The First Two Pages: "Trust" by Susan Bickford
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An Essay by Susan Bickford

I first started focusing on short stories as a change of pace from struggling with my long form novels. I figured this had to be easier.

No surprise to readers here, I'm sure: I was wrong. Not only was writing short just as hard. It was also different in ways that allowed me to explore and grow as a writer following a different path.

My initial drafts of "Trust" were based roughly on the predicament of a cousin's wife, whose father emptied the money in a trust fund left to her by her grandfather on the day before her eighteenth birthday. Focused on revenge, the story meandered to over 6,000 words without a satisfying flow.

Stepping back, I decided this had to become a more straightforward crime . Of course, a death was required. Now, how to tell the tale.

As a diehard pantser, I reluctantly decided to test-drive some plotting. Much more manageable when writing short. I wrote out a timeline of events, starting with the way back backstory, through confrontation with the father, a death, and then the aftermath.

Studying that, I realized I had multiple ways to tell the tale. It would be easy to make this a police procedural mystery: body is found, police come in to investigate, the details are gradually teased out.

Ah. But I don't write mysteries. Why start now? Perhaps this could be structured along the lines of suspense, where the intended victim is at the center of the story.

First, I introduce Linsey. Setting is critical and a certain amount of backstory is required with a quick peek into her situation.

> Linsey Slocum checked the parking area under her bedroom window. No sign of her father's car. Apparently, he had already left for his job at the car dealership on Route 20. *Hurray*. One less confrontation to deal with this morning.
>
> Unfortunately, she couldn't tell if her stepmother's car was in its usual location around the corner. She felt a small knot of dread in her belly.
>
> She headed to the bathroom to get ready for the day. Her stepsiblings, Donna and Ricky, were at their father's house for a regular visitation weekend, so she didn't need to wait for access. Lucky for them, they could escape from their mother, Belinda.

My goal was to set the stage without overly "telling." Lindsey is a teenager with a stepmother she can't stand. The family is probably comfortably middle class but not wealthy—she has to share a bathroom.

I didn't identify the exact location just yet, but you may notice the reference to Route 20, plus a mention of the lousy weather. A secret hint for people who grew up in New York State singing "The Erie Canal Song" ("I gotta mule an' her name is Sal. . .") every week in public school music classes for twelve plus years. They will recognize Route 20 as one of the key East-West corridors "from Albany to Buff-a-a-looo-ooo."

Having introduced my main character, I needed to put her in the middle of a dangerous situation. I decided to do that right away, even though it meant jumping a bit ahead on the timeline.

> Thirty minutes later, she stuffed her laptop and notebooks into her favorite messenger bag and grabbed her cellphone before heading downstairs. She had just enough time to grab a protein bar and head to her weekend job at the town library.
>
> Entering the kitchen, Linsey came to an abrupt stop. Belinda looked up from pouring green ooze from the blender into a glass. A matching glass sat close by on the counter.
>
> "Ah. Here you are. It's a peace offering." Her smile was lopsided, and her eyes had a nasty squint that made Linsey's skin crawl. "I know you love these smoothies, so I made one for the two of us to share so that we can sit and talk."

This was when I had an aha moment. I suddenly realized that in most (all?) of my stories, the villains die or are undone by their own nefarious deeds and plotting.

For me, crime stories are always about justice. They don't necessarily require happy endings, but the antagonists do need to get their just desserts. Let's see a bit more of Lindsey's antagonist:

> Probably due to all the drama of the previous evening, Belinda did not look quite as poised and perfectly coifed as usual. She seemed to have skipped her morning full-on makeup routine, and she was wearing pink sweats rather than one of her weekend designer outfits that murmured luxury.
>
> Linsey forced a false smile of her own and took the glass Belinda held out to her. "This looks great. I really want us to all move forward together. As a family."
>
> Linsey did not want to turn her back on Belinda, and it seemed Belinda felt the same way. As they edged forward in an awkward

waltz toward the small family room area next to the kitchen, Belinda's cellphone chimed.

Now to set up the deadly confusion that will be Belinda's undoing:

"Oops. I have to get this. It's my sister. I'll be right back." Belinda set her glass down on the corner of the nearest counter and hustled through the door to the living room.

From the other room, Linsey could hear Belinda's hushed tones with an overlay of a bitchy whine, but not all the details. "Oh. My. Good. Such a *hss* mess. What *hss hss* little bitch. And Scott. He's *hss hss* useless … *hss hss* divorce."

Linsey tried to inch forward so she could hear better while remaining hidden by the door frame. She felt the messenger bag over her shoulder catch on something and whirled just in time to see Belinda's glass start to tip over.

She was able to catch the glass before it hit the countertop but over half of Belinda's drink and some of her own splashed across the counter.

Note that Lindsey acts reflexively, just trying to make things better without any bad intentions.

Crap! Belinda would have a fit. She righted the glass and set her own next to it. She shed her messenger bag and started a frantic cleanup of the counter.

As she rinsed the mess down the sink, she could hear the phone call was coming to an end. Linsey wiped down both glasses and slid her own into the same position where Belinda had left hers.

"What? I can't believe this. You went ahead and drank your smoothie without me?" Belinda's face flushed, and she scowled as she picked up what had been Linsey's glass.

I have to say I really enjoyed writing this scene.

The Saturday Evening Post said they found this a bit dark for them, but it squeaked through. Read it here. And remember: Trust is also a verb.

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She headed to the bathroom to get ready for the day. Her step-siblings, Donna and Ricky, were at their father's house for a regular visitation weekend, so she didn't need to wait for access. Lucky for them, they could escape from their mother, Belinda.

Thirty minutes later, she stuffed her laptop and notebooks into her favorite messenger bag and grabbed her cellphone before heading downstairs. She had just enough time to grab a protein bar and head to her weekend job at the town library.

Entering the kitchen, Linsey came to an abrupt stop. Belinda looked up from pouring green ooze from the blender into a glass. A matching glass sat close by on the counter.

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"I'm sorry, Bee. I'm late for the library, and I need to get going. I still have a little left." Linsey waved Belinda's glass. "We have a few minutes."

Belinda slugged down a hefty portion of the green drink. "That is so typical of you. So selfish. Ugh. I can't see why you love these things so much."

Linsey drained the rest of the glass in her hand. "I do want to talk. Let's do this later. I'll be home about six."

Belinda finished her smoothie and slammed the glass onto the countertop. "Suit yourself. Clean up before you go."

Linsey watched Belinda retreat from the kitchen. Sweats were not a flattering look for her stepmother. "Hey, Belinda. This is my house now. Clean up after yourself."

Ignoring the blender and the glass Belinda drank from, Linsey skipped the dishwasher, scrubbed out the glass she had used, and then thoroughly dried it. Opening the cupboard door to replace the glass, she noted a prescription bottle tucked away on the right side.

She squinted for a closer look. The name of Belinda's mother was on the label, and the date was from a year ago when she had been dying from cancer.

What the hell? Actiq?

Finally, calm enough to face the world, Linsey headed for the front door.

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Susan Alice Bickford was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and grew up in Central New York. Susan writes thrillers and suspense stories that are often embedded in the rural areas of New York State and New England, featuring resourceful female protagonists. Her novel, *A Short Time to Die*, was nominated for a Left Coast Crime Best Debut Novel. *Dread of Winter* was nominated for an Edgar. Her short stories have appeared in anthologies and *The Saturday Evening Post.* This story can be read at: https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2025/12/trust/