

The First Two Pages: “Triangle” by Rabbi Ilene Schneider

From *Jewish Noir II: Tales of Crime and Other Dark Deeds*,

edited by Kenneth Wishnia and Chantelle Aimee Osman (PM Press)

An essay by Rabbi Ilene Schneider

I have written only six short stories. Five of the six have been published, and a synopsis of the latest will be “premiered” at Noir at the Bar at this year’s C3 writers’ conference. Five of the six are mysteries, including a flash fiction, while the other is alternative history. Two of the six have won awards. All are very different from my Rabbi Aviva Cohen cozy mystery series, but the five mystery short stories share a theme: revenge and getting away with murder. Literally.

I often find when I write either fiction or nonfiction (including this essay) that once I get the opening sentence “right,” the rest of the story flows. I woke up one morning with the first sentence of my first short story “Miami Snow” fully formed in my brain like Venus. With a sentence like “The morning after I arrived in Miami, I opened the window shades in my bedroom and saw eight inches of snow” rattling around in my head, I knew I had to do something with it. And it couldn’t have anything to do with cocaine.

The second story, “Peanut Butter and Glitter,” was written as a revenge fantasy to cheer up a friend going through an acerbic divorce from a so-called man

who had emotionally abused her and their children for years. It opened with ““Is ... is he dead?”” The rest of the story practically wrote itself. And it cheered up my friend.

The alternate history story, “We Were Slaves,” examines how society might have developed had the 15th-century Moors and Jews of the Iberian Peninsula defeated the Christian armies and conquered all of Europe. The opening paragraph describes a possible scenario:

The man standing in the middle of the sidewalk blocking other pedestrians would have been handsome had his dark face not been contorted by rage as he screamed at the young boy. The man’s well-trimmed beard with its scattering of grey, his black hair curling around the edges of his lavishly jeweled turban, his beautifully tailored clothing told of his aristocratic lineage. The boy, on the other hand, was quite ugly with his closely shorn red hair, green eyes made brighter by the tears he tried to suppress, and pale skin with its smattering of freckles. It was difficult to guess his age as slaves were often malnourished and, therefore, small. When Fatima glanced over again, she noticed the black tattoo in the middle of his forehead, etched into every slave at the age of thirteen. So the boy wasn’t a child but an adult. The man gave the slave an open-handed slap, hard enough to leave a reddened palm print on his cheek.

And finally, we come to the topic of this essay, “Triangle,” included in the newly published anthology *Jewish Noir II: Tales of Crime and Other Dark Deeds*. For some reason, the story just wouldn’t come together. I couldn’t find its voice. I had too much back story, too many “info dumps.” The pacing was wrong. Worse, I couldn’t find the “right” first sentence. I would rewrite the story, send it to the

editor, Ken Wishnia, who would email back, “Almost, but not quite.” I kept plugging away, and just couldn’t nail it.

Finally, I got the email I had been hoping for. “YES, this is a Jewish Noir story. Nice work!”

What had changed? A lot was Ken’s faith in my ability to get it right. But there were three things I did that made a difference. One was to switch from a third-person to a first-person narrator, so I could find the proper voice, one that was witty and “normal,” with a lot of suppressed rage and not so suppressed psychopathic tendencies. The second was to add a sentence to the sappy, touchy-feely ending, a sentence that totally reversed the outcome and earned me Ken’s praise. He wrote to me, “Oh, SNAP! What a crack-of-the-whip ending! You totally lulled me into a false sense of tranquility, then the ending stings like a rat tail.”

And what allowed me to find the voice and the pacing and the perfect ending was coming up with an effective first sentence. In Ken’s words, “The opening is fabulous: ‘Murder.’ It was her first thought....”

The First Two Pages of “Triangle”

Murder.

It was my first thought when I heard the name of the new patient.

I am a nurse. Murder isn’t part of my vocabulary. Or shouldn’t be. Okay, so I favor assisted suicide, which some consider murder. I

consider it rachmanut, mercy. If I had the energy, I might move to a place where it is legal. But my medications, the same ones that keep my resentments and hatreds under control, sap me not just of the drive needed to enact revenge, but of oomph in general.

I long ago discovered the meaning of beshert, fate. And now I was experiencing another example of synchronicity. And now I was experiencing another example of synchronicity.

As is protocol when reporting for work at the ridiculous hour of six-thirty in the morning, I met with the nurse going off duty who would update me about the patients. “Whatcha got for me today, schweetie?”

Michelle grimaced. “I’m too tired today to be amused by your Bogie imitation, Rose. And what are you doing here on the day shift? I thought you prefer the overnight one. I missed you last night.” We usually work three days on and three days off for twelve hours each shift. I was returning after my time off.

“I have something to do tonight. In fact, I’m taking a vacation day tomorrow.”

“Ooh, a hot overnight date?”

“Yeah, right.” I wasn’t about to let her know what I had planned. She already thinks I’m nuts. So do my therapists. I prefer “eccentric.”

“Okay,” I continued. “Fill me in on what happened so you can go home and soak in a bubble bath with a trashy novel and a box of chocolates.”

“Which I intend to do as soon as I get the kids’ lunches packed and them onto the school bus. So, the good news is, no one died. The bad news is, no one got well enough to be transferred to a step-down floor. The worse news is, we have a have a new admission. The worst news is every bed is filled and Brenda’s called out sick. They’re still looking for someone to sub for her.”

“Worst” was right. Cardiac Critical Care is stressful enough without being short-staffed. It wouldn’t be a fun night. And tomorrow would be impossible with my being out, too. But there was no way I was going to give up my plans. They were too important to me.

Michelle ran down the important information about the continuing patients and then went into more detail about the new admission. “He’s a seventy-eightyear-old retiree, overweight, sedentary, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, Type II diabetes, on meds for all of those, but they barely keep the numbers in check. He

was conscious when he arrived and able to give us his medical history. Surprisingly, considering his lifestyle, this was his first heart attack, although he's been having an irregular heartbeat that he didn't bother to tell his doctor about until the chest pains started.

Unsurprisingly, he said he really hadn't been paying attention to his diet since his wife died three years ago and he eats out a lot, mostly fast food. One son, who lives in Seattle and is flying in now."

Michelle glanced at her watch. "He should be here soon. The patient's name is Max Blanck, no relation to Mel—I asked, and the last name's spelled differently. Jewish, requested a visit by a rabbi. I notified the chaplaincy office."

I had stopped paying attention when I heard the name.

I had immediately recognized it.

"Yoo, hoo, Rose." Michelle snapped her fingers in my face.

"Wake up. I know you're a night owl, but you haven't even started your shift yet."

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One of the first women rabbis ordained in the U.S., Rabbi Ilene Schneider is a retired Jewish educator and hospice chaplain and a long-time resident of Marlton, NJ. She has decided what she wants to be when she grows up: a writer. Despite spending her retirement (from earning a regular paycheck) birding, gardening, binge watching TV series, going to movies, traveling, crocheting, creating water colors, and over-sharing on Facebook, she is the author of the award-winning Rabbi Aviva Cohen Mysteries: *Chanukah Guilt*, *Unleavened Dead*, and *Yom Killer*. The fourth, a work-in-progress, is *Killah Megillah*.

She is also the writer of award-winning short stories and the non-fiction *Talking Dirty – in Yiddish?*, created an on-going website of questions and answers about Chanukah (www.whyninecandles.com), and edited *Recipes by the Book: Oak Tree Authors Cook*. Her latest short story, "Triangle," is included in the anthology *Jewish Noir II*.

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