

**The First Two Pages of “Etta at the End of the World”
by Joseph S. Walker**

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An Essay by Joseph S. Walker

“Etta at the End of the World” was originally written to be submitted to an anthology of crime stories set in Florida, in defiance of the fact that my actual experience of Florida is, to put it generously, limited. I didn’t visit the state for the first time until I was well into my forties, and I’ve still only spent a total of about two weeks there, spread out over a few visits. Trying to find the kernel of an idea for a Florida story, I took a notebook and spent some time freewriting about my impressions and memories.

The impression that sticks with me the most: a sense not so much of the surreal as the hyperreal. To someone who’s spent almost their entire life in the Midwest, Florida can be overwhelming because it is so insistently and definitively itself. I’m sure that people who actually live in Florida find it all perfectly normal—the palm trees, the absurdly blue ocean, the alligators strolling around golf courses. I kept feeling like I was in the opening credits of *Miami Vice* or like I could walk around behind the stunning views to find they were painted backdrops.

The memory that sticks with me the most: the sunset off Key West. Every tourist knows the experience of arriving at some acclaimed attraction only to feel let down. The sunset at Key West is one of those rare experiences that surprises

you by fully living up to, and perhaps even surpassing, its advanced billing. It is spectacular, and I have a very distinct memory of feeling, as I watched it, that sunset meant more in this place because it is literally the end of the road. Mile marker zero for America is in Key West. While I watched the sunset, my writer's brain conjured the sketchy figure of a desperate character who had come to see it, even knowing that it was the end of the world, possibly the last thing they would ever see. I thought there could be a story in such a character, and I tucked the thought away.

Later, brainstorming about a possible Florida story for the anthology, I kept coming back to these two things—the impression of Florida being somewhat unreal and the transcendent Key West sunset. I decided to pair them. The story, as it hazily took shape in my mind, would trace a transition from one to the other. It would begin with the sense of breaking away from reality and end with the sunset, a fitting setting for a moment of epiphany or possibly tragedy. I hadn't decided. I did know that I wanted my central character, the one we would follow to that moment, to be on the run but for a reason that would gain the reader's sympathy. By the time I sat down to actually write, I had come up with Etta.

As I remember, the first paragraph came fairly quickly:

After she left the truck stop south of Jacksonville, Etta kept passing signs with names she'd heard all her life from TV and people with the time and money for vacations. Orlando. Tampa. Daytona Beach. It all felt imaginary, but then Florida felt imaginary, like a

giant billboard for itself. She passed a lot of palm trees before she accepted that they were real. She couldn't always see the ocean off to her left, but she knew it was there, knew it by the wind and a smell that would never touch Iowa. The sky was big and blue and untouched until the late afternoon, when mountainous clouds started to rise up out of the east. It was like driving into a 3D antidepressant commercial, but she felt an itch at the back of her neck all day. She was cutting herself off. There was only one direction to go now, and if they found her, no place else to run.

My first goal here is to set the scene, establishing the sense of Florida as being as disorienting to Etta as it was to me. Of course, this also tells us something about the character. Her sense of being detached from real life provides a bit of foundation for her actions later in the story. In the last couple of sentences, I set a narrative hook. Etta is running away, being pursued by enemies as yet unidentified, and she knows that by heading into Florida, going farther and farther south, she is cutting off possible escape.

The second paragraph is a single sentence, hopefully setting that hook deeper:

Of course, running wasn't really the idea.

At this point I want to have stirred the reader's curiosity. If she's not trying to escape, then what is she doing?

In the third paragraph we tighten focus, zooming in from an impressionistic depiction of a long day of driving to a concrete description of the place where she ends up:

She pulled off in Boca Raton. It was still light out, but she had no chance of making Key West before sunset, and her back wouldn't take another night in the car. She found a run-down motel, not one of the big chains, a few blocks away from the beach. The Sandcastle Lodge. It was a long L, two stories high, sheltered from the main drag by a mini-mall and backed by a big abandoned lot full of scrub pine trees. She'd put up with the roaches for the sake of a desk clerk who wouldn't find cash strange.

Cheap motels: second only to seedy bars as the crime writer's locale of choice. Much of this paragraph is what I think of as stage directions, establishing the scene and highlighting the things the reader needs to know about. Both the mini-mall and the abandoned lot will be significant later in the story. Hopefully, in addition to setting the stage where the action of the story will occur, a couple of the other small notes here (the sore back from having slept in the car, the reliance on cash) are working to advance the reader's sense of the character by underlining Etta's sense of desperation.

The fourth paragraph is where the story surprised me:

Her room was on the first floor, near the swimming pool tucked into the elbow of the building. A man in the pool was drinking a can of beer and roughhousing with a couple of kids, while a plump woman perched on one of the deck chairs made dismayed noises every time one of them went under the water. The only other person near the pool was a teenaged girl, sleeping on her stomach on a lounge, wearing sunglasses and a red swimsuit that said she thought her body was a little slimmer than it actually was. Etta only glanced at her as she walked by, but the clearly defined bruises on the girl's upper arm jumped at her like they were lit up in neon. She'd seen their match often enough in her own mirror. Four angry purple blemishes perfectly staking out the shape of a man's hand. The girl's arm was the most real thing she'd seen all day.

When I first began writing the story, my plan was that it would follow Etta from her first moments in Florida through to the climax in Key West. There would be some incidents along the way, such as an encounter with a cop who seems a little too curious, but most of the drama of the story would come from interspersed flashbacks telling the story of how Etta came to the point of killing her abusive husband and then fleeing her home state of Iowa. The bruises on the girl's arm, and the way the stark reality of them clashed with the air of illusion Etta found in Florida, were intended simply to be the trigger that would lead Etta into her first flashback. The girl herself was an extra, not to be seen again.

The problem was that Grace (it turned out the girl's name was Grace) wasn't happy being an extra. She made noises in the night, and the next morning she knocked on Etta's door and asked for help. The bruises on her arm became the inciting incident for the actual plot of the story. Some of my original plan for "Etta" is still present in the published version. The final scene is still set against the backdrop of a Key West sunset, and there's even one lingering flashback, though it's confined to a single paragraph. Bringing Grace into the story, however, changed it from a passive structure dominated by flashbacks to an active, forward-looking plot. Etta doesn't get to spend the whole story just thinking about something she's already done. She now has to make a decision about what she will do.

What this illustrates about writing, or at least my method of writing, is the value of treating the first draft as a place to just throw things at the wall to see if they stick. The bruises on Grace's arm weren't part of my plan for the story, but I put them in because I wanted Etta to have something to look at on her way to the motel room, something that would make her think about her own situation. First drafts are the place to drop in things like that and see where they go. Later drafts are for editing, paring back, eliminating the seeds that didn't grow into anything.

The other lesson I'm taking away from "Etta" as a writing experience is to never give up on a story. "Etta" was rejected by the editors of that Florida anthology. I should have sent it to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* immediately at that point, because it felt like a *Hitchcock* story and Linda Landrigan, the magazine's superb editor, has been very supportive of my work. I had another story already submitted to *Hitchcock*, though, and at the time I had a personal rule against having more than one story submitted to any one market at a time. I no longer remember why I thought that was a good idea.

At any rate, I submitted the story to another market, which also rejected it. I read the story over again, decided I still liked it despite the two rejections, and, having wised up a little, sent it to *Hitchcock*. Linda gave the story a home, and to my astonished pleasure it is now nominated for an Edgar. I may have thought Florida seemed unreal, but that was nothing compared to the feeling of scrolling

through the Edgars nomination announcement and seeing my name listed alongside so many authors I've been inspired by. I'm still half convinced it's all a very elaborate practical joke, but it's deeply gratifying to know that the story has found readers who enjoyed it.

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Joseph S. Walker lives in Indiana, where he teaches college literature and composition. Seeking a change from the breakneck, glamorous world of academia, he began writing short mystery and crime fiction in his forties. He has now published more than thirty stories, appearing in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly*, and a number of other magazines and anthologies, including the recent *Mickey Finn: 21st Century Noir* (Down & Out Books) and *Peace, Love, and Crime: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the 60s* (Untreed Reads). Three of his stories have been named to the "Distinguished" list in the annual *Best American Mystery Stories* collections, and in 2019 he won both the Al Blanchard Award and the Bill Crider Prize for Short Fiction. Follow him on Twitter @JSWalkerAuthor and visit his website at <https://jsw47408.wixsite.com/website>.