Soprano*'s creator David Chase, who wrote the endlessly entertaining *The Rockford Files* episode "Sticks and Stones May Break Your Bones, But Waterbury Will Bury You."

And why is DiMeglio hiring Phil?

DiMeglio says, “I suppose we should get down to business. Are you married, Phil?”

I hold up my hand, showing no ring. “I was lucky to escape.”

He doesn’t seem to think that’s funny. “I’m married. Wonderful lady. No children yet, but I am already rich in my blessings.”

“Marital bliss. Glad someone’s enjoying it.”

“However, it has come to my attention that my beloved wife is having an affair. While this pains me deeply, I am a forgiving man. Plus, the church frowns upon divorce.”

I fake-frown in mock sympathy. Does the church say anything about having one of your goons throw acid in a reporter’s face?

His voice takes on a hard edge. “But the man who seduced her into adultery, this I cannot forgive. He must be made to pay for his sins. And he will pay here on Earth. Justice and vengeance cannot wait until the next world.”

I ask, “And who is this unfortunate man?”

“That’s what I’m hiring you to find out.”

Phil hasn’t said he’s taking the case. But that’s the way Johnny DiMeglio rolls. No one says no to him.

That’s the end of the first two pages. I hope it’s intriguing enough for readers to continue to the bombshell dropped on Phil at the end of the scene.

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James Blakey’s fiction has appeared in *Mystery Weekly*, *Crimson Streets*, and *Over My Dead Body*. His story “The Bicycle Thief” won a 2019 Derringer Award. He lives in suburban Philadelphia where he works as a network engineer for a software consulting company. When James isn’t working or writing, he can be found on the hiking trail—he’s climbed thirty-eight of the fifty US state high points—or bike-camping his way up and down the East Coast.