

The First Two Pages of “The One” by Eve Elliot

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An Essay by Eve Elliot

One of the most famous tenets of crime fiction is to “play fair,” meaning there should be no supernatural explanations, no surprise characters, no *deus ex machina* at the conclusion of the tale. And of course, you should never lie to your reader.

While many great writers have played fast and loose with these rules (often exceptionally well), a good crime story generally presents all the clues and explanations right there in black and white; the reader must simply be eagle-eyed enough to pick up on them.

This presented a challenge, when I saw that submissions were open for the Capitol Crimes short story anthology, *Cemetery Plots of Northern California*. “Give us 5000 words set in a graveyard near Sacramento,” they said.

And that’s all they said, besides “Go!”

I had never written a short story about a crime (being a veteran romance writer) nor had I ever been to Northern California (I’m an ex-pat Canadian living in Ireland), but more than anything, I considered it a challenge because I wanted to write about a crime of the mind. (Theft of the heart? Larceny of love? Okay, now I’m getting carried away.)

My story is about the final stage of a “long con” and how an impulsive decision to help set up the next con ends up nearly blowing the whole charade. The bulk of the story involves watching a master con artist having to think on her feet and

talk herself out of a disastrous situation, and my hope is that she does it so convincingly that the reader might actually believe her, or at least see why her victim might.

I assumed that the savvy readers of crime fiction would catch on pretty quickly that the first character introduced, Amanda, is a con artist ad-libbing her way out of a jam —this is a crime fiction anthology, after all, so the reader is going to expect *something* is up. But I also wanted readers to be puzzled about why she'd *really* stopped at the cemetery on her way out of town and be surprised or at least somewhat amused when they find out.

In other words, I wanted to be a con artist, too. I wanted the story itself to be a bit of a con job on the reader, who is led to believe certain things only to find out they've been tricked, too.

It's not a full twist (more like a half-gainer), but it's my way of paying homage to the theme.

I knew that the story should begin with the villain herself. It should unspool slowly, revealing more and more about who she is and what her game is. But to “play fair” with the reader, I knew I had to drop a couple of large hints in the first paragraph and show that she may not be who she appears to be.

Amanda Stack stepped from the cab outside Sacramento's Calvary Catholic Cemetery and pushed her oversize Chanel sunglasses farther up her nose. The sun melted into the horizon after another sweltering day, streaks of salmon and coral bleeding into the darkening sky.

The driver retrieved her rolling carry-on case from the trunk, and she held out a hundred-dollar bill folded between two manicured fingertips. He took it and scowled. The meter read \$99.85, which she

thought was already highway robbery. She was damned if she was going to cough up a tip, too.

The driver muttered under his breath as he dug in his pockets and fished out a nickel and a dime for the change, slapping each into her palm with grubby fingers. She smirked and thanked him, sweet as cherry pie. It stung, of course, to hand over that hundred, but not as much as it usually would have.

Tonight was different.

Tonight she had six hundred more of them, crisp and sharp and smelling like heaven, nestled safely in the lining of her Gucci bag.

Amanda is presented to the reader as an elegant, affluent woman who wears designer sunglasses and waves around hundred-dollar bills. But at the same time, she waits for fifteen cents change, and wouldn't dream of leaving a tip. This, I hoped, established that while she appears to have money now, she didn't always. She also knows how to be "sweet as cherry pie," even while feeling the sting of having to part with money.

And since I knew it was important to get the first hook in quickly, to grab the reader's attention and give them a reason to keep reading, I have Amanda deal with the loss of a hundred-dollar bill by reminding herself that there are many more of them in the lining of her designer bag.

And then, just to leave the reader in suspense, I move on without explaining why she has so much money in her purse.

She telescoped up the handle of her case and began to walk through the cemetery, glancing around to see if she had company. She liked this graveyard, it was peaceful and quiet, and not so large that it took her forever to do what she needed to do. Her high heels clicked on the paved walkway and the wheels of her case rumbled behind as she turned to her right and strode briskly up the familiar pathway, toward the section she knew so well.

Here I chose to slowly introduce a bit of uncertainty. She glances around, the implication being she would rather be alone—why, we don't yet know. In my mind, it spoke to her general wariness, the hyper-vigilance of a career con artist who must always be aware of her environment. I also wanted to hint that she didn't want an audience for something so personal, so out of character for her.

The reader gets the tiniest glimpse of the real person underneath her façade through her thoughts about the peace and serenity of the cemetery, but in an attempt to throw the reader off balance a little, I immediately put another question into the reader's mind: *What is it she's here to do?*

The final line, about her business-like stride on “clicking heels” through familiar pathways, hopefully shows her returning to her purpose, or at least trying to.

Maybe she shouldn't have taken the time to come here, she thought. Maybe her first impulse to head right to the airport had been the right one. But when the driver had turned down Verner, and the broad brick entrance had come into view, she'd tapped on the grimy partition and told him to stop.

You'll be glad you did this, she assured herself. It's just an extra ten minutes, then you can grab another cab and head for the airport.

This is the first whisper of doubt the reader sees in her, even if they don't yet know why she was heading to the airport, why she felt she should go there directly, and why simply passing by the gates of the cemetery had made her impulsively decide to stop. The reader gets to hear her own inner dialogue here, and hopefully starts to believe that her purpose in stopping here, in spite of having some pressing need to get to the airport, is an emotional one.

I'm playing with the reader here, making them think she's here to see a loved one, and to further entrench this suspicion, I spend the next paragraph showing her

idly reading the names on the gravestones as she walks by.

As she walked, she glanced down at the smooth, flat gravestones embedded in the earth, her eyes flicking past the names of grandparents sharing eternity together, husbands and fathers gone too soon, wives and mothers remembered with fresh flowers even decades later. *Beloved husband of Catherine*, one read. Another remembered *Louisa, Loving Mother of Jeremy and John*.

Does Amanda actually have a soft side? She notices things like men who died young, or that some older graves are obviously still tended by loving family members. She may not give these markers too much time, her eyes do “flick” past them, but she is noticing them.

She slowed her pace as she approached Amelia’s plot, the one she’d found herself tending to sporadically over the last year. Not often, she had to admit, but enough to make sure the crispy brown bouquets were cleared away at least once in a while, and the raised letters on the memorial stone were brushed free of dirt and debris.

And here’s where I come as close to lying to the reader as I dare.

I chose my words carefully here—I wanted to imply that this is a relative’s grave, but I never come out and say it. By revealing that Amanda has attended to it only sporadically, I hoped the reader might infer remorse that she hasn’t visited her dead loved one often enough. I mention brown, crispy flowers, but don’t expressly say Amanda put them there, only that she clears them away.

I hope it works. I hope that without the context of the rest of the story, the reader believes that this is the resting place of someone dear to her. And when the truth is revealed, I hope the reader understands why Amanda felt the need to tend to the grave, at least now and then.

She stopped in front of it now, and let herself remember. A year ago, almost to the day. She’d been standing in front of this plot, her

attention snagged by something, she couldn't remember what, when she'd noticed Ted for the first time.

But since I can't resist planting clues that a reader could go back and check on after the first reading, I mention that she'd been standing at this grave a year ago because her attention had been "snagged by something, she couldn't remember what." The reader will hopefully glide over this and not realize that I'm actually saying she *wasn't* communing with her dead sister, she had merely stopped there because something unusual, but ultimately insignificant, had caught her eye.

And with the simple words "she'd noticed Ted for the first time," the reader now understands that her victim has entered the picture. I chose the name Ted to imply he's an older man, because "Amanda" implies someone relatively young, and that dynamic alone should hopefully start clueing the reader in to what might be happening here.

As the reader moves on from these first few pages (as I hope they want to), the backstory unfolds and Amanda's skills as a con artist are put to the test. I hope the reader spots that her improvisation is based on a few key truths she plucks from her real, if secretive, life, but which she has to amend on the fly to suit her story. At the same time, I hope they don't see that they've been a fed a bit of a line as well.

After all, what else would you expect from a con?

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Eve Elliot is a Canadian-born voice actress and romance novelist who has discovered the joy of writing crime fiction. Her first work in the genre was the audio drama *The Death of Dr. Davidson*, which she produced with a full cast, and her short story "The One" was selected for the 2021 Capitol Crimes anthology *Cemetery Plots of Northern California*. She lives in Dublin, Ireland. Find out more at www.eveelliot.com.