

The First Two Pages of “Lucky Thirteen” by Tracy Clark  
From *Midnight Hour: A Chilling Anthology of Crime Fiction from 20 Authors of Color*,  
edited by Abby L. Vandiver (Crooked Lane Books)

An Essay by Tracy Clark

I don't write short stories. They're too difficult. They take a special skill, the right kind of brain. Not the kind of brain I have. Short story writers are laser-focused, sleek, facile, wicked smart, and they have their stuff down to a science. If the world was run by short story writers, seriously, we wouldn't have half the problems we have today.

And then there's me.

I write slow. I agonize over the placement of a comma. I've wasted days going over one page in my WIP because I knew full well it wasn't right and unless I got it right, I'd have fat chance of getting whatever followed to work either. Building blocks. One scene builds upon the next. If the blocks are shifty, if the scene stinks, it all stinks. But I've got 90,000+ words to work out the kinks in a novel. A measly 5,000? Would someone *please* hand me a calming cup of chamomile tea... and a shortbread cookie?

So, when my pal Abby Vandiver emailed me to ask if I would submit a short story for a new anthology she was putting together entitled *Midnight Hour*, a collection of stories written by writers of color all themed around midnight, you'd think I would have said no. *No way, Abby. I can't write short stories. They're too*

*hard. Wrong brain. Slow. Yada, yada, yada.* But I didn't. I said yes. Sometimes writers are gluttons for punishment. Sometimes they step out into the unknown like they know something they don't, exhibiting a confidence they know full well they do not possess. That writer is me.

Anyway, I went near catatonic for a couple days, then I started rooting around in the cluttered attic that is my brain, searching figuratively through the dusty trunks stored there for an idea I could cram into 5,000 words. Side note. You don't realize how few 5,000 words are until you try to shoehorn a story into them. What is sheer torture for a long-former? **SHORT STORIES**. It's like setting off on a year-long cruise around the world and being limited to one overnight bag. Room for backstory? Nope. What about that cool flashback? Spike it!

So, I stared blankly into the void for a bit, my mouth agape, thinking about midnight and what could happen to a person around the witching hour. Maybe I could I write about witches? Nope. Midnight. Midnight. Well, what's the most celebrated midnight of the year? New Year's Eve, of course. What could I do with that? I dunno. More thinking. More rooting. I saw an old man walking in the street carrying a bag of groceries. He walked slowly; he was in no hurry. He was old, but he was holding his own. I wondered where he lived and what he planned to do when he got back home? I wondered what kind of life he lived? I began to write.

I named my character, my old man, Henry Pearse. Henry's a little past his prime, a little slow, but he's still in there swinging for the fences. The story opens with him walking home with a bag of groceries... on New Year's Eve. Then the worm turns. Then stuff gets real. Then midnight hits. There are no witches in the story. I hit that 5,000-word cutoff, but it likely took a couple seconds off my life.

"Lucky Thirteen" is just my second short story. I'm glad I wrote it, but I'm mostly glad it's in the can. Writing a novel gives you time to breathe and ruminate, wax poetic even. Writing a short story is like dancing on a hot griddle with aluminum foil on your feet. No thanks.

### **The First Two Pages of "Lucky Thirteen"**

Henry Pearse made his way up the quiet street, a bag of groceries, light but cumbersome in his arms. He walked slowly, mindful of the icy sidewalk and the slush beneath his feet. He was of a certain age now, not as surefooted. Caution was the ticket. He wasn't infirmed, by any means. He got around just fine for a man of sixty-two. Still to himself, as the old folks liked to say. But sixty-two was not twenty-two, and ice was ice.

He stopped a few feet from his cracked front stoop and glowered up at the old frame house, then turned to scan the raggedy block, his eyes narrowing, his look accusatory. He would have to say, if asked, that he could just about smell its despair, its cowardly resignation. It had years ago, but hadn't the good sense to lie down and toss the dirt.

The town had had a thriving factory once and jobs that paid decent wages, but the factory folded and snatched the jobs away. Now the town was as close to nothing as nothing could get. The left behinds, the ones caught sleeping by change and innovation, now stumbled like zombies after an outbreak. Aimless. Henry hated them. They hated him right back.

He made his way up the cracked walk, wanting to get inside and settled before the fools came out. They always did on New Year's Eve, as though clowning it up at the appointed hour would make their lives any less of a waste, any less insignificant. Shooting off cheap pistols and even cheaper firecrackers like it was the Fourth of July was nothing more than meaningless noise, Henry thought. Childish.

If they knew anything, they'd know how important New Year's Eve was, especially midnight. The stroke of twelve was a gift, a sparkling moment of transformation from old to new—a new day, a new year. It was a renaissance.

Henry looked up at his mother's house and scoffed. Robin's egg blue. It had always been that color for as long as he'd known the place. As though the lightness of the paint could cancel out the darkness inside.

“Gone now, you old cow. And good riddance.”

The woman never understood him. Tried remaking him, hadn't she? Turn him away from his passion. Stuff him in a box like everyone else. What kind of mother did that?

He'd known early what he was meant to become, and he had considered that certainty heaven sent. Henry had had a calling, a talent, drive. All behind him now, though he missed the thrill of it, the sense of accomplishment. But a man had to know when to hang up his cleats, when to take his bow and leave the field.

Henry climbed the front steps, opened the door and pushed inside, damp mustiness smacking him in the face as violently as the snap of a wet towel. He drew in a sharp breath, held it, until he could ease into the stench of his mother's rotting belongings and the ghostly remnants of her disapproval. The stink seemed to seep up through the floor cracks, slither out of the heating vents, bleed out of the walls.

*Straighten up and fly right, Henry boy, she'd say. You got to learn to get along in this world. And later when she saw she couldn't change him, You're the devil, Henry Pearse., the devil come straight from Hell.*

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Tracy Clark, a native Chicagoan, is the author of the Cass Raines Chicago Mystery series, featuring ex-cop turned PI Cassandra Raines. A multi-nominated Anthony, Lefty and Shamus Award finalist, she is also the 2020 winner of the G.P. Putnam's Sons Sue Grafton Memorial Award, a nominee for the 2022 Sue Grafton Memorial Award, and an Edgar Award nominee for Best Short Story. Tracy is a member of Crime Writers of Color and serves on the boards of Bouchercon national the

Midwest Mystery Conference. Her latest book, *Runner*, released in June 2021. When not writing, she's watching old black-and-white movies, reading, or just puttering around. She roots for the Cubs, the Sox, the Bears, the Blackhawks, the Chicago Sky and the Chicago Fire equally.