

Quack and Dwight the First Two Pages

I think it might be best to start out by putting the first 2 pages of my JEWISH NOIR story “Quack and Dwight” on the page and then discuss the text after that:

I considered not answering when I saw Shirley Chung’s name on the caller ID. We’d been friends forever, going back to high school AP classes. She eventually went to law school while I got a PhD in psychology. Last time I took on a client for her, he was a six-foot plus brute named Aaron. His junkie mother had dumped him with her abusive, drug-dealing brother when he was five. Shirley, the LA County prosecutor in Palmdale, was hoping that the fourteen year old would testify against his uncle, considering the multiple bruises he had on his backside from disciplining. The boy, however, had developed a paper-thin temper that craved for any opportunity to explode. I discovered this when he lunged at me and broke my nose.

I answered the phone.

“I’ve got an emergency situation and need your help ASAP,” Shirley said without a hello.

“When and what?” I asked, opening up my calendar.

“We’re going to trial in two days and we need help with a child witness.”

My week was already full with my regular patients. Moving them would be an aggravating hassle.

“That’s too soon, Shirley. You should’ve called me a month ago.”

“We had somebody else, but he dropped out,” Shirley said in an apologetic voice.

“Why?” That was crazy to take a contract with the county and then drop out unless there is a family emergency. You’d be blackballed for any sort of expert witness testimony.

“Personal reasons, he says.” Shirley’s sarcastic tone let me know that she didn’t believe him. “Regardless, we need you bad, and I’ve been authorized to double your hourly rate for an entire week, whether you’re needed or not.”

That was a lot of money, and I could always reschedule my patients.

“Tell me about this kid. Is he going to try to kill me?”

“He’s eight. You can hold your own against that, right?”

“What’s the situation?”

“We busted a meth cook and his wife several months ago. They had a trailer next door where they baked the drugs for a prison biker gang. We’re coming down hard on the kingpin, a shitstain named Jack Taft. Neither the cook or his wife will testify against Taft, but the boy says he saw him there several times and witnessed Taft giving his father money.”

“Is he the only witness?”

“We’re working on the mother. She gave testimony and then recanted. Somebody got to her. I’ve told her she’ll never see her boy if she doesn’t open up. If we can get her and the son’s testimony, we can take the bastard down.”

I was intrigued. “So Taft is bad news.”

“The worst. He scares people shitless. We usually bust his crew, but never him. Nobody testifies against him. Ever.”

“Is the boy in danger?”

“He shouldn’t be. Gangs, as lawless as they are, usually don’t kill kids. It’s taboo. But...”

“But what?”

“It’s the kingpin, so the rules are more... flexible.”

A little voice inside of me screamed: *This isn’t your problem, Ben. The money isn’t worth it.* But another voice, the side of me that stood for law and order and craved to be a cape-wearing-crime-fighting crusader said yes... out loud.

Thank you for reading those first two pages (a page and $\frac{3}{4}$). I’m happy you made it this far! I’ve published several short stories and written many more, but this was one of my more difficult projects as it took me nearly two months to get right.

Getting the beginning of this story was tough, and so was nailing the characters down. I pretty much knew the story I wanted to tell a few days after the anthology’s editor asked me, but how much of the story to give and who the characters were was a little more challenging. I always had the protagonist, Dr. Ben Steinberg, written as an expert in child psychology. His career choices seemed to change with each draft from a best selling pop child psychologist to a juvenile social service worker. At one point Shirley Chung had been an administrator at a juvenile delinquent center before she became a LA County prosecutor.

Once I settled on the story thanks to advice from a wonderful LA County prosecutor (not sure if she wants to be mentioned by name), I needed to figure out

where to start the story. I wanted set up immediate trepidation, so when Ben is hesitant to take call from his high school buddy Shirley Chung, I hoped to give a subtle hint that there could be trouble. Then I gave a backstory about a violent incident the last time he did a job for her. The world that Shirley works in is dangerous, and with this call she is bringing him into it. Although he seems insignificant, the large fourteen year old will play a role again.

Even with the bad incident that happened last time, Ben shows that he is amenable to a friend in need as he looks at his calendar. He's somebody with a big heart. When Shirley tells him that he is needed this week as the previous psychologist dropped out, this should be a hint that the case is going to be something bad. Then the situation is revealed about the meth dealers and how the mother has recanted her testimony. When Ben asks if Jack Taft is "bad news" and Shirley responds "The worst," I hope readers will catch that things will be scary if he accepts the assignment. The stakes are high. And Ben considers this as "A little voice inside of me screamed: *This isn't your problem, Ben. The money isn't worth it.*" This is the rational response that most of us would have, but if he followed that path there wouldn't be a plot or story would there? A man walks away from money and a potentially dangerous situation and goes on analyzing children in Santa Monica for the rest of the week. Not much of a fun read is it? Which is why Ben has a hero complex:

But another voice, the side of me that stood for law and order and craved to be a cape-wearing-crime-fighting crusader said yes... out loud.

Not only does his acceptance put the story in motion, I think this also works for the character in the story and the rest of his actions. Ben could have been medical doctor or anything else, but he chose child psychology to help young ones who are in need.

I hope these two pages will excite readers enough to follow through and keep reading the rest of "Quack and Dwight."



Travis Richardson's story "Quack and Dwight" appears in JEWISH NOIR, edited by Kenneth Wishnia and published by PM Press. He has been a finalist for the Macavity short story award in 2014 and 2015 as well as the Anthony short story award in 2014. His novella LOST IN CLOVER was listed in Spinetingler Magazine's Best Crime Fiction of 2012. He has published stories in crime fiction publications such as Thuglit, Shotgun Honey, Flash Fiction Offensive, and All Due Respect. He edits the Sisters-In-Crime Los Angeles newsletter Ransom Notes, reviews Anton Chekhov short stories at www.chekhovshorts.com, and sometimes shoots a short movie. His latest novella, KEEPING THE RECORD, concerns a disgraced baseball player who will do anything to keep his tainted home run record. www.tsrichardson.com