

The First Two Pages: “Being Alive” by Brian Cox
From *Every Day a Little Death: Crime Fiction Inspired by
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An Essay by Brian Cox

Making a story work sometimes requires me to abandon first ideas that I loved.

I learned a version of this painful reality decades ago when I first read the well-known writing advice attributed to Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch: “Murder your darlings.” It’s an axiom I took to heart as a young writer. Over the decades, I’ve developed an openness to entertaining the sacrifice of any beloved character, any clever bit of dialogue, poignant scene, or passage of lovely prose in service of bettering the story. I’m willing to run red ink through any one of those components—love it, though I may!—if it strengthens the story.

First ideas, on the other hand, are still tough for me to let go. First ideas are those seeds of inspiration that form the genesis of the story and from which everything else grows. They can be a character’s distinguishing attribute or their voice, a special relationship, a snippet of dialogue, an intriguing setting, a single, dramatic image, or even an ending. Whatever they are, these first ideas have tremendous staying power because they give me an initial foothold on the story cliff, which can be such a treacherous climb, and they afford me a way to continue scaling. I’m grateful for every one of my first ideas and cherish them. As a result, I am also fiercely loyal to them,

even when it happens that one of them, having served its purpose in helping the story gain form, is now vestigial like a tailbone—or worse, encumbers the story’s flow.

That’s when it helps to have an astute editor nudge me and make me do what I know in my heart I need to do, which is let that first idea go so that the story can be more effective.

When Josh Pachter approached me about writing a short story for his anthology *Every Day a Little Death: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Stephen Sondheim*, several first ideas struck me. The song “Being Alive” from *Company*, one of my favorite Sondheim musicals, would be the source of inspiration and would offer the central theme of the story. While “Company” in the Tony Award-winning musical’s title refers to having friends over, in my story “company” would mean the CIA—so I knew I was writing a tale of espionage. I quickly latched onto the trope of a disillusioned agent who wants out of the spy game, and I knew he was in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula during the winter, which would underscore his isolation. Lastly, I knew the story would open with the three words “Another vodka stinger,” from the brilliantly cynical song “Ladies Who Lunch,” and end with the two words “Everybody dies” from the same song.

These first ideas excited me, and I built the story around them.

When it was done, I liked a lot of it, but I knew I had a problem. The beginning. The story started on a deceptive foot. I had decided to open the story with a character

who was not the protagonist in order to misdirect the reader as to whom they should trust. While it worked at the outset, it later produced a jolt in the reader that was unsatisfying and confusing. And I knew this. But, dammit, the story needed to start with “Another vodka stinger,” and I couldn’t puzzle out how to keep that as the opening line and at the same time smooth out the jolt.

So, because I was loath to abandon this first idea, I crossed my fingers and hoped that maybe the jolt wasn’t as noticeable as I thought it was. Maybe I could get it by the reader.

I’ll never know because I couldn’t get it by Josh.

He identified the problem with the beginning and suggested I start with a scene I originally had as a flashback. I recognized immediately that he had found a solution to the jolt. But then the story wouldn’t start with “Another vodka stinger” and the story had to start with “Another vodka stinger” because, after all, it was a first idea.

But I knew he was right. For the story to work, I would have to let go of how I first thought the story would begin, as clever as I thought it was. This first idea was now an impediment to the story’s full potential. It had to go, and so I sacrificed it, as difficult as that was. And the story is better for it.

The first quick scene establishes the inciting moment, which is the receipt of a mysterious package by the protagonist, before moving into the second scene, which begins with the first idea:

“Another vodka stinger, please,” said Marta, pushing her empty glass forward. “Heavy on the sting.”

She had thought when she walked into the Rock River Tavern that she might need to tell the bartender how to make her preferred cocktail. There were only two bars in this rural Upper Peninsula town, and she suspected a vodka stinger might be viewed as something exotic. Who even knew if they had crème de menthe this far from civilization? But she’d been mistaken. Joanne’s past was portrayed in a gallery of tattoos up and down her right arm, and she clearly knew how to do more than pour pints of beer and shots of whiskey. Rock River seemed to attract people with all manner of personal histories – ones they shared, and those they didn’t.

These two paragraphs work to introduce the setting in the Upper Peninsula and the idea that Marta is susceptible to underestimating the town’s characters, many of whom have pasts that shouldn’t be dismissed as provincial.

We meet Stove, a bar denizen who enjoys playing the jaw harp, and learn that the area is undergoing uncommonly warm weather. I had initially envisioned the story taking place in a winter landscape, but when I was in the U.P. last year, all the talk was of how little snow they’d gotten and so I decided to fold that oddity into the story. It seemed timely in a way.

I go on to sketch a picture of the U.P. town because I wanted the setting to be as essential as any one of the characters. The U.P. is beautiful, but it can also feel far removed from the goings-on in the world, which is precisely what many people love about it.

In the end, most of the first ideas for “Being Alive” remain to underpin the story, each serving an essential role in the story’s execution, but it is the sacrifice of the first

idea that perhaps delighted me the most that allows the story to work at its highest level.

One more darling murdered. One more story better off for it.

The First Two Pages of “Being Alive”

The parcel in his PO box was unexpected, and Robert Dean Jones considered it with a curiosity approaching suspicion. The return address was for an out-of-state sporting-goods store he'd never heard of. Old mistrusts die hard if ever, so he waited until he was in his truck before cautiously opening the package with a pocketknife. Atop the packing paper inside was an unsigned note in familiar handwriting that read, “Robert, I heard you've taken up fishing. Now you just need bait.”

He pulled away the packing paper to find an assortment of cheap lures and a box of slip bobbers, the kind he hadn't used since he was a kid. He gave the paper a once over, noticing nothing unusual, before turning his attention to the colorful spinners. He studied each one but didn't spot anything out of the ordinary. If there was something his old station chief wanted him to see, he was at a loss. He examined the orange-and-yellow bobbers next, but still found nothing of note. It wasn't until a second, closer examination that he noticed one bobber seemed ever so slightly heavier than the others. He gave it a gentle twist.

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Joanne set the drink in front of her. “Extra sting,” she said.

The only other person in the tavern was a guy in an orange hunting cap at the end of the bar, hunched over a draft. His name was Steve, but the locals called him Stove because he ran a fireplace-and-chimney repair business. He'd been eyeing Marta since she walked in, but so far had said nothing, only plucked occasionally at a jaw harp pinched against his teeth, grinning when Marta looked his way at the sound of the instrument's twang.

In the window hung two four-leaf clovers cut from green cardboard—an unenthusiastic gesture to mark St. Patrick's Day—and between them an orange neon sign that read ROUQIL. On one wall was a framed copy of the yellowing front page of the *Mining Journal* with the headline “Champs!” immortalizing the high-school football team's Class C State Championship from almost fifty years ago. Outside, Main Street was deserted, the only traffic an occasional pickup sporting a gun rack.

Marta wasn't surprised that *this* was where Robert would arrange to meet.

“I expected it to be a lot colder,” she said.

She'd taken off her parka when she came in and sat down. She wore jeans and an untucked red flannel shirt she'd chosen because she thought it would help her blend in. Her dark hair was shoulder length, with a sharp part on the left. Her black eyebrows were bold, defined, and swooping. When she smiled with closed thin lips, her cheeks lifted as though filled with puffs of air. Men had told her that her cheeks made her look younger. Innocent, some said, which made her laugh.

“It's been a peculiar March,” said Joanne. “Normally, we'd have four, five feet of snow. Even the old-timers say they can't remember it being so warm, this time of year.

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Brian Cox is a fiction writer, newspaper editor, playwright, *New York Times* crossword constructor, and the artistic director of Pencilpoint Theatreworks in Ypsilanti, Michigan. His short story “The Surrogate Initiative” was included in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2020*. His play *Clutter* premiered at Theatre Nova in 2017 and won the Wilde Award for Best New Script, and his children's plays *Stone Dragon Stew* and *Welcome to Candy Kingdom* have been produced throughout the US and internationally. In the late 1980s, he served for several years as the managing editor of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* under Cathleen Jordan. He and his wife Dana have two children, Elijah and Annie.