

**The First Two Pages: “Six Questions” by LaToya Jovena**  
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An Essay by LaToya Jovena

I hate to admit this, but it wasn't until this blog post that I realized I start most stories with the setting. “Six Questions,” which appears in *The Most Dangerous Games*, starts by making it clear that we are in court, and that a casino is a party to the case. I will tell you who's who and why you should care later, but first I want you to feel comfortable knowing where we are.

People had protested every time a casino opened in the area, but they fought the casino due in court today the hardest, because it had table games.

This is immediately followed by my main character's feeble attempt to frame the wronged party, which in this case is the casino, as a victim.

The casino would have negative social consequences. People would become addicted to gambling and crime would follow. So Lori found it ironic that the casino was the one hurt in this case, the victim of the crime.

I did this for the simple reason that if there is to be a villain, then there has to be a victim. I also did it because everyone wants to read about casinos being robbed. Matt Damon has three movies on this exact topic.

Now that you know where we are, and who—you think—the victim is, I tell you a little something about the characters. Characters staring in the mirror waxing poetic about their appearance is frowned upon in literature; not to mention there

isn't enough space for that in a short story. Therefore I describe Lori as a woman in menopause and further explain that the very thought of high heels makes her feel physical pain. I also tell you that Lori is a reporter, which hopefully makes it clear that she is observant.

Now we get to have some fun by reading about what Lori observes.

She heard high heels clicking on the cement before she saw them. Tony was wearing a different suit, but it was still a little too large and a lot too boxy. He looked like he wanted to be a player but fell short. His attorney's suit fit impeccably. Then there was Tony's girlfriend. She was wearing a tight tan high waisted skirt and a white blouse. On her feet were the signature red soles of some fancy designer.

I like looking nice as much as the next girl, but my obsession with fashion has very little to do with the actual designers. What I love about clothes is that we all use them as costumes to tell the world something about ourselves. A college kid in pajama pants is telling you they probably skipped a shower and that their parents are still subsidizing their existence. Scrubs tell you that the wearer works in the medical field. Every single one of us jumps to these conclusions. I use this in my stories a lot. Lori may not have a passion for fashion, but she knows that a red sole marks a shoe as expensive, that ill-fitting clothes mark someone as being poorly put together, and that a tailored suit marks someone as successful. As I said earlier, in short stories we have limited space, so I have to tell you who people are in as

few words as possible. Clothes are my go-to way to do that, but it's not my only way.

In the case of Lori, I tell you a lot about her by her reactions, or lack thereof.

I was once in a grocery store—in the middle of a sunny day—when the lights went out. I looked around and there was a worker stacking potatoes, which he kept right on stacking even though we were now standing in the dark. Were the lights actually out? Was I losing my mind? Eventually he felt me staring and suggested I check out before the back-up generators shut down the registers. Apparently the lights go out a lot there.

That story is one hundred percent true, and it helps explain Lori. She describes court as a boring place where the prosecutor normally wins. She also describes everyone as being shocked and dissatisfied with the sentences handed out. Apparently Lori has spent a lot of time in court.

Finally—buried as a throwaway line in the first two pages—I have Lori hint at the subject of our story, by expressing that she knows nothing about her.

But Lori knew nothing about the girlfriend, except that while Tony was the criminal, she looked like the player.

I did this to keep it subtle. At this point the reader's main focus is on the case. We are in a courtroom after all. What is the crime? What was the evidence? Did you say he was convicted? What was his punishment? I answer all of these questions in the first two pages to get them out of the way, because it's a red

herring. The real mystery is: What happened to the money? If you want to find out, you have to follow the person who isn't going to be led away in handcuffs, and to do that you will have to read *The Most Dangerous Games*.

### **The First Two Pages of “Six Questions”**

People had protested every time a casino opened in the area, but they fought the casino due in court today the hardest, because it had table games.

Their arguments were all the same. The casino would have negative social consequences. People would become addicted to gambling and crime would follow. So, Lori found it ironic that the casino was the one hurt in this case, the victim of the crime.

It was nine in the morning and already eighty degrees. Menopause would dictate that she wait inside, but Lori wanted a good story and the details necessary to write it.

She heard high heels clicking on the cement before she saw them. Tony was wearing a different suit, but it was still a little too large and a lot too boxy. He looked like he wanted to be a player but fell short. His attorney's suit fit impeccably. Then there was Tony's girlfriend. She was wearing a tight tan high waisted skirt and a white blouse. On her feet were the signature red soles of some fancy designer. Looking at her shoes made Lori's ankles hurt.

Lori knew everything there was to know about Tony; it was all public record. Tony's attorney wanted to be found. He handed out business cards like orange slices after a kids' soccer game. But Lori knew nothing about the girlfriend, except that while Tony was the criminal, she looked like the player.

The courtroom had never been an interesting place. TV always made it look like some dramatic moment would occur, shocking everyone; but that never happened. Most cases are solved before trial, if the defendant and prosecutor can settle on the terms. Of those that weren't, the prosecution won eighty percent, as they had won this one. Today was sentencing day, sure to be a yawn, but she would get her story.

Both the defense and the prosecution knew the penalty that went with each charge. The judge could choose the minimum, the maximum, or somewhere in the middle. Everyone knew that, too. But there was always shock, awe, and dissatisfaction from someone whenever the sentence was handed down.

Tony was sentenced to eight years. He'd be eligible for parole in two and most likely would get it. Honestly, not a bad deal for stealing nearly a million dollars. Of course, part of his sentence was restitution, but there was no way the casino was getting all the money back.

Tony took the news stoically. His attorney patted him on the back. His girlfriend interlaced her fingers with his. The casino's representatives looked disgusted.

Lori wrote it all down, leaving her opinion out of it, but she had a few. The first was that from what she'd seen, Tony had gotten away with way more than a million. The casino came up with that number because the police found a quarter of a million in cash in Tony's apartment. Cameras had caught Tony pulling the scam four times. But Tony had worked at the casino for six years. It seemed unlikely that he had only started robbing them the last four months of his employment. Most likely, he knew where the cameras were. Lori thought that he only recently got sloppy enough to get caught.

The bailiff approached Tony, while Lori looked for his mother. She had come to court most days but was absent today. She probably didn't want to see them lead her son away in handcuffs.

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**LaToya Jovena's** short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2022*, and *Twisted Voices Stories from Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. She lives in the suburbs of Washington, DC, and imagines all sorts of crimes which end up in her stories. Follow her on Instagram [@LaToyaJovena](https://www.instagram.com/LaToyaJovena).