

**The First Two Pages: “Born Cross-Eyed” by Linda Landrigan**  
From *Friend of the Devil: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the Grateful Dead*, edited by Josh Pachter (Down and Out Books)

An Essay by Linda Landrigan

One of the most common problems I see in stories submitted to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* is the writer starting the story in the wrong place. (One thing I really appreciate about this blog is its conscientious focus on where a story starts.) That's one of the reasons why, when Josh Pachter invited me to submit a story to *Friend of the Devil*, my first thought was that I would rather pull out my fingernails.

I'm an editor, not a writer. And I know myself well enough to recognize that finding the right place to start a story is something that I struggle with myself.

Eventually, though, I decided to give it a shot. The anthology collects stories inspired by the songs of the Grateful Dead, and mine was “Born Cross-Eyed.” Let me confess here, too, that I was not very familiar with the works of The Dead (I even bought a book to try to get up to speed), but I saw in the lyrics of this song the perspective of a rambler about to embark once again on the open road. They recalled for me the transient encounters characteristic of travel and how they can be impactful. And coupled with that is the chagrin of saying goodbye. The open road means exploration and freedom from entanglements and endless possibilities, but also potentially separation and loneliness.

As it happens, I have a fondness for episodic road stories, so that was my way in. In the end, my story, “Born Cross-Eyed,” is not really a road story, but it *is* a tale of discovery—one with a nod, also, to Shirley Jackson.

And at least it starts on the road:

She wasn’t really worried about Miss Crowley, Beryl told herself as she took the exit from the highway for Granville. But she was.

I chose to begin this way because I like stories that start with a character in action, and here Beryl is doing two things: driving and worrying. This not only allowed me to scratch my road story itch, it also immediately set my character in a place and in a conundrum: we don’t yet know why she is worried about Miss Crowley, but the fact that she is (hopefully) engages the reader’s sympathy right away. The opening also (I hope) signals that much of the action of this story is going to be interior. The reader doesn’t yet know what path of discovery Beryl is going to travel, but she knows at least that she is firmly inside this character’s head.

For years, a highlight of her visits home had been a stop on the way out of town to chat with her old fifth grade teacher at a coffee shop. But on Beryl’s last trip to see her parents, the time hadn’t been right to meet up. Then Beryl didn’t get a birthday card—and Miss Crowley had never missed her birthday in the fifteen or so years since Beryl had been her student. Friends sent her texts and her folks called, but Miss Crowley sent an old-fashioned card with a lovely, affirming message that always cheered Beryl up.

I wanted this paragraph to do a lot of work: I wanted it to give the reader some sense of a character who will never actually appear on the page, and I wanted to show why this relationship was so important to Beryl, since this is what drives her behavior. But I also wanted to get in mentions of Beryl's parents (a memory concerning her father will be an important moment), and I wanted to signal that much of the material of this story was going to involve Beryl's past.

She'd tried calling from time to time, leaving messages at first but then she started getting a fast busy signal instead. She was a little surprised to realize that she didn't have an email address for the older woman, but then, Miss Crowley had never been that forthcoming about herself. Beryl had never even been to her house.

And here I wanted the turn: the realization for both the character and the reader that not all here may be as it appears. From this point on, I hope the reader is going to be experience just a little tension and dread.

At first, Beryl's odyssey takes her through "squiggley" suburban streets where all the houses are devoid of human activity (again, trying to make the mundane feel strange). In this tight warren of streets Beryl gets herself lost, briefly, but that opens her up to the first of the story's encounters, that memory I mentioned:

Beryl found a safe place to pull over and had an odd sense of déjà vu. Once she'd been in the car with her father, driving along a winding, deserted street like this. Coming to a sudden stop, he had banged his fists on the steering wheel and started to cry.

I love stories that juxtapose the quotidian with the unusual and the threatening. I think Shirley Jackson does a terrific job with this, and I'm always delighted when I find such stories for *AHMM*. In this case, Beryl's journey of discovery leads her down a strange rabbit hole of history and secrets as she probes the whereabouts of her old friend.

Just as I expected, I didn't have an easy time writing the story. My first few attempts were awkward rambling things. But what I hoped for was a story that gives the sense that anything can happen and where the anticipation of that next thing is at once thrilling and frightening.

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