

**The First Two Pages: “Two Hundred Miles” by Margaret Lucke
From *Fault Lines: Stories by Northern California Crime Writers*,
edited by Margaret Lucke (Sisters in Crime Northern California Chapter)**

“Two Hundred Miles” was a gift from the muse. One morning as I lay in bed, half awake and half lingering in a dream, a young woman’s voice began to speak to me: “They tell me it’s not a long trip. A couple hundred miles...”

When I got up, I went straight to my computer and began to write this story.

They tell me it’s not a long trip. A couple hundred miles.
I’ve never been that far from home. Three and half, maybe four
hours. Sounds like forever, I say.

No, they reply, how long you’ll stay once you get there—
that’s forever.

She is not only young but unsophisticated, as is suggested by the fact that she has never traveled as far as two hundred miles. Now she is leaving home forever, apparently at the direction of the unnamed “they.” Who are “they”? I don’t ever name them, and my protagonist doesn’t either, but they are in charge. That is one of several questions I want to pose in these brief initial paragraphs, along with: Who is this? Where is she going? Why forever?

Here and throughout the story I tried to keep the language simple, the kinds of words and sentences that this young woman would use as she tells her own story. It’s rare for me to write fiction in the present tense, but in this case it

seemed the best choice for bringing the reader into her thoughts and experiences as she is going through this journey.

They notch the cuffs in the last position. I can't slide my hands out, but my wrists are so delicate that the cuffs slide up and down my arm. I might like it better if the metal rings clasped my wrists tight, unmovable. The cuffs are joined by a chain fastened to the back of the seat in front of me.

The bus seats are hard. The windows are scratched and smeary. The panes aren't glass, they're plastic, extra thick. On the outside, narrow metal bars run across them.

The other passengers are silent, sunk deep in their thoughts, their fears, their regrets. Except for a frizzy-haired blond chick at the very back, who's screaming about innocence and revenge and how the bastard had it coming.

Maybe he did. Maybe they all do.

In these paragraphs we learn where she is and the nature of journey she is undertaking. While I don't name the destination, I wanted to make it clear that she is on a bus taking convicted criminals to prison. The reader can figure out that "they" are guards, the latest in a succession of "theys" that includes cops, judge, and jury. These paragraphs focus on specific physical details that make up the protagonist's confined environment—the cuffs on her wrist, the hard seats, the bars on the bus windows.

Then comes the first hint that her crime might involve someone else, someone who deserved whatever happened.

My goal in those opening paragraphs was to draw readers into a specific moment and make them curious about who this young woman is and how she

came to be in this decidedly unpleasant situation. She's going to prison forever—a life sentence. What brought her to this point?

The blond girl's using language that would have made my grandma blush and cover her ears. I can almost hear Grandma's voice: Lyssie, I hear you use words like that, I'll whup you good. She would have, too.

The bus lurches out of the parking lot and lumbers down the main street. This is the town I grew up in, and I'm seeing it for probably the last time. The elementary school. The Baptist church. The Frostee Freeze. People gawk as we go by. A little boy with an ice cream cone points at us, and his mother reaches down and turns his head away.

The Bar and Thrill, where Derek bought me my first drink. The bartender didn't even check to see I was underage. Fairview Park, where Derek gave me my first kiss. The Cottonwood Motel, where he showed me what a woman does to please her man.

With her presence in the prison bus established, I wanted to widen the story and begin to let the reader learn who this young woman is. Her name is Lyssie, perhaps short for the more grownup-sounding name Alyssa, and she was raised in this small town by a strict, straitlaced grandmother. Another character is introduced as well—Lyssie's boyfriend Derek, probably older than she is and very likely bad news. Is he the guy who, in Lyssie's case, had it coming?

The blond in the back keeps yelling. Finally they go talk to her. I don't know what they say, but she shuts up.

We roll past the corner of Oak Street. Two blocks down is my grandma's house, where I grew up. A little house, just four rooms. She put me in the attic bedroom, up under the eaves. It was my mom's room when she was a little girl, and at night when I lay awake in the bed she had slept in, breathing the air she had

breathed, I would make believe she was there with me. I would pretend that she hadn't run away and left me, that in the morning I would open my eyes and she would be there, holding out her arms. I would rush into them and she would hold me and never let me go.

Here is a little more about the factors that shaped Lyssie into who she is today. She grew up in a tiny house, occupying the girlhood bedroom of the mother who abandoned her. She describes her fantasies matter-of-factly, without letting on how she felt about never having those dreams fulfilled. My hope is that readers will nevertheless grasp her yearning for the love and comfort she missed out on.

Grandma had this thing about always keeping the inside of the house clean and neat, swept and dusted. Perfect and untouched, as if no one really lived there. Yet it was falling down around us. The roof leaked and the front porch sagged and the yard was full of weeds. One of my chores was to keep the weeds pulled, but I never saw the point. They just grew back again.

Once I met Derek I had no time for chores anyway.

More about home Lyssie grew up in—the grandmother's desire to present a perfect face to the world, or at least to this small town, while the reality behind the façade is very different. Until writing this essay I hadn't realized how much this sentence—"Yet it was falling down around us"—sums up the tragedy at the heart of this story.

And along comes Derek again—the man she hoped would make her life better. But as we can guess from the fact that she is on her way to prison, instead he made it worse.

“Two Hundred Miles” is a very short story. The manuscript is only five pages in total, so the first two pages take us more than a third of the way to the end. We ride with Lyssie, sharing her thoughts, her memories, the sights she sees from the bus windows and the feelings she endures. The story and the readers’ understanding of what has happened build slowly until the end, when we’re brought to the moment of the crime. The story concludes when the bus arrives at its destination.

My goal in writing this story was to be subtle, to tell the story in Lyssie’s voice and through her perceptions, and not to spell things out too much. I wanted to draw readers into her world and let the readers fill in blanks for themselves. Through what is stated and what is not stated, readers can come to their own conclusions about what has happened and whether Lyssie’s fate is justified.

While I was the editor of *Fault Lines*, the anthology by Sisters in Crime NorCal in which this story appears, the task of choosing the stories to be included wasn’t mine but was accomplished by a hard-working selection team.

I was honored that they picked this one to be part of a collection of stories of which our chapter is very proud.

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Margaret Lucke writes tales of love, ghosts, and murder, sometimes all three in one book. She is the editor of *Fault Lines*, the anthology in which “Two Hundred Miles” appears. She is also the author of four novels in two series. *A Relative Stranger* (nominated for an Anthony Award) and *Snow Angel* feature San Francisco artist and private Jess Randolph. Next spring will see the publication of *House of Desire*, the second of her tales of love, ghosts, and murder on the California coast, following *House of Whispers*. Margaret’s other credits include two how-to books on writing and more than 60 short stories, feature articles, and scripts for mystery weekends. She teaches fiction writing classes and workshops and is a former president of the Northern California chapter of Mystery Writers of America. Visit her at www.margaretlucke.com.