

The First Two Pages of “Billy’s Plan” by James L’Etoile

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An Essay by James L’Etoile

As much as I want to be a proper plotter, all organized with fancy spreadsheets and color-coded index cards, I’m coming to realize I’m not wired that way. Writing “Billy’s Plan” was more of an intuitive project starting with my protagonist’s voice and a general kernel of an idea where Billy wanted to go. While I try to plot out my novels and other projects, writing organically is a whole lot more fun. I get to discover the story as I go. If I’m drawn into the story, hopefully, the reader will be as well.

In this case, I knew what Billy Love wanted (his motivation) and how he would set about achieving his goal. Billy is a very flawed guy, and he’s been living rent-free in my head for several years. A couple of story ideas came and went, but nothing seemed to gel until Colin Conway reached out with the concept behind the anthology. All the stories would occur in and around The Hope, a flophouse single room occupancy hotel, facing its dying days. The residents face eviction and uncertainty. This was the perfect opportunity for Billy to get out of my head and onto the page. Writing the story intuitively, as opposed to rigidly plotted, let Billy’s voice remain true.

From the opening lines of “Billy’s Plan,” we set the tone of the piece:

Billy Love didn’t want to die in prison, but life on the street was killing him.

We quickly learn Billy is an ex-con struggling to make it on the outside without the structure of prison. He’s become institutionalized.

I originally wrote the opening lines in first-person point of view because it offered a more intimate and personal perspective. Listening to Billy’s story directly as he makes his way to his dank apartment came across shallow and heavy on self-pity. That intimate, close perspective made Billy come off as a whiny, complaining victim of circumstance.

Changing the point of view to third person limited paints Billy’s struggle a little differently. He’s still a very flawed character who has trouble staying out of his own way. A change in point-of-view makes him come off less whiny and more of a deliberate scam artist, working an angle. The third-person point of view lets the reader ride along with Billy in the opening paragraphs as we discover the root of his scheme to go back to prison so he won’t be homeless when he’s evicted from The Hope.

If I’d kept the story in first person, it would have taken me longer to draw out Billy’s ruminating internal dialogue and establish his deliberate self-determined path. My preference for third person brings what some refer to as a cinematic quality to the passage. We’re able to walk with Billy up the stairs and

discover he has drug debts he can't pay, he's suffering from HIV, and he needs medical attention.

Billy patted the baggie of meth in his pocket. The way Billy had it wired, he planned on being out of here before anyone knew he was gone—back inside a familiar prison cell for a violation. Billy's plan for a little in-prison tune-up and getting on the prison's HIV meds was literally in the bag. The antiretrovirals, and the therapeutics, were easier to come by in prison, and he didn't have to worry about a roof over his head.

A short parole violation meant he could wipe his debt clean with Little Eddie, the local dealer, by going back to prison—a convict bankruptcy.

This passage offers us a little more perspective on Billy's faulty moral compass. There's a subtle foreshadowing here of Billy's plan to get back to prison to avoid the consequences of his decisions and life choices.

The following lines set the hook:

Going back inside on a violation would give him a chance to hit the pause button, get healthy again, figure out a new life; maybe find one of them jobs down at the Amazon warehouse. Decent pay and whatever he could lift from the shelves—just like a regular guy.

Billy has a plan and this time it'll be different—better. It's also telling us what's at risk if his plan fails.

And of course, his plan fails, and he's tossed out of his apartment before the eviction date, threatening the precarious plan he's set in motion. Billy, though, as we see in the following lines, fails to make the connection between his actions and real-life consequences.

He hefted the black garbage bag that symbolized what his life had become. He was a cast-off, one of society's unwanted. He wasn't even good enough for the Hope.

Billy's overdriven his headlights again. His short-term goals have crumbled in on him and his desperation starts to build, as does the story's tension. The stakes have been raised, and he's running out of options. When Billy's parole agent comes in on page two, he readies a riskier plan.

Now the hook is fully set. Billy can't go back to prison for the quick reset he planned, and he can't wipe the slate clean with his local drug dealer. Now, what does he do? He can't run from his life choices, but how can he plot to escape the consequences? By the end of page two, I want to know what Billy will resort to as the pressure builds on him. How far is he willing to go? If I'm invested in the story at this point, I hope readers want to find out how it unfolds too.

As a footnote, Billy was based on a real encounter with a convict while I was working at the infamous Folsom Prison. The real Billy was a heroin-addicted career criminal who nickel and dimed his way to a lengthy third-striker sentence for armed robbery. Billy and hundreds of other inmates I knew were ill-prepared to return to life on the streets and came back to a familiar place—prison—when life got hard.

It was common for HIV-positive inmates to intentionally violate parole when their T-cell counts got low. They would violate so they could receive better

medical care in prison than they could access in the community. It is a sad indictment of the criminal justice and health care systems, and it's what inspired "Billy's Plan."

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James L'Etoile uses his twenty-nine years behind bars as an influence in his novels, short stories, and screenplays. He is a former associate warden in a maximum-security prison, a hostage negotiator, facility captain, and director of California's state parole system. He is a nationally recognized expert witness on prison and jail operations. He has been nominated for the Silver Falchion for Best Procedural Mystery and The Bill Crider Award for short fiction. His published novels include *At What Cost*, *Bury the Past*, and *Little River: The Other Side of Paradise*. Look for *Black Label* in the summer of 2021 from Level Best Books. You can find out more at www.jamesletoile.com.