

The First Two Pages: “The Smart One” by Janice Law
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An Essay by Janice Law

I wrote “The Smart One” for *Crimes Against Nature*, an anthology of environmentally themed mysteries. The difficulty with the required topic is that most of the big environmental crimes, like the near extermination of the buffalo, the creations of “fur deserts” in the west for political reasons, or the relentless plowing of the Great Plains just before the dust bowl, were the products of many hands and, therefore, very difficult to handle in a short story.

I needed a crime that had distinct perpetrators, that took place in a discrete amount of time, and that would have a small number of interesting characters. After I found something suitable, I faced the usual decision, whether to start with action, exposition, dialogue, or atmosphere. Action, at the moment, is almost the cliché opening of mystery novels. It provides sure-fire interest but can require too much backstory for short fiction.

Exposition has rather gone out of fashion, requiring as it does, a patient reader and an unmistakable and gripping authorial voice such as too few of us possess. Atmosphere, too, can be dangerous ground, taking up too much early space in the narrative and, at worse, arousing thoughts of Snoopy’s comic gambit: “It was a dark and stormy night.”

Fortunately, the fact that I had been hearing little bits of chat between my characters settled me on dialogue. I decided to write a conversation that would create

atmosphere and unobtrusively fill in the details that would normally require exposition.

The first paragraph illustrates the technique I employed:

“You were always the smart one,” Eddie said, without taking his eyes off the road. That was the first thing he’d said in the half hour or so they’d been in the car, and Tony, who would normally have made a joke and said, “conventional wisdom” or “no dispute about that,” hesitated a moment.

This paragraph does a couple of things, it gives us the setting, it tells us that Eddie and Tony know each other well, and it suggests a certain uneasiness on Tony’s part. It was my plan from the start (in as much as I had a plan, as I rarely know the details of a plot) to build an atmosphere that becomes increasingly sinister, first through dialogue and, later, from the country setting where the men will take a walk.

The paragraph also suggests the different verbal styles of the two men. Eddie is laconic. His short statements are declarative, and their sentiments often annoy or unsettle Tony, who responds at length to Eddie, and at even greater length within his own thoughts. While Eddie says little, he’s the one who drives both the car and the conversation.

“Your dad was an honest man,” he remarks. When Tony reflects that his father would never have grown the business, Eddie agrees that Tony has ideas. “Like I say, you were always the smart one.”

For reasons we do not yet understand, this exchange impels Tony to reach for a cigar, which he does not light. Eddie does not like smoking in his car, although he smokes himself and used to smoke in all his vehicles. Now it is apparently “Bad for the

kids' lungs," the first mention of Eddie's children.

At the top of the second page, we get a real workhorse paragraph, one which provides a reason for the changes in Eddie: his sick daughter. We also have a reason for Tony's presence in the car and for his wariness about Eddie, and we get a hint about their shared business in one word, *locations*.

Course Billie's illness changed everything. After Billie was diagnosed, Eddie turned careful. Tony knew that and what he'd like to know was whether Eddie was now careful about everything or just smoke in cars and kids' diets and helmets for cycling. That would be useful knowledge, and it was one reason that Tony had given up a golf game for this ride, when locations, after all, were Eddie's part of the business.

The other three paragraphs of page 2 expand on their respective roles in a trucking company and enlarge our view of Tony's personality. At this point in the story I want the reader to be uncertain which of these men is the more dangerous. Is it expansive, verbal, confident, and smart Tony or silent but purposeful Eddie?

Tony handled the books, the money, the customer relations. Eddie did the trucking and disposal. He was behind the wheel from the first and still was on special occasions. But mostly now Eddie was scheduling and seeing that trucks were maintained and hiring and firing drivers. And finding locations. Locations were Eddie's turf, and it was in Tony's interest to know nothing about them.

He should have told Eddie what he usually told him: *I trust your judgment. I don't need to know everything.* With the unspoken addition: *it's better I don't.* Did Eddie realize that? Did he realize that a little insulation, a little deniability, could be a good thing? Maybe. Eddie wasn't the smart one in the outfit but that didn't mean he hadn't picked up a thing or two working with someone who was always on the ball and who had imagination to burn.

I should have made some excuse if I didn't want to refuse outright, Tony thought. But there he was up against the Billie situation again. Everything lately came back to his seven seven-year-old niece, a cute kid,

pretty and bright, the smart one in Eddie's bunch and the youngest by—what? a dozen years. He hadn't recognized her the last time she was home: a naked eggshell head that the girly pink band with the rose couldn't conceal, the spider arms and legs, the pallor.

Finally, we are also introduced to Billie, ironically “the smart one” among Eddie’s children, who will prove to be the crucial person and the driving force in the narrative.

The structure of “The Smart One” was a little bit unusual for me, and when I sat down to write this blog, I realized that the design was actually similar to the structure of a very great and famous story and one of my favorites, Poe’s “The Cask of the Amontillado.” I read it as a schoolgirl and taught it later, but it took me quite a while to recognize the similarities: two men with history between them talking about trifles on what seems like a commonplace excursion that turns increasingly sinister.

Altogether a neat illustration of how effective plots survive and evolve.

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Janice Law is an Edgar-nominated (*The Big Payoff*) and Lambda Award-winning (*Prisoner of the Riviera*) novelist. She has written two series of mysteries, as well as contemporary fiction and short stories, mostly for *AHMM* and *EQMM*. Her work has appeared in a variety of anthologies, including *Paraspheres* (fantasy), *Enter the Apocalypse* (sci-fi), *Vengeance* (MWA), *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year 2021*, and several Level Best editions. Her most recent novels are *Mornings in London* (mysteriouspress.com), *Homeward Dove* (Wildside), and *The Falling Men* (Amazon). Retired from teaching, she now has more time for birdwatching and painting. www.janicelaw.com.