

**The First Two Pages of “The Last Laugh” by Lori Roberts Herbst**  
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An Essay by Lori Roberts Herbst

“Everybody counts, or nobody counts.”

This is Detective Harry Bosch’s driving philosophy in Michael Connelly’s long-running series, and for reasons I can’t explain, the phrase is ever present in my mind when I write.

When the Sisters in Crime Guppy Chapter requested submissions for their newest anthology, *The Fish That Got Away*, my goal was to pen a light murder mystery with a ribald overtone. Along with aiming at the required theme, that was about the only idea I had. Thoughts would bubble in my mind (yes, it’s a pun), but nothing rose to the surface. Often when I’m trying to force “funny,” it doesn’t come, so I stopped trying to fish for ideas (sorry...) and just let the concept gurgle around in my subconscious. Fish that got away... A criminal who doesn’t get caught? An unrequited love?

Still, that Bosch phrase niggled at the edges of my mind. So many people lived on the fringes of society. Could they expect the same level of attention from the justice system? Many recent examples showed that the fish often isn’t netted in such crimes.

*Everybody counts.* Or at least they should.

Now I understood what I wanted: a story that centered on the fringe dwellers. To whom *did* they count? What people in their lives would go the extra mile to *ensure* that they counted?

Just then, the memory of a traveling circus I'd attended as a kid popped into my mind. I remembered the midway workers hawking their games and prizes, the acrobats twirling above my head, the people selling tickets and cotton candy. And I had it. The story began to form.

I began researching traveling circuses: their operations, their personnel. I read interviews with carnies, clowns, and contortionists, all of which gave me insight into their day-to-day lives, as well as their hopes and dreams. Above all, the circus people talked about being part of a self-made family. They looked out for each other. Everybody counted.

Now to create the appropriate atmosphere, which required painting light overtones atop a serious subject.

When we found Spanky curled in a fetal position in the back seat of his yellow clown car, Paloma and I assumed he was sleeping off another bender. Wouldn't have been the first time. There was a reason Spanky didn't need to wear a red plastic nose like the rest of the clowns.

I tugged at the end of my lime-green tie and took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar odor of elephant dung. I opened the car, stuck my foot inside, and prodded Spanky with my floppy blue shoe. Not a whimper or a moan.

With the offbeat names Spanky and Paloma in the opening, readers should realize right away they aren't likely dealing with a cast of suburban homemakers or elite millionaires. The casual mention of the clown car is designed to pique curiosity, along with providing the sense that this setting is normal to these characters. The second paragraph clarifies that, like poor Spanky, the narrator is also a clown—and that trouble is afoot.

In terms of characterization, it was critical to walk a tightrope (pardon the pun—or don't) of creating funny, self-deprecating characters without tumbling (another one?) into stereotypes. With the first description of Paloma, readers may be lured into believing she will be portrayed as a caricature, but that notion will soon be proven wrong.

I wriggled out of the car and turned to Paloma in her sequined costume, auburn hair piled atop her head. She lifted a well-plucked eyebrow and raked a set of purple fingernails across her neatly trimmed beard.

*Neatly trimmed beard?* As with the clown car, my goal was to throw in the reference to the beard as if it were so expected that it didn't require further elaboration. *Just a bearded lady in a traveling circus. Nothing to see here. Keep moving.*

The big-top stage is set and the performers assembled. A dead clown, a bearded lady, and another clown who wants to get to the bottom of his friend's murder. Now to insert a bit more of the bawdy tone. I typically write cozy

mysteries, somewhat tame, and the prospect of “letting loose” intrigued me. So let’s make the bearded lady a babe. And don’t think our narrator hasn’t noticed her... assets. Time for a little sexual innuendo.

[Paloma] nodded and hugged her arms across her body, causing generous breasts to bulge over the seam of her low-cut costume. I squirmed, and the plastic daisy affixed to my lapel squirted an embarrassing trickle of water.

In fact, maybe within the shadows of the murder mystery, a love story is taking root. Buster, the narrator, begins to experience some twinges of jealousy.

“How well did you know Spanky?”

She averted her eyes and shrugged. “Not well. Just in the... you know... biblical sense.”

“You’ve been sleeping with him?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course. He’s a clown. Everyone knows about clowns. Just look at his big feet. You know what they say—”

I cut her off, feeling the heat rising in my face. “I’m a clown. How come you and I never...?”

She glanced down at my feet. Despite the oversized shoes, they measured a mere size eight, the low end of average.

“Oh,” I said. My lips curved downward, mirroring the painted red arc surrounding my mouth.

Paloma placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Besides, Buster, you’re a sad clown. No woman wants to look up during her moment of passion and see a frown. It kills the mood.”

Poor Buster. Could this be the unrequited love I mentioned? The fish that gets away? But lest readers get swept into a tale of lust and desire, I need to remind them that there’s still a murder to solve—that Spanky *counted*.

The word “kill” brought me back to reality. I fished the phone from the pocket of my baggy pants and dialed 9-1-1. When I told the dispatcher Spanky was dead, she said she’d send in the cavalry.

Even so, I didn't hold high hopes anyone would expend much effort toward solving Spanky's murder. Circus folks fell on the low end of society's hierarchy. After a cursory investigation, the police would dump Spanky's death into the unsolved files. The circus would pack up and move to our next stop, hire another clown, and forget all about poor Spanky.

All the pieces are now in place. We have the murder of a clown in a traveling circus, a crime unlikely to garner much attention from local authorities. Will Buster and Paloma solve the crime? Will boy get girl? And who will get the last laugh?

Hopefully, readers will be riveted enough to find out.

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Lori Roberts Herbst's first published short story, "The Last Laugh," appears in the anthology *The Fish That Got Away*. She is also the author of the Callie Cassidy Mystery series, available on Amazon. Her debut novel, *Suitable for Framing*, placed first place in category at the 2020 Chanticleer International Book Awards, and the second book in the series, *Double Exposure*, was released last month. A member of Sisters in Crime, Lori serves as secretary of the North Dallas chapter. She is also a member of the national Guppy Chapter and Mystery Writers of America. A former educator, Lori spent much of her life writing, editing, and psychoanalyzing. Through thirty years of teaching journalism, advising newspaper and yearbook staffs, instructing budding photographers, and counseling teenagers, she still managed to hang on to a modicum of sanity. Then she retired and assumed her third career: author. Visit her website at [www.lorirobertsherbst.com](http://www.lorirobertsherbst.com).