

**First Two Pages of “Death Will Finish Your Marathon” in  
*Where Crime Never Sleeps: Murder New York Style 4***

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*In September and October, The First Two Pages features posts by some of the authors who contributed stories to Where Crime Never Sleeps: Murder New York Style 4 (Level Best Books, September 2017), the fourth anthology of crime and mystery short stories by members of the New York/ Tri-State Chapter of Sisters in Crime.*

In addition to contributing “Death Will Finish Your Marathon,” I served as editor of the anthology, so the the New York theme—“ the infinite variety of New Yorkers and the uniqueness of New Yorkishness,” as I put it in the volume’s introduction—was as important to me as my protagonist and his sidekicks or the crime itself. Part of my agenda for the first two pages was to make New York City live and breathe.

So whaddaya think, Bruce was gonna say, “I picked up bagels at Zabar’s and met Barbara on the corner of 81st and Broadway”? That’s the way I suspect a non-New Yorker would write New York. Bruce Kohler, recovering alcoholic with a smart mouth and a heart of gold, is the quintessential Manhattan native. It’s not a matter of labels or addresses. I do it with voice, or rather, Bruce does it. I just write it down.

*If you’ve never been on Staten Island, you must be a real New Yorker.* If that isn’t on a T-shirt, it ought to be. Marathon Sunday, the ungodly hour of 5 AM, my first trip across the Verrazano Bridge.

My writing process always starts with Bruce’s voice in my head, and it comes through loud and clear after seven stories, four novels, and a novella. Bruce has tremendous charm, so I let him talk, because within the first two pages, I want the reader to fall in love with him. I let him say whatever he wants in the first draft, but as I revise, I tighten it up, packing plenty of information the reader needs into a brief space. Here’s the opening paragraph:

My friend Barbara has talked me into doing some crazy things over the years, but running the Marathon was right up there. Run twenty-six miles? Without getting paid to do it? And neither the law nor bad guys breathing down my neck? Yep, it was one of those unexpected gifts of sobriety that makes everybody laugh when you complain about it at an AA meeting.

You may never have heard of my series, but now you know that Bruce is a recovering alcoholic who has a friend named Barbara. You’ll meet her in a minute, a woman of endearing enthusiasm and a disastrous lack of boundaries and brakes. I want you to fall in love with her by the end of the first two pages too. You’re already getting the idea that she’s the one who pushes, as he goes along reluctantly. Running from the law? Maybe in his drinking days. From bad guys? Maybe the murder that we can guess is coming up is not the first for these amateur sleuths. If you’re discerning, you may also pick up that Bruce is a guy who can laugh at himself. It’s one of the things I love about him, and I hope that readers will concur.

There's more: Did you know that a marathon is 26 miles? If you didn't, now you do. Did you know that people laugh at AA meetings? A lot? That was quite a secret when I first started writing about Bruce ten years ago, and it's one of the things I hope will draw the fascinated reader in before the end of the first two pages.

I love a character-driven mystery, and I'm a sucker for snappy dialogue and evolving relationships woven into the puzzle. But I also know that the short mystery story reader demands a crime. The hook must be set by the end of page two. The reader must have a compelling reason to read on.

This particular story, as it happens, started out as a novel, same title, that I abandoned at 60,000 words a few years back because it wasn't working. The hook was: Who would kill an old man that everybody loved?

I have a confession to make: In the manuscript I handed in, the victim wasn't introduced until page three. I was having too much fun with the banter among Bruce, Barbara, and the third triumvir, Jimmy, to realize I needed to bring Arturo, the Ancient Marathoner, out of the dugout and up to the plate. It *did* occur to me when I had to prepare for a two-minute timed reading from the story at a promotional event. If you want to stick to the time limit and end with a punch line, you cut. You can always kill another darling. But by then, it was too late to revise the published story.

Here's what I should have made sure appeared on page two:

The Ancient Marathoner was a legendary runner who had finished strong in the first New York Marathon in 1970 and many subsequent Marathons until old age had overtaken him. They called him the Ancient Marathoner because he dominated a park bench by the South Gatehouse at the Central Park reservoir, telling his stories to passersby, whether they wanted to hear them or not, like the Ancient Mariner in the poem.

In the printed version, page two ends with the Ancient Marathoner telling his stories by the Central Park reservoir. So I did introduce him in a timely fashion, thanks to the publishing process. But with a little more cutting on page one and the top of page two, I could not only have killed him within the first two pages but told you what made that surprising.

"He'll be at the finish line," she said. "The runners used to touch Arturo for luck before the race. Now they do it at the end."

"Why would you need luck after the race? You've already finished."

"It's so you'll run again next year."

"Whew! I'm glad you told me. I'll stay far away from him."

“Bru-uce. Don’t be like that! Everybody loves Arturo.”

But somebody didn’t. The blow was perfectly timed: the moment when the Kenyan and the Ethiopian in the lead were fighting over the last hundred yards. When the Kenyan, exhausted but triumphant, stumbled across the finish line, he tripped and fell across the body of the Ancient Marathoner. It could have been a heart attack. But as the Medical Examiner’s office discovered soon enough, it wasn’t.



**Elizabeth Zelvin's** short stories have been nominated twice for the Derringer and three times for the Agatha Award. They have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and all four volumes of *Murder New York Style*. She served as editor for *Where Crime Never Sleeps*. Liz authored two books of poetry before publishing *Death Will Get You Sober*, the first novel in the long-running Bruce Kohler mystery series. The Mendoza Family Saga, historical fiction about a Jewish brother and sister who sail with Columbus and find refuge in the Ottoman Empire, includes *Voyage of Strangers*, an Amazon bestseller, and *Journey of Strangers*. Liz is also a psychotherapist and a singer-songwriter whose album is titled *Outrageous Older Woman*. You can reach her at <http://elizabethzelvin.com> and <http://facebook.com/elizabeth.zelvin>.