

The First Two Pages: “Traveller from an Antique Land” by Anna Scotti
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An Essay by Anna Scotti

Santa Monica is a beach town tucked between L.A. and the ocean, typically described as delightful, yet quite the opposite as seen through the eyes of Lori Yarborough, the erstwhile librarian-on-the-run. As “Traveller from an Antique Land” opens, Lori is no longer running, but squatting in a homeless encampment beneath the Las Lagrimas Bridge. She has recently returned to California following years undercover in South Carolina, Montana, New Mexico—even Maui.

At first glance SaMo sounds nice enough, and relatively unchanged: “Lululemon-clad moms still pushed Cybex prams briskly along Montana Avenue. Bruins still jogged from UCLA down through Brentwood and gathered at the bars by night.” (For the uninitiated, a Cybex is not that old Target umbrella stroller you keep folded in the hatchback; a nice one can run upwards of two thousand bucks.) But Lori goes on to describe this “changed” Santa Monica as filthy and crime-ridden, with sidewalks “reeking of urine” and—she’s stretching to find something here—“baffling multi-sign parking regulations, and a subway that had never gathered the critical mass of law-abiding commuters to make it safe to ride.”

My goal in this opening is for the reader familiar with Santa Monica to say, “Oh, come on. Things really aren’t that bad,” and for even the reader *unfamiliar*

with the city to get an inkling that Lori might be seeing things through the proverbial smog-colored glasses.

Indeed, in the next paragraph, Lori shows a bit of self-awareness when she notes, “I guess the real difference was in perspective.” Yes, it is, Lori, and readers who have followed her journey through ten installments will—I hope—take heart here. Our once-intrepid PhD candidate, no longer undercover, is nonetheless still in hiding—from the friends she put in mortal peril, from her mother and cousin, and from the demons that all drunks face, the ones inside, the ones that urge them to have another drink rather than confront whatever it is that drives them to the sauce. Lori has hit rock-bottom. But she’s still smart, still brave, and still capable of self-reflection. She’s the same girl she ever was—just a bit older, a bit wiser, and a bit overly fond of her white wine and Stellas. It’s just like old times.

All she needs now is a murder.

But hang on. Lori is, at this point, what we call an “unreliable narrator.” Oh, she’s not lying or running a con, she’s not psychotic, she hasn’t been slammed on the head. She’s not a baby, or of low intellect, nor is she senile. She’s just—seeing things not quite clearly, and the reader picks this up when Lori tells us in one breath that she’s living on the sidewalk “where men spit and dogs piss,” and with the next that “It sounds rough but I was okay.”

Lori is an alcoholic, but she hasn't admitted that to herself yet. The reader is left to figure it out when she admits that "most days I had enough cash to get a box of sav blanc and a couple of bruised bananas at the 7-11 for supper." She's almost paralytically depressed, recognizing that there are people who would help her—Tony and Marta Morales, her mother, her former handler Colleen Hendricks—but actively avoiding contact with all of them.

The hard part about writing about someone who is depressed is not to be depressing. Depression is excruciatingly boring—yet necessary both to the plot, and to Lori's evolution as a character. In order for the story to work, I needed the reader to get a real feel for what it might be like to live on the streets, yet I didn't want to bore him or her with statistics about the unhoused, nor to make Lori's situation so unpleasant as to be unpalatable to read. So the little elements of her life are shown in a way that might intrigue readers and keep them curious.

Is there anyone who hasn't seen an ordinary, "normal-looking" person begging or sleeping on a park bench or digging through the trash bin and wondered, *how would I handle that situation?* Well, here's how. Lori accepts handouts from women who visit Westside homeless camps with sandwiches and bottled water. She dumpster-dives behind restaurants for leftover pizzas and uses a porta-potty at a nearby construction site before the crew arrives each day. Life ain't pretty. So my dilemma was how to maintain the gritty, matter-of-fact tone that

Lori's story demands, without alienating readers by sinking too far into the abyss. Add to that the fact that the majority of women experiencing homelessness have been, or will be, sexually assaulted. Yet Lori sleeps in a tent in a camp full of men, with caution but without fear.

The solution, as it is to so many of life's problems, was to get a dog.

Lola is "a rescued pittie-mix [whose] hacked-off ears and scarred muzzle were enough to scare the casual bad guys away, the college boys and street punks looking for women to harass or drunks to roll." I knew when I wrote Lola that she had to enter this story off-screen, as it were, because what I had in mind for her adoption would be enough to sustain an entire story on its own. (Readers can find that tale in "When Speaking Fails," one of the two librarian-on-the-run stories in *It's Not Even Past* that did not first appear in *Ellery Queen*.) So in "Traveller," Lola is already *statutum facto*. She sleeps at Lori's side, eats what Lori scavenges, and, although Lori is friendly enough with the men in the camp, she notes, "I didn't discourage the men around me—and they were nearly all men—from being a bit frightened of Lola."

This is a fairly long story—nearly 10,000 words—and the first two pages, as with any story, have a number of jobs to do. First and foremost, of course, is to draw the reader in—to make him or her want to read to the end. The pithiest dialogue, the most poignant message, or a drop-the-mic ending mean nothing if the

start of a story isn't compelling enough to catch and keep a reader. So while reintroducing old characters and a bit of backstory—the Moraleses, whom Lori thinks are a part of her past, will feature heavily in this tale—I've also got to introduce several new characters and, while striving for realism, create some sympathy for this ragtag band of vagabonds that have befriended Lori. First up, the well-to-do Westside women who spend a morning or two a week serving up food and essentials to the homeless.

Every few days, a caravan of Land Rovers and Wagoneers pulled up and disgorged a flock of yummy-mummy do-gooders, each laden with bags of sandwiches and doughnuts and fruit and toiletries, and sometimes a friendly word or blindingly bleached smile, too. The sandwiches were good, and you didn't have to praise God or promise to get clean to get one. You just had to put your hand out and say thanks.

Lori may sound a bit snarky when she refers to these ladies—who exist both in her world and in our own parallel universe—but she needs them, and she knows it. A very perspicacious reader may put two and two together, at this point—a gun on the table in the first act, and all that—but my hope is that the story flows smoothly enough that the reader will be as shocked as Lori is when one of those “yummy mummy do-gooders” turns out to be Lori's determined friend, Marta Morales.

The next task was more challenging. A sainted few of us hand out sandwiches on Saturdays, sure—but let's be real. Most of us avoid street people

when we can, shifting our eyes away on the subway, focusing intently on our phones when they try to connect. We might tithe at church or mosque or temple or stuff the red kettle with spare change in December, but we'd prefer not to meet the homeless one-on-one, to partake of a stone-soup meal or a sip of wine from a chipped cup. Yet it's essential, for this story to work, that the reader tolerate or even *like* these characters. My job was made harder in that there are no children in the camp - or even women, other than Lori—to soften our hearts. It's easy to turn away from a feculent, barefoot man as “the other.” It's harder to turn from the hopeful gaze of a woman clutching a hungry toddler. But to introduce a child to the mix would be to turn all eyes to him or her and away from the story I'm trying to tell. No, the cast had to stay all-male and all-adult. The solution was to show that Lori is valued in the camp, while simultaneously demonstrating that the men have human needs exactly like our own.

I guess I got lucky because some of the guys figured out early on that I could help them with the things that are doubly hard when you're on the street. I could write letters home in English or Spanish, I could email resumes from my phone, or show them how to load data onto a burner, google symptoms on Web MD, and translate legalese for the ones who had court dates pending. If they had the cash, I was presentable enough to buy envelopes or stamps or cigarettes at the drugstore without getting thrown out. In return they'd bring me jugs of water, or leftovers for Lola, or handfuls of change for the bus, whatever they had to share, and I got to pitch my tent in the most sheltered section of the outer abutments of the bridge.

Sounds pretty cozy, right? These guys write home to their moms, they apply for jobs, they even save leftovers for Lola! And Lori gets “the most sheltered section.” But lest the reader think perhaps sleeping rough isn’t so bad, after all, the passage continues.

The inner abutments looked more private, but no one went back there. Too many rats, used needles, and bad mojo. So I slept on concrete with steel on two sides and Big Oscar on the other.

And again, because the first couple of pages have to serve many functions, including laying groundwork for the story to come, these forbidding inner abutments are exactly where the body of a clean-cut college boy will soon be found. But before we can get to the heart of the plot (and note that I don’t say of the *story*, because the heart of the story is not the solving of a murder, but the saga of Lori’s redemption)—before we can get to the heart of the plot, we have to meet Big Oscar up close and personal; he is a complex character who will be integral to unfolding events.

Every homeless village has an unofficial mayor, and ours was Oscar. It wasn’t just his size that made him boss, although I’d certainly seen that size preclude violence between angry men more than once. He was calmly and quietly in charge, making sure any women who wandered into the camp were left more or less unmolested, and advising anyone who looked to be underage that they’d have to move along. The goal was to keep the eyes of the city, of the law, and of the nearby homeowners off us to the greatest extent possible. That seemed the best way to protect our little quarter-acre of paradise.

So Oscar is a good guy, ostensibly - and vulnerable, regardless of his imposing size. Lori explains that when she helped Oscar obtain some emergency heart medicine, despite being “well over six feet, at least 350 pounds, filthy, and scary as hell,” he “cried like a baby, a massive baby with forearms like canned hams and fists like coconuts.”

Indeed, Lori muses that street people are, for the most part, just folks.

When you read about the homeless in the newspaper, it's the unmedicated nutjobs, the ones who won't take their meds and won't go to shelters, who get all the attention. But most of the homeless are just people who have fallen on hard times. Old folks who couldn't afford a jacked-up rent, men who lost their jobs, women fleeing domestic violence, runaways who just couldn't stand Dad's smacks or Uncle Bob's groping for one more day. They're mostly wanting to keep to themselves, mind their business, and somehow get by until better days roll in. Our little place under the bridge was just that - our place - and so long as everyone behaved, the city let us be.

The first two pages of “Traveller from an Antique Land” have done workhorse duty. For those picking up a librarian-on-the-run story for the first time, there's enough backstory to grasp the character and understand her circumstances. For knowledgeable fans, there are elements new enough to intrigue—Lori is out of WITSEC, drinking too much, and living rough—but plenty of references to assure them that the character is still her essential self—erudite, resourceful, and, despite a smart mouth, vulnerable and kind. We've got important new characters, Lola and Oscar, a favorite old character, Marta (with the promise of Tony to come), and a familiar setting seen through an unfamiliar lens. It's clear that Lori can't continue

on as she is; despite her “unreliable narrator” assurances, she is definitely *not* okay.

So something’s gotta give.

Now, about that murder...

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Stories from Anna Scotti’s “librarian on the run” series have been selected three times for *Best Mystery Stories of the Year* (Mysterious Press) and have been recorded for several podcasts. The series began with “That Which We Call Patience” (*Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, 2019). In June, Down & Out Books will release all of the *EQMM* stories prior to “Traveller From an Antique Land” as a collection entitled *It’s Not Even Past*. The book will include two new stories, never before published.

Scotti’s short stories have been finalists for the Macavity, International Thriller Writers, Claymore, and Derringer Prizes, as well as for the *Ellery Queen* Reader’s Choice Award. She is also a poet and young adult novelist. Her work can be found in a variety of journals including *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Nimrod*, and others. Scotti teaches poetry and fiction online. Learn more at www.annakscotti.com.