

## **The First Two Pages: “There’s an Alligator in My Purse”**

By Paul D. Marks

From *Florida Happens: Tales of Mystery, Mayhem, and Suspense from the Sunshine State*, edited by Greg Herren (Three Rooms Press)

Thank you for having me here, Art. Now all I have to do is figure out what to say...

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“There’s an Alligator in My Purse” was inspired by Florida. And this particular story set in Florida was inspired by the fact that I wanted to try my hand at something for the then-upcoming Bouchercon anthology that would be part of the 2018 St. Petersburg Bouchercon convention. Necessity being the mother of invention (Frank Zappa aside), that was the real inspiration for the story.

Since I was writing this story for a specific market/publication in the hope that it would be accepted, certain parameters had to be met: “We are looking for stories set in, or inspired by, Florida and its eccentricity and complexity. We want diverse voices and characters, tales of darkness and violence, whether they are noir, cozy, hard-boiled or suspense. Push the boundaries of your creativity and the theme! Note: The stories don’t have to actually be set in Florida, but can be ‘inspired’ by it—so a character can be from here, it can be built around a piece of music about Florida; etc.” They also said: “Florida. Just the state’s name inspires a

reaction when heard. It is a state of pristine white sand beaches, green water, abundant wildlife, strip clubs, bait shops, theme parks and transients.”

The original theme for the anthology and convention was “Sunny Places, Shady People,” so I wanted plenty o’ sun and plenty o’ shady people. And Florida’s a good place for both. It’s also a good place for crime.

I could have gone one of two ways with the story, a serious noirish mystery, which is more what I’m known for...if I’m known. Or, since people seem to make fun of Florida, the other choice was humor and satire. I chose the latter, hence the alligator in the purse – and there is one—though he doesn’t make his appearance in the first two pages. I’ll give you a little tease though: His name is Desi. So, if you’d like to meet him you might want to read the story. ☺

I started with the title, which came to me out of nowhere, as these things often do. I thought it was funny. Okay, funny. Now what? Now I have to build a story around it. And hopefully give the rest of the story at least a chuckle or two. So, I had to figure out who would have an alligator in their purse— and why. I just let my mind wander and I had fun with it. I wanted it to be absurd but not so unrealistic that it couldn’t happen. I hope I succeeded in that. This story was a hell of a lot of fun to write and I hope others enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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The first two pages have to set the tone and I wanted to get that going from the get-go. And I think the title of the story does set the tone before the actual story even begins. I don't think anyone looking at the title "There's An Alligator in My Purse" is going to think they're in for a heavy, noirish story, though you never know...especially in F-L-A.

The other thing that sets the tone are the opening lines—a signal about both tone and subject matter. They also introduce the characters in a fun way:

The Teaser

"She makes a beautiful corpse, doesn't she?"

"You just kill me."

"No, I just killed her."

"You know what they say, live fast, die young and leave a good lookin' corpse."

"Or at least a dead one," I said, with a wink.

As you'll notice the first thing is "The Teaser." The story has section breaks with various story elements spelled out, Teaser, Backstory, Climax, etc. That way no one can miss what's going on. Like an exoskeleton, I wanted to make the story structure visible. I hope that adds a bit to the humor. The purpose of this—I think?—is to show the artifice of the story.

In the Teaser, we get a hint at who the narrator is and what his job might be. We also learn a little about him in the casual and light way he talks about having just killed someone. And that brings us to another element of the Teaser: the dead body. My background is as a "script doctor" and one of the things you learn

working on commercial screenplays is to start with a “teaser” that will hook the audience and keep them glued to the screen. In many cases (in thrillers, crime stories, etc.), this is a dead body. We wonder who the dead person is, who killed them, why, etc. I once had a producer tell me that you had to have someone dead in order for the audience (or in this case the reader) to care about anything else that’s happening. The stakes have to be extremely high. I don’t necessarily agree that you need a dead body, or certainly not in the opening scene, but it does tend to set the stakes high and hopefully make people want to keep reading. Hence: the D.B. in the story.

In this section, we also learn a bit about the narrator, a hitman, and his, uh, work ethic:

I’m a pro. I like to do a competent job. I like to have my marks look presentable, both for themselves and for my clients. It’s good for word of mouth and getting killed is hard enough, on both the mark and their family, so at least they should leave a suitable lasting impression.

I’m also California boy, so the main character is a transplant from CA. As the narrator he gives us a mini info dump about how and why he landed in Florida:

But before I start, I’d like to talk about my adopted state of Florida. I was becoming too well known in my native California and had to relocate. Florida gets a bad rap because it has a bad rep because what’s normal for Florida isn’t necessarily normal for anywhere else. But in reality we’re just like any other state, only more so. So, here I am in St. Augustine F-L-A, the Sunshine State, which some people call the Gunshine State. Partly because it looks like a gun and partly because of all the guns standing their ground. So there I was, and you

know what they say, one door closes and another door opens. After my California door closed, Door Number Two opened and Ashley Smith stepped through.

Ashley Smith stepping through that metaphorical door is what truly sets the plot in motion as she wants to hire the narrator to do a “job” for her. So, we’ve learned a bit about the narrator, the tone of the story, the beautiful corpse, where it’s set and the real teaser: what the hell happens when Ashley Smith steps through that door. A lot of info in a small space and hopefully enough of a tease to make the reader want to continue with the story. And we haven’t even hit the two-page mark yet.

The narrator and Ashley Smith are the two main characters. And both make their entrances in the first two pages.

So now, onto the next step: As every real estate agent will tell you, what you really need to think about is:

Location. Location. Location.

I knew I wanted the story set in Florida, not just inspired by it. So the next task was deciding where in Florida to set it. I’d already had a story published way back when set in Miami’s hot—in more ways than one—South Beach. I could have revisited that area, but I figured maybe a lot of the other entrants might set their stories there, and that truly was a consideration. There’s a lot of coast in Florida, as well as inland areas that people seem to overlook when thinking about

the state, so that gave a lot of possibilities. But Florida also has the oldest Euro-settled city in the United States: St. Augustine. Plenty of old world charm there, so: location settled.

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The next section of the exoskeleton is the Backstory. Since this tale bounces back and forth in time, I thought that, besides showing the artifice, labeling the sections might help the reader follow better. In the first part of the Backstory, the narrator meets Ashley Smith at the Egret Café—No regrets at the Egret—where she interviews him for a job the way any prospective employer would interview a prospective employee: How many years have you been doing what you do? Do you enjoy your work? Things like that. And:

Ashley Smith needed a job done. I was the right man for the job. A symbiotic relationship that serves everyone's purpose—capitalism in action, payment for services rendered. My services had been recommended to her. So we met at the Egret Café: “No Regrets at the Egret”. The Egret, a St. Augustine institution, inhabited a Spanish Colonial style building near the water. I sat at a table on the windward side, the breeze blowing my Fabio-long hair—like something out of a romance novel, if murder is the price of romance.

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When you're writing, it's always hard to know what to put in, what to leave for later in the story, and what to leave out altogether. Sometimes my first drafts run way too long, other times way too short. This one ran way too long. I just let the characters ramble and watched where they took me. Then I went back and

decided what was necessary, what worked and how much of this or that I needed. Sometimes you can have too much of a good thing—like backstory, lovingly referred to as an “info dump.” But sometimes you can also not have enough. Then people wonder about the characters. Who are they? What’re they doing? And that works to intrigue the reader sometimes. But sometimes it just serves to put them off. So in this story, or any story, one has to create a delicate balance of elements. It’s like cooking. You want just the right amount of salt or any other spice. Too little and the food is bland. Too much and it overwhelms you. So you play with it...until it tastes just right.

The main purpose of the first paragraph, the first page, and the first two pages is to draw the reader in. To that end you have to have various elements to do that: the hook, interesting characters, set the tone. And hopefully all these elements come together to pull the reader into the story and make them want to read on to the end.

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Paul D. Marks is the author of the Shamus Award-winning mystery-thriller *White Heat*, which *Publishers Weekly* calls a “taut crime yarn,” and its sequel *Broken Windows* (dropping 9/10/18). *Publishers Weekly* says: “Fans of downbeat PI fiction will be satisfied...with Shamus Award winner Marks’s solid sequel to... *White Heat*.” Though thrillers and set in the 1990s, both novels deal with issues that are hot and relevant today: racism and immigration, respectively. Marks says “*Broken Windows* holds up a prism from which we can view the events burning up today’s headlines, like the passionate immigration debate, through the lens of the recent past. It all comes down to the saying we know so well, ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’.” His short stories appear in *Ellery Queen*

and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazines*, among others, and have won or been nominated for many awards, including the Anthony, Derringer and Macavity. His story “Windward” has been selected for the *Best American Mystery Stories of 2018*, edited by Louise Penny and Otto Penzler, and has also been nominated for both a 2018 Shamus Award and Macavity Award for Best Short Story. “Ghosts of Bunker Hill” was voted #1 in the 2016 Ellery Queen Readers Poll. He is co-editor of the multi-award nominated anthology *Coast to Coast: Private Eyes from Sea to Shining Sea*. [www.PaulDMarks.com](http://www.PaulDMarks.com)