

The First Two Pages: “The Cave Man” by Shannon Taft

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An Essay by Shannon Taft

Upon hearing that the theme for this anthology would be urban legends, I wrote three pertinent short stories despite knowing that no more than two could be submitted for consideration and only one—at most—would be selected by the judges for inclusion. The first story, “Beware the Bunnyman,” used an urban legend that police in the real world have investigated; the second, “Missing,” had characters re-enacting a fictional urban legend; and the third, “The Cave Man,” created a legend from scratch. I wanted to test how each approach would work before making any decisions, and the risk that a story might go entirely unused was worth it to get the best possible story written for the specific needs of the anthology. In the end, I submitted the latter two stories to the judges, but nothing went to waste as all three tales were ultimately published—the first two in a magazine and the third in *Urban Legends*.

For the creation of an entirely new urban legend, I began by looking at what urban legends have in common. For example, they are often used to try to explain mysterious events, and they frequently serve as a morality tale in which those who violate society’s standards come to a bad end. The legend should be shocking but plausible enough to engross the listener. I was stymied for a moment on what could

constitute sufficiently immoral conduct today to justify the creation of an urban legend, and I concluded that it would be best if I created a tale that had been around since before the 1960s. That way, it could begin its journey in an era when society's notions of morality were far stricter.

Looking back, one time period fairly shouted it was meant for such a tale—the Prohibition Era. “Prohibition” is, by its very label, quite moralistic; it judges the conduct of others and prohibits the disfavored behavior. Prohibition in America came about because the purchase and consumption of alcohol was deemed so immoral that a Constitutional Amendment was passed to try to stop it. But, as should have been foreseen, people drank anyway. Their willingness to ignore the law to purchase this drug of choice gave rise to criminal enterprises that competed violently for such a lucrative business, resulting in several famous murders. With such a judgmental and moralistic society living side-by-side with drinkers violating the official norms, and violent people interacting frequently with supposedly upright citizens as part of the alcohol economy, all I needed to do was add a mysterious situation in need of an explanation, and the required elements for the creation of a plausible urban legend would be at my disposal.

When shaping the specific details of the legend, I wanted to tap into the primitive fear that often comes with urban legends. It is the unknown, the perils that lurk in the darkness beyond our ability to rationalize or explain, that makes an

urban legend something people will want to repeat around campfires for decades to come. It was the thinking about the word “primitive” that gave me the notion to create the “Cave Man” legend. I followed this approach, not only because we think of cavemen as primitive, but because caves are dark and dangerous places where a threat could be lurking around the bend and characters cannot simply flick on a light to illuminate the perils they are facing. This not only creates a visceral feel for readers but also, logistically, a good setting for a killer to strike.

However, creating an urban legend was not enough. I also wanted a modern mystery in which someone had recently died to create a sense of urgency to solve the crime. I needed a first sentence that would grab a reader’s attention and make them feel compelled to read on to answer a key question. It is for this reason that I nearly always start with dialogue. In this case, the first sentence—which was also a complete paragraph—read:

“The Cave Man murdered Alicia,” my twelve-year-old daughter, Morrigan, insisted, speaking over me as I tried to explain to the police detective what had happened.

Thus, within the first five words, the reader knows via dialogue that someone named Alicia has already been purportedly murdered and something or someone known as the “Cave Man” is going to be a suspect. Before the sentence is over, the reader knows that the protagonist is the parent of a twelve-year-old girl

and that the police have been called in. The protagonist possesses some information to share, but if the reader wants to know what it is, they must read on.

I also had Morrigan speaking over her mother because this is something many readers may identify with. While speaking to the police regarding a murder is not part of daily life for readers, navigating life with a pre-teen who has definite opinions that feel unrealistic to a parent might be quite familiar. And even if the reader has no children, this parent-child interaction is still something to humanize the protagonist and give her dimension. The protagonist is trying to convey important information to the police and manage the needs of a traumatized twelve-year-old girl at the same time—a task no one could envy.

The first paragraph was deliberately brief because I had not yet given readers any setting. I needed to provide just enough information to tell the readers some of the stakes and—hopefully—make them want to read on to get answers. Who was Alicia? What was her connection to Morrigan? Why does Morrigan say Alicia has been murdered? Who is the Cave Man? Why would Morrigan claim the Cave Man is responsible? Are the police speaking to Morrigan and her parent because one—or both—of them are suspects? What was the protagonist trying to say before her daughter spoke over her? It does not matter precisely which questions a reader forms. What does matter is that whatever the reader wonders

will be enough to compel them to continue and that any questions the author can reasonably foresee the reader asking are answered by the end of the story.

The next paragraph provides setting, so that readers are not presented with extended dialogue in a vacuum.

Overhearing those words, one of the people from the medical examiner's office paused his trek toward Bootlegger's Cave to frown at us, then resumed and proceeded inside. I'd lost count of the officers, crime scene personnel, and others who had disappeared into its darkness.

Readers now know to picture a dark cave entrance and a busy scene where more personnel than the protagonist can keep track of have passed through. The reader can also deduce that if there are so many officers, and the medical examiner has multiple people on site, then a body has been found and Morrigan is not being fanciful in saying Alicia is dead. They also learn that the cave is named after a bootlegger, so we have begun to provide a taste of the background for the Cave Man's legend discussed above.

The rest of the first two pages gives a few more hints about the history of the cave and the bootleggers and how Alicia and Morrigan came to be at the cave and sets forth a cast of characters from Alicia's life who may later become suspects or provide information about why someone would kill Alicia. Hopefully, by the time those two pages are over, readers are immersed in this world and invested in

discovering what happened to Alicia and how the legend of the Cave Man came to be.

The First Two Pages of “The Cave Man”

“The Cave Man murdered Alicia,” my twelve-year-old daughter, Morrigan, insisted, speaking over me as I tried to explain to the police detective what had happened.

Overhearing those words, one of the people from the medical examiner’s office paused his trek toward Bootlegger’s Cave to frown at us, then resumed and proceeded inside. I’d lost count of the officers, crime scene personnel, and others who had disappeared into its darkness.

I stroked a lock of my daughter’s auburn hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear before letting my hand rest gently on her shoulder.

“Sweetie, I really need you to be quiet right now. The detective will have questions for you when I’m done, okay?”

Morrigan pulled her shoulder away. A new batch of tears streamed down her cheeks. Her voice, raw from her earlier sobbing, rasped, “You never listen to me.”

I was having too much trouble holding myself together to be able to rehash old arguments and turned back to the man who’d introduced himself a few minutes before as Detective Wocksoki. He was in his forties, with crow’s-feet wrinkling the outer edges of his brown eyes—like he’d spent too much time squinting at suspects. Thus far, he’d shown no emotion at all about working on the death of a child, which made me assume he was used to repressing his feelings. At the moment, I envied that skill. All I could think about was Alicia, far too young to die, and how it could have just as easily been Morrigan. “What was the question again?”

“I asked how the girls came to be in the cave, Ms. Millibarn.”

I took a deep breath, trying to gather my wits and focus. “My daughter’s friend Alicia is—I mean, she was staying with us for the week while her parents are on a trip for their wedding anniversary. School’s out for spring break, and Alicia’s grandmother is too unwell to watch her for that long.” I hadn’t been able to reach Alicia’s mother

yet and could not imagine how I would explain to Jayne my failure to keep her child safe.

“Don’t say *parents*.” Morrigan nearly snarled the last word. “It’s her mom and stepdad! Alicia wanted to stay with her uncle Tim, her real dad’s brother, but he said he was going to be busy. Something for work.”

“I called to let him know what happened, after I couldn’t reach Jayne,” I explained to the detective. Jayne had given me Tim’s phone number, as well as his mother’s, for emergency purposes, since they live nearby. I never imagined I would need them. “Alicia’s father passed on when she was an infant. Tim is notifying his mother, the grandmother I mentioned.”

“We have someone notifying the family more officially,” the detective said, and I thought I heard some disapproval of my preempting that process. “Now, about the cave?”

“Right. The girls wanted to see the cave.”

“It used to be called Bootlegger’s Cave,” Morrigan cut in. “We’re studying Prohibition in school, and the teacher said the local bootleggers hid their still and their whiskey somewhere in the cave.”

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Shannon Taft is an attorney in the Washington, D.C. area. She fell into writing short fiction mysteries after being told that it could hone her writing skills in preparation for drafting “The Great American Novel.” When she discovered that publishers were willing to buy her short stories, she decided to keep writing those until it stopped being fun. (As you can see, that hasn’t happened yet.) In the meantime, she wrote a novel and won the 2026 St. Martin’s Minotaur / Mystery Writers of America First Crime Novel Competition. That book, *Ghost of a Clue*, is expected to arrive in stores and online in late 2027 (or early 2028).