

The First Two Pages: “Living On Borrowed Time” by Melissa H. Blaine
From *Crime Travel: Tales of Mystery and Time Travel*,
edited by Barb Goffman (Wildside Press)

As writers, so many of our stories begin with questions. We watch a meeting in a coffee shop and ask, “What’s going on with those two?” We read an article online and think, “How did that happen?” We observe someone and wonder, “Why did they do that?” We hear about a fork in the road and ponder, “What would I do?” The questions that we ask and how we each answer them drive the stories we tell.

I find it endlessly fascinating how writers in anthologies with prompts like *Crime Travel* come to such different stories. Each of us started with crime and time travel. From there, our experiences, personalities, styles, interests, and, yes, the questions that we asked formed the stories we created.

As I was thinking about the first two pages of “Living on Borrowed Time,” this idea of how the questions we ask form our stories came up again and again. In many ways, those first two pages are a roadmap to the questions that I asked when I started thinking about a story for this anthology.

“Living on Borrowed Time” began with a Google search. You could say that my first question was “What is time travel?” I’ve watched all the requisite movies over the years, but couldn’t quite find a story I wanted to tell. So, I did what any

self-respecting writer does and headed off to search “time travel” online, hoping that something in one of the articles would spark an idea. It did. I wish I had remembered to note the page where someone asked or commented something along the lines of “if time travel was real, there would already be tourists from the future here.” This would be the little nugget that I couldn’t let go of.

There had been whispers and rumors about time tourists for years, but they were always pretty fringe.

Once I had the idea of time tourism, the questions started pouring in. What would it look like? Who would use it? Would people from the past notice if time tourists started showing up? Two pieces were instantly clear to me. One was that if time travel did exist, somebody somewhere would be monetizing that into time tourism and there would be people paying for the experience. Second, there would absolutely be groups of people who believed that time tourists were visiting them in the past and everyone else would view those groups with a healthy dose of skepticism.

For the believers, though, time tourists were around every corner, making ripples in history. Stell and her crowd of tinfoil-hat wearers bought history books by the dozen, reading and rereading them, trying to spot the changing text that they knew had to be happening.

Those pieces helped set the stage for the story’s “world,” a place where time travel did exist, where people were taking trips back in time to experience

moments in time, and where time travel wasn't mainstream for the people who were being visited.

For me, the next question became, "If I was a time tourist, where would I go?" That brought a whole host of fun ideas spanning history and the globe, but since the anthology was crime related, I turned to famous crimes and mysteries. This is the point where I wish I could say that I thought, "I could discover what Agatha Christie was doing during her disappearance!" Alas, I did not have that thought until months later.

No, the time tourism "package" that captured my thoughts was "I could discover who Jack the Ripper was." On the surface, this seems like a decent use of time travel; it is one of our most enduring mysteries and I'm certainly not the only person who watches far too many documentaries on the topic. But, it's one thing to use science to discover Jack's identity and quite another to travel back in time to learn his identity by putting yourself at the scene. That's where the time tourism train makes an unfortunate turn into the moral dilemma mountain, because to learn the identity of a killer, you'd have to be a witness... to something horrible.

My five-foot-nothing dishwater-brown-haired wallflower look must be scary in the future because the guy flopped that book into my hand quicker than a bee sting. I turned it over slowly, wishing I hadn't once I saw the title, *The 50-State Stabber: History's Most Infamous Serial Killer* by Bhavin Jons.

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I still cringe a little that my instinct was to go watch a serial killer, because the logical end is that you'd really have to watch the serial killer to know the truth about his identity. At the same time, this question and answer got me to the main characters: the next victim, two curious young men who didn't think through what they were doing, and, in the background, an infamous serial killer like Jack the Ripper.

The questions I asked and the order they came in had a direct influence on the direction of the story. Had I started with "Who is time traveling?" my story would likely have ended up in a different spot. Being mindful of the questions we ask can help us as writers to find different angles and nuances to stories that we might not otherwise. Switching up our usual order of questions can also bring fresh insights and new stretches to our writing.

The last big question for me at the start of the writing process was "What would I do if I saw time tourists watching me?" This question gave me both the timing for the story (present day) and my main character's reaction:

Here's what kept running through my mind as I whipped open the door of the BookBQ and marched across the street: if they were time tourists watching me, I was in a hot mess and I wanted a way out. Think about it. If you're a time tourist from the future, where are you going to go? Kansas City? On Thanksgiving Day in 2019? Sure, the annual Plaza Lights spectacle would be great, with jewel-toned bulbs adorning fifteen blocks of buildings. And the stores and restaurants always did booming business as everyone trickled in to watch the lighting ceremony and fireworks. But still, it's Kansas City, not Paris, France. And it's not like I was a movie star or something.

I'd worked the lunch crowd at Gibson's Diner on the Plaza and gone to the bookstore afterward while waiting for the festivities, still wearing my uniform, no less. Why would anyone pay money to watch me or the lighting ceremony...unless something big was about to happen?

The main character, Jennifer, will soon discover that she's in the crosshairs as The Stabber's next victim. And the question that drives the story after the first two pages is Jennifer's "How do I find a way out?" I'll leave the answer to that question for you to discover in "Living on Borrowed Time."

The First Two Pages of "Living on Borrowed Time"

The moment I saw them I knew there was going to be trouble. I hadn't made it to twenty-six, teaching high school students and waitressing on the side, without picking up a keen tradar (that's radar for trouble). The two teens huddled in the alley, peering around the edge of a big blue dumpster like children playing peekaboo. They would have stuck out like sore thumbs anyway since they were talking into their gloves like they were phones, but the Kansas City Outlaws NHL hockey jersey totally gave them away. Time tourists.

My roommate, Stell, and I had just watched a program on time tourists a few nights before. It was on one of those cable channels that shows all the weird conspiracy programs like aliens building the Great Wall of China and people trying to track down Bigfoot's buried treasure. Stell is a believer. Of everything. Give her the most outlandish explanation for something, and she'll buy into it with little more than a wink. Me? I'm more of an Occam's razor type of thinker. The simplest explanation is probably the right one. Even if it seems impossible.

There had been whispers and rumors about time tourists for years, but they were always pretty fringe. Most people rolled their eyes at the suggestion, laughing that if there were time travelers from the future coming back to the past, there would be no way they'd leave the environment in such a crappy state without trying to help it.

They could end up living with our mistakes, after all. For the believers, though, time tourists were around every corner, making ripples in history. Stell and her crowd of tinfoil-hat wearers bought history books by the dozen, reading and rereading them, trying to spot the changing text that they knew had to be happening.

As I stood in the front window of the BookBQ Bookstore, I held up a coffee-table version of *Kansas City's Fountains and Park Art* to cover my appraisal of the alley. The teens, barely adults, were far enough back that they couldn't have seen much of what was happening on Nichols Road. The only visible shop window was the one I was standing in, straight in front of the alley. Three days ago, I would have thought they were casing the joint, although who robs a bookstore, especially on Country Club Plaza? Now, that not-right jersey was scratching at my brain.

Here's what kept running through my mind as I whipped open the door of the BookBQ and marched across the street: if they were time tourists watching me, I was in a hot mess and I wanted a way out. Think about it. If you're a time tourist from the future, where are you going to go? Kansas City? On Thanksgiving Day in 2019? Sure, the annual Plaza Lights spectacle would be great, with jewel-toned bulbs adorning fifteen blocks of buildings. And the stores and restaurants always did booming business as everyone trickled in to watch the lighting ceremony and fireworks. But still, it's Kansas City, not Paris, France. And it's not like I was a movie star or something. I'd worked the lunch crowd at Gibson's Diner on the Plaza and gone to the bookstore afterward while waiting for the festivities, still wearing my uniform, no less. Why would anyone pay money to watch me or the lighting ceremony . . . unless something big was about to happen?

"You're time tourists, aren't you?" I stuck my hands on my hips in my best superhero or angry mother pose. They were surprisingly similar.

"Wha . . . uh . . . no. I . . . uh . . . what?" The one closest to me stammered. A bead of sweat appeared at the line where his spiky-blue hair met his pimpled forehead. He slowly edged the book he was holding under the edge of his jersey toward his back pocket.

"Uh-uh. Hand it over." My fingers curled over my palm in the universal gesture for *give it*.

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hand quicker than a bee sting. I turned it over slowly, wishing I hadn't once I saw the title, *The 50-State Stabber: History's Most Infamous Serial Killer* by Bhavin Jons.

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"I don't know what you're talking about, ma'am." This kid had dreads and kept his gaze pointed just beyond my right shoulder. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"It's 2019. This book isn't published until . . ." I flipped to the copyright page and tried not to let my eyes bug out of their sockets. "Holy crap, not until 2073. You really are time tourists. Stell was right for once." I leaned up against the dumpster, feeling a bit lightheaded.

"Why'd you give her the book? You just broke about thirty-five different rules, Jeremy. We are so dead." Dreads glared at Jeremy, whose blue eyes immediately found a spot on the ground to stare at.

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Melissa H. Blaine is a member of Sisters in Crime, The Short Mystery Fiction Society, and the Grand Rapids Region Writer's Group. "Living on Borrowed Time" is her second published short story, although she's ghostwritten over twenty nonfiction texts and developed over two hundred more. As an executive coach, Melissa specializes in remote professionals, team development, and helping creatives and authors delete the doubt. In her spare time, she hikes and snowshoes with her dog, fosters kittens through a local rescue, and photographs cemeteries. You can learn more about her work at www.melissahblaine.com.