

**The First Two Pages of “Becoming Ian Fleming” by Kevin Egan**  
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An Essay by Kevin Egan

The opening scene of “Becoming Ian Fleming” sat in a file folder for many years, waiting for me to write the novel it was intended to kick off. I never did.

I came across that folder in the summer of 2019. Though my No. 2 pencil scribbles on a white legal pad were faded and fuzzy, I managed to type that opening scene into my computer and began working it into a short story that was very much unlike the original novel idea.

“Becoming Ian Fleming” is a slice of nostalgia based on a real event. The opening scene, which runs for 1½ pages, is intended to serve as an overture by setting out the circumstances, introducing the main characters, and establishing the voice of the adolescent narrator.

Here is how the story begins:

Late in the summer my uncle ran for mayor, three convicts in transit between two prisons escaped into the woods on the outskirts of town.

Note that the narrator speaks in personal terms, referencing his uncle's campaign for mayor rather than stating a particular year. In addition, since the escape is an important event in the narrator's life, he remembers exactly where he

was standing when the first hint of the convicts' unwanted arrival wound its way into his senses.

My cousin and I were campaigning on that hot, sleepy afternoon, a chore that entailed asking neighbors if we could plant signs bearing my uncle's name in their yards. We were in front of Billy Nardoizzi's house when we heard the sirens in the distance, but we paid them little mind because we were dickering over whether we should knock on the door.

I chose to have the boys hear "distant sirens" rather than see squad cars rushing toward an emergency. In this small town, sirens could mean anything from a brush fire to an ambulance call to a fender-bender in the town square.

Thematically, I wanted the distant sirens to convey an adolescent detachment from the concerns of the adult world. (I return to this idea more explicitly later in the story.) But at this moment, the sirens, whatever they signal, pale in comparison to the issue at hand—whether they should knock on Billy Nardoizzi's door. A point of contention obviously exists, otherwise why the dickering?

Before resolving that minor disagreement, I concentrate on what the two boys perceive while standing on the sidewalk on that hot afternoon.

Mr. Nardoizzi's truck was not in the driveway, which meant he was out working somewhere in town. A second floor window was open, and behind the screen a typewriter pattered fitfully.

These contextual details—the absent truck; Mr. Nardoizzi's job as a handyman; the sound of a typewriter—fill out the scene. At the same time, both the

truck and the typewriter are important to the plot.

And then the scene moves on. The boys' job for the day is almost done.

Their plan—or, more precisely, their hope—is to spend the rest of the day at the beach.

We had only one sign left, one sign that separated us from the rest of a summer day and the hope that we could catch a ride to the beach. My cousin, however, hesitated.

Here the narrator's cousin ends the dickering with inescapable logic.

“Let's come back when Mr. Nardozzi is here,” he said. “He fixed our roof in the spring.”

His obvious point was that Mr. Nardozzi was a sure vote in November and a solid yes for a sign on his patch of hard-pan and crabgrass.

The narrator, however, sees through the suggestion.

But despite the logic, the truth was that my cousin was scared of Billy Nardozzi, and it could only be Billy typing inside that second floor window.

This sentence reveals two things about Billy Nardozzi. First, he is kind of scary (at least to the narrator's cousin), and second, he is spending a summer afternoon alone in his house (note there is no mention of his mother) and banging on a typewriter. More importantly, the sentence also implies a difference of opinion about Billy. The cousin is scared of him while the narrator is more open-minded if not actually curious. This curiosity will drive the narrator's actions as the story progresses.

The scene ends with the narrator relenting, the two boys heading for home, and another neighbor telling them the reason for the sirens.

I gave in, and we rounded the corner onto my street, where I immediately spotted Mrs. Rocco, my next door neighbor, waving frantically from her front porch.

“You boys better get home,” she said. “My Johnny just called from the police station. A bunch of criminals escaped. They’re all over town.”

Mrs. Rocco speaks in exaggerated terms, as will many of the townspeople over the next few days, trading rumors and other nuggets of misinformation. This short bit of dialogue also introduces the third of the story’s main characters, along with the narrator and Billy. Mrs. Rocco’s son—“my Johnny”—is a private investigator. He has called her from the police station because his good working relationship with the local police allows him access to inside information.

Later in the story, John Rocco will enlist the narrator’s aid in searching for Billy Nardozi, who has gone missing along with his father's truck and the last of the three convicts. The narrator also will solve the mystery of Billy’s obsessive typing, which is critical to understanding the reason for his disappearance.

The scene ends with the two boys reacting differently to the news of the escaped convicts.

My cousin ran off so fast that in my memory he left a swirl of cartoon dust in his wake. I climbed to my front porch, leaned my uncle's last sign beside the door, and went inside.

The scene I uncovered in that old folder ran for 2½ pages. I kept it intact for the first five drafts while I worked out the rest of the story. In the sixth draft, without any apparent intermediate editing, it appears in its final form. Most of the full page of cuts involved details of the escape and a demographic description of the narrator's hometown. Now that the story was “set,” I didn't need those details or that description; I needed an overture.

My habit is to edit a “finished” story exhaustively, often weighing every word for several weeks before I even consider submitting it. Six more drafts of “Becoming Ian Fleming” followed, but none included any changes to the first 1½ pages.

I was particularly pleased with the opening scene of this story, which recalled that boyhood summer when three escaped convicts actually came to town. I hope readers will appreciate it as well.

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