

**The First Two Pages: “Underpass” by Robert Lopresti
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An Essay by Robert Lopresti

I spend a fair amount of time on a bicycle. Since I retired, I average 90 minutes a day on two wheels. And I love trails. Bellingham, WA, where I live, has a ton of trail systems.

One day I discovered the Whatcom Creek Trail after riding past the entranceway, or trail head, for literally decades. (I never said I was observant.) Almost as soon as you enter it you find yourself taking two underpasses beneath Interstate 5, the highway that stretches all the way from Tijuana, Mexico to Vancouver, Canada.

It is a common experience there to be biking into bright light and then drop into what feels like complete darkness in the underpass. One day it occurred to me that if something was in the middle of that trail and I was cruising at a good speed I would never know what I hit, until I went flying over it.

What if it was a corpse?

And that’s exactly what happens to my character at the beginning of “Underpass.”

So what do I try to do in the first two pages? Well, I don't make a habit of this, but in effect I did the journalism thing of 5 W's.

WHO: It was important to establish some stuff about my protagonist. He's badly organized. He has a minimum wage job. He has a somewhat shady past but he's trying to keep to the straight and narrow (although, as we will see in later pages, his view of that takes some detours). Mostly he's trying to learn to think before he acts.

WHAT: A bicycle and a dead body.

WHERE: An underpass under I-5. If you live on the West Coast, you at least know we're in that part of the world. All the place names I mention in the story are real in Bellingham, by the way (although the businesses are not).

WHEN: During the summer of 2020. Lockdown is like a ghost, haunting every decision my characters make.

WHY: I'm not talking about why the corpse is a corpse. We won't understand that until much later. But the reasons for our hero's behavior are well set up by his personality and history as hinted at in the first two pages.

So, that's what I was trying to do. How well did I succeed? Read for yourself.

Sean was running late even before he ran over the corpse.

It hadn't been the alarm's fault. His phone had rung smack on time and he popped out of bed like a fireman. But it was just one of those mornings when everything moved in slow motion. He sat down

with coffee and half a microwaved burrito, then saw it was already quarter past six. To reach work by seven he would have to take off now.

The burrito returned to the fridge. He grabbed his bike and went out the door, then rushed back for his mask. Can't go to work with a naked face in this wonderful summer of 2020.

Where the hell had he put it last night? He would have to use the spare he kept in his locker, which made his ears bleed by the end of the shift.

So it was Covid's fault that he was late. Not that Mr. Crocasta would buy that. "No excuses," he would say. "You do or you don't do." Sounding just like Yoda.

So Sean was pedaling as fast as he could when he turned onto the Whatcom Creek Trail, the fastest way to get from downtown to Electric Avenue where the Lunchbox was located.

It was a sunny day, bright even through his sunglasses. There were two underpasses, first under the southbound highway, and then under the north. Both were short but pitch black compared to outside, and when he entered the second he never saw the body until he ran over it.

Sean flew, landed on a mucky spot that kept him from breaking anything, and rolled another two yards. He rose, swearing. Shedding his helmet, he fumbled around for his bicycle, pulled it up by the handlebars and almost tripped over something.

He reached down. *God!* It was a person.

"Mister, you okay?"

Sean touched the man's cheek. *No mask*, was his first thought, quickly followed by: *He's cold. He's dead.*

In a weird way that was a relief. The man surely couldn't have gone cold in the ten seconds since Sean hit him. He must have been dead for, what? Hours?

Didn't matter. The smart thing was to haul ass before someone saw him. The fact that he had nothing to do with the man's death wouldn't stop the police from making his life hell.

Sean pushed his bike. The front wheel wouldn't roll. *Damn it.*

He closed his eyes. They were beginning to adjust to the dark, but he could not be certain that parts of his bike hadn't fallen off. He might leave traces.

That changed things.

He pulled out his phone. There was no signal in the underpass, so he stepped out into the bright sunlight with one eye shut. That would keep one eye adapted for the darkness, a trick he had learned from a guy in stir for house robbery.

“911. What’s your emergency?”

“Yeah. I just found a dead body.”

“Where are you, sir?”

“Under the overpass. Or in the underpass. I-5 on the Whatcom Creek Trail.”

“That’s off Meador?”

“Right.”

“What’s your name, sir?”

Sean hesitated. But they already had his phone number, didn’t they? “Sean Palient. Like Patient, but with an L.”

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Robert Lopresti is a retired librarian who lives in the Pacific Northwest. His hundred-plus short stories have won the Derringer and Black Orchid Novella Awards and been reprinted in *Best American Mystery Stories*. His novel *Greenfellas* is a comic caper about the Mafia trying to save the environment. He blogs at SleuthSayers and Little Big Crimes.