

**The First Two Pages of “The Summer Uncle Cat Came to Stay”  
by Leslie Elman**

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An Essay by Leslie Elman

“The Summer Uncle Cat Came to Stay,” published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* (January/February 2020), is the most ambitious story I’ve written to date. So, I am gratified, thrilled, and deeply honored that it earned an Edgar Award nomination from the Mystery Writers of America for Best Short Story of 2020.

Though written in the third person, the story unfolds mainly within an eight-year-old girl’s frame of reference. The challenge was limiting description to the things that an ordinary eight-year-old would notice and could comprehend in some way—not necessarily the way an adult would comprehend them, not necessarily the “right” way, but in a way that makes sense to that ordinary eight-year-old.

When you’re a child, the adults in your life—parents, guardians, teachers—make clear to you the rules that govern your world. For the most part, assuming those rules are reasonable and are applied fairly, you don’t question *what* they are. Furthermore, being a child accustomed to living with rules, you’re unlikely to wonder *why* those rules exist. I’m not talking about the rules that parents enforce for a child’s safety—hands off hot stoves and sharp objects—but about the rules that simply let a child know “this is how we do things around here.”

From the start, “The Summer Uncle Cat Came to Stay” lays out the rules for “how we do things around here.” Here’s how it begins:

The summer Uncle Cat came to stay was 1962. Regina, aka Gigi, was eight. She had a lot of uncles, but Uncle Cat was her favorite. He was more like her idea of a grandpa than an uncle. Gigi didn’t have any grandpas.

Their farm in Ulster County was far enough from the city to make it a trip you had to plan with suitcases in the trunk, provisions in the car, and change for the tolls poured into her dad’s hat, which sat, upside down, between her parents, Dom and Antonella, on the bench seat of their Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight. When they approached a tollbooth, Gigi would lean over the front seat, sort through the change, and hand the correct amount to Dom. He’d toss it into the exact-change basket. Then they’d wait for the machine to swallow it, digest it, and lift the gate for them to pass.

That was an important job she had; counting the exact change. Dom didn’t like to wait at the toll booth. Even the seconds it took for the coins to jangle through the machine made him antsy. When they pulled up to a toll booth with a toll collector inside, Gigi felt disappointed because she knew Dom was displeased.

I wanted the story to work on two levels. First, the reader is seeing life through Gigi’s experience, and while her experience is truthful, it’s also understandably naïve. She’s only eight years old, after all. On the second level, adult readers can apply their own life experience to what they’re reading. And they may ask the question it never occurs to Gigi to ask: “*Why* is this the way we do things around here?”

Presumptuous as it might be, I wanted the reader to do a little work—to read and absorb the story on the surface and then (if I did it right) to reflect on the clues

intended to make it clear that Gigi's perception might only be revealing part of what's actually going on.

Take, for instance, this passage on page 2:

Gigi liked it best on the farm when it was just the three of them [Gigi and her parents]; raising chickens, growing vegetables, picking apples for Antonella to make her famous Crow Starter pie. Uncle Cat said it was the best Crow Starter he ever had except for what a lady called Nonna used to make. He once asked for the recipe, but Antonella said she never wrote anything down. Kept it all in her head. And if you asked her how much flour goes in and how much sugar, she wouldn't be able to tell you. She just knew when it looked right. Uncle Cat nodded like that made perfect sense to him.

This is what Gigi sees and she accepts it without question as the way things are done in her household. Will adult readers accept it at face value, too? Or, might they wonder if this passage has deeper significance? (Hint: It does.)

The vocabulary Gigi uses is one signal to readers that there's something beneath the surface they ought to pay attention to. "Crow Starter pie," "a lady called Nonna": these are Gigi's interpretations of words she's heard but does not understand. (Italian words, in this case.)

We've all had the experience of applying our own "translations" for words we mishear or misunderstand. Such misinterpretations are commonly known as mondegreens, referring to a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish ballad called "The Bonnie Earl o' Moray," in which the fourth line—"And laid him on the green"—is misheard as "And Lady Mondegreen."

Some mondegreens are nearly universal (honestly, John Fogerty sang about a “bad moon on the rise” *not* a “bathroom on the right”). Yet, very often, they are unique creations that derive from one’s personal experience.

As a child, I was certain that “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” contained the line “Like a dime up in the sky,” because I knew what a dime was, but (at nursery rhyme age) I was unacquainted with diamonds. Given that, in my experience, dimes were shiny, my interpretation made perfect sense to me. And in Gigi’s case, her interpretations of the unusual phrases she hears make perfect sense to her. She lives on a farm. She knows what a crow is and she can figure out what starter means. A *crostata*; not so much.

Similarly, I wanted to give the impression that Gigi is being excluded—sheltered, if you like—from conversations going on around her. At the time the story is set, 1962, it wasn’t unusual for adults with recent immigrant heritage to converse amongst themselves in the language of the “old country”—Italian, German, Yiddish, etc.—particularly when they didn’t want the kids (who spoke only English) to know what they were talking about.

So, again, Gigi reflects her story to the best of her ability, but it becomes apparent to the reader in the first two pages that her story is not the whole story. This creates a sense of tension that persists through “The Summer Uncle Cat Came

to Stay,” reminding readers that there’s something rather unusual about “how we do things around here.”

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Leslie Elman’s short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly*, and *Vautrin* magazine. She is the author of several trivia and quiz books, including *Weird But True: 200 Astounding, Outrageous, and Totally Off the Wall Facts*. She also writes the syndicated newspaper column “Trivia Bits.”