

The First Two Pages: “Sunset Beauregard”

By Karen Cantwell

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I was inspired to write “Sunset Beauregard” after listening to a series of podcasts documenting Hollywood’s sordid history—particularly the early years, or what is referred to as The Golden Age of Hollywood. Fake news, it would seem, is nothing new at all. In fact, Hollywood studio execs in the 1930s and ’40s hired “fixers” to cover up the lies, unsavory acts, and outright crimes of the movie stars who kept them rich. Fixers weren’t nice guys. They did the dirty work to ensure the stories that made the papers and gossip magazines portrayed only glitz and glamor and purity. Darkness and depravity were buried—kept hidden from public view.

Intrigued both by the era and by this stark dichotomy of reality vs. controlled narrative, I set out to write a story that told both sides. One point of view would be that of a Hollywood fixer I named Johnny Roland, and the other would be that of a waitress named Mary who loved to read the paper every morning, keeping up to date on the charmed lives of her favorite movie stars.

Originally, in my mind, Johnny would be tall, thin, and suave: an image that opposed the darkness of his profession. But with word count slim and an entire murder mystery to solve, I decided instead that Johnny’s physical appearance

should be a metaphor for the “real” Hollywood which he represented: a jungle.

After some tweaking, I opened the story with this line: “Like a gorilla, Johnny Roland ruled the jungle known as Hollywood.” This way, from the first words I set the tone and also described one of my main characters. Later in the story, I reinforced the Johnny’s gorilla-like physical traits, while balancing them with personal quirks like an obsession with cleanliness and disdain for cigarette smoking.

As a fan of noir film and fiction, I knew this story would best be served by writing Johnny’s POV in that style, so I continued the first paragraph by describing Johnny’s entrance to the murder scene:

He didn’t ask permission to enter the crime scene on 21 Summit Drive; instead, he carried his reputation like a badge, daring the blue suits to refute his authority. He had arrived before the investigation began. He always did. That was his job. When the studio needed a problem fixed, they sent Johnny to do the dirty work.

My favorite aspect of noir fiction is the snappy dialogue, so that’s what needed to come next. Johnny inspects the dead body of actor Beau Kellum lying face down on the living room floor of his home. Standing near the feet of the dead actor, is corrupt LAPD police detective, Roy Jackson, who gets paid to call Johnny before the coroner. Johnny finally addresses Jackson, reminding the detective that skeletons in closets can be dangerous:

“Thanks for the call.”

“Like I had a choice.” Jackson’s reply was bored.

“How’s your wife?”

“You’re an ass.”

“And your girlfriend?”

“Don’t push me Roland.”

Johnny picked a piece of lint from his sleeve. “What, a friend can’t kid around?”

“I need better friends.”

“Apparently, so did Kellum.”

As this first scene in my story continues, the reader meets a murder suspect hiding in the kitchen. It ends with the revelation that the dead actor’s dog, the famous Sunset Beauregard, is missing.

For the second scene, I introduced the alternating and opposite POV: Mary Anderson, a lovable waitress and fan of the movie stars. Mary needed to be innocent, believing what she reads in the papers to be true, yet a bit street smart. She’s a waitress at a local diner, but possesses a calm reserve of elegance. In keeping with the jungle theme, I introduced her this way: “

Like an enchanted cobra, a trail of smoke slithered skyward from the tip of a lit cigarette. The lipstick stained cigarette rested in a metal ashtray on the Anderson’s kitchen table. Dressed for a day at the diner taking orders and schlepping food, Mary Anderson unfolded the morning paper. She read the headline and fell into her chair. “Georgie,” she said, grabbing her heart. “Beau Kellum is dead.”

Because I was solving two mysteries in this story (the murder of Beau Kellum and the disappearance of his dog, Sunset Beauregard), it was imperative both subjects be treated in every scene. Additionally, to keep Mary’s POV distinct from Johnny’s, I wrote the dialogue less noir-snappy. This second scene then, ends more

quickly than the first, but with more substantial information. While her husband George repairs a kitchen cupboard, Mary tells him what the paper says about Beau Kellum's death:

“Says here he was murdered in his own house. Shot in the back.”

Working the screwdriver, George grunted. “Almost got this fixed.”

“I wonder if it was a mob hit.” Having grown up in South Boston, Mary always thought of the mob when she heard about a murder. It's why they had left—to steal her Georgie away from the gangster-run boxing world.

“He probably just pissed off the wrong guy.”

Mary set the paper down and took a long drag from her cigarette. Smoke swelled from her mouth and nose when she spoke again. “The article don't say nothin' about Sunset Beauregard. I wonder what happened to him. I sure hope he's okay.

George stopped what he was doing to look at Mary. “Who's Sunset Beauregard?”

“His dog. Gorgeous Irish setter. His lucky charm he used to say.”

“Guess he ain't lucky no more.”

With two different points of view established in the first two pages, the story unfolds and character evolution begins. Tough guy Johnny, who constantly tells people, “I don't care,” comes to realize he may just care more than he realizes. And Mary's eyes are opened to the harsh truth behind the false headlines she reads every morning. Of the many short stories I have written, the characters in “Sunset Beauregard,” Johnny Roland and Mary Anderson, are my favorites. I hope the readers come to love them and the other characters as much as I do.

Oh, and yes, Beau Kellum's murder is solved and we find Sunset Beauregard.

But you'll have to read the story to find out how!

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Karen Cantwell enjoys writing both short stories and novels. Her stories have appeared in *Chesapeake Crimes: They Had it Comin'*, *Chesapeake Crimes: This Job is Murder*, *Chesapeake Crimes: Fur, Feathers, and Felonies*, and other short story anthologies. On the novel front, Karen loves to make people laugh with her Barbara Marr Murder Mystery series and Sophie Rhodes Ghostly Romance series. You can learn more about Karen and her works at www.KarenCantwell.com.