

**The First Two Pages: “The Fourteenth Floor” by Adam Meyer**  
**From *Crime Travel: Tales of Mystery and Time Travel*,**  
**edited by Barb Goffman (Wildside Press)**

“The Fourteenth Floor” began as many of my short stories do, with a bit of real-life intrigue. In this case, it was a *New York Times* article about a security guard who found a stolen wallet, one that had been swiped over four decades earlier. In going through the missing wallet, the guard said he felt like he had gone back in time—there was a newspaper clipping about the death of Senator Robert Kennedy, black-and-white family photos, and an American Express card issued in 1964.

The moment I read it, I knew I had a short story. I saved the article in a file on my desktop with a note that said, “Story about an old crime? Or time travel? Or both???”

The answer, it turned out, was yes. I would ultimately write a short story about an old crime *and* time travel. What I never dreamed was that it would take eight long years to write.

At first, all I had was a vague notion of what the tale might be: something about a crime and a security guard, set in my hometown of New York. I waited for a jolt of further inspiration, but it never came. I’d pull the article out every three,

six, nine months, read it over, then put it away again. I still didn't have the ingredients I needed: a main character, some kind of conflict, *a story*.

Then Barb Goffman spread the word about an anthology she was doing called *Crime Travel*. I felt like this book would be the perfect home for my story, if in fact I could write a story. I read the article for what might've been the twentieth or thirtieth time, and finally something clicked. And this is how I launched in:

At just after nine p.m., Frank Russo—the night guard at the Hunter Building on West Sixty-Third Street on the Upper West Side—dropped his frozen dinner tray in the trash, glanced down at the walkie-talkie on the table beside him, and began to make his rounds.

That first line took some serious thinking. I like to start my stories with some kind of action rather than exposition. Maybe not a car chase, but at least a character in motion, one who's *doing* something. In this case, however, I had a character who wasn't doing much... at least not yet. So as I continued, I tried to make up for the lack of action with what I hoped would be a small twist—that Frank is doing his rounds but maybe not quite as we imagined:

The eighteenth floor was clear, seventeen looked good, nothing to worry about on sixteen. No trouble tonight. Then again, there was no trouble most nights—especially for Frank. He could make his rounds without ever having to get up from the plush leather chair behind the security desk.

By then, I felt like I had hopefully planted enough of a hook to keep readers going for a few more sentences. So I took a little time to explain that Frank had been at his job for forty years, and even though he wasn't much for technology, he

could at least use the building's remote camera system. And then I dropped the kicker: it's after hours, there's not supposed to be anyone wandering around here, but he sees something on the video screen:

The grainy image showed rows of empty desks, a tall filing cabinet, a photocopy machine. Standing in the middle of the desks was a young woman wearing a flower-print dress that ended just below her knees. She spun slowly, her eyes wide with surprise and a hint of fear, then hurried off.

Immediately Frank switches to the other camera angles to see where she's gone, but she's not on any of them. She's vanished! At this point I was almost one page into the story, and I felt like I had momentum on my side. Anyone who'd read this far would hopefully be hooked and wondering what had happened to the woman, just as Frank did.

Now I knew that I had to get Frank to the fourteenth floor to see what was going on and try to solve this mystery. But first, I wanted to raise the stakes. What's it really matter whether he's seen anything up there or not? Sure, it's his job, but this was more than that. This job was his life, the only thing he really had, and he's got to be careful in order to keep it:

Frank had heard rumors of cutbacks the last few months. Most of the downsized guards were old-timers like him. Being almost sixty-five was enough of a liability. He didn't want to give them any other reasons to let him go.

Like reporting a mysterious girl who'd never been there in the first place.

With all that in mind, Frank decides that the next logical step is to check in by walkie-talkie with his colleague, Colin:

“Colin, you see anything unusual tonight?”

Frank waited for a reply. His counterpart, Colin, was stationed at the building’s side entrance on West End Avenue. Colin was about twenty-five, the same age Frank had been when he started here. Like Frank, he was supposed to watch the entrance and the cameras, though he usually spent most of his shift talking on his phone with various relatives, trying to sort out the latest family drama, and taking small nips from a flask of whiskey.

“Nah, Frank, quiet as St. Rita’s on a Tuesday night.”

Having Frank talk to his younger colleague did a lot of heavy lifting for me. By introducing Colin, I was able to show a contrast with Frank, who’s a real straight arrow. It also helped me strengthen Frank’s sense of doubt. Did he really see something up there? Or is he just an old man who’s starting to slip?

As the scene continues, I was also able to underline the differences in their lives. Colin’s got all this family drama while Frank is a man living all alone in a small apartment overstuffed with books. Colin has his whole life ahead of him, and who knows what he’ll be doing in six months? Frank, however, is hoping to retire from here someday. This job is his life.

That’s why by the end of the second page, Frank has pretty much made up his mind: he needs to go up to the fourteenth floor and make sure things are all right. As he gets into the elevator, however, it begins to shudder and shake. Frank soon finds that he’s not just going to the fourteenth floor. He’s going on an

unexpected journey through time, one that will take him forty years into the past and perhaps change his life forever.

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Adam Meyer is a short story writer, screenwriter, and novelist. He's written the upcoming TV movie *My Daughter's Ransom* and has stories due to appear in 2020 in the anthologies *The Beat of Black Wings*, *Invitation to Murder*, and the Malice Domestic anthology *Mystery Most Theatrical*.