

The First Two Pages: “Locked-In” by William Burton McCormick
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An essay by William Burton McCormick

My Edgar Award-nominated story “Locked-In” was conceived as a confined-space suspense drama where the danger escalates step-by-step until the blistering climax. The task in the first two pages was to establish an opening with enough risk to engage the imagination while still allowing room for the situation to worsen. Start with too dire a position and there is nowhere to go. Begin too mundane and the reader (or acquiring editor) may fail to read on. Over the course of the story, I needed to take protagonist Jeff Hartley from the humdrum of housekeeping in his cellar to a hellish struggle for survival worthy of “The Pit and the Pendulum.”

Deception at the beginning was necessary. The reader must perceive the situation as bad, worthy of reading further, but remain ignorant of greater dangers ahead. Did I succeed in the balance? Let me procrastinate on this analysis and ask you to do the heavy lifting. Below are the opening pages of the story in their entirety. Please, have a read, see what I did and what you think. I’ll meet you on the other side for a chat.

August, 1943

The whoosh of a swinging door, the click of a latch and instantly I know I’ve locked myself in the cellar.

Idiot.

I try the handle. The door rests firmly in basement brick, its iron face like a battleship hatch, gray and riveted with flecks of red paint clinging to the edges and beneath the bolts. It does not budge at my tugs, not a quarter-of-an-inch even as the wrenching turns violent and my words profane.

Trapped.

I caress my brow with dirty, housework fingers. How could I do this? So much to do today and I strand myself in here? So typical. *Moron.* Mr. Watkins warned me about it on taking the house.

That cellar door swings, Jeffrey. Bad hinges. Bad construction. Damn treacherous thing. Always prop it open. June locked herself in twice our first year.

I'm well on pace to eclipse his ex-wife's record, not three days into my rental. Watkins will find that amusing when he comes to collect the rent in....Jesus, twenty-eight days?

I release a long pensive sigh. Better get him on the telephone when I'm out, insist he remove the locks altogether. Solve the problem once-and-for-all.

But as for today?

My wristwatch says quarter-to-three. Let's somehow salvage the afternoon.

With no obvious tool in this filthy, mice-infested basement to break down an iron door, I move to the far wall, stand beneath the two narrow street-level windows just below the ceiling. Their dusty panes rest nine feet above the floor, looking out over lonely Jasper Lane, a dead-end side street enameled in black brick and shadowed under dying trees. Little more than an alley between two rows of small dingy houses, seldom trafficked even in the heart of the great city.

I consider my predicament. A deep cellar, the windows are too high and too small to crawl through. And even if I could get up there, why compound the day's folly by breaking the pane? Pain-in-the ass to replace the glass. And I'd lacerate my skin poking an arm through to signal someone.

The musty air tickling my nostrils. I stifle a sneeze and opt for patience. Not such a tragedy really. Nothing scheduled today that I can't do tomorrow if necessary. I'm my own boss. A stranger, new in town. No one's expecting me.

I wait.

And wait some more.

Damn isolated lane. They should plant some living trees, give people a reason to come here.

At five-after-four in the afternoon, the first pedestrian strolls by outside. Tan pant legs and black loafers are all I can see through the high windows. He walks at a leisurely pace, the man exiting Jasper for the open avenue nearby.

“Hey!” I shout, rising on my toes and instinctively waving.
“Mister! Hey! Can you help me? Down! Down here!”

He passes the first window, the second, and then out of frame. Not slowing a step.

Can't even hear me in this pit.

I rummage through the cellar's sparse storage shelves, find a handful of old bolts and lug nuts. I'll toss a few against the window, hard enough to be heard, yet hopefully not enough to damage the glass.

More waiting. At four-twenty, a woman in a navy blue dress walks by. I cast the bolts against the windows as she passes. No reaction.

I throw again, a bit harder, when a man walks his terrier at five o'clock sharp. The dog woofs, smudges the window with a curious black nose, but the master drags his pooch away without a downwards glance.

May have to break the glass.

At five-twelve, a handful of lug nuts rattle the pane hard enough to gain the attention of a woman in bright yellow heels. She kneels down, stares at me through the window.

“Help me, please, Miss!” I shout. “I've locked myself in this basement. Can you come inside and unfasten the door?”

Her stare is icy cold. “If you think I'm coming in there alone with you, fellah, you're crazy!”

“But—”

“No. Not with all the odd things and killings happening in this part of town. Sorry.”

She stands and her yellow heels are quickly lost from view inside the darkening street.

Good God, what a day. Mary told me to stay in Nebraska.

I crush the next lug in my palm, wind back for maximum effort. Poised to throw, pent energy in every muscle as I wait. *Come on.*

I am lucky. Seconds after the woman, another pedestrian nears, a man wearing spectator shoes with reddish-brown toes and heels. I cast, moxie in the motion. The nut punctures a hole in the glass, a spider web pattern over the pane. Propelled like missiles, a few shards lodge in the fabric of the stranger's trouser legs.

He stops. A white gloved hand brushes off the glass, the face still too high to be seen.

Did the opening pique your interest? Hope so!

So, what I tried to do as my "hook" was to establish the story's central problem in the very first sentence: "The whoosh of a swinging door, the click of a latch and instantly I know I've locked myself in the cellar."

Our protagonist's initial problem is clear. He's locked himself in the cellar. That certainly seems like a dicey situation. And I establish immediately that it won't be easy to get past that intimidating portal:

The door rests firmly in basement brick, its iron face like a battleship hatch, gray and riveted with flecks of red paint clinging to the edges and beneath the bolts. It does not budge at my tugs, not a quarter-of-an-inch even as the wrenching turns violent and my words profane.

Trapped.

Having established a degree of tension, I now deliberately mitigate it. Through his interior monologue, Jeff shows us he is not too worried (yet!): "Not such a tragedy really. Nothing scheduled today that I can't do tomorrow if necessary. I'm my own boss. A stranger, new in town. No one's expecting me."

This both serves as a backstory (establishing that Jeff is a stranger in town) and also shows something of his character. Jeff does not panic. But it also is subtle

foreshadowing. If no one is expecting Jeff, will anyone miss him while locked in that cellar? Will he be here a long time? Long enough that it could jeopardize his health or life? This possibility will likely occur to the reader, even if it has not yet struck Jeff. Suspense is most effective if the reader is cognizant of dangers before the character is. (For more on my theories of suspense read my article for [Trace Evidence here](#)). At this point, Jeff hasn't quite realized this is anything more than an inconvenience. That will change.

Let's look how things escalate just within the excerpt I provided:

1. Jeff is locked in the cellar (inconvenient).
2. People won't help him escape the cellar and Jeff may have to spend the whole night there (frustrating and unpleasant)
3. Jeff may have to break the window glass: "Pain-in-the ass to replace the glass. And I'd lacerate my skin poking an arm through to signal someone." (i.e. more inconvenient, more frustrating, costly and painful).
4. There are "killings happening in this part of town." Oh, oh!

Point Four is the first hint that there are dangers here far greater than just being marooned in the basement. Indeed, throughout the story we take Jeff from trapped in the cellar (bad) to being robbed (worse), then to the possibility of eventual starvation, and finally to a threat of a truly ghastly death. (You'll have to read the story to see how).

The trick of the story is convincing the reader “This situation can’t get worse for poor Jeff.” And then it does. Repeatedly. All the way to the denouement.

Building suspense and making the reader ask: “What happens next?”

Allow me to digress here and talk about the story’s inspiration and influences as they affected my decisions on setting, format, and style. From its conception, I wanted “Locked-In” to be a universal story where anyone could imagine themselves in this situation. Hopefully, most readers have not had their homes invaded by murderous strangers (slight spoiler there), but I suspect almost everyone has had a moment in life where they feared being trapped in a confined space. My relatives owned a small farm in Upstate New York with a deep, musty cellar. Visiting as a child, I used to go down there and play with the ancient toys left from previous generations. I often wondered what would happen if that cellar door slammed shut, locking me down there while my kin was over in Rochester for the day or out in the fields until sundown. This was the germ of my idea.

And we all know germs can kill you.

It took decades until that fear manifested into a story. I let it germinate until 2019 when I developed the idea of a man trapped somewhere calling for rescue only to discover that his alleged rescuer meant him harm. Then those old images of the farm cellar came to mind. It seemed a perfect setting. But how much more frustrating if it were in a big city with so many people around unwilling to help?

Without giving away the ending, one of Jeff's final attempts to escape references a certain Bay Ridge mob insurance scam. That real-life scam was a trick used by Lenny Montana, professional wrestler and mob enforcer, who left the Colombo crime family to become an actor and play Luca Brasi in *The Godfather*. (He who "sleeps with the fishes.") I read an article talking about Montana's mob days and it mentioned this ploy as a good earner. I found it intriguing and locked it away (pun) to use in some future story. When I needed a way out for my hero when drafting "Locked-In," the methods of this mob scam seemed a potential solution. It is also why I made Jeff an insurance man, so it'd be credible he'd know about this gangster con and how to use it to his potential benefit.

The next issue at the conceptual phase was in what time period would it take place. I set the story in the 1940s mostly to prevent Jeff from simply grabbing his cellphone and calling for help. It also allowed me to make some period piece references to the Jazz Age and have my protagonist listen to the radio program *Lights Out*. (I often listen to Old Time horror and detective radio programs via the internet. I like to flatter myself and think "Locked-In" would have made a good episode of *Lights Out*, *Suspense*, or *Inner Sanctum*).

So, now I had my plot, ending, setting, and time period. Is the story's tense bugging you? The most important decision I had to make before writing a word of "Locked-In" was settling on a tense. I know many readers prefer stories written in

the past tense, whether first person or third person. Yet, I was resistant to this for “Locked-In.” I wanted the emotional immediacy of a first-person story where Jeff talks directly to the reader. It seemed to match the tale, where he is the only developed character and the only one whose thoughts we know. But if I used a first-person past tense, it’d hint to the readers that Jeff either survives or is speaking from beyond the grave. Not good. Third-person past tense would work (since in the third-person tense Jeff isn’t the one telling the story and therefore doesn’t have to survive), but it would lose some of the intimacy with the character. So, I risked first-person present tense, unpopular as it is, which gives us the cleanest access to Jeff’s emotions and thoughts while still allowing that he might not make it out of that damp, mice-infested cellar alive. Hopefully, you can stomach it.

There’s some Steven Spielberg influence in this tale. Not the wonderful, wide-eyed adventure-weaver of classic ’80s Spielberg, nor the mature director who gave us *Schindler’s List* and *Saving Private Ryan*. but first-half-of-the ’70s Spielberg. The young filmmaker who made his name with pulse pounders *Duel* and *Jaws*, directed the first episode of *Columbo*, and was seen as the heir to Hitchcock and the new “Master of Suspense.” *Duel* is especially influential in the later parts of “Locked-In.” Like that film, the plot concerns a life-and-death game of cat-and-mouse between two individuals in an isolated environment. And like

Duel, the antagonist never speaks, is never fully seen, and the motives for his attack remain ambiguous to the end. There is greater mystery and terror in the unknown (as Lovecraft wrote and Spielberg showed). That is why my villain is mainly only identified by his spectator shoes glimpsed through cellar windows or beneath door drafts. He is introduced stalking a woman who knows about the killings in town: “Seconds after the woman, another pedestrian nears, a man wearing spectator shoes with reddish-brown toes and heels... He stops. A white gloved hand brushes off the glass, the face still too high to be seen.”

Monsters are scariest unseen.

So, my “Locked-In” recipe? Take childhood memories of a farmhouse cellar, add healthy doses of Poe, Spielberg, and *Lights Out* goodness to offset the obnoxious first-person present tense odor, and add a dash of mobster-turned-actor reminiscences.

Blend on high for 6000 words or so.

Serve cold.

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