

The First Two Pages: “Secretly Keith” by Charlie Kondek

From *Midnight Schemers and Daydream Believers*:

22 Stories of Mystery and Suspense,

edited by Judy Penz Sheluk (Superior Shores Press)

An Essay by Charlie Kondek

For the Superior Shores crime story anthology *Midnight Schemers & Daydream Believers*, I was thinking about theft.

The writer of a theft story has a lot to figure out. He has to describe what’s being stolen and how, whether it involves a low-effort, low-reward robbery like holding up a gas station, or a high-effort, high-reward one like a heist. He has to decide how much to describe the person or place being robbed. Likely the thief is going to be fleshed out as a character, but what about the object of the thief’s desire? Will it be developed or somewhat faceless, a person with a back story and something valuable or a cold, unseen vault? And the writer has to determine how the thief expects to get away and get compensated, whether he’s stealing cash or something that needs to be fenced.

All this was on my mind in approaching the story that ended up becoming “Secretly Keith.” I wanted to write about a personal robbery, for cold cash, by thieves that are, shall we say, less than professional. I was thinking about the kind of person that has cash on hand in these days of electronic banking and who might try to take it from him, and about the prompt in the anthology’s title. And as I

pondered these things, the characters started to emerge, informed by the setting where I place most of my work, suburban Detroit, where I was raised and still live.

Here is the opening, refined with editor and publisher Judy Penz Sheluk:

“Big” John Warmer was not a big man, unless you counted his stomach, a characteristic he not only failed to conceal but to which he drew attention by wearing t-shirts a size too small. Equally mismanaged was his hair, bald except for the ring below his crown, which he kept long in a so-called “skullet.” A ridiculous dark mustache complemented this and, with Big John’s propensity for wearing Levis and cowboy boots, sleeveless flannel shirts and trucker hats, he looked like he’d stepped right out of *The Dukes of Hazzard*. “Warner?” someone would ask, meeting him for the first time. “Your name’s Big John Warner?”

“Warmer,” he would correct. “As in, ‘you’re getting warmer.’” He was the local bookie at Fleet’s, a working man’s bar in Westland.

I’m glad I chose to start here, with the person who’s going to be targeted by the thieves. Those opening lines about Big John give the story a tone right away and provide a simple but effective pushing off point for what follows. We continue by saying more about what makes Big John ripe for robbing, and by whom:

Big John was not mobbed up but operated independently, albeit with the tacit permission of the bar’s owner, Tim Fleet. One had to assume he kicked a percentage of his book to Tim also, a quiet, amiable, but serious and enterprising man that often emerged from his office to stand behind the bar and chat with customers. Still, as small as Big John’s operation was, he probably took in a few thousand dollars a month from the bar’s regulars and those in its wider orbit betting on professional, college, and even some high school games. Nick Papke, setting up his guitar and amplifier on Fleet’s small stage that Friday, tried to remember when he and Rex first got the notion to rob Big John, or if it was simply another in the long chain of questionable ideas and worse decisions that comprised his life’s sequences.

Now we're moving. From the momentum created by introducing the character that would be robbed, we've established the stakes and introduced the protagonist. Time to find out more about him and how he and his accomplice plan to pull this off:

Nick, balding, bearded, eyes perpetually offended, had little to show for his forty-eight years on earth. Somehow he'd never been able to run the course laid out for him by his middle-class parents, the schools, the internships. Nor had he ever made it in a trade—that would have required some kind of initiative. And so he was stuck in a dead-end manufacturing job paying rent to his roommate and best friend Rex Haag, who owned a tiny house in Garden City. Nick was divorced. He had a daughter that wanted little to do with him. He had hoped when she turned twenty-one that she'd turn up at Fleet's to hear him play, but she never did, despite his invitations. Which was a shame, because playing guitar and singing in a rinky-dink cover band was all he was really good at. Tim Fleet let Nick and the band play classic rock and country tunes on Friday nights, for an amount that almost covered their tab.

The thing about robbing Big John was, they thought they could get away with it without him ever knowing it was them. See, John, like many of his customers, could barely work his mobile phone much less a banking app, so he only ever took bets in cash. And especially on a heavy betting weekend like this one, heading into the NFL playoffs and college bowl games, that was a lot of money on hand. Whenever Big John accepted a large amount, or if he had to pay some out, he'd go out to his car, always backed into the same corner of Fleet's lot with its rear to a fence, visible under the lights. Naturally, Big John had a ridiculous car, a long, ginger ale colored 2006 Lincoln Town Car Classic Edition. When he needed to deal with money, he'd get behind it and open the enormous trunk and do something no one was allowed to see.

And we're off. This plot is in motion, and it's pretty clear where it's going.

There's other characters, including “mastermind” Rex Haag, but this is going to be

a pretty basic collision between Nick and Big John. The word limit for this anthology call was 5,000, so as usual I am trying to be economical with the material. Even so, these first two pages are moving quickly. There's a few twists coming, as you can imagine, but for this story, I kept it pretty basic.

My stories aren't always like that, of course, but I think it worked very well this time. As for what happens, you'll have to buy the anthology to find out!

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