

The First Two Pages: “The Touch of Death” by BV Lawson
Winner of the Derringer Award for Best Short Story, 2012

From *Hot Shots: Celebrating Thirty Years of the Short Mystery Fiction Society*,
Edited by Josh Pachter (Level Best Books)

An Essay by BV Lawson

I’ve been fortunate to have the opportunity to write in a wide variety of literary forms, from poetry, to essays, to blogs, to plays, to novels. But my very first attempts at writing came in the form of short stories, at the ripe old age of six. I’ve never really looked back, and I’ve been writing short fiction continuously for the better part of several decades. When I began penning crime novels, the shorter literary form often took a back burner, but those little strains of story ideas never stopped coming, and it was impossible to say “no” to the incessant siren song.

To me, one of the most rewarding and appealing aspects of writing short fiction is how it mirrors a blank piece of staff paper. As with a musical composition, which can veer off in a variety of styles and forms, so too can short stories afford a blank slate and the opportunity to write in a diverse range of genres without the commitment to a full novel. Beethoven may have written masterful symphonies, but among his more than seven hundred works are also songs, variations, overtures, sonatas, trios, and quartets.

Thus, I found myself mulling over the idea of not just a straight-up crime story but instead a genre mashup, a fantasy-crime story with a very unlikely hitman

at its center. As the story opens, we learn our reluctant hitman, Larry, is very tired of the business, and for reasons that become clear in the story, he's only at peace when he's around children:

Larry liked being around kids at the park, watching them from his splintered bench where he had to wipe the bird shit off every morning. The parents probably thought he was one of those perv geezers, but that wasn't it at all. It was the stillness of the children that attracted him.

He'd long ago learned he couldn't shut out the sounds of death around him, so he'd learned to push it into the background, like his own "tape mix," as the young people called it. Worms desiccating in the sun, the last heartbeat of a squirrel as it turned into road kill, the last gasp of a heart attack patient in the ambulance speeding by. If he listened closely enough, he could even hear the clots forming in coronary arteries in the pedestrians strolling along the hiking trail.

But the kids, they were young and healthy, and the only sounds he heard from them were whatever came out of their mouths.

Where did I get the idea for this particular character? *The Simpsons*, actually, but I took a prank undertaken on Bart Simpson's part to an entirely different level, making it much more literal and thus creating Larry's unorthodox gift that he uses to great effect in his dark calling.

The children drew closer, and Larry watched the boy as he folded the middle three fingers of his hand, leaving the thumb and pinky standing straight up, then waved the hand at the girl. "I'll put the touch of death on you," he cried.

As the little girl ran away screaming, Larry grabbed the boy's upraised hand. "Wherever did you learn that?" he asked.

"I saw it on TV." The boy squinted at Larry in the sun. "Don't you ever watch *The Simpsons*, mister?"

But every good protagonist—even an unsettling one—needs a foil, and in this case I decided to make the antagonist Larry’s former boss, Samuzzo, who drags Larry out of his retirement in order to do one last hit using his special talent, something Samuzzo once called “the perfect weapon.”

Samuzzo, on the other hand, was a walking death machine. You could say that of anyone who’d lived as long as Samuzzo in his particular business, dispatching his competitors and betrayers neatly and efficiently. But Larry wasn’t sure he’d ever met anyone else who could have chomping parasites in his gut, scars in his cirrhotic liver, and a heart doing an impression of a drunk drummer and still be alive and upright.

The protagonist and antagonist of a story are often easy, but the “why” of a plot can be crucial. Sometimes, I find the most challenging aspect of a story is to get to its heart in order to mine the depths for its *raison d’être*. In “Touch of Death,” Larry allows himself to be dragged back into the field to do what he thinks is one last hit after Samuzzo plays on his weakness, crimes against children. But in order for balance to be restored to the universe and Larry’s journey in this story, this particular act sets in motion a chain of events that will leave neither Larry nor Samuzzo the same.

At its core, this story is about the burdens we carry that take us into some very dark places and the defense mechanisms we use to try to find some semblance of peace with it all. Or, as in Larry’s case, the moral code he relies on to keep his soul intact.

But they didn't know Larry's code. He only used his gift when he was paid to do it. And it had worked well. This way, society got rid of some lowlifes, and the money angle helped Larry avoid any more accidental deaths. He hadn't had one of those since his army days, where he'd first gotten paid for killing.

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BV Lawson is the award-winning author of fifteen mystery novels and novellas, which have garnered praise from *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal* and been chosen as a Featured *Library Journal* pick and for finalists for the *Publisher's Weekly* Book Prize, Shamus Awards, Silver Falchion Awards, Daphne Awards, and *Foreword Book Reviews* Awards. BV's short stories, essays, and poems have appeared in dozens of publications and won Derringer, *Dillydoun Review*, *Noir Nation* Golden Fedora, and *Gemini* awards. Her short fiction has also been longlisted for New Writers Flash, *Fractured Lit* Elsewhere Prize, Bath Flash Contest, and Fish Short Story prizes, shortlisted for *Flash 500 Quarterly* and *Anthology Magazine* awards, and named finalists for *Pulpfictional* and Tucson Festival of Books Literary Competitions. She can be found at bvlawson.com.