

**The First Two Pages of “All in the Planning” by Marco Carocari**  
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An Essay by Marco Carocari

Stop me if you heard this one before: one dark and frosty night, a couple gets into an argument while driving their car down a deserted road...

“All in the Planning” originated as a writing prompt some here may recognize, and I’m beyond excited that it made the cut for *Malice Domestic 16: Mystery Most Diabolical*.

My descent into a life of crime (fiction) with the intent to distribute occurred relatively late in life, aka my mid-forties. And though I’d just completed what would become my debut novel, *Blackout*, I knew I still had a lot to learn. Enter: writing classes.

The original prompt seemed simple enough, yet I profusely sweat over it for days, deadline looming, without a clue what to do with it. Until I realized the whole thing was missing a corpse in the trunk. Of course. There, problem solved (sort of).

At first, all I knew was I wanted to write a noir-ish tale about the kind of people you wouldn’t wish as neighbors on your enemies. Fearing my main

character, Roy, might turn some people off if we spent the entire time in his head, I decided against writing him in first-person. Close third allowed the necessary bit of distance from my seriously flawed protagonist, who's devious but also, let's face it, somewhat of a tool. And this way, Roy didn't have to narrate his every move—we get to observe his journey side by side.

Approaching the project *tongue-in-cheek* let me—and, ideally, the reader—have some fun with him and his “charming” girlfriend while gradually making their situation infinitely worse.

I'm a huge movie buff and love atmospheric cinematography when the camera fades in on a scene and, in a mere few frames, sets time, place, and, most importantly, mood. I always strive to write my scenes as vividly as possible to give the audience a similar experience, but that can at times take up a bit of space. Word count was limited, and I needed to get to the point sooner rather than later (like now).

I rewrote the first line ad nauseam to make sure it (hopefully) flowed and provided as much information as possible without tanking it:

An hour past midnight, Roy barreled down the cold, deserted highway, two-thirds of a bottle of Hendrick's mollifying his senses,

his blood-crusted hands clenching the steering wheel of his not-so-dearly departed wife's Thunderbird.

This somewhat gritty image puts the reader in the middle of the action, introduces our protagonist, and already suggests that, clearly, not all is well. The remaining paragraph I used to expand on that first image—and Roy's situation—and provide a glimpse into his mind:

Brenda had absolutely forbidden him to get behind the wheel of the bronze-colored Anniversary Edition, her pride and joy, unless she was present. And though he was pretty sure the trunk wasn't what she'd had in mind at the time, he assumed, technically, he was still in the clear. With his Range Rover at the shop, he didn't exactly have options.

I wanted to establish the story's wry tone right off the bat and, hopefully, keep readers intrigued. And because I want them to instantly get a feel for individual characters by what they say and how, I led with dialogue whenever possible. Yet, the first two pages barely contain any. I sacrificed most dialogue so that the lovers' body language could do the talking as tensions increase. Alison and Roy may care for one another and share a common goal here, but if they were, presently, any further from being on the same page, they'd literally appear in different stories.

What went wrong, you ask? Let me count the ways.

## The First Two Pages of “All in the Planning”

An hour past midnight, Roy barreled down the cold, deserted highway, two-thirds of a bottle of Hendrick’s mollifying his senses, his blood-crusted hands clenching the steering wheel of his not-so-dearly departed wife’s Thunderbird. Brenda had absolutely forbidden him to get behind the wheel of the bronze-colored Anniversary Edition, her pride and joy, unless she was present. And though he was pretty sure the trunk wasn’t what she’d had in mind at the time, he assumed, technically, he was still in the clear. With his Range Rover at the shop, he didn’t exactly have options.

“Slow down!” His girlfriend, Alison, fidgeted in the cream-colored leather seat on the passenger side, her breath forming clouds in the car’s frosty cabin. She cranked up the heat and rubbed her hands. Wiping a strand of long, bleach-blond hair from her face, she stared at snow-covered trees streaking past, illuminated by the spherical silver moon and the car’s headlights. Her small fists clenched and unclenched repeatedly.

Roy didn’t reply, catching a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror. The mug with the sharp cheekbones someone had once described as a woman’s wet dream looked unkempt, like someone had wiped their feet on it, and his piercing blue eyes were bloodshot.

He shut his lids for an instant and found himself assaulted by visual echos of angry, crimson streaks splattered across his living room walls. His entire life derailed in one stroke. Well, more like half a dozen, he couldn’t remember. He hadn’t stopped to count.

A floating sensation, accompanied by a sharp intake of breath to his right, pried his leaden eyelids open. The car swerved hard on a patch of ice, and adrenaline jolted through his system. Roy blinked, the road ahead a blur, and he white-knuckled the steering wheel in a frantic attempt to correct course.

Alison gasped for air, bracing herself against the door and the glove compartment with her arms. “*Jesus*, Roy, I told you to slow down! You’re gonna get us killed.”

He got the car under control, but his heart pounded furiously against his chest.

“Relax, I got this,” he said through clenched teeth, hoping that saying it out loud might assuage his own frazzled nerves.

“Yeah, sure, like you got *her*.” She half nodded towards the trunk, her painted, red lips an angry line.

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t start with me. You weren’t there.”

Exhaling sharply through her nose, Alison turned her head. She resumed staring out the passenger window, biting the nails on her right hand, and incessantly stroking the green nylon skirt she wore under a dark brown beaver coat with her left.

Roy grimaced and focussed on the road. She’d been uncharacteristically quiet since arriving at his house two hours ago to help clean up the mess. Well, *his* mess. Not that he blamed her—his living room wall resembled a giant, morbid Rorschach test. But he welcomed the silence, needed the time to think. Five hours to dump the body, eliminate all evidence, and create the illusion that Brenda took off on one of her spontaneous trips she never invited him on. Time was running out.

He pulled a silver flask from his blue silk shirt pocket and took a swig, leaving liquid beads on his three-day stubble. The gin stung and warmed the back of his throat.

Alison huffed out her sharp, theatrical sigh that preceded all their impending arguments. Quiet time was over. “Jesus, Roy, what were you thinking?”

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Marco Carocari grew up in Switzerland, where he traveled the globe working for the airlines, and later as an internationally published photographer, and frequently jobbed as a waiter, hotel receptionist, or manager of a professional photo studio. In 2016 he swapped snow-capped mountains, lakes, and lush, green pastures for the charm of the dry California desert, where he lives with his husband. *Blackout* is his first novel.