

**The First Two Pages: “And Now, An Inspiring Story of Tragedy Overcome” by Joseph S. Walker**

From *Three Strikes—You’re Dead!* edited by Donna Andrews, Barb Goffman, and Marcia Talley (Wildside Press)

An Essay by Joseph S. Walker

I love writing for themed anthologies. Something about having that initial starting point (be it a song, a place, a time) almost feels like having a cheat code. I don’t have to come up with an idea out of thin air; all I have to do is build on the foundation provided.

There’s also an appealing element of gamesmanship in trying to increase the odds of an acceptance. In the case of this anthology, which sought stories involving crime and sports, my initial impulse was to use baseball, the sport I know and love best. I rejected this for a couple of reasons. First, I’ve published at least three other stories in the last few years involving baseball, so it was time to change things up. Second, I guessed the anthology would get a lot of baseball stories. Not only is it a popular sport, but it’s one that seems especially well suited to writing. (I can’t prove it, but I suspect there’s been more great writing, both fiction and nonfiction, about baseball than about any other sport.) The very title of the anthology—*Three Strikes—You’re Dead*—referenced baseball, after all.

Assuming the editors would want a collection using a variety of sports, I would stay away from the diamond. What I wanted was a sport popular enough to

be familiar to the editors (and eventual readers) of the anthology, but not so popular that there would be a number of stories about it to compete with.

Fortunately, an answer was ready to hand. My wife was a figure skater in her youth and remains a dedicated fan of the sport. Over the years we've gone to many competitions and exhibitions—we even had the privilege of attending the national championships a few months ago. I don't know the sport as well as I know baseball (for the life of me, I still can't tell a Salchow from a toe loop), but I know it well enough to set a story in that world.

Writing a crime story tied to figure skating immediately presented a complication that might be a challenge, an opportunity, or both. To anyone of a certain age, associating crime and figure skating would immediately and inevitably evoke one specific event: the 1994 assault on Nancy Kerrigan by associates of her rival, Tonya Harding. Even editors and readers who don't know the sport well would remember the scandal. I didn't want to create the impression that I was simply, in some way, retelling what had happened, but I thought I could still draw upon the lasting impression it created: that the sport, particularly among the young women who are usually its biggest stars, is driven by fierce competition that can sometimes reach far beyond the ice itself.

Without spoiling what happens in “And Now, An Inspiring Story of Tragedy Overcome,” I can say that these musings eventually brought me to the “what if”

question that shaped it: what if one of the skaters in a Harding/Kerrigan style rivalry came from an organized crime family?

The result differs from most of my other stories in one significant way. Usually, I'm an enthusiastic proponent of the notion that a short story should start as close to the ending as possible. Most of mine cover a period of a few days at most, with many taking place in the space of a single day or a single hour. This one, though, episodically covers roughly eighteen years, taking my skater literally from her birth to—well, that would be telling, wouldn't it?

All of this is by way of setting up what it is I wanted to do in the opening scene of the story. Here's the first paragraph, along with the initial exchange of dialogue:

It was past two in the morning by the time Lonnie Walsh found the right private waiting room on the seventh floor of the hospital. His mother, Helena, stood at the window, staring over the parking lots stretching toward the expressway.

Brant Simmons, Lonnie's brother-in-law, was curled up in a fetal position on a couch. Lonnie's stomach lurched at the sight of him.

"Where have you been?" Helena asked, without turning around.

"I had a thing," Lonnie said. "At the place with the guy about that stuff."

Helena stiffened. "Make your jokes," she said. "Your sister died in childbirth two hours ago."

Here we have our three most important characters: crime-family matriarch Helena Walsh, her son Lonnie, and her son-in-law Brant Simmons. Helena and Brant are in physical positions which, I hope, convey a lot about their character

and the roles they will play in the story, even before we know the context: she is rigid and upright, giving her back to the people nearby. He is curled up like a baby on the couch. She is strong, but cold; he is weak. If I've done my job right, this tension between them, which continues throughout the story, is already established in the first paragraph.

The story is in the third person, but our point of view character is Lonnie, and it's him we'll follow for the duration of the narrative. What do we know about him so far? We know he doesn't like Brant, and we know, from his first line of dialogue, that he can be a bit of a smartass. His response to the news of his sister's death tells us more:

Lonnie did a couple of years in college, back when he was pretending he might be something different than what everybody knew he was. At the phrase *died in childbirth* he had an immediate, visceral memory of the books from some of his lit classes, thick black paperbacks with *USED* stickers and cracked spines. Dying in childbirth was a thing out of those books. It was a thing that happened to Dickens characters.

"That still happens?" he said.

Here I'm trying to do two things. First, if the reader is paying attention, I've created a little bit of tension in the form of an unanswered question: what is it, exactly, that Lonnie is, but briefly pretended not to be? More abstractly, hopefully this tells us something about his personality. Confronted with sudden family tragedy, he has trouble thinking about it directly; instead, his mind follows an association to a minor sensory memory. It's a strategy for putting off the trauma.

The story goes on, with Helena and Brant dominating the dialogue:

“You have a niece.” Helena’s voice was like a pencil scratching at rough paper. “Her name is Kayla.”

From his spot on the sofa, Brant groaned.

“Stop that noise,” Helena said. “Sit up.”

Brant rolled himself into a sitting position, his head hanging down near his knees. He wasn’t crying, but his face was red and twisted. “Go easy,” he said. “I just became a widower.”

“Don’t talk to me about your loss,” she said. “Alonso.”

Lonnie, his vision swimming with watery images of his little sister, was slow to reply. “Ma.”

This is straightforward character work, deepening the impressions we already have of these characters. Helena is rough, direct, controlling. Brant is rather pathetic, more concerned with his own suffering than anything else. Lonnie is a little in his own head, only half listening to their exchange. The fact that Helena calls her son “Alonso” while he thinks of himself as “Lonnie” and calls her “Ma” should tell us something about the way she dominates that relationship; it’s not just Brant who is intimidated by her. She continues:

“I’m telling you this in Brant’s presence so there’s no confusion. This family takes care of its own. Anything that girl needs, for the next twenty-one years, you will provide for. Tuition, medical bills, clothing.”

None of this would, in other words, come from Ma’s bankroll. No surprise.

“Yes, Ma.”

We’re given more clues about Helena here: she’s determined that her granddaughter will be supported, but at the same time she puts a limit, twenty-one years, on that support, and she gives the responsibility—and the cost—to Lonnie,

rather than paying for it herself. Lonnie isn't surprised by this, and when he thinks about his mother's money, he uses the term "bankroll," which is intended to be suggestive.

Helena sets out the rules:

"Family is everything," Ma said. "Brant. You need money for my granddaughter, you go to Lonnie."

"I need money now," Brant said. "I have to hire someone. I can't take care of a newborn by myself."

"Do what you need to do," Helena said. She still had not turned from the window. "If it's for Kayla, Lonnie will pay." Her voice got stronger. "But if one dime of his money goes to the track, or a bottle you can pour down your throat, or a shiny new car so you can impress some tramp, I will see it taken out of your hide. Understand me, Brant. I'll put my men to work on you, and I will watch it and enjoy it. Do you believe me?"

"Yes," Brant said. The voice of a child caught misbehaving, surly but resigned. "I just want to bring her up the way Sophie would have wanted."

"Take Lonnie to see his niece," Helena said. "I need to say goodbye to my daughter."

Helena makes it clear just how low her opinion of Brant is by listing the things she suspects he'll spend money on. She also makes it clear what the price of such indulgence will be: she'll put "her men" to work punishing him, and she'll enjoy watching. It might not yet be entirely explicit what Helena is, but she's not, say, a librarian. The fact that Brant immediately believes her threat and doesn't whine or offer excuses also tells us something. Since he takes her seriously, we should too.

At the end of this opening scene, then, we have a newborn girl entering life with a weak, self-indulgent father, a domineering and possibly violent grandmother, and an uncle who has been given responsibility for her. I haven't even mentioned a sport yet, but hopefully I've given the reader reason enough to be interested in what's going to happen to Kayla—and how Lonnie will be involved.

That's the goal of the first two pages: to get the reader to want to read the third. I look forward to readers letting me know if I've succeeded!

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Joseph S. Walker lives in Indiana and is an Edgar-nominated author of more than one hundred short stories. His fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Mystery Magazine*, *Tough*, and a number of other magazines and anthologies. He has been nominated for two Derringer Awards, and he currently serves as the Derringer Awards Coordinator for the Short Mystery Fiction Society. His stories were awarded the Al Blanchard Award in both 2019 and 2021, as well as the Bill Crider Prize for Short Fiction at the 2019 Bouchercon. In 2023, his story "Crime Scene" became the first selected for inclusion in both *Best American Mystery and Suspense* and *The Mysterious Bookshop Presents the Best Mystery Stories of the Year* (marking his third straight appearance in this annual collection). Visit his website at <https://jswalkerauthor.com/>.