

The First Two Pages: “No Fault Murder” by Susan Kuchinkas
From *Fault Lines: Stories by Northern California Crime Writers*,
edited by Margaret Lucke (Sisters in Crime Northern California Chapter)

I love writing prompts, so when I saw the call for submissions for the Sisters in Crime Northern California anthology with the theme of “fault lines,” I wanted to take a shot with a new story. Free-associating, I quickly went from no-fault divorce to no-fault murder. That gave me a basic premise: a couple with marital problems and a murder.

When I’m using a prompt for a short story, I just begin writing. I started this one with a tough, noir voice.

He was a bad boy, with a record—internet fraud, drugs—and a worse reputation. She was a good girl. College degree, nice job as an accountant, friends. So why was it her that ended up dead?

As my protagonist, private detective Carla Strong, developed, she morphed into a softer and more rounded character. Carla is inexperienced: Her biggest case was finding a missing fox terrier. A middle-aged, uncool woman by her own regard, she was reeling from being dumped by her husband.

Because of that, I didn’t fight my editor too hard on the edit she wanted to make to that opening paragraph. She wanted: “So why was it she who ended up dead?”

That's correct grammatically, but no one talks that way. We compromised on: "So why was she the one who ended up dead?"

As I saw her more clearly, Carla's voice became softer, and I added in more of her perspective. Writing in the first person let me use Carla's thoughts and reactions to show her character and, I hope, build empathy for her.

In a short story, you can't dump a lot of exposition; you need to dribble in just enough. In the paragraph introducing the client, I snuck in Carla's age for a little backstory and illustrated the way she constantly compares herself to others:

The sister, Emily Melendez, seemed like a very nice girl. I know, I'm supposed to say *woman*, but when you hit fifty, the young ones start to look really young. She came to our meeting at WeWork in a skinny pantsuit. She had a trendy, shaggy haircut and cool shoes. I pegged her for one of the tech elites, and it gave me a little twist of pleasure that she was coming to see me. There are some things you still can't just google.

As Carla learns more about the case, I continued her internal commentary. Her slightly wistful take on Eddie shows she'd like to have more fun. The final sentence of this passage, "things change, don't they?" ties the case to Carla's own situation, giving her an emotional stake in the case.

Emily gave me the goods on her sister, showed me a photo of Rosie and Eddie Litz on her phone. Eddie was blond and a bit pudgy, in a good way. He looked like he liked his beer and would be fun to drink with. His fair skin and blue eyes contrasted with the jail tattoos all over his arms, which were twined around Rosie in the photo. She

looked like she liked it. She was laughing, big white teeth like seashells, long dark hair curling down one shoulder.

They seemed like a happy couple. But then, things change, don't they?

#

Susan Kuchinskas writes mystery, crime and science fiction. Her science fiction/detective novel *Chimera Catalyst* was published in 2018. The sequel, *Singularity Syndrome*, will be released in 2020. Her short fiction has appeared in a variety of journals and zines, including *Shotgun Honey* and *Switchblade*. She works as a journalist and content strategist for technology companies. Find out more at <http://kuchinskas.com/my-books/>.