

The First Two Pages: “The Portuguese Sailor” by Ellen Byerrum
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An Essay by Ellen Byerrum

How, in a relatively few words, do you set the scene and the tone of a story with a hint of what may come? How do you invite the reader into your particular world of the moment as if it’s a personal tête-à-tête?

Sometimes I like to start with dialogue. Other times, I prefer to present the atmosphere or the problem. Because every story has its own rhythm and unfolds at its own pace, not every approach works equally well to introduce the characters and setting and plot. Still, as a former reporter, I always carefully consider my beginning, my *lede*. It is the writer’s opportunity to grab the reader with information that teases the story to come.

In my *Urban Legends* story “The Portuguese Sailor” I wanted to catch a mood that suggests something otherworldly, perhaps even paranormal, is in the air.

My grandmother warned me, as her grandmother had warned her. Now that it was my duty to warn, I vowed to avoid the fate of the mythical Cassandra, never to be believed. My name is Cassidy. I’m a reporter.

The first paragraph reveals that whatever is afoot, it is familial and generational, ancient, passed down from grandmothers to granddaughters. And now it is narrator Cassidy’s turn to warn someone about some danger; however, by invoking the mythical Cassandra, she is afraid she won’t be believed. Because she

is a reporter, someone who collects information and disseminates it, she knows there are people who will question whether her facts are accurate and true—or fake news.

Short stories are challenging for me because they often take so much time to conceive and plan and follow through. In some cases, the short story is almost as difficult as writing a full-length book. Another challenge is that often the theme or subject matter of any given anthology hasn't coincided with an idea I thought I could write. However, the anthology *Hooked on Urban Legends...And Murder!* was different, and it presented the most delicious opportunity, as it coincided with an idea that was rolling around in my head, an idea for which I had found no place.

The story didn't have to be a specific myth or a traditional legend, such as "Bigfoot hiding in the trees" or "the Hook" or "the Lady in White." I was tantalized by the urban legend concept, and my idea, which wouldn't let go, grew from the small germ to a full story. The peril in my story doesn't lurk in the woods, it hides in our dreams. Specifically in Arabella's dreams.

My childhood friend Arabella had no idea about the danger that lurked in dreams, her sweet, innocent dreams. Okay, maybe they weren't such innocent dreams, at least not the ones about that handsome stranger, the Portuguese sailor, the "Dream Lover," to use my grandmother's term.

By that second paragraph, the main characters—Cassidy, her grandmother, her friend Arabella, and the Portuguese sailor—have been introduced, though we

don't yet know how they will wind through the story. Is the grandmother simply a teller of dramatic tales? What does Arabella dream? Does the Portuguese sailor really exist? Is he the Dream Lover?

Foreshadowing is foreboding, and Cassidy foresees trouble for her friend, Arabella. The Dream Lover/Demon Lover is a long-standing character in literature, one that figures in folk songs and plays and is woven through stories and books. The Dream Lover is rarely a good thing, often unattainable, and generally dismissed as fantasy—or a demon. He is a stand-in for (or exploiter of) innocent hopes and romantic dreams. Yet dreams take on multiple meanings. They can drive us to complete our ambitions, they can comfort us at night, they can disseminate nonsense or even turn into nightmares.

These introductory paragraphs also disclose that Cassidy is stuck in a low paying reporting job and gets sent on “oddball” assignments in search of wacky stories, such as ghost hunting, by her capricious editor. The editor character is barely mentioned here but is part of a setup that pays off later. When Arabella invites an exhausted Cassidy to come visit her in Philadelphia for spring break, offering her a desperately needed lifeline, Cassidy jumps at the chance.

Our focus turns to Arabella, “whose energy never seemed to flag, plowing through grad school at full speed.” Furthermore, we learn:

She was a hot young scientist on the rise, working on a new medical research project, she said, but all she had to do over break was check in daily at the lab.

In contrast, Cassidy's career seems stuck, unappreciated, uninspired, on a fast track to nowhere. Arabella is a force of nature, the woman who has everything.

Arabella was tall, slender, and striking. People always remembered her brilliant gold-flecked eyes, the wild and curly dark-auburn hair that spilled down her back, her rare sparkle, her energy.

Cassidy has her own ambitions—to write books—but the daily grind holds her back, while her childhood friend Arabella seems unstoppable. However, there might be a dark side to the young scientist's brilliance, which attracts the Dream Lover.

Arabella was already a star, on a fast track to a PhD in medical research, uncovering cancer's dark secrets. She was the one, we all said, born to do great things, to cure diseases, to benefit mankind, to win the Nobel Prize. People were attracted to Arabella, to her quick wit, her easy laugh, her star quality. Maybe that's what drew the Dream Lover. Or did she conjure him up in a dream?

The scene turns to Arabella's Philadelphia from Cassidy's unnamed town where it begins. It is spring and the uninhibited Arabella responds to the romance of the season. She reveals that she is ready for a dalliance to fulfill her "biological imperative."

Philadelphia was lovely that spring. Warm breezes, flowers in bloom, trees exploding in lusty pink and purple blossoms. We wore summer skirts and bright tops that floated in the wind. "I'm aching for a love affair," Arabella remarked as we people-watched on campus

my first morning there. “We have a biological imperative to mate, you know. And it’s spring.”

Arabella’s biological imperative usually meant short-lived flings. She had a healthy “biological imperative,” and she always claimed she was the huntress, not the hunted. She nattered on about “urges.” I watched with a twinge of jealousy while couples strolled hand in hand down green-shaded paths. Arabella led us on long walks, through the parks, beside the Schuylkill River, to the art museum, dodging traffic and tourists.

Arabella is clearly the leader here and she is ready for action. But we wonder whether this time the huntress will be the hunted. Cassidy doesn’t appear to be envious of Arabella, though she is clearly capable of simple mild jealousy when she sees the couples strolling “hand in hand down green-shaded paths.” But she is along for the ride, as any good reporter would be.

The story up to this point has Arabella clearly in the lead—but possibly with trouble nipping at her heels (though she doesn’t know it yet). My hope is that the reader is intrigued enough to want to follow along and turn the following pages.

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In addition to the occasional play, Ellen Byerrum writes mysteries, thrillers, children's books and middle-grade stories. And now, short stories! Much to her surprise—after being spurred on by a bit of jealousy of her friends who have produced wonderful short stories—she started writing a few, three of which are to be published this year. She is delighted to have her work, “The Portuguese Sailor,” included in *Hooked on Urban Legends—and Murder!* A former job safety reporter in Washington, DC, she is the author of twelve Crime of Fashion Mysteries, set in D.C. Two COF mysteries, *Killer Hair* and *Hostile Makeover*, were filmed by Lifetime television. Her new Screwball Noir Art Deco Mysteries are set in 1934’s New York City, right after Prohibition was repealed.