

The First Two Pages: “The Case of the Bogus Cinderellas”

by Jacqueline Freimor

Winner of the Black Orchid Novella Award

From *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* (July/August 2023)

An Essay by Jacqueline Freimor

I started writing “The Case of the Bogus Cinderellas” after reading about these weird collectible stamps in *Atlas Obscura*. For the uninitiated, Cinderella stamps are stickers, such as Easter Seals, that look something like postage stamps; “bogus” Cinderellas, a subtype, look exactly like postage stamps but cannot be used to mail anything, because the so-called countries that issue them, called micronations, don’t actually exist. As soon as I started down the rabbit hole of the world’s micronations, my brain went into plot overdrive: Who on Earth would create their own nation, and why? Who creates the stamps, and writes the national songs, and designs the uniforms? And more to the point, how could I use this information in a mystery story? The crime of fraud, involving bogus Cinderellas, immediately came to mind. I knew this kind of silliness would appeal to my fictional private eye, Jeannie Tannenbaum, who over the course of three published short stories and two as-yet-unpublished novels has demonstrated her love of any and all things off the beaten track.

I first envisioned the story as a novel, but I soon realized I wouldn’t be able to stretch the material that far. I then rewrote it as a short story, but that didn’t work, either; now I had too much material. Then I happened to see a flyer for the Black Orchid

Novella Award, conferred annually to a fifteen-to-twenty-thousand-word novella “in the traditional deductive style exemplified by the Nero Wolfe series”—a perfect style and length for my story. Better yet, the prickly relationship between my detective, Jeannie, and her attractive, young assistant, Randy Miller, paralleled the prickly relationship between Rex Stout’s detective, Nero Wolfe, and his attractive, young assistant, Archie Goodwin. The stars were aligning. My story seemed a natural fit for the contest.

I rewrote the story a third time, this time as a novella, with Jeannie, as in my previous stories, its first-person narrator. The story still didn’t work. There was way too much exposition, and the dialogue was leaden. Then I had a brainstorm that I should have had much, much earlier: What if I made Jeannie’s assistant the first-person narrator, like Archie Goodwin in the Wolfe novels? Randy would do all the legwork, like Archie. And Jeannie would be holed up in her apartment, like the agoraphobic Nero Wolfe (but in Jeannie’s case, it was only because she had broken her ankle). Once I recast the story with Randy as the first-person narrator, it began to flow.

The final version of the story starts in media res, one of my favorite literary devices, partly so I could pepper the exposition throughout the narrative in small, digestible bits and partly because as a reader, I appreciate it when writers draw me into the action right away and fill in the details as I read on. And because the story is in Randy’s point of view, I gave him the opening lines:

“And then it turned out the stamps were phonier than a three-dollar bill,” I said. “They were counterfeit.”

I wanted to establish the scene, the characters, and the relationship between Randy and Jeannie as quickly as possible, so the story continues:

Jeannie wriggled in her chair and pointed. “Could you bring me a pillow, please?”

I grabbed one of the velvet throw pillows on the couch, strode to the ottoman, and lifted Jeannie’s foot in its fiberglass cast. Had she even been listening to me?

“Ow,” she said. “Easy.”

I gritted my teeth and lowered the cast as I slid the pillow under it. “How’s that?”

She scooched deeper into her chair. “Better. Thanks, Randy.”

The rest of the first page provides Randy’s backstory and details about bogus Cinderella stamps. That Jeannie had not really been listening to Randy allows him to repeat himself to her, thereby allowing *me* to provide this information to the reader.

Page two of the story continues the exposition through dialogue, this time about the micronations that issue bogus Cinderella stamps, and characterizes the Jeannie-Randy relationship even further. Randy tells Jeannie that there are more than sixty micronations in the world, and continues:

“...and they’re all over. The one that’s probably the most well known is Sealand, a fort in the North Sea that the British built during World War II. There are some here in the US, too, like the Republic of Molossia. That’s in Nevada.”

Jeannie snorted. “Oh, well, *Nevada*. Studies have shown that living in the desert can melt your brain.”

“Really?”

“No. God, Randy, you’re too easy.”

I took another deep breath. I was not going to let her irritate me today; I was not.

Finally, at the end of the page, I had Randy introduce details of the crime: Randy’s philatelist cousin, Franklin, had been scammed into buying fake stamps—*bogus bogus Cinderellas*, if you will—a meta-level irony that I hoped would make readers laugh and also create tiny stress fractures in their brains.

Still, although Jeannie is interested in these details, she has a business to run and money to make, so on the third page (I know I’m supposed to discuss only the first two pages, but the third page is only a half-page, I swear) she gets down to brass tacks:

Jeannie thought a moment, then shook her head. “I don’t know, Randy. I mean, what’re we talking about here? I know you want to do a favor for your nephew—”

“Cousin.”

“—cousin, but for us to take on a penny-ante case about a kid’s stamp collection—”

Oh, now I got it. “I should have explained. ‘The kid’ is thirty-two years old. And he’s lost more than eighty-seven grand.”

This clinches it for Jeannie; she’s hooked. And I hope that by setting up a semi-antagonistic relationship between the characters and sprinkling stranger-than-fiction expository elements throughout the first two (and a half) pages, I’ve hooked the reader, too.

#

In 1995, Jacqueline Freimor won first place in the Unpublished Writers category of the Mystery Writers of America’s Fiftieth Anniversary Short Story Competition, and she’s been writing ever since. Her stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Rock and a Hard Place Magazine*, *Vautrin*, *Black Cat Weekly*, and *Mystery Magazine*, among others, and in several anthologies, including *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year* (in 2021) and *The Best American Mystery and Suspense* (in 2022 and 2023). “The Case of the Bogus Cinderellas” won the Wolfe Pack’s 2022 Black Orchid Novella Award and is being

published in the July/August 2023 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. You can buy and read Jacqueline's work at www.jacquelinefreimor.com.