

**The First Two Pages of “Scars of Love” by Brendan DuBois**  
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An Essay by Brendan DuBois

Pretty much the most popular question writers get is this one: “Where do you get your ideas?”

And my smart-aleck answer is always this: “I subscribe to a service out of Poughkeepsie, New York. For five dollars a week, I get a postcard with an idea scribbled on it.”

Hah-hah-hah.

Never gets old, does it?

But when it comes to the creative process in writing, there is no one overreaching answer for all writers. There is no “one size fits” all, despite what some writing teachers or pricey seminars preach.

Yet one can learn a lot from how other writers work.

For example, I sometimes use my own self-designed Rule of Two.

How does it work?

Every tale—in my opinion—begins with two important things.

The story.

And who’s TG? Meaning, who’s The Guy or The Gal, i.e., the main character?

Those are the first important Two Words.

But where do you get the story?

Getting to the story means another two words, the most important in fiction writing: what if?

What if a body appears in your front yard?

What if you woke up one morning to find your checking account balance is zeroed out?

What if you're on a highway and see a car crash but when you go to rescue the occupants, you find the vehicle is empty?

Think of your favorite novels or short stories. Once you boil it all down to the very essentials, it all comes down to "what if?"

But it has to be a *gripping* what if.

What if I got up one morning to find all four tires on my Lexus are flat?

Meh.

Okay. What if I got up one morning to find that my Lexus sedan has been replaced by a Ford F-150 pickup truck, and the license plates were the same?

Now you're talking!

With the "what if" is addressed, then it's time for another two words.

Back fill.

How, what, and when did this mysterious “what if” occur, and who or what was responsible? This is how you get your plot. You get the initial “what if,” and work both backwards and forwards to fill out—see, another two words!—the plot.

But a plot is nothing without the characters.

And circling back, the adventurous author returns to the original two words.

TG—The Guy.

Think of The Guy as a shape you see approaching you in the fog. Is it old? Young? Middle-aged? Male? Female? What is their background, their experience? TG has to be a vital part of the plot, but a reasonable part of the plot. Meaning, if you come up with a story about a lone-wolf special operator who goes behind enemy lines to destroy an ISIS base, would it make sense that said special operator is a seventy-year-old nun from the Sisters of Mercy?

Probably not.

Now... another two words.

Tie in.

The person you’ve developed as a character, how do you tie them into the plot? Are they the instigator? The victim? A combination? Are they engaged in the plot as an amateur, a pro, a civilian or professional?

But no matter how strong your main character turns out to be, it’s rare that they stand alone on the stage as the plot unfolds. Which leads us to...

Supporting characters.

The Guy can't be out there on their own. There have to be friends, enemies, people who represent support or obstacles. They don't have to be as fleshed-out as The Guy, but they also have to be as three-dimensional as The Guy.

Now you have most of the pieces to start your writing, to follow the Two Word rule, until you reach these two sweet words.

The End.

And if it all works out, you might find yourself in the Land of the Five Words.

“Pay to the order of...”

### **The First Two Pages of “Scars of Love”**

I had another late night bar-hopping in Southie with uncles, cousins, and second cousins, so my head was throbbing some as I went to the three-story brick building in Boston's famed Scollay Square that housed my office, carrying a take-out coffee from my late breakfast.

I opened the wooden door that led to a grimy small foyer, and then upstairs, the stairs creaking under my heavy footsteps. At the first landing a narrow hallway led off, three doors on each side, each door with a half-frame of frosted glass. Mine said B. SULLIVAN, INVESTIGATIONS, and two of the windows down the hallway were blank. The other three announced an attorney, a piano teacher, and a press agent. There was some yelling coming from the press agent's office, a high-pitched girl's voice being part of the action.

I shook my head as I unlocked the door leading into my office. Almost a weekly occurrence, when some poor young girl who's taken a bus from Maine, Vermont, or New Hampshire to seek her initial

fame in local theater ends up with that piece of sludge down the way. After a week of promises, new dresses, make-up sessions and the like, the girls are in serious debt, and they're forced to pay it off by dancing at one of the local stages wearing panties and pasties.

Most of these girls—while naïve—are tough farm or mill girls, and they don't like being screwed around like that. When I had first moved here, I had heard the screaming and had gone down to the office, slugged the sleaze press agent in his big nose, and let the girl leave. A day later two heavy-set guys in nice suits and speaking with an Irish lilt, told me that while the press agent was an asshole, he was their asshole, and would I please not interfere with his business anymore?

Or words to that affect.

In turn, I said, I'd leave him alone if the yelling stayed yelling. If it turned to screaming, I was going back in.

We all agreed that was a fair deal, and I hadn't seen the two guys since.

I flicked open the light and walked in, and there was a sheet of paper on the wooden floor. I bent down and picked it up, and there was a note for me, the handwriting shaky.

*Dear Mister Sullivan, I hope to meet you at ten a.m. on Wednesday to discuss hiring you for a matter, thank you very much, Peter Collins.*

I checked my watch. It was ten minutes to ten.

I shook my head, put my take-out coffee on an old oak desk that had been left here when the previous tenant—another bookkeeper—had moved out. Rumor had it that he worked for a couple of the mob families in the city and was caught skimming, and his next place of residence was the bottom of Boston Harbor.

I took my coat off, hung it up on a coat stand, and surveyed my office, which consisted of the desk, a chair, a Remington typewriter on a stand, two solid metal filing cabinets with locks, and two wooden chairs in front of the desk. The only illumination came from a single window that hadn't been washed since at least Pearl Harbor, but it still had a good overview of the square.

There was a curtain near the window that hid a small room with a bed, radio, easy chair, table lamp, and icebox. A closed door there

led to a small bathroom that most days had plenty of hot water and a nice big bathtub.

I checked the time again.

Ten a.m.

A shadow came by the glazed glass and there was a knock on the door.

“Come on in,” I said, and I went around my desk, wishing I had gotten here a few minutes earlier, at least to brush my teeth and comb my hair.

I was hoping Mister Collins didn’t care.

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Brendan DuBois is the *New York Times* bestselling author of twenty-six novels, including *The First Lady* and *The Cornwalls Are Gone* (March 2019), co-authored with James Patterson, along with *The Summer House* (June 2020), and *Blowback* (September 2022). His next novel co-authored with Patterson, *Countdown*, will be published in March 2023. He has also published nearly 200 short stories. His full-length novels include the eleven novels in the Lewis Cole series, as well as the *Dark Victory* science fiction trilogy.

Brendan’s short fiction has appeared in *Playboy*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, *Analog*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Strand Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and numerous anthologies including *The Best American Mystery Stories of the Century*, *The Best American Noir of the Century*, and *Best Science Fiction of the Year*. Six times his short fiction have been selected for *The Best American Mystery Stories* anthologies.

His stories have thrice won him the Shamus Award from the Private Eye Writers of America, two Barry Awards, two Derringer Awards, the Ellery Queen Readers Award, and three Edgar Allan Poe Award nominations from the Mystery Writers of America. In 2021 he received the Edward D. Hoch Memorial Golden Derringer for Lifetime Achievement from the Short Mystery Fiction Society.

He is also a *Jeopardy!* game show champion, and lives in New Hampshire.