

The First Two Pages: “The Canadians” by Mary Keenan
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An Essay by Mary Keenan

Late in 2021 I challenged myself to a yearlong project: submitting a short story to every anthology available to me. “The Canadians” came toward the end of that run when I was losing momentum, and it showed: every germ of an idea trailed off to the sound of crickets. My only requirement was a Southern California setting—ideally, San Diego—and that was part of the problem. I’d never been. I spent a few days browsing tourism sites, Reddit threads about moving to San Diego, Google Maps, and real estate listings. Before long I was so smitten with San Diego that I was looking up flights and hotels. And I still didn’t have a story. I had a small, dark idea I did my best to nudge into something more, but it didn’t gel. Comedy comes more naturally to me. So I thought some more about my dream of vacationing in San Diego. That’s what gave me my start.

There’s such a stereotype about Canadians, and how nice and friendly we are. It seemed like a fun idea to pit a Canadian tourist, or better still married retirees who could play off each other, against a not-nice and not-friendly criminal . . . or better still two criminals who could also play off each other. With crime stories I particularly enjoy coming up with a weapon that isn’t a gun, and “The

Canadians” was the perfect vehicle for something absurd. Once I’d worked a twist into the Canadian stereotype, I was ready to begin.

The use of contrast was an easy choice for me because I wanted the oddities of the four characters to be a surprise. Leading with seriousness—suspense even—was a no-brainer, as was which character should appear in the opening paragraphs. Sam sees himself as an impeccable James Bond type, despite evidence to the contrary, which he references mentally as he moves down the stairs of a hotel where he’s been stalking his prey. His self-importance gave me an early opportunity to suggest that this story isn’t going to go the way he, and possibly the reader, expects.

Sam’s shoes fell softly on the carpeted stairs, his fingers curling around the weapon in his pocket as he approached the hotel lobby. He was six foot two, dressed in chinos and a crisp long-sleeved shirt open at the collar with a sweater over his shoulders, and he moved confidently with his back straight and his eyes forward. Nobody looking at him would know how long he’d waited for this day. Or how far he’d traveled. San Diego wasn’t where he expected things to end, but he wasn’t sorry. The weather and the sightlines were very much to his advantage.

He’d been trailing his old adversary, Richard Hart, halfway across the country. It was past time to settle their differences. Sam wasn’t exactly the victim here: he’d stolen clients from Richard, exploded his car, beat him to the chase on more than one robbery. But Richard was the true aggressor. He’d cost Sam lucrative contracts. Smashed his knee so badly he needed a replacement. Scammed him out of his safe house.

The last straw was Richard’s theft of the money Sam had stashed behind a dummy bookcase in his Des Moines apartment. He’d earmarked it to finance a fledgling criminal operation designed to set him up for life. When Sam saw the rubber chicken Richard left where

the money had been, he knew he couldn't rest as long as Richard was breathing.

I wanted the image of a rubber chicken to linger, so rather than building on it right away I took the narrative straight back to serious Sam and his mental monologue, concluding with the sight of his target's car lingering in the hotel's circular driveway. His moment has come. Then, as before, I added something that hits a wrong note—a reference to the shape of Sam's weapon—before he's interrupted by the arrival of the Canadian tourists.

The morning was unfolding exactly as he'd planned. He looked like every other business traveler he'd seen in the hotel earlier, and those milling around the lobby on his way to the empty lounge. The pants, the shirt, the sweater. From the lounge's terrace doors, Sam watched the tail end of Richard's car in valet parking, beyond the faux-concrete columns anchoring the hotel's front gardens. He slipped his fingers back into his pocket. Closed them over the tube of metal that would separate Richard from everything he cherished in this world. Prepared to slip out unnoticed and—

Now I was free to introduce my twist on the Canadian stereotype. Friendly, to a fault. Enthusiastic, to the point of annoyance. Sun-seeking, but not just in Florida.

A voice like a rusty bandsaw cut across Sam's thoughts.

“Haaaaarve.”

Sam was still wincing when the whine resolved into words.

“Wouldja look at this cute little patio. I didn't see that when we checked in.”

A morose voice answered the grating one. “It was pitch black. We didn't see anything.”

“Well, I want to have breakfast out here tomorrow. I know the driveway’s right there but it’s the same setup back home, a restaurant patio practically on the street, and the views are a heckuva lot better here. There’s even palm trees right alongside.”

I wasn’t ready to release Sam’s steely grip on the narrative, so I gave him a little time to recover from the arrival of the Canadians. He still thinks he can salvage his day. The reader may not be so sure, but it’s clear he’s going to try.

Sam adjusted his stance to suggest he was simply testing the temperature or getting some air. His weapon was unconventional enough to attract notice, so he slipped his phone out of his pocket as though that was all he’d ever been reaching for. He could resume his plan once these two were gone.

I’m lazy about physical descriptions. I have to remind myself that readers often like to have some idea of what they’re looking at. But as the Canadians come into view, even I would expect Sam to have some opinion about them. I took the opportunity to contrast these retirees on vacation with a crook about to take out his competition, bearing in mind that appearances can be deceiving:

They were a couple in their sixties, the man with a belly swelling the front of his untucked polo, the woman hiding hers under a tropical-print blouse. Their hair matched: white, short, and brushed up on top, though hers was tinted purple at the tips and had a few curls brushed forward at the sides of her face. She seemed less shy with strangers, too.

When Sam was finished coldly analyzing these party crashers, I gave him a light slap in the face. His disguise is working too well. The Canadians don’t have

the first clue he's capable of murder and, incidentally, on the brink of committing it.

“Excuse me, sir. Are you another guest or are you staff? It's hard to tell around here, and my husband Harve and I are looking for a good place to go out for breakfast.”

Sam second-guessed his chinos, wondering if they were the wrong color after all.

“I don't work here.”

Then, just beyond the end of page two, I delivered a payoff:

“You been to San Diego before? Heard of anything? None of our friends have ever been this far south in California, and the lineup at the front desk is something else. A nice lady from Tallahassee told us they all work for the hotel, in corporate. They're here for management training and those cute uniforms are so they don't lose track of each other on their scavenger hunt today.”

Only now does Sam realize he based his “Normal Guy” business casual outfit on a corporate retreat's scavenger hunt costume. From here on, he knows he's got problems, and the reader knows this isn't a suspense story.

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Mary Keenan is a Toronto-based writer exploring the unlikely alliances that form in the wake of a crime, always alert to opportunities for comic relief. Her traditional mystery *Snowed* was longlisted for the 2023 Debut Dagger Award from The Crime Writers' Association in the UK and won Crime Writers of Canada's 2023 award for Best Unpublished Mystery. Other projects have been finalists in both the Daphne Du Maurier and Claymore Awards. Several of her short mysteries have been published, including “The Canadians” in *Killin' Time In San Diego*, and “He's No Gary Cooper” in *Entertainment To Die For*. She is a fan of classic movies and social history and can be found at www.marykeenan.com.