

The First Two Pages of “Dreaming of Ella” by Francelia Belton
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An Essay by Francelia Belton

When it comes to my writing, I have to start with the perfect first line, and my short story “Dreaming of Ella” was no exception. I had a general idea of what my story was going to be about. You see, I had the honor and privilege of being invited to submit a story to Akashic Books for the latest entry into their award-winning Noir series of location-based dark fiction anthologies. Denver was finally joining the lineup and best-selling novelist Cynthia Swanson would be the editor.

Cynthia asked what neighborhood I wanted to write about, and I chose Five Points because it was considered the Harlem of the West back in its heyday, peaking in the 1950s and '60s. So, right away I knew my protagonist would be a jazz player, and I chose a trumpet player because that is my favorite out of all the brass instruments. And my character needed a goal, which in this case could only be one thing...to be famous. But of course, every story needs a conflict or obstacle, so right at his big break he gets some devastating news which threatens to destroy his dream.

But what does all that have to do with finding the perfect first line you ask?
Well, everything.

A story needs to open at just the right place because the opening sets the story in motion. And because this was a noir story where the hero is plunged into a downward spiral, I wasn't sure if I should start the story right at the devastating news or just before it where it seemed like my protagonist was on top of the world. Initially, I thought the first line should be the devastating news.

Morgan Marshall was about to walk on to the stage when he got the news about his mother and needed to get to the hospital right away.

However, something about it didn't feel right. Why would anybody feel sorry for this character? Sure, the guy's mom was dying; who wouldn't sympathize with that? But the reader didn't know anything about him.

So, I needed to start the story right before his life changed and I thought about this line:

Morgan Marshall was playing trumpet on the bandstand in the Silver Sax when *the* Miss Ella Fitzgerald walked in and changed his life forever.

Part of me felt like that was a little hokey, though. I knew I needed something...more. But I didn't know what that was! Luckily one day while researching, I came across a PBS special that highlighted just this time and place I was writing about. One of the bass players from that time said all he wanted to do was play jazz. And his passion and love for the music leapt right out of the

television screen, and all of those feelings imbued themselves into me, and consequently, into Morgan. My first line was born, and I never looked back.

The First Two Pages of “Dreaming of Ella”

All he wanted to play was jazz, and to one day play trumpet to the First Lady of Song’s voice. So when *the* Miss Ella Fitzgerald walked into the Silver Sax one chilly November night in 1956, Morgan could hardly believe his dream might come true.

It was half past midnight, and the night was still young. Morgan swayed on stage, blowing a hypnotic tune on his trumpet and swinging with the rest of the fellows in the Sax’s house band. Along with his brass, piano and drums, alto and bass, jamming and jiving, thumping and thriving, just another weekend night down in The Points. The Harlem of the West. Welton Street in Denver was your last stop for jazz between St. Louis and California. And Morgan felt electric.

In between songs, Morgan pulled the yellow silk handkerchief from his tan cotton jacket, the best thing about his Sunday suit, and wiped the sweat from his face. Despite the cold outside, the room was sultry and thick with heat and tribal jubilations. Smoke and the tangible aroma of beer hung in the air like a fog after a snowstorm.

A spattering of couples sat at the round tables before the bandstand. Men in snazzy suits with carefully knotted ties, ladies in lovely dresses with strings of pearls, talking, laughing, taking sips from glasses of fancy cocktails or bottles of beer. Cigarettes perched on the edge of ashtrays or clasped between fingers, with periodic drags producing tendrils of blue haze past parted lips.

A commotion broke out at the entrance, and people craned their necks to see what was happening. One of the bar girls hurried over to where the club’s owner, Charles, spoke with the bartender. He lowered his head so she could put a hand to his ear. Charles’s head snapped up, an incredulous look on his face. He peered over her shoulder as a statuesque woman walked in wearing her quintessential Edwards-Lowell sable coat. Charles rushed over to take it off her shoulders. They exchanged an enthusiastic greeting and hug. The buzz of voices in the club rose in pitch and volume, and Morgan knew what folks were saying without hearing their words.

That was the First Lady of Song, and she had honored the Silver Sax with her presence.

Morgan's ring finger paused midkey and his horn drifted from his lips. The note he blew hung in the air for the briefest of moments before vanishing from the ether. One by one his bandmates ceased playing.

Any one of the greats could have walked in the joint, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, but tonight it was Lady Ella herself. The woman who took her vocal cues from the horns and made them her own. The woman who Morgan had listened to all his life and dreamed of meeting. The woman who now elicited a silence in the Silver Sax so deep, it commanded spiritual deference.

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Francelia Belton's love of short stories came from watching old *Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* television shows in her youth. Last year she published a collection titled *Crime & Passion: Three Short Stories*, and her fiction has appeared in various publications, including "Dreaming of Ella" in the *Denver Noir* anthology by Akashic Books. Her short story "Knife Girl" was a finalist in the 2020-2021 ScreenCraft Cinematic Short Story Competition and a semi-finalist in the 2021 Outstanding Screenplays Shorts Competition. Her short story "The Brotherhood of Tricks and Tricks" was a quarterfinalist in the 2022 ScreenCraft Cinematic Short Story Competition.

She is an active member of Sisters in Crime and has served as Vice President (2015-2018) and President (2019-2021) for the Colorado chapter. She is also an active member of Mystery Writers of America, Crime Writers of Color, and the Short Mystery Fiction Society.

You can read more of her stories at <https://Francel.Be/Writing-Stories>.