

The First Two Pages: “For Elizabeth” By Christine Eskilson

From *Heartbreaks & Half-Truths*

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An Essay by Christine Eskilson

I write primarily for myself. That is, I aspire to write stories that I would enjoy reading, as most writers do. Growing up, my favorite authors were Carolyn Keene, Agatha Christie and O. Henry, not necessarily in that order. I was—and still am—a Plot Lover. I blew past characters and scenic descriptions for the most part, searching for that twist to compel me to reassess everything I’d just read and marvel over exactly how I’d been fooled. Eventually I sussed out Dame Agatha’s specialty (the one person who could not possibly have committed the crime and/or who suffers a near miss almost always is the murderer), yet she still managed to trick me numerous times. No one, however, could accuse her of being a master of character development.

Although in writing my stories plot still always comes first, I’ve learned the obvious lesson that characters can’t be far behind. (I’m still grappling with scenic descriptions but that would be another essay.) That instruction particularly resonates when you’ve chosen first person narration, as in the case of “For Elizabeth.” As my story doesn’t begin with a murder or other crime, the first two pages needed to immediately interest the reader in my narrator and set the stage for what follows.

The story opens with an overview of a romantically frustrated man, befitting his placement in an anthology entitled *Heartbreaks and Half-Truths*:

I've loved Elizabeth for years. From a pimply adolescence obsessed with maritime history and video games through a lucrative tech career and right up to my present confines. We met in high school, where all great passions are born. Elizabeth was in my Spanish class sophomore year, our desks only inches apart. Those inches, however, could have spanned miles. I spent most of the semester too terrorized to talk to her, fantasizing from afar that I was a daring New World Explorer and she was Queen Isabella. That was about as impure as I got in those days. Unfortunately there was a putative King Ferdinand in the picture—a blockhead senior named Rob, whose prowess on the Newton North High School football field was grossly disproportionate to the combined size and caliber of his heart and brain.

I plucked my narrator, Matthew, from a boy I briefly knew in middle school. He must have been lurking in the recesses of my brain for years. “For Elizabeth” has its roots in a sixteenth-century English scandal, and this particular boy had an encyclopedic mind when it came to Tudor royal history. Because I was one of the few other eighth graders who also knew in chronological order the names and fates of the wives of King Henry VIII, we struck up a middling friendship. Although I can't remember his name now, and I have no idea how his life unfolded, my story catapults him into high school and beyond, obsessed with a woman named after one of the most powerful English monarchs ever.

Following that opening sketch, I needed to demonstrate Matthew's desire in action. Riffing on the underlying royal theme, I placed him in the position of a

chivalric knight defending his lady's honor. My initial characters and setting, however, were undoubtedly prosaic: teenagers in suburban Boston. Matthew is spending a high school summer dishing ice cream when Elizabeth and his imagined rival Rob walk in. What can be more chivalrous in an ice cream store than defending the right to a cone of one's choice? After Rob insinuates that Elizabeth doesn't need ice cream because she should be watching her weight, Matthew takes charge.

I don't exactly remember what happened next but Emma, who was putting more mix in the soft serve, swore I practically leaped over the counter, teeth bared. The upshot was that Rob's white polo shirt was splattered with frozen strawberry bits and mini chocolate chunks, Mr. Howard fired me on the spot, and Elizabeth and I became friends for life.

The bond between the knight and his lady is sealed. Although my first two pages are hardly the stuff of plot-driving crimes or mysterious doings, hopefully through Matthew's introduction I have laid the table for a satisfying story of what happens to a man who loves too much.

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Christine Eskilson received honorable mentions in the 2012 Al Blanchard Short Crime Fiction Contest and the 2012 Women's National Book Association (WNBA) Annual Writing Contest, third place in the 2017 WNBA Annual Writing Contest, and first place in the 2018 Bethlehem Writers Roundtable Short Story Contest. Her stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies.