

The First Two Pages of “Nameless” by Kim Keeline

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An Essay by Kim Keeline

One of the reasons I have enjoyed writing short stories over the last two years is that I get to experiment with different characters and their voices. My upcoming story “Nameless” was a chance for me to experiment with the point of view of a teenage detective. Since I had started my love of mysteries reading stories of teenagers like Nancy Drew solving various crimes (seldom murder, though) and I collect series books as an adult, this was something I’d been wanting to try for myself for some time.

The Capitol Crimes Sisters in Crime group wanted stories set in Northern California graveyards for their anthology *Cemetery Plots* (released first week of October 2021, with a launch party online and in person near Sacramento on October 24). I found the theme of the call for stories intriguing, so I started looking up graveyards and found out that San Francisco has basically created a whole town that centers around the burial industry. Colma, CA is where all the dead of San Francisco are buried today—and where the dead of the past were moved to make more room for homes in the city.

Wondering what sort of person would live in a city of the dead, I realized that the town probably has a lot of industry professionals (mortuary workers or related

industries like florists) and the service workers who provide for them (grocery stores, restaurants, etc.). But all of that means families—so I tried to imagine what a teenager living in a town dedicated to the dead would be like. What would she think of her town? Why was her family there? What sort of thing might happen to a teenager in the town that would be interesting?

I already knew about the history of Joshua Norton, the self-proclaimed Emperor of the United States. When I realized he was now buried in Colma, I knew I wanted to work that into the story, so that's when I realized that a body could be found on his grave. That was all I had to go on when I started my draft.

Trying to figure out where my heroine lived, I went to Google maps, only to find there is a condo building right next to the cemetery where Norton is buried. If my heroine's family was living on the top floor on the side facing the cemetery, they would be able to look over the fence onto the grounds. It seemed a perfect location to illustrate what it is like to live with the dead always present in someone's life.

The fact that those who work with crime and death often develop a sense of humor to deal with the darkness just made it natural that both Daisy, my teen heroine, and her family would have a slightly corny sense of humor. I made her dad have some of the same jokes as my own father, so that added to the story.

My first draft of this story, however, was almost twice the length I needed it to be. I had to cut ruthlessly. Some jokes and references had to go, especially early in the story, which was painful but necessary. I liked Daisy's voice by then, so I didn't want it all to go away. However, balancing lines necessary for plot and lines that were really only there as part of the character voice was one of the things I struggled with for two weeks as I edited the story.

For instance, originally this opening section included the lines: "There isn't much to do in Colma as the town is kinda dead. That joke isn't very original, but you can blame my parents. They love corny jokes, and living in a cemetery town tends to make 'dead' and 'dying' a punchline. As Mom said yesterday, she was just dying to get to work, but then, when it comes to a mortuary, isn't everyone?" I use the "town is kinda dead" later in the story—but it didn't really add to this section, nor was it my strongest joke in Daisy's voice, so I think I made the right decision to excise it. It was one of the earliest edits I made while trying to fit my story within the word limits. I also felt that I didn't have to lay out explicitly that mortuary workers sometimes use humor to escape the grimness of their work. I had to hope that the readers would get it when they saw the use of light humor within Daisy's family.

You often hear it is important to start right in the middle of the story. Especially with short stories, where you have very little room and no time for

introductions. Authors often jump right into action and dialogue. However, I felt that both the setting of Colma (and Joshua Norton's grave) and the voice of my teenage detective (my very own Nancy Drew or Trixie Belden) needed a bit of space, so I spent the first page or two mostly letting her talk directly to the reader and set the scene.

The first two pages are mostly about the setting, hinting at issues with Daisy's brother (the first time I've worked a subplot into a short story), and hearing Daisy's voice. I tell you there is a body but then I back up and let Daisy give the reader the background before getting to that moment in scene a little later.

I hope readers will enjoy my story as much as I did in planning it. Here's the first scene of "Nameless," laying out all you need to know about Daisy's town and her family leading up to her discovery of a body on a Saturday morning:

In Colma, California, known as "the City of Souls," the dead outnumber the living 1,000 to 1. You'd think one more body wouldn't matter.

The tombstone read:

Norton I - Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico
Joshua A. Norton 1819-1880

But that wasn't who was dead.

I mean, Emperor Norton was dead—in a coffin six feet under. His body had been moved to Colma in 1934, during the great San Francisco cemetery eviction, to make way for development.

A woman's body lay on top of his grave, sprawled like a doll dropped from a child's hand.

I hadn't meant to find her. Once I did, I had to discover who she was.

My name is Margaret, but everyone calls me Daisy because “Margueritte” is the flower’s name in Spanish. I’m fifteen and a sophomore at El Camino, the city’s only high school because the dead don’t do homework.

Mom is second generation in the funeral business. She met my dad when she started at Woodlawn Memorial Cemetery, where they both still work.

We live directly across the street from Woodlawn, so their commute is less than a minute walk. It’s not like you are ever far from a cemetery when you live in Colma. When there are seventeen major cemeteries, every street has at least one entrance to a graveyard. You get used to it.

Heck, there are history walks and annual events connected to our cemeteries. We get a lot of tourists. Wyatt Earp’s grave is one of the most popular, but at Woodlawn, the favorite is Emperor Norton.

Joshua Norton was an eccentric old man in gold rush San Francisco. Sort of homeless, possibly a bit crazy, he declared himself Emperor in 1859. He printed his own money, made proclamations, and became sort of a legend. He has both a tombstone and a nearby stone circle plaque. People still leave cards and flowers on his grave.

The next tombstone over is the Empress Norton. It’s for Jose Julio Sarria who wasn’t even born until more than forty years after the Emperor’s death. He was an activist and first openly gay person to run for public office in the United States. He performed a drag act as “The Grand Mere, Absolute Empress I de San Francisco, and the Widow Norton” and was buried next to the Emperor in 2013. I think the two graves are San Francisco all over—history, eccentricity, gay culture, politics, everything.

Both tombstones are visible from our condo’s dining room window, if you know where to look. I also take peaceful walks in Woodlawn a lot. Few people are around in the mornings—living people at least.

I wouldn’t have gone out that morning if it weren’t for my brother, Nick. He’s six years older and goes to UC Santa Cruz. He hadn’t been around much lately the last few years. I didn’t mind.

He showed up Friday, as we were starting dinner, and announced he’d be spending his spring break with us. Nick hardly spoke and spent all evening texting on his phone. When I went to bed, he kept insisting to my parents that everything was fine. Sure, whatever.

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Kim Keeline has had two short stories published before “Nameless” (one of which was a Derringer Finalist for Best Short Story). She freelances in design and web work (particularly helping authors promote themselves) and still sometimes lectures on literature and history, like in her old days as an academic. She is also organizing Bouchercon 2023 for San Diego while working on her novel.
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