

## **The First Two Pages: “Althea” by Faye Snowden**

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An Essay by Faye Snowden

When Josh Pachter invited me to submit to the Grateful Dead anthology, *Friend of the Devil*, I said yes even though I’m not a bona fide Deadhead. But I enjoy their music, the folksy, bluesy feel of it. The song I selected, “Althea,” fascinated me. And I was intrigued by the dialogue between a backsliding man and the ever-patient girlfriend he was finally dumping. What surprised me is that the girlfriend wasn’t even angry. Me personally? I would have keyed his car—or thought about it. Hard. I wanted to turn the song on its head. I’ll let you, as the reader, be the judge of my success.

My edits for the story began before I even lifted a pen. I’d envisioned a protagonist who longs to escape his cheating wife and two troublesome teenagers. He abandons his family one night on a vintage Indian motorcycle he restored with his own hands. Later, he picks up a beautiful stranger in a seedy bar. They go on a long road trip where she involves him in a murder. The story would end with him standing on a cliff, his hands in the pockets of his Levis and blue sky all around. In the distance a hawk would be circling on a gentle wind. And our protagonist would then take his hands out of his pockets, lay himself on that homegoing wind, and

glide (yes, glide like that hawk!) eventually to his death. Much better than keying his car.

Besides the obvious embarrassing aspects of such a tale, I realized I had other problems. I enjoy short stories that are focused and lean. They work when the protagonist's desire is concrete and crystal clear. At some point, he must believe only one path will lead him to what he desires most. And symbols are fine when they occur naturally in writing, but the final story suffers when authors write with symbols (mountains, hawks, wind) top of mind. I had to let go of both the main character and the plot I had envisioned in service to writing a tale that I would want to read.

I started by giving my protagonist, Quint, a clear desire. He wants, no, he desperately *needs* money. And not to leave his marriage but to save it, or so he tells himself. What he really wants to save is his pride. He doesn't meet Althea in a seedy bar. This is a bar where the bartenders wear vests and bowties and call him sir. Further, Althea's beauty is questionable, but she's able to trap him by claiming she knows how he can get his hands on some money. Using this start, I was able to write a passable first draft. But upon review, I found that the story wasn't as lean as I liked them. It still had too many tentacles, e.g. images and characters that distract from the story's main focus. Take a look at the first draft's opening paragraph:

Quint had never been good at money. That was just a plain fact. He was good at fatherhood, and up until this point, he had marriage down. When they were ten years old, he and his wife swore a blood oath that they would be married when they grew up. He kept that promise. They married in front of a preacher in an El Cerrito church after they both graduated Berkeley. He'd never forget how happy his mother was to see him off, or that ridiculous purple ostrich feather in her hat waving in the wind as they drove away for a honeymoon in San Clemente. His daughter Sadie would argue a body to death if they tried to convince her that her father didn't hang the moon and fling the stars into the sky. And his son claimed the man, dad jokes and all, who shaved his head to hide the bald spot. But money, yeah, he sucked, and the oft discussed shit was about to hit the proverbial fan.

See what I mean by too many tentacles? The blood oath, the mom, and her hat with the purple ostrich feather waving in the wind. The dad jokes. And don't forget San Clemente. There were so many images that the poor reader wouldn't know where to focus. Further, Quint's voice became lost in all of that. Here is the paragraph in the final edit:

Quint had never been good at money. That was just a plain fact. He was good at fatherhood, and up until this point, he had marriage down. When he was ten years old, he swore a blood oath to his sweetheart that one day they would marry. He kept that promise. They wed in an El Cerrito church after they both graduated Berkeley. His daughter Sadie thought that he hung the moon and flung the stars into the sky. And his teenaged son didn't mind claiming as father the man who shaved his entire head to hide a bald spot. But money, yeah, he sucked, and the oft discussed shit was about to hit the proverbial fan.

The reader can better feel the tension between the two Quints: the family man and the loser who's bad with money. For me, I could also hear Quint, in his own words, talk to me.

During more editing, I found another distraction on the first two pages. While writing I thought it would be fun to add a couple of lovers sitting at a piano, drunkenly tapping out the tune and singing a bad version of “You’ve Got a Friend.” I deleted the entire paragraph. By cutting the drunks, every onstage character—Quint, Althea, Sylvester—in the first two pages and beyond, had a stake in the story.

After submitting the final draft to the editor, he asked that I significantly decrease the wordcount. This was a difficult task, but afterwards the first two pages were better for it. Images were tightened, and sentences were shortened. For example, “She wore long black braids and flowers in her hair, not a discreet daisy behind the ear, but an entire crown of yellow and purple wildflowers” was changed to simply say, “A crown of purple and yellow wildflowers sat atop her long black braids.”

Finally, the editor suggested I make clear the race of the two main characters. I balked at first, resenting how many readers automatically assume the main characters of popular fiction are white. It does place an extra burden on writers of color. It’s the world we live in, however, so I agreed to his suggestion. I decided that I wouldn’t do it explicitly, but in a way that would attach and add to the story. There would be no sentences such as, “Althea, a Black woman, walks toward Quint.” Instead, we see Althea’s race through Quint’s eyes and in reference

to other important story points. Here is the sentence I went with: “Her smile, all straight white teeth against smooth brown skin, made her look hungry.” From that, the reader, and maybe Quint to some extent, can see that Althea is dangerous. We know that Quint is Black when he remembers his grandmother’s nagging admonishment when he thinks of Althea as “his people.” He hears his grandmother’s words in his head, *All skin folk ain’t kin folk*.

As you can probably tell from this essay, I’m trying to build my short story chops. I take them seriously but have fun during the process. I try to learn from each one I write. With “Althea,” I learned focus over detail can make the story better.

### **The First Two Pages of “Althea”**

Quint had never been good at money. That was just a plain fact. He was good at fatherhood, and up until this point, he had marriage down. When he was ten years old, he swore a blood oath to his sweetheart that one day they would marry. He kept that promise. They wed in an El Cerrito church after they both graduated Berkeley. His daughter Sadie thought that he hung the moon and flung the stars into the sky. And his teenaged son didn’t mind claiming as father the man who shaved his entire head to hide a bald spot. But money, yeah, he sucked, and the oft discussed shit was about to hit the proverbial fan.

For the past few weeks, he’d become a regular at a cocktail bar on Durant near the university. He liked the fancy bartender there in his black vest and bow tie, enjoyed the way he kept calling him ‘sir’. The bartender had introduced himself several times, Lester or Slyvester or some shit, but Quint couldn’t remember. He just knew he was easy to talk to and kept his opinions to himself, which he sorely needed at this

jumping off point to the crash landing that would be the rest of his life.

“Another whiskey, sir?” Lester or Slyvester asked.

“Sure, why not fiddle while Rome burns?” Quint answered.

“Just put it on my tab.”

“Don’t do that. I got it. It’s on me.”

It was a woman’s voice, lithe and silky. When he turned toward her, he found himself confronted with deep brown eyes staring into his. It was as if she were studying him to discover the best first cut for a dissection. A crown of purple and yellow wildflowers sat atop her long black braids.

“No thank you, beautiful lady,” he lied. She wasn’t even two-beer beautiful. And that smile, all straight white teeth, made her look hungry. “I’ve decided that I won’t be a complete cliché today.”

“What do you mean?” she said, taking the barstool next to him and leaning close, smelling of white oleander, and late afternoon sunshine that reminded him of blue sky and clothes drying on the line.

“A married man in a bar, spending the last of his credit balance on expensive whiskey, defeated and defenseless, meets a woman in a bar to further fuck up his already shattered life. What do the kids say? Nope, not today.”

“You don’t sound too fond of yourself,” she said.

“I’m afraid when I tell my wife what I have to tell her she won’t be too fond of me either.”

She laughed and slid his iPhone aside to make room for the two twenty-dollar bills she set near his elbow. He used two fingers to push them back over to her.

“I’m not hitting on you,” she said.

“Then why are you buying me stupidly expensive drinks?”

“You first. Why so sad?”

“I don’t tell people I don’t know my business, not on elevators and not on airplanes.”

“We are in a bar,” she said.

Quint had never been good with money. That was just a plain fact. He was good at fatherhood, and up until this point, he had marriage down. When he was ten years old, he swore a blood oath to his sweetheart that one day they would marry. He kept that promise. They wed in an El Cerrito church after they both graduated Berkeley. His daughter Sadie thought that he hung the moon and flung the stars into the sky. And his teenaged son didn’t mind claiming as father the

man who shaved his entire head to hide a bald spot. But money, yeah, he sucked, and the oft discussed shit was about to hit the proverbial fan. “Or in bars.”

“You and Sylvester seem to get along well.”

He wondered about that. How did she know he talked to the bartender? He had never seen her in the bar before. Or maybe she had been there plenty of times, but he didn’t notice her because he was too busy drowning his troubles in whiskey.

He tilted his almost empty crystal glass at her. “The man gives me whiskey, so I tell him all.”

“My name is Althea. Does that help?”

No, it didn’t, but he kept quiet hoping that she would go away.

“Just open up,” she leaned in even closer. “Tell me if you’re wrecked or reckless.”

She stopped. They looked at each other for a few moments. The way she talked intrigued him, her turn of phrase. The whiskey slithered in his veins like molten fool’s gold, urging him to tell her. He hadn’t even told his wife, yet here he was ready to confess to some strange woman in a bar. He knew then that he wasn’t wrecked or reckless. He was both. It reminded him of the summer visits to his grandmother in Louisiana. They walked a lot, took buses, but Quint had always been terrified of walking across the Texarkana bridge. The short railing and the racing cars below put a fear into his belly that mirrored pain.

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Faye Snowden is the award-winning author of The Killing series (Flame Tree Press). The second book in the series, A Killing Rain, was named as one of the best southern gothic mysteries of 2022, was longlisted for CWA’s Gold Dagger, and won gold in the Foreword INDIES Book of the Year awards. Two of her short stories have appeared in “Best of” anthologies. Today, Faye lives and writes from her home in northern California.