

**The First Two Pages of “The Very Last Time” by Juliet Grames**  
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An Essay by Juliet Grames

As the curator of the Soho Crime imprint, I’ve had the great privilege of spending the last twelve years of my professional life steeped in our excellent genre. To be honest, it’s not just my professional life—I read a lot of crime fiction in the evenings and on weekends, too. But to be even more honest (I’m counting on you to forgive me here), I’m not exactly a genre monogamist. Even before I self-indoctrinated as a crime fiction apologist—a trajectory I date back to my fifth-grade discovery of Ellen Raskin’s *The Westing Game*—my father had already brainwashed me to be a speculative fiction nerd. What can I say? I love both these genres. I find a different flavor of solace and delight in each of their various microgenres.

The story “The Very Last Time” was born out of a desire to try to honor both of these literary traditions in one story by winking cheekily at both their respective canons and conventions. Many other writers have combined these genres to great creative success—the story is in part an homage to them; the narrator actually references some in the text itself—and the stakes felt very high.

The craft choices I made in the first two pages required careful planning: I needed each sentence to offer an incentive for continued engagement along both genres’ expected trajectories until I could expose the complete premise that would present a

meet-up point for both. In other words, I needed crime fiction readers to stick with me through a plot surprise that would sorely try their credulity; I also needed speculative fiction readers to sign up for the wild ride despite the relatively low word count I had to devote to world-building.

I decided that rooting the drama in an alleged real-world setting, then teasing and easing into the speculative elements, would be the best path. Each sentence needed to feel only a little bit off, just enough to push the reader on to the next, until I could lay out my premise at the 25% mark of the story—too late, I hoped, for the reader to throw up their hands and walk away.

My principal tool for accomplishing this forward movement would be Susan Hatcher, my first-person narrator. I needed her voice to be so forceful that she would be able to drag the reader, even the strictest proceduralist, down a road of increasingly farfetched plot revelations. I needed Susan to overwhelm and distract the reader from their disbelief. So I started with Susan, and her big emotions:

Francis had been gone five days before the police came. In retrospect, perhaps I should have pretended I wasn't expecting them. But by the time the squad car pulled up the driveway, I wasn't thinking clearly through my dread.

Then I tried to create a fake “safe space” of a wheelhouse crime genre law & order scenario, but with a little too much self-awareness to tip off the reader that rules are probably going to be broken real soon:

I met the cops—two of them, just like on TV—at my screen door. They were both young white men, I would guess in their late twenties, of similar stocky builds. If I'd met them in the street I would probably have found them indistinguishable. One officer pulled a small notebook out of his pocket and propped it on his wrist, ready to scribble. The other spoke. “Are you Susan Hatcher?”

The challenge with writing an unreliable narrator is striking a balance between the slow burn of the reader's accruing misgivings, something that can only be accomplished through carefully editorialized introspection, and enough external action to keep the pacing palatable. That was my goal with *Susan Hatcher*. In my efforts to execute this, I took inspiration from great practitioners on both sides of this supposed genre divide, and books like Agatha Christie's *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.

One thing I can say for sure: my work on this genre mash-up was some of the most fun I've ever had as a writer, and this will certainly not be *The Very Last Time* I indulge.

### **The First Two Pages of “The Very Last Time”**

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I met the cops—two of them, just like on TV—at my screen door. They were both young white men, I would guess in their late twenties, of similar stocky builds. If I'd met them in the street I would probably have found them indistinguishable. One officer pulled a small notebook out of his pocket and propped it on his wrist, ready to scribble. The other spoke. “Are you Susan Hatcher?” “Yes,” I answered apologetically. I was so nervous I could choke, but I still felt bad that this officer had had to climb my steep porch stairs, that he was huffing a little, and that I was going to have to lie to him. “Is something wrong?”

The lighter haired officer—Jared Dube, according to his brassy nametag—answered gravely. “Your husband’s employer has reported him missing, Mrs. Hatcher.”

“He’s missing, then.” I heard how small my voice sounded. My poor Francis used to say it drove him crazy when my voice got whiny.

Officer Dube leaned forward. “Do you mean to say he’s not missing?”

In that instant, the cloud of numbness I’d been hiding in dissipated, and I felt tears gather in my eyes. “I’ve just been waiting for him to come back,” I said truthfully. “I keep expecting him to show up at any moment.”

When my voice cracked, the officers exchanged glances, and I quickly turned my gaze to the floor so they wouldn’t think I was testing their reactions. I took a step back into my foyer and fanned them into my house. “Why don’t you both come inside? We can talk more comfortably.”

Jared Dube and his partner, Evan Gates, sat at my kitchen table and established my identity as I filled them each a glass of tap water.

“We’ve been trying to reach you for two days, Mrs. Hatcher,” Officer Gates said sternly. “Francis’s employer, Hart Media, reported him missing on Wednesday. Apparently he has not been to work this week and their calls to his cell phone and residence have gone unanswered. As have ours.” Officer Gates eyed me, letting the unasked questions hang in the air, although he failed to wait long enough for me to implicate myself. I was still trying to figure out how I would explain why I hadn’t answered the phone when he asked, “Do you have any idea where Francis could be?”

“No,” I said, and then had to stop myself from saying more. I cringed at how clipped my answer sounded, how artificial.

Officer Dube asked, “Mrs. Hatcher, when was the last time you saw your husband?”

What was the correct answer to this? Five days ago? Or three centuries ago?

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Juliet Grames is SVP and Associate Publisher at Soho Press, where she curates the Soho Crime imprint. Her debut novel, *The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna*, was published in 2019 by Ecco/HarperCollins and translated into ten languages.