

## **The First Two Pages: “No Fences”**

By Eve Fisher

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I am obsessive about beginnings. I write and rewrite the first few pages over and over and over again, primarily because short stories require you to get down to the story pretty damn quickly. And, at the same time, doing a little sleight of hand so that people don’t come out at the end of the story saying, “Well, I saw that from the beginning.” So I work and rework, trying to get it just right.

Back in November 2011, *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* published “No Fences.” It starts out slowly enough: two women, two neighbors, Janet Olson and Willa Heppler. They’re polar opposites, and it took me a lot of rewrites to get how to present that. Dialogue? Action? Or—what I finally decided on—giving their opinion of each other:

Willa didn’t approve of divorced women who tried to act like they were still in their twenties, smoking, drinking, and staying out late at night. Janet had no use for mousy, overweight women who practiced inane cheerfulness while the alcoholic husband was out chasing skirt every night.

And by their behavior:

Willa was the kind of woman who took in stray cats. Janet brought home the occasional two-legged animal. There was no fence between their houses, which made both of them nervous.

That last line tells me that there's something more going on than just personal distaste. They might have something to hide from each other. Hard to do in a small town where everybody (supposedly) knows everything...

But, as time goes on, they "achieve détente" over Cody, Willa's son, who thinks Janet (the school librarian) is great. And Janet's house becomes Cody's safe haven when Jack, Willa's husband, comes home drunk and violent.

Jack Heppler finally managed to drink himself to death when Cody was fourteen. Now that Willa and Cody were free of chaos, violence, and infidelity, Janet urged Willa to enlarge her horizons. Willa had never lived outside of Laskin, never been further away than Sioux Falls. With the insurance money, social security for Cody, and selling the house, they could move almost anywhere, do almost anything.

Willa stayed put. Jack's mother was old and frail, and Willa couldn't abandon her now. Willa had a job at the Fancy Fixings gift shop that she loved. Later, after Mrs. Heppler died, Willa's Uncle Arnt – who had retired from the merchant marine - moved in with them, temporarily, until he figured out what to do with himself. All in all, Willa was happy.

Cody wasn't. Grandma Heppler had been frail and difficult towards the end, but she'd lived with them all of Cody's life, and he both loved her and was used to her. Uncle Arnt was a total stranger, a proud, loud, and bad-tempered old man who had no affection for this noisy, clumsy, inconsiderate, judgmental, emotionally turbulent teenager. Cody drove him crazy, and he let him know it.

The result was that Cody practically moved in with Janet. They watched movies together over pizza, popcorn, and pop. Janet took him to doctor and dentist appointments, tutored and coached him, listened to him. They took walks together, and long drives in the country. Willa didn't seem to mind. Uncle Arnt had some kind of liver trouble – he'd been a drinker too – and required a lot of care. And she was dating Eric Neilson, pastor at the little Congregational Church out near Herman.

When I wrote that, I hoped that it was obvious that Janet and Cody's relationship is deep, intense, inappropriate, and perhaps criminal. I wanted the reader to think prurient thoughts about them, and wonder why Willa doesn't seem to mind, and how long she'll put up with it. And when Cody gets a girlfriend his own age (Kim, page 3) to be certain that everything is about to blow sky high. To watch Janet's jealousy and despair and worry with sympathy and apprehension. And, when Kim is found murdered (page 8), to say to themselves, it can't be that obvious. Or can it?

Meanwhile, with any luck, I've managed to slip a few other statements on page 2 past the reader. Go ahead. Re-read it. Can you see another theme running through? Another possible inappropriate, perhaps criminal situation going on?

(SPOILER HINT: Think about how many people have died or are very sick...)

I believe that a short story is a magic act, all about distracting the reader from the reality happening in front of their eyes with... something else. Like a highly inappropriate relationship that should press some buttons.

I like stories that build, that are based on character, that take their time (but not too much time!) to get to the point. I like playing with the fact that what is good news for one person can be disastrous for someone else. And the truth that just because someone's innocent of one type of immoral/criminal behavior, doesn't

mean they're not guilty of something else. And that, just because someone is guilty of one type of immoral/criminal doesn't mean they're guilty of something else. (Think of the assumption in Nazi Germany that Oskar Schindler, con-man, opportunist, war profiteer, and adulterer, would collaborate with the Nazis in slavery and genocide—and they were totally wrong.)

In “No Fences,” Willa and Cody, Janet and Kim are all guilty of something: the question is, what are they guilty of, and who's going to pay?

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Eve Fisher has been writing since elementary school, everything from songs to plays to short stories of all kinds. Her mystery stories have appeared regularly in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* for almost 20 years, as well as other publications, and she's part of the mystery writers' blog, SleuthSayers, at [www.sleuthsayers.org](http://www.sleuthsayers.org). A retired university history professor, she still writes and publishes historical articles, as well as fantasy and science fiction. She does volunteer work for the Alternatives to Violence Project at the penitentiary, which gives her an interesting acquaintance. She lives in South Dakota with her husband and 5,000 books.