

## Bogusly Autobiographical

By Dave Zeltserman

SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT is one of my 'bogusly autobiographical life in writer's hell' stories, which are stories featuring a writer with just enough bogusly autobiographical details to get my cousin and other friends calling me after they'd appeared in the past to make everything is okay and my wife is still alive. What makes this story different than these previous ones is that the bogusly autobiographical details hit closer to home, and the writer isn't given a fictional name, but goes nameless. In fact, readers might start wondering how much of this story is true, and whether I could be this unnamed narrator. There's a good reason for that. As with Jack Ritchie's classic 'FOR ALL THE RUDE PEOPLE,' I want readers to have a moment of doubt over whether what they read was fiction or something else. In other words, I want readers freaked out by the end, even if for only several heartbeats.

Without further ado, let me submit the first 2 pages for your perusal. After that I'll be dissecting the first paragraph to see what it accomplishes, and then the last.

I could start this with when I first decided to kill Malcolm Pratt, but the problem in doing that is I'm not exactly sure when that was. The obvious moment would be when I first received his letter, but I don't think that was it. I'm not saying his letter didn't have me seeing red. It did. And yeah, I'll admit that if he had been in the same room with me when I read it I probably would've beaten him to death before I realized what I was doing. But even still, I think it was years later before I consciously made the decision to kill him. I might've at times found myself fantasizing about doing awful things to him if I had the chance, but those were really nothing more than harmless daydreams.

Even when I started sneaking away to a shooting range four towns over, I don't think I was seriously planning to kill him. Not even

when I bought a 9mm pistol from a gangbanger in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I can't tell you why I did either of those, but I'm pretty sure the idea of hunting down and killing Pratt was still only a farfetched thought floating around in my subconscious, and not something I seriously planned on ever doing.

Maybe it was at the awards banquet last year. Pratt had sought me out to congratulate me for the success I'd been having, and when I looked into his round pink-scrubbed face, the lower half covered by his meticulously groomed facial hair, and saw the way he smiled at me in his innocuous, clueless way I realized he had forgotten about the letter he had sent me twelve years ago. Something about that bothered me far more than if he had remembered doing it. It was as if I was too insignificant for him to care about the torment he had caused me, and that he could just send me that letter and forget all about it as if it were nothing. I think it was then that the idea of killing him, actually killing him and not just fantasizing about it, took hold and became something real. But again, I can't be completely sure that was the exact moment.

Some of you reading this are probably familiar with my short stories and novels, and are naturally going to draw conjectures about me from them, and you'll think you have some clue about why I did what I did. You'll be wrong, but that's still your prerogative. Others of you who aren't previously familiar with my writing are probably going to

assume I'm little more than a deranged psycho. I could be deluding myself, but I don't think that's the case.

I guess it's not too hard to figure out that I'm a writer given that this story is sitting smack in the middle of a Jewish noir anthology. Of course, the other stories surrounding this one are fictional works, while mine is something very different. Let's for now call this a piece of creative nonfiction, although that's not quite what it is. Some of you might be thinking I've written a confession, but you'd be wrong. Badly. If you have enough patience to read on until the end, you'll understand what this really is and why I needed to write it.

The first sentence, '*I could start this with when I first decided to kill Malcolm Pratt, but the problem in doing that is I'm not exactly sure when that was,*' sets the tone for the entire story. We know from this that our unnamed narrator has either done something bad or is planning something bad, and possibly even murdering Malcolm Pratt. We also know that he's been carrying a near homicidal grudge against Pratt. And finally, we can strongly suspect that there's something very wrong with our narrator, and that he's more likely than not psychotic. From the second line, '*The obvious moment would be when I first received his letter, but I don't think that was it,*' we know that the cause of this seemingly homicidal grudge is a letter that Pratt sent our narrator. The rest of the paragraph leaves us no doubt that there's something very wrong with our narrator, and also gives the reader a good idea that he or she is going to be following our unnamed narrator on a one-way ticket to hell.

Now let's look at the last paragraph of these two pages. The first line, '*I guess it's not too hard to figure out that I'm a writer given that this story is sitting smack in the middle of a Jewish noir anthology,*' further establishes (as it does earlier) that the narrator is a writer, and also by indicating that the story is appearing *smack in the middle of a Jewish noir anthology* makes the reader wonder what's going on since that's where they're reading the story. (But drat it! The story has been placed second to the last in the collection. Oh well.) The rest of the paragraph further tells the reader that the other stories in the collection might be fiction, but this one is something different. Further, it ends the paragraph by stating emphatically that what they're

reading is not a confession, and creates somewhat of a mystery as to what they're actually reading. That if they want to find out what this really is, they have to read on to the end. The expectation I'm creating will lead to disappointment if the reader is easily able to guess the reason why our narrator is writing the story. In fact, I'm betting that most readers are going to be surprised when they get to the end, but will also feel that the story played fairly. If I'm right, the story succeeds, if I'm wrong, it fails.



Dave Zeltserman is an award winning crime, horror and mystery writer whose crime and horror novels have been named by The Washington Post, NPR, WBUR, American Library Association, and Booklist as best books of the year, and his mystery short fiction has won the Shamus, Derringer and Ellery Queen's Readers Choice award (twice). Three of his books have been optioned for film. "Something's Not Right" appears in *Jewish Noir*, edited by Kenneth Wishnia and published by PM Press.