

The First Two Pages: Judy Penz Sheluk

When it comes to short fiction, you probably don't have two pages to capture someone's attention. You certainly don't have the luxury of a prologue to hint at the backstory, or an entire chapter to start outlining what's coming and who's who. At best you have a few paragraphs. If you can hook the reader with those, you have a fair shot at keeping their attention. Let's take a look at the opening of my short story, *Live Free or Die*, which is included in *LIVE FREE OR TRI*: a collection of three short mystery stories, published January 2016.

The first time any of us met Jack he was wearing a dark green suit. That seemed odd to me. It wasn't St. Patrick's Day, and the office attire was mostly business casual, with an emphasis on the casual. This was especially true in "cubicle hell," where an overworked staff of four plus supervisor made collection calls and routinely canceled insurance policies for non-payment.

Later, Jack would confide in me that the green suit was his only suit. "Wear a green suit and everyone assumes you must own a black one, a brown one, and a blue one," he had said, and I had to admit it made sense. But the first time I met him, my only thought was, "Green suit, can't be from around here."

In those two paragraphs, I'm introducing the narrator—someone working in a job few would aspire to— and I'm telling the reader that Jack is not only a stranger, he's someone who isn't going to be like the rest of the office staff. The next two paragraphs fill in a few more of the blanks.

I should have known Jack was going to be trouble right from the beginning. In my defense I was twenty-one to his thirty-one, and until a few months before, when I'd been dumped for a girl with the improbable name of Ankh, I'd had the same boyfriend throughout high school.

Anyway, my inexperience with men aside, there was something riveting about Jack. It was more than his stature—six-foot-two with the build of an athlete; you could imagine six-pack abs and muscled thighs—more than the penetrating stare of eyes a bluish shade of tanzanite verging on violet. It was as if he wore his charisma like a suit of armor and polished it up every morning.

Now we know that our narrator is a young woman clearly out of her depth with a man like Jack. Perhaps you'll even be reminded of a charismatic creature from your past that you'd much rather forget. The point is, if I've done my job as a writer, you'll want to know what sort of trouble Jack is bringing into our narrator's life. You'll want to read on.

Jack came to the company as an efficiency expert, imported from the U.S. Head Office in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to the Canadian head office in Toronto. The suburb of Don Mills to be exact.

Apparently we were inefficient at collecting monies owed. I could have told them it was because we tended to empathize with the insured, if only because we were all stone broke

ourselves. Thanks to our minimum wage jobs and age-rated auto insurance, most of us couldn't afford to pay the premiums, let alone own a car. Extending payment terms for a week or two, where was the harm in that?

My first mistake was agreeing to have lunch with Jack, though to be fair, he asked all five of us in the Credit Department, each on a separate day. My day of the week was Friday. Jack made me feel as though he'd saved the best for last.

A few more details are fleshed out, including the story's setting of Toronto, Canada, but the premise remains clear: our unsuspecting narrator is a prime target for someone with Jack's experience. If you're on your game, you'll recognize that the title of the story is taken from the New Hampshire's motto: Live Free or Die. In case you didn't get the connection, I spell it out:

He drove a midnight blue Chevy pick-up with a front bench seat and extended cab. The license plate included the message, "LIVE FREE OR DIE," which Jack informed me was the State motto of New Hampshire. I preferred Ontario's more mundane "YOURS TO DISCOVER," but I'll admit to being somewhat biased.

I suppose I was expecting a sandwich at the local deli, or maybe fish and chips from Captain Sam's, given it was Friday. Both were just south of the office, and regular hangouts for the many white-collar workers in the area. But Jack drove west on Eglinton. Clearly we were going to take more than my allotted hour for lunch.

"Molly tells me you like authentic Mexican," Jack said, not taking his eyes off the road. "I was in Toronto a few years back. I remember a decent place on Yonge Street. Viva something-or-the-other."

If you're from Toronto, you'll remember a fabulous authentic Mexican place at Yonge and Eglinton called Viva Zapata, which is, unfortunately, no longer in business. If you're not, the goal is to make you feel as if you might recognize the area, should you come for a visit. But hang on a second. Who the heck is Molly?

Molly was my supervisor. I wondered how the subject of my food preferences had come up. "Molly told you that I like Mexican food?"

Jack grinned, his teeth flashing in the sunlight. "Let's just say I was curious about you." The Mexican restaurant was no longer in business, but that didn't stop Jack. He navigated the truck into a tight parking spot along the street, hopped out, put change in the meter, opened my door, and led me to a British-style pub a couple of blocks down.

"It's not Mexican, but I was here a couple of nights ago," he said. "Typical pub food, but a good atmosphere, and a nice selection of draft beer."

I don't like beer, but the idea of dining out in a pub on a workday lunch hour had a certain charm. "I could go for an order of bangers and mash," I said, trying to demonstrate my worldly knowledge of tavern fare.

"So could I," Jack said, and chuckled softly. I got the distinct impression we weren't talking about the same thing, and found that I didn't necessarily mind. It had been a long time since Norbert had dumped me.

The story continues on from there, with more than a few twists and turns. If I've done my job as a writer, you'll want to read the rest. If that's the case, you can find *LIVE FREE OR TRI* on Amazon in trade paperback and on Kindle. To thank you all for reading this post, I'm offering the Kindle version as a free download for three days only: February 9th to 11th. **Buy Link: <http://authl.it/4ly>**



Judy Penz Sheluk's critically acclaimed debut mystery, *The Hanged Man's Noose: A Glass Dolphin Mystery*, was published July 2015. Her short crime fiction is included in *The Whole She-Bang 2*, *World Enough and Crime*, *Flash and Bang*, the first anthology by members of the Short Mystery Fiction Society. Her collection of three short mystery stories, *Live Free Or Tri*, was published in January 2016. Judy is a member of Sisters in Crime (International,

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