

The First Two Pages of “Crawling Distance” by Laura Ellen Scott

From *Lawyers, Guns, and Money*:

Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Warren Zevon,
edited by Libby Cudmore and Art Taylor (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Laura Ellen Scott

“Dad, get me out of this,” is one of the greatest phrases in rock lyrics, and those words set the tone for “Crawling Distance,” a story inspired by Warren Zevon’s glorious “Lawyers, Guns, and Money.” The whole *Excitable Boy* album provided the soundtrack of my relationship with my father ever since he brought it home. Dad wasn’t a big music guy, and the only stereo in our house was in a room with nowhere to sit. That summer he also brought home Maria Muldaur’s debut album and Talking Heads’ *Fear of Music* (all found in a bin at Lawson’s convenience store), but *Excitable Boy* was the only record that kept us standing there, riveted for the whole 31 minutes, 29 seconds.

“Crawling Distance” is about a screw-up son on the verge of screwing up again. We’ll call him Junior. He’s the narrator, and in the first two pages he tries to come off as a savvy operator, but the truth is he’s always on the back foot. Junior’s style is faux noir. Just about everything in this story is faux noir:

It’s 10 pm on a Wednesday night in late January, and I’m standing in front of the Rode-A-Ways bar like an idiot. I can’t go inside because the place is padlocked and hasn’t been open in years, apparently. This is why you don’t plan missions using Yelp. When a car screeches to a halt behind me, I bolt. Screeching cars aren’t bringing balloons and flowers.

Junior’s father is a corrupt real estate mogul who has sent his son to hardscrabble Havana, Pennsylvania to liaise with a seedy lawyer/ low-rent sadist named Piedmont

Trebuchet. (Piedmont Trebuchet is a finger-snapping name, right? I dreamed it three years ago.) The driver of the screeching car is Trebuchet, but Junior doesn't know that. While running away, Junior manages to trap himself in a dark alley that dead-ends at a fence yard full of angry dogs.

I can't even tell if I'm being followed, so in desperation, I do the dumbest thing possible and fire up my phone for light.

Turns out the dogs are mutts, half angry, half bored, quivering from shoulder to tail.

Turns out Piedmont Trebuchet, Esq. is standing behind me, only about six feet away.

Junior is a fun narrator to write because he's the most clueless character in the story. When he says "turns out," the phrasing is a buffer against responsibility, sort of like the "How was I to know" part of "How was I to know, she was with the Russians too?" Despite Junior's efforts to control any given situation, he's at the mercy of the cosmos. What he can't admit is that the cosmos is most likely his own father.

Trebuchet's a lawyer with only one client. I'm an operative for that same client. Ours should be a near-perfect relationship.

"You about gave me a cardiac, PT."

He remains silent as a ghost. His jacket, on the other hand, is pretty loud, featuring an orange and purple pattern that pixelates him in the phone light.

I'm about to remark that he's looking too snazzy for this town, when he comes up on me quick, raises a gun from the shadows, and shoots me in the damned knee. I slam back against the fence, where the dogs wait and snarl.

Bewildered, Junior believes he's going to bleed out in the alley, but Piedmont doesn't seem to think so, and by this point the reader should be settled into their role as being smarter the narrator.

Piedmont looms over me, blotting out the only two sad stars in the night sky. He drops a letter-style envelope on my chest and says, "From you know who."

I reach down, and my knee still feels like a knee. It's wet, though, and stings like hell. "I ain't never going to run again. Call an ambulance, will you?"

Whatever Junior did wrong before the story started, Dad is still mad, but not mad enough to have him killed. By the end of page two, Junior has cryptic orders to find a fishing camp called *Little Havana*, inhabited by rust-belt retirees clinging to an odd lifestyle inspired by Pre-Castro Cuba.

It'll be a few secs before I notice that I'm feeling increasingly better not worse, and that my blood smells like the exhaust from a German car. But those moments before I realize PT got me point-blank with a paintball gun are real soul searchers, so not a total loss.

If Dad's still steamed about the golf course snafu, there'll be more where this came from, but I plan to put things right, tonight.

In general, every line, image, and action of these first two pages is a subversion of the expected: Havana is a dying rail town in in Pennsylvania, guns don't always fire bullets, and Dad's love/largesse may have reached its limit. Junior is destabilized and headed into danger.

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Laura Ellen Scott is the author of five novels, including *Blue Billy*, the recently published third book in the New Royal Mysteries series from Pandamoon Publishing. Feel free to connect with her on twitter @LauraEllenScott.