

The First Two Pages: “Last Train to Clarksville” by Michel Lee Garrett
From *Daydream Believer: Crime Stories Inspired by the Songs of the Monkees*,
Edited by Lawrence Allan and Michelle Kubitz (Shotgun Honey Books)

An Essay by Michel Lee Garrett

Amazingly, I had the honor of actually being *invited* by Michelle Kubitz to submit a story to *Daydream Believer: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of The Monkees*—which I found oddly terrifying. This wasn’t just an average, run-of-the-mill story I was writing of my own accord and submitting into the void. This was a story that I had specifically been sought out to write, apparently being good enough to warrant an invitation. My imposter syndrome, as you might imagine, had a field day with this.

I am, admittedly, merely a casual fan of The Monkees. I knew best their biggest hit, “I’m a Believer.” But with Michelle apparently believing that my voice would lend something worthwhile to the collection, I set out to become a slightly less casual fan. I listened to a compilation of their most well-loved songs, ruminating on potential imagery as a jumping-off point for crime fiction. Admittedly, every song I listened to was a banger. But it was “Last Train to Clarksville” that hooked me.

There’s something thematically interesting about trains. Their power. Their ruggedness. Their predestination. Their antiquatedness. As a writer of rural crime fiction with a preoccupation with country music and ramblers, I’ve written stories featuring trains before. But there was something else about “Last Train to Clarksville”

that hooked me—the line about the speaker not knowing if they were ever going home. There was something interesting there.

I started thinking about what kind of place “Clarksville” could be. That’s when the idea of Clarksville as a prison—Clarksville Correctional—came to me. The rest of the story started falling into place.

I started “Last Train to Clarksville” using a technique taught to me by my mentor, T. Fox Dunham: grounding the story not in the dramatic stakes of the story, which revolves around an attempt to recover the lost score of a bank robbery gone wrong, but instead in the *emotional* stakes of the story. As much as the story is about the missing money, really, it’s about the relationship between two sisters.

The story starts with an awkward car ride: Alesha, the younger sister, has come to pick up Janice, the older sister, from Clarksville Correctional after five years on the inside. By forcing the reader into this awkwardness, the reader feels both their estrangement and yet some distant affection. And through that tension, the reader is compelled to continue.

“You look good,” Alesha said.

“What?”

She was wearing the same clothes on the day she went inside. Jeans and a weathered flannel. The prison hadn’t even bothered washing them. The same dirt and grime, ground even deeper into the fabric. Clarksville had done the same to her.

“Um. It’s good to see you, I mean.”

Janice doubted that, but let it go.

The story then flashes back to explore their relationship in greater depth. The reader gets flashes of their childhood, before being treated to examples of the letters

that they wrote back and forth during Janice's time in prison. The relationship is strained, but there is some tender affection beneath the strain. Again, the contrast and the tension propels the reader into story.

Imagine Janice's surprise the first time she found a letter in her prison inbox. They hadn't spoken in years, yet here was pages of earnest updates: she'd gotten married to a man named James, an early-career professor of English literature. They had a newborn daughter Kiera together. She'd had trouble finding a job after graduation, but found new fulfillment in motherhood. Community service projects at church. Volunteering at the food bank. Still devouring books, on a true crime and thriller kick lately. And how was Janice? Was there any way she could apologize for her silence? Could she be a better sister, even if it was only by letter? Would it be okay if she kept writing? Love, Alesha.

It was overwhelming. Janice almost didn't write back. But she penned a short response. "I was surprised to get your letter. But I'm happy you've found happiness, more than I ever found..."

The story flashes forward again to the present, re-grounding the reader in the tension present in the car ride.

Janice attempts a moment of vulnerability, admitting how much she appreciates her sister coming to pick her up. Alesha responds in a way that's well-meaning but reduces her sister into a statistic: mirroring how society often reduces the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated to abstract numbers, rather than people.

"I appreciate this, by the way," Janice said. "A lot."

Alesha took a second to try to respond to Janice's words.

"Recidivism rates in this country," she landed on.

Janice didn't know what to say to that. They slipped back into silence.

Here, Janice asks why her sister is alone. Did her husband not want to come with her? There's some hostility in the subtext. Does her husband disapprove of Alesha coming to get her ex-con sister?

But instead, Alesha stumbles over her response. Something is wrong. Alesha—who lives a simple but seemingly idyllic life—has some kind of depth she's keeping hidden from Janice. Now the reader has questions—another force to propel them deeper into the story. What is Alesha hiding?

“James didn't want to come?” Janice asked after a while.
“No—”
“No?”
“No, he did...” Did she just wince? “But, um. Work.”
“Work?”

Alesha makes a reference to being glad that Janice is coming home.

Janice—just like the speaker of the song—doesn't know if she really is coming home.

After all, there's still one big thing Janice hasn't brought up yet. She needs Alesha to stop by the train station. Why? Well, it was a bank job that landed her in Clarksville Correctional in the first place—and she's hidden away the money in a backpack in one of the lockers at the station.

Janice cleared her throat. “Can we make a stop?”
“Bathroom? Road snacks?”
“The train station.”
“What?”
“I put some stuff away for myself.”
Alesha gave her a suspicious eye.

“In one of the lockers,” Janice said. “Clothes. Some other stuff. For when I got out.”

Alesha glanced away from the road to take a longer look. Janice turned back out the window. Fidgeted with the button at the wrist of her shirt.

“Oh no,” Alesha said.

“What?”

“This is about the bank thing, isn't it?”

Janice blinked in quick succession. “What? No, I—”

“At trial, your lawyer. Part of your defense. How they couldn't find the money. You think I don't see it?”

Janice was too stunned to lie. “How did you even...”

“Do you know how many times I've read this story?”

“This isn't one of your little books,” she snapped, louder than she intended. Her temper had gotten shorter inside. “This is my life.”

“And is it worth, what? A burlap sack with a dollar sign on it?”

But when Janice stops at the locker, she finds the money isn't there. It's missing—and, with a little digging, it seems that someone from her past beat her to the punch: her abusive ex.

And with that, all the pieces of the story are in place.

Will the sisters reconcile? Will they recover the lost money?

Will Janice ever make it home?

Find out... in “Last Train to Clarksville.”

#

Michel Lee Garrett (*she/her*) is an author, poet, and transgender activist. She is the author of *Born a Ramblin' Man: Fourteen Tales of Thieves, Killers, Vagabonds, and Lost Souls* (Shotgun Honey, 2025), the editor of *Burning Down the House: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the Talking Heads* (Shotgun Honey, 2024), and the editor of *Transcendent Love: True Stories of T4T Relationships* (JKP Books, 2027), the first book from a major publisher to explore relationships between trans people in their own words. Her poetry has appeared from *Red Branch Review*, *100subtexts*, New

Words Press, and the Chicago Writers Association, among others. She has worked as an investigative reporter, the communications director of a U.S. Senate campaign, the speechwriter to the president of a major research university, and the chair of an advocacy-focused LGBT+ nonprofit. Find her online at leegarrett.net.