

The First Two Pages: *A Golden Eclipse*  
by Debra H. Goldstein

*(The First Two Pages is devoting August to celebrating the release of Day of the Dark, a mystery anthology edited by Kaye George, published by Wildside Press, and inspired by the coming total solar eclipse. I hope you enjoy getting a look at the opening pages of some of the twenty-four stories in this anthology!)*

Normally, I begin short stories with a clever line of dialogue or a dead body. My goal is to engage readers immediately. In **Day of the Dark: Stories of Eclipse**, the opening of my *A Golden Eclipse* short story is contrary to my normal style. It builds slowly in a manner parallel to the con revealed in the story.

The opening lines are simple:

*“I’ll make one more call, then we’ll have you give it a try,” Joe Martin said.  
Agent Lana Bradford nodded at Joe, her unaccustomed ponytail bobbing. Hopefully this was the only thing she hadn’t considered in prepping for her first undercover assignment. She trained her eyes back on Joe punching numbers into his phone.*

The purpose of this opening is to introduce the two main characters. We learn Lana is an agent in an undercover situation. Whatever her mission, and we are intrigued to know what it is, Joe is the target and the crime involves using the telephone. Her “unaccustomed ponytail bobbing” infers disguise. Nothing in these first lines physically describes Joe Martin, but the word choice of his name subliminally sets the stage for “good old joe.”

The next paragraphs flesh out the characters while slowly advancing the plot.

*“It’s Joe Martin, Three A Travel. This is not a sales call. I’m responding to your recent Winter Travel Show request for information about viewing the North America eclipse.”  
Sitting beside him, Lana forced her lips upward when he made an okay sign with his hand and flashed her a wide-toothed grin. Fixated by the gold-capped upper tooth centering his smile, she tried not to stare at him.  
“Yes, ma’am,” he said, peering through his reading glasses at a script. “With it being over forty years since a total solar eclipse passed over the continental United States, August 21, 2017, is definitely going to be a special time for Americans to find a spot between Oregon and South Carolina to experience this spectacle. That’s why we’re providing safety information*

*about looking at an eclipse and, if you like, information about the different existing viewing opportunities. You do realize that depending upon where one chooses to watch from is the difference between having a second or two minutes and thirty-eight seconds to see the moon pass between the sun and the earth?"*

This passage provides the reader with an immediate quandary: is Joe a reputable company man or is he a con man? Lana's need to force a smile and his gold tooth are designed to let the reader know there is something fishy about the scripted call and Joe. The remainder of the phone call establishes, without it feeling like an information dump, the con while explaining the who, what, where, when and why of a total solar eclipse. Balancing these two things was tricky because for the rest of the story to work, I had to make certain readers, without being turned off, understand the importance of this eclipse, what a total solar versus partial eclipse is, and the limited times and places on the North American continent one could see it on August 21, 2017.

Once the reader was educated about eclipses, it was necessary to finish establishing the con and the story's setting.

*Putting down his script, he consulted the separate list of names he used to make his calls. "Between you and me, Mrs. ... Maple, thanks to my wife booking a discounted Three A package last month, we're going to be sitting pretty on a hotel veranda in St. Louis, Missouri for one of the longer exposures."*

*Lana observed how he paused and listened intently. "I agree," he said, again smiling in Lana's direction. "She's giving me a once in a lifetime gift. Considering how low the prices are right now, you can do the same thing for your husband. Do you think he'd be more interested in seeing the eclipse as part of a rafting trip down the Salmon River or from an observation mountaintop, hotel veranda, or campground site?"*

*She couldn't hear Mrs. Maple's response, but because he flipped his script to its back page, she was certain this part of his spiel would concentrate on what hotel accommodations were available. Once Joe started speaking again, Lana tuned him out and glanced around the one room office.*

*Four women, who she assumed were housewives who also had answered his ad for part-time telemarketers, sat across the room. Their metal six-foot table was identical to the one where Joe and she sat. Both tabletops were covered with white paper cloths too short to drop more than an inch or two over their sides. Each of the blue-jean clad women wore a headset and were engrossed in conversations.*

*The only other thing in the room was a bare card table dedicated to a coffee pot and its fixings. When Lana saw dust swirl above the table in the sunshine coming through the room's*

*one window, she realized there weren't any window treatments. She made a mental note to avoid the coffee as she listened to ascertain where Joe was in his pitch.*

*After sitting through his full con repeatedly that morning, she knew how the conversation would go. He'd recommend a hotel that met the mark's price range, charge a partial deposit to her credit card, obtain an email to send her a receipt, and combine his thank you with advising her to use protective eyewear or view the eclipse indirectly.*

*The only problem with the transaction, as Lana well knew, was that the partial deposit never reached the hotel or campsite. Rather, it found its way directly into Joe Martin's personal overseas banking account. The mark wouldn't be any wiser until she and her husband showed up at the booked location clutching their worthless receipt.*

Unlike my stories that begin with immediate conflict generated by a dead body, this caper required a slow set-up that took the "first two pages." From that point, the remainder of the story became a series of plot twists. Each twist is designed to remind readers that no matter what the event, there are always people ready to use any occasion to take advantage of others. The beauty is that the depth of character, setting, and plot introduced in the first two pages eclipses the fact the reader has been fooled into reading the remainder of *A Golden Eclipse*.



Judge Debra H. Goldstein is the author of **Should Have Played Poker: a Carrie Martin and the Mah Jongg Players Mystery** (Five Star - 2016) and 2012 IPPY Award winning **Maze in Blue**. Her short stories and essays have been published in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. She serves on the national Sisters in Crime and Guppy boards and is an MWA member.

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