

The First Two Pages: “Please See Me” by Deborah Lacy

From *Fault Lines: Stories by Northern California Crime Writers*

Edited by Margaret Lucke (Sisters in Crime Northern California Chapter)

When I was a kid, a burglar snuck into our kitchen and stole my mom’s purse and my dad’s wallet while they were watching *Laugh-In* on our couch not fifteen feet away. My sister and I were both asleep down the hall, door closed, so my parents had the sound on the TV turned up while they ate my Dad’s favorite meal—broiled steaks with sautéed onions. It was a celebration, and also payday, so there was more cash to steal than usual. Before my parents went to bed, they locked the doors and turned off the lights.

My dad gets up pretty early, and the next morning when he went to get the newspaper just after dawn, he saw my mom’s purse in our driveway, its contents strewn about. At first he thought my sister and I had been playing with her purse, but then he noticed there were handbags and wallets outside of every house on our cul de sac. Driver’s licenses, credit cards, laundry receipts, and half-eaten rolls of lifesavers just sat out on the asphalt.

The same burglar had invaded every home on our block before the last adult had gone to bed and locked all the doors.

This real life burglary inspired my story “Please See Me” in *Fault Lines: Stories by Northern California Crime Writers*. While the real-life incident freaked out our entire neighborhood those many years ago because the thief knew so much

about their habits, my mom reminded me of it recently, suggesting that it would make a wonderful jumping-off point for a story.

Leaning into the theme of *Fault Lines*, I had our heroine deal with her feelings about a burglary turned bad by writing a term paper about the incident for a college course—providing her with the opportunity to interview everyone who was robbed.

This paper discusses the problem on increasing crime in the United States in the 1970s, its relationship to society in general and the victims of a particular deviant act—residential burglary.

The thesis is that crime is not only an individual act but also a social phenomenon. The question that is posed is, “Who has responsibility for what?” The emphasis is a sociological one.

I wanted to open the story with the beginning of the term paper that the protagonist writes to help her make sense of the crime. It was important to establish the term paper as a way for her to process the information dispassionately, as if she and family weren't the main victims.

Once that was accomplished, I began the narrative of the story to establish character and the plot:

From everyone else's perspective I went back to my sociology class too soon after Gary was murdered. Granted, these were many of the same people who couldn't understand why I went back to finish my degree in my thirties in any event. Perhaps they were right this time. I'm weepy, exhausted and irritable all at the same time. It's a charming combination.

Despite all of this, I went back to class. I had to. No one else could understand. I had one more term paper to graduate, and to better help myself deal with the situation, I wrote my final paper on the increasing problem of residential burglary, using interviews with the

other victims in my neighborhood as a case study. The topic of the paper is supposed to be the impact of addiction on the human psyche.

This may have been a mistake.

I clutched the graded typewritten pages tightly as I walked across campus, my macramé purse swinging back and forth. The papers had been returned to us in class that day. The professor had written the words, “Please see me” in red ink on the front page. I had waited until the end of office hours in hopes that no other students would be there to compete for his time.

I knew that I didn’t have to go. But even though I wasn’t ready to talk, I forced myself forward because the sooner I met with him, the sooner it would be over.

She’s clearly nervous about visiting the professor, but why is she so nervous? Does she feel like she’s still in danger? I used this section to open up dramatic questions, then grounded it back in the emotionless statistics of the paper:

Evidence shows a substantial increase in crime in the United States since 1970. According to FBI Uniform Crime Report of 1975, serious crimes have increased 39% since 1970. At the same time, population—often correlated to increased crime rates—rose only 5%. This suggests the need to re-examine previous social thinking and treating of crime and its consequences.

Now that the structure and foundation has been established, the story can continue going back and forth between the emotional narrative and the analytical term paper until discovery of what really happened that Friday night on the cul de sac.

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Deborah Lacy’s short mystery fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, the 2016 Bouchercon anthology *Blood on the Bayou*, *Mystery Weekly Magazine* and several other anthologies. She also runs the Mystery Playground blog