

**The First Two Pages: “The Home Front” by Charles Ardai**  
From *Death Comes Too Late* (Hard Case Crime)

An Essay by Charles Ardai

I began as a short story writer. Years before I published my first novel (*Little Girl Lost*, 2004), I published my first story (“The Long Day,” *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, March 1988). Longtime editor Eleanor Sullivan was still at the helm of the magazine, having taken over from founding editor Frederic Dannay when he died, and she either saw promise in or took pity on this 18-year-old would-be writer who’d handed her a slender typewritten manuscript, since she did me the greatest kindness anyone ever had. I don’t just mean acquiring the story, though lord knows it was a kindness that she did that. What she did after acquiring the story was edit it, to within an inch of its life. She did it the old-fashioned way, with an actual red pencil, and if there was one sentence her pencil didn’t becrimson, I don’t recall seeing it. The pages looked like the aftermath of a battle. In that moment, she taught me not only what it took to be a better writer but what it took to be a proper editor—two lessons I’ve held close to my breast ever since.

Fast forward three decades (and a half), and I’m about to publish my first collection of stories, *Death Comes Too Late*. You won’t find “The Long Day” in there—frankly, even thoroughly edited, it’s just not strong enough to reprint. But

you will find 20 other stories, and every one of them benefitted from my channeling my inner Eleanor Sullivan when I sat down in front of the keyboard.

The story that opens the book, “The Home Front,” is set in the U.S. during World War II, and the first business at hand is conveying that information to the reader without coming right out and stating it:

I pulled up to the pump, stubbed out my Victory cigarette in the ashtray, and waited for the kid in the overalls to come over. He was wiping grease around on a gear shaft with a cloth that had seen better days. Looking at him, you couldn’t say what had gotten him out of the service. Flat feet, maybe. But he was about twenty years old, big as an ape, and I couldn’t see any reason that he wasn’t using those big arms of his to bayonet Nazis instead of to pump gas.

The plot turns on a bit of information that present-day readers are unlikely to know much about: that wartime rationing limited the amount you could buy of various commodities, including food and gasoline.

I showed him an A coupon. “Give me my four gallons, kid. I’ve got money.”

The kid wiped, wiped, wiped his hands, but the rag only made them greasier. “Ration’s been reduced,” he said. “An A gets you two gallons now.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I held the coupon out the window. “Give me four. I’ve got enough to pay for it.”

“Have you got another one of those?”

“No.”

“Then you don’t get four gallons.” The kid looped the rag under his belt and shrugged. *What can I do?* the shrug said. *Don’t blame me, blame Hitler.*

There was a wartime organization called the OPA, the Office of Price Administration, whose job it was to enforce the rationing rules, and that meant

cracking down on anyone profiteering on the black market—charging extra for selling more than a given purchaser was entitled to buy. In spite of the OPA, black market sales still happened, sometimes out of greed and sometimes for more sympathetic reasons. In my story it's a bit of both.

I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my pocket and held it out to the kid. "I'll pay a dollar a gallon."

The kid's eyes got wide, and as round as dinner plates.

"That's a lot of money."

"Yeah. It's a lot of money."

"I've got some that I've...wait here." The kid ran off behind the garage.

He came back carrying two metal gas cans, one in each hand.

He uncapped the nozzle on one and upended it into the car's tank.

When it was empty, he started the second can.

I put the bill back in my wallet.

Most of the time, the black market operated smoothly and profiteers didn't get caught, but you never knew when the person you were selling to might turn out to be law enforcement.

"Four gallons." The kid came back around to the window.

"That'll be four dollars, mister." He said it as though this were a legitimate transaction.

I unfolded my wallet and held it up, showing the kid a badge that said "Office of Price Administration" in small letters. He didn't have time to read the words, but he knew what the badge meant.

"Hold on," he said. "You asked me—"

"And you agreed."

"Please—my family—"

"Should've thought of that sooner," I said. "Get in."

And we're off to the races.

How would Eleanor have edited these first two pages if she'd lived to 2007? There's no way to know; she died in 1991. I'm sure she would've made them better. She was the finest editor I've ever known.

But I like to think that the four years I spent working with her had some impact. I learned to cut, cut, cut—mercilessly to cut. I learned to deliver information casually, via a bank shot, rather than shoving it in front of the reader with a spotlight glaring down on it. I learned to take out the *said*s when they weren't needed, to listen to dialogue and tinker with the wording until it's arranged the way people actually talk. Some writers have natural gifts—the rest of us, if we're lucky, have good editors.

Eleanor also taught me about burying the lede, incidentally. Something you don't want to do when you're a newspaper journalist, but that you often *do* want to do when you're writing fiction, especially mystery fiction. And I suppose sometimes when you're writing an essay like this one.

“The Home Front” won the Edgar Award for Best Short Story. I was dumbfounded. I no longer remember who I thanked from the podium. But I know who I should have. Eleanor died in *Ellery Queen's* 50th anniversary year, but she has lived on in my brain ever since. If not for her sure editorial hand and her encouragement and the lessons she instilled, there would have been no “Home

Front,” no Edgar Award, no novels, no Hard Case Crime. No first two pages and no last two.

I certainly feel her ghost hovering over all the pages of *Death Comes Too Late*. If you pick up a copy, I hope you’ll join me in remembering her.

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Charles Ardai is the founding editor of Hard Case Crime, in which capacity he’s had the privilege of publishing—and editing—writers such as Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, Ray Bradbury, Erle Stanley Gardner, James M. Cain, Donald E. Westlake, Lawrence Block, Gore Vidal, Michael Crichton, and Brian De Palma, among many others. His own novels include the Shamus Award-winning *Songs of Innocence* and the Edgar- and Shamus-nominated *Little Girl Lost*. He also created the best-selling crime comics *Gun Honey* and *Heat Seeker* and wrote for the TV series *Haven*.