

The First Two Pages: “Salt, Sand, Slay” by Cindy Martin
From *Gone Fishin’: Crime Takes a Holiday: The Eighth Guppy Anthology*,
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An Essay by Cindy Martin

When I plan a vacation, I seek out activities. I’m not talking about walking through museums or strolling into unique shops. I mean extreme action.

Last fall, my husband and I took a trip to the Grand Canyon to celebrate my sixtieth birthday. In the first three days of the getaway, we hiked three miles deep into the canyon, biked fifteen miles of challenging rolling hills along the rim, and kayaked ten miles on the Colorado River along Horseshoe Bend. To me, that’s exhilarating and inspiring.

My daughters, even now as adults, have come to expect action on vacation: white water rafting and ziplining to snowmobiling and skiing.

With that said, when I sat down to write a short story for the eighth annual Guppies anthology, *Gone Fishin’: Crime Takes A Holiday*, I knew it would involve some sort of exercise. I chose running since I’ve been at it since I was fourteen years old, and I’m a fitness instructor. One of my favorite getaways was a weekend in the Florida Keys for the Seven Mile Bridge Run (not to be a nerd, but it’s actually 6.8 miles).

I’ve competed in this race with my husband multiple times. Running at daybreak over the turquoise waters gives you time to think. When you’re a crime

writer, thinking involves plotting murders and mayhem. Once I knew what my crime and vacation spot would be, I debated how to start the story.

I considered the bang of the gun at the beginning of the race or a cut-to-the-chase approach by placing the body behind crime scene tape flickering in the soft Florida breeze. Instead, I began with the setup of a husband and wife in their car heading from Miami to Keys where they would join their friends and run in the Seven Mile Bridge Race. Everyone can relate to driving somewhere with a spouse, family member, friend. The setting was simple, beautiful, yet there is underlying tension between the couple. Something dark and deadly will taint the tropics.

As Steve and I crossed Card Sound Bridge, entering the Florida Keys, the stress of planning this weekend melted away. I soaked in the cloudless sky, painted a vivid cerulean. Along State Road A1A, brilliant green palm fronds swayed above tiki huts and seashell shops. Smiling, Steve tapped his wedding band on the steering wheel to a Jimmy Buffet tune.

“Isn’t that a fact? Changes in latitude. Changes in attitude,” I said.

“Absolutely, Grace.” My husband kept his eyes, covered in aviator shades, on the road.

Even though we were seated with only a small console between us, he seemed far away—his mind elsewhere.

Often, I used this approach when I was a TV producer for *America’s Most Wanted*. In my twenty years of writing hundreds of scripts, I asked myself with each case: *How do I make this story different? Where do I begin?* There’s plenty of options: crime, location, fugitive, victim, detective, an event.

Let's back up to my thought process on approaching this short story. I confess I'm a plotter. I learned from being a producer that plotting or at least sketching out a skeleton outline of major points and actions helped me write. With a rough outline in my notebook, I travelled to crime scenes to interview detectives and victims' family members. I was dealing with real life, nonfiction. All the plot points were facts, but I had to develop creative storytelling.

A few years ago, when I decided I wanted to author a thriller novel, I discovered writing fiction was a totally different animal. The best advice I received was to start with short stories. So, I put on my student hat and plunged into the world of honing my craft. Thanks to Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America workshops, podcasts, and blogs, I was able to soak up valuable tips from established authors.

With "Salt, Sand, Slay," I wanted to lure the reader into a trouble-in-paradise scenario by introducing the four characters, a race, Florida Keys, and the warm month of April. (Journalism 101: Who, What, Where, and When). I added subtle conflict: two couples who may not be so happily married.

After our daughter left for college, I had floated several potential trips by my husband. He found flaws with each and every one. Steve knew the streets of Miami and layout of the gym better than the interior of our home, especially the bedroom. After twenty-four years of marriage, I adapted to his adrenaline style of working violent cases—even when he disappeared for three days because he wouldn't quit until he found the guy, gal, suspect, murderer, rapist, fill

in the blank. Often, I joked with my colleagues at the book shop that I should file a missing persons report on my detective husband.

On a rare dinner date a few months ago with our former neighbors, Steve became fired up to go to the Keys. Kaci and Paul bounced between their properties in Miami and the Keys, making a killing on their rentals. They were more like business partners than husband and wife. Paul, the introvert, preferred sunsets and late nights reading with a glass of wine. In fact, when he lived next door, Paul and I joked that we were a two-member book club, since we shared crime novels and occasionally met to discuss them over a glass of wine.

Layering is key. By the bottom of the second page, readers should sense jealousy and question what's really going on.

Kaci emerged from the canary-yellow cottage next door wearing a short white cotton dress that showed off her sun-drenched skin. Paul followed in khaki shorts and a short-sleeved shirt decorated with flamingoes. After a round of hugs, Kaci and Paul escorted us into our place.

“It’s so cute. It reminds me of a gingerbread house,” I said.

That was the turning point in the short story where things turn upside down.

I tighten the screws on the next page and continue twisting and tightening. It became a story of things aren't the way they seem.

In the past two years, I've had four short stories published. It was no simple feat. Each one was an investment of several months where I worked on word economy, structure, theme, and where to begin. In all of my stories, the most edited and rewritten pages are the first two. The countless rewrites and approaches often had a ripple effect on the rest of the story. The process was long. I was fortunate to

get feedback from other writers with a mixture of experience in an online Sisters in Crime Guppies group called Emerald Stories.

I equate writing to running. Each step, each word, counts. You set a pace to carry you through to the end. When you reach your goal, you put on a medal and exhale, knowing you gave it your all. That's winning.

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For 20 years, Cindy Martin chased down fugitives as a producer for the *America's Most Wanted* TV show. She travelled around the world, interviewing law enforcement and victims' families, and wrote hundreds of scripts. Cindy is a member of Sisters in Crime, Mystery Writers of America, and International Thriller Writers. She's had four short stories published and is working on her debut thriller novel, *Relentless*. When Cindy isn't writing, she's teaching killer fitness classes, running, biking, and staying active in her community. She resides in southwest Florida with her husband, three daughters, and two dogs.