

The First Two Pages of “No Postman, No Doorbell” by Dixon Hill

From *California Schemin’: The 2020 Bouchercon Anthology*,

Edited by Art Taylor (Wildside Press)

An Essay by Dixon Hill

My First Two Pages essay may be a bit different from what you’re used to. While writers and readers may expect that writing requires an author to shed a certain amount of blood, sweat, and tears, First Two Pages readers may not be expecting just exactly *how much* blood I had to shed in order to land this thing.

I say “land,” because to me writing this story was like fighting a marlin. At first, the story was just a little twitch on my line. I noticed it, but wasn’t sure I’d actually caught anything, and it didn’t show many signs of life—perhaps trying to fool me by playing dead. Then it struck! Hard! It dove deep and ran hard, so that I had to pay out a lot of line, then crank and crank to reel it in. And every time I thought I was winning, it tried to run away from me again. And several times it tried to jerk me out of the boat into the sea and run away *with* me! Then, when it finally came time to haul it into the boat, it kept smacking me in the head!

Now: well may you be dubious about this claim, considering that I wrote said story while sitting alone in my backyard office behind our house in the middle of the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. But, you see, what happened was this: late one

night, between four and five years ago, I was moved to write basically the following scene.

It's not like my bar stool moved or anything when she hopped onto that stool next to mine; I felt her the way a fisherman feels the line tighten and knows he's tied into a big one. I'd seen her coming, in the bar-back mirror. Watched her strut across that dark lounge like a tiger in the night, maybe five-three—half of it legs—about ninety-eight pounds all told. She had shoulder length sandy blonde hair, blue eyes, skin bronzed by the sun and all shined-up from the care and pampering those rich women get.

Petite but sure, she cut a swath through the very air when she walked. She was small and thin, and damn well built. We would have called her a “spinner” where I was from. The impact she made, that came from the way she carried herself.

That weight, that impact, was part of what I felt when she hopped up on that empty stool I'd been saving and tossed her keys on the countertop right beside my wallet. That made me smile inside, but I kept a straight face.

I'd followed her here, watched her from a table in a dark corner, two Saturday nights in a row. I wasn't staying in the hotel then, had a better room down the road. This place was for the feed company rep, the traveling salesman, anybody on the cheap-but-clean route through town. But, I'd been there to see what happened, watched how she operated. Made note of how it happened a second time, one week later. Two weeks of scoping out the fishing hole, getting a feel for the way she rose to the bait and struck the line, the way she liked to be played before she let herself be landed, all part of planning my own cast—for tonight.

Both times I'd watched her, she'd come in around 10:30. The lounge was pretty full; she had her pick of targets. Her criterion was easy to spot. She bit on the well-heeled. They had to be in suits. And they had to be in good shape. She liked blondes, which was why I'd bleached my dark hair that morning—even my eyebrows. And, down below.

I wrote the above, then was stumped about where the story went. I knew the guy in the bar wasn't just there to pick up a woman—though I knew this *was* part

of his scheme. He had some ulterior motive, but I wasn't sure what it was, or even if he was a bad guy or a good guy. And, this woman he was after, I didn't have any idea who the heck *she* was! But I had a feeling she was married. And I suspected he might want to use her to get at her husband's money. Which I figured probably made our main character a bad guy. Or, at least, one of those guys who yearns to be good, but just can't seem to help being sucked into doing bad things.

On the heels of this, came the thought: "Well, whatever it is, this is certainly not going to be some classic like *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, because you, Mr. Knucklehead, are no James M. Cain." Following which, I promptly wrote the title "No Postman, No Doorbell" across the top, hit SAVE, and shut down my computer for the night.

This sort of thing is not particularly unusual for me. I'm more of what some folks call a "pantser," meaning I don't outline my stories, but instead head into them with just a scene or two in mind (often the opening and closing scenes), and usually have to figure out (or *discover*) everything else—such as why the characters are doing what they're doing, and what they're about to do next—as I work on it. So, in a case like the one above, I'll save the chunk of "starter stuff" giving myself time to think. Or, as I tell my wife, "I have to mull it over a bit."

She has other terms for this "mulling" of mine, most of which begin with the phrase: "Oh, God, are we *ever* going to get paid for this one?"—largely, I believe,

because she thinks this is some form of writer's block. But I don't consider this writer's block at all, largely because I usually have two or three works in progress sitting on my computer that I'll write on until something comes along that makes this story assume a form and life of its own. I swear it's not writer's block. I swear on my tattoo! (Well, I don't actually have a tattoo, but I'm sure that if I did I'd consider it sacred and swearable.)

So, for the next year or two, when I hit a dry spell in writing, I'd open my computer file entitled "WRITING pieces and parts" (not to be confused with my files "WRITING short stories", "WRITING novel-size", or the inevitable "WRITING why did I ever choose to do this to myself"). There, I cycle through my ~~Island of misfit toys~~ list of scenes like the one above, to see if I can find a way to breath life into any of them. Unfortunately, everything I came up with felt too contrived. The scene refused to take in the creative breath from which a story could blossom.

Then, in early 2019, I learned that the committee for the upcoming Bouchercon, to be held in Dallas, Texas, had launched a contest called the Bill Crider Prize for Short Fiction. And the theme for this contest was: "Deep in the Heart (relating to Texas, whether locale, characters, history, etc.) with an element of mystery or crime." They also said they wanted "fascinating characters and twisty plots."

This time, when I cycled through “WRITING pieces and parts,” the scene above seemed primed for action. I realized the guy in that hotel bar was already exhibiting a soft spot in his heart for that woman, if he wasn’t careful. Instantly, I realized: “She’s married to a Texas rancher with a huge ranch worth millions, and he loves the ranching life, but she’s a gold digger. And this guy wants a piece of those millions.” And WHAM! This marlin of a story jumped up out of the water and dove straight back down—running deep and hard! It was all I could do to hang onto the rod and reel of my thoughts, high-test line smoking out between my fingers as they struck the keys on the keyboard in my lap.

Once I had the story completed, which didn’t take more than a day or two, I rubbed my aching muscles (landing a marlin is hard work, I assure you!) then went back through it, plugging holes—which took a while.

I don’t mean plot holes. I wasn’t worried there; though the marlin had run in a pretty twisty way, I figured I’d tied everything up pretty neatly. The holes I was worried about had to do with “The Eyes of Texas.” You see: my grandfather had been an army officer and a leader in the CCC group that worked on Palo Duro Canyon, south-east of Amarillo, in the 1930s. He took his family there with him, which made a big impression on my dad, who had been born in the ’20s and was a small child. As a consequence, I heard many stories of dad running around the canyon as a kid, and of movie theaters full of people who all jumped to their feet

and stood in silence when “The Yellow Rose of Texas” was played before the films.

I don’t know what other songs he learned there, but my father also often belted out “The Eyes of Texas are Upon You” while walking around our house when I was kid. In fact, he’d sometimes stop in mid-verse to turn, look at me, and intone: “Those eyes are real, son. Those people are serious about that! They *mean it* when they sing about those eyes.” Though I was born and raised in Arizona, this was undoubtedly meant to make me behave when my father’s own eyes happened to be looking elsewhere, I’m sure. But this reassurance had a tendency to be eroded when my mother, who had spent some of her childhood in Texas, would add, “Boy, do they ever!”

So, the holes I was busy plugging were the holes that might lead an owner of those eyes to throw my story against the wall as a voice screamed, “That boy don’t know *anything* about Texas!” I scoured maps to find the right place to put the ranch, and to look for towns around that I could use in the storyline, in place of the town names I’d tossed in as place holders. I was delighted to discover that, with only a little bit of poetic license, I could use Langtree, Texas—the home of Judge Roy Bean—as one of them. Then I looked up names of grocery stores in that area, so I could use one of them as the place where the character bought some groceries (an integral part of the story—not just fluff). I spent days searching out and

carefully inserting verisimilitude-lending tidbits where relatively generic items or activities had been before.

And I think it paid off. A few months later, a contest committee member notified me that mine had been a winning story, so I could attend the 2019 Bouchercon for free to receive my prize! I had several online friends who had been to Bouchercon and written about it, but I had never been. I couldn't wait to go!

My wife's take was a bit different: "So: you started writing this story two years ago, hoping to sell it for money. Instead, you won a contest and they're giving you free admittance to a conference in Texas. But we have to pay to get you to and from the conference, plus pay for your room and your meals. How much do you think this is going to cost us?"

I shrugged, then said, "But I have to go!"

She nodded. "Yes, I think you do. But I think you need to seriously consider taking on more hours in your part-time job at Lowe's if this keeps up!"

To make a long, wonderful, and heart-warming story short and factual: I had a terrific time at Bouchercon, gathered tons of tips, met a lot of new people, and finally got to actually meet many of the folks I used to blog with at SleuthSayers in person! To top it off, my story had won the Bill Crider Memorial Scholarship and that meant that I won a free admission to the 2020 Bouchercon in Sacramento—one winning story: two free Bouchercons! What could go wrong?

And, one of the things I had really wished I could have done for the Dallas B-con, was to submit a story in hopes of having it land in that year's anthology. But I didn't know that I was really going to go to Dallas until I learned that I had written a winning story, which was after the anthology submission date. So, I hadn't done it. Consequently, I was determined to submit an entry for the 2020 anthology.

Returning home, I started writing a story about a murder in a robotics factory. I got the story well worked out and largely written, and my early research indicated there were many robotics labs around the Sacramento area, so I figured it would work quite well. I even discovered that a very early "talking robot" (which may actually have been a bit of a showman's trick instead of an actual robot) is on display at a Sacramento restaurant, and I had my two detectives talking things over in there (the restaurant owner emailed me that he'd be fine with the idea).

And then disaster struck.

I had figured that the roboticists would be working on a certain problem in robotic motion and that the way they had been doing this work was the key to discovering who the murderer was (i.e. the murderer had used this mechanism to make the robot in the lab they used smash his hated coworker's head in, and to frame someone else for it). But I don't know anything about robots—not real ones,

at least. So I looked up how they do this particular sort of work and how they plan to solve this particular robot motion problem.

Only to discover that this particular problem in robotic motion had long-ago been solved.

WHAM! I slammed my head against my desk. (You might want to add a few more WHAMs, because I actually did it several times in a row.) Talk about frustration!

No real roboticist would be working on this problem, and if anyone reading the story knew that, my story would go out the window. In fact, it *was* out the window—unless I could find some sort of robotics problem that someone could be working on in a contemporary (or maybe just slightly futuristic, even!) lab, which could be used to murder someone and try to pin it on somebody else.

I began my search, but the submission deadline was drawing close! (I know: I should have made that robotics problem my starting point, then I wouldn't have been so badly surprised. But I had actually written that problem in, because I had seen a NOVA or some other program all about it. So, I already knew it was a real problem. It was only later that I realized I had probably seen that NOVA back in 1987 or something. WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!)

And, every time I'd think: "This might be a problem that would work. I wonder if they're working it, because I could use it in manner X, and this would

probably allow murderer Y to frame Mr. Z. Oh, excellent!” And, this new marlin of a story would start jumping and diving as I fought to make things configure in my head. Only to do subsequent, time-consuming research that made it very clear: this was no longer a problem either!

And ... WHAM! My head's hitting my wooden desk again.

And the deadline is closer still!

Finally, about the fifth or sixth time I found myself sitting on our bathroom sink while my wife pulled splinters from my forehead and then bandaged it, she said, “This has to stop. The kids are getting grossed out. They won't eat in the kitchen anymore, because you keep running through, dripping blood all over the floor on your way to the bathroom. Why don't you do what Joseph Walker suggested and use that story you won the contest with? You said he's a good writer; why don't you listen to him?”

I had met Joseph Walker at the Dallas Bouchercon. He's a really nice guy, and his story “Last Man in Lafarge” had won First Place in the Crider Contest. (And it *deserved* to win! If you didn't read “Last Man in Lafarge” in *EQMM* when it came out—read it! It's a great story!) I had told him of my robot problems and, as we were quickly approaching the deadline, he had suggested I might submit “No Postman, No Doorbell” to the 2020 anthology in its place. After all, the anthology rules stipulated that a story could not have been published—there weren't any rules

stipulating that it couldn't have won a contest. And, though the story had been a contest winner, it had not been published. So it seemed eligible.

I think it was the letter from the director of our local blood bank, which stated that “writing accidents” were no excuse not to “make your heretofore agreed upon donations. No matter how much blood you may have lost through your forehead!” that finally convinced me.

Now, however, all my Texas detail would have to be switched to California detail. And I had only a few days to do it in. Yet, I had to ensure that a Californian reading the story wouldn't say, “Well, it's nice, but no way could that happen in this state.”

Again, I scoured maps until I found just the right spot for the ranch—in a place that would make water rights (a subject I knew might be as near and dear to a Californian's heart as it is to an Arizonan) an important element of the plot. I found the name of a small local grocery store in the area and worked the proper neighboring towns and real geographical elements into the plotline. I even surprised myself by finding a way to make it possible for the two main characters to smoke in that bar where they meet—which is actually an important element of demonstrating her deceptive nature. I had the two smoking in the Texas bar and hotel, but I was shocked to find a way to believably get them to do it in California!

And, in the end, I landed the story and sent it in for consideration. Only to jump for joy some time later when I learned that the story would finally be published—and among stories by such an august group of writers! And Art Taylor, who edited the anthology, gave me *excellent* suggestions—including asking, if I recall correctly, something along the lines of: “I understand giving the rancher a down-home accent, perhaps. But, why does he sound like he’s from Texas?” Oops! That Art’s got one great eye!

And then, dear reader, you know what happened—and that this year’s Bouchercon was held online.

My wife told me how sorry she was. But when she doesn’t know I’m looking, I think I sometimes see her secretly smiling at the money we saved by not going to the B-con in person.

(In her stunned state, when she learned that I had won attendance at a second Bouchercon we’d have to pay to travel to, she somehow forgot herself and agreed to go with me. But I intend to hold her to it and make her go with me to the next B-con that’s held live!)

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Dixon Hill’s fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, *Boy’s Life*, and anthologies.