

**The First Two Pages of “We Are All Strangers Here” by Art Taylor**  
From *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* (Sept./Oct. 2022)

An Essay by Art Taylor

As I wrote in a recent blog post for *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, the genesis of my new story “We Are All Strangers Here” owes a lot to George Saunders’ craft guide *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* and specifically to his analysis of Anton Chekhov’s story “In a Cart.”

Following some of Saunders’ observations and tips, my own story progressed step by step with a goal toward establishing certain information in a scene or a paragraph, gauging what readers know and what they might think/expect from that scene/paragraph, and then trying very deliberately to take the story in a different direction in the next section. In short, what readers may *think* is happening in the opening scene of “We Are All Strangers Here” may turn out to be not quite what’s happening at all—and I hoped to continue that movement progressively and with higher stakes throughout.

But in that first section of the story, what *exactly* was I trying to build—both in the scene itself but also with an eye beyond—and what were the elements of the initial foundation?

Looking back at the opening, two overall ideas stand out: an emphasis on self-awareness and self-control on the one hand and a persistent focus on

assessment on the other.

The narrator is a woman sitting at a hotel bar, and while the first line may seem simple description and scene-setting—the drink on the counter, the phone in her hand, the purse on the empty stool beside her—she admits upfront that she’s been “nursing” that Amaretto Sour, with hints of a conscious decision. And perhaps the other elements are deliberate too? Not just narrative scene-setting (the teller telling) but a more purposeful scene setting: the actor laying out her props.

That trend continues, with several bits of action emphasizing self-consciousness and intentionality:

- When a man approaches and asks about the empty stool: “I take my time eyeing him, toe to head, slowly.”
- When he introduces himself: “I offer my own hand if not my name.”
- When he offers to get her another drink: “I’ll have another, yes, please. But I don’t let strangers buy me drinks.’ I’ve already pulled out a twenty. I lay it on the bar.”
- When he offers a cliché: “I layer my agreement with a touch of world-weariness.”

I tried to emphasize this aspect of her character further, more explicitly, with a simple dialogue tag—“I lie”—and self-awareness about her clothing doing a lot of work after the man asks her if she’s at the hotel with the convention:

“Yes,” I lie, though I seem dressed for it: wrap blazer with a ruffle back, pencil skirt. The slit along my thigh would be a little much for the office, but I’m not in the office, obviously. “But I don’t remember seeing you in the meetings.”

By the final exchange of these first two pages, I hope that the reader is aware

how carefully she's cultivating every move:

My turn to shrug. "Everybody needs a change of pace, right? Change of scenery? A break from the same four walls, same routine, same everything." I raise my nearly empty glass, peer over it, my eye steady on his. I take the last sip before answering. "Break from my husband too."

That mention of a "husband" is, if I planned well, the first big left turn for the reader—and for the man she's speaking with as well, of course.

As for the "assessment" side of this opening, that man who joined her seems to be the subject of scrutiny and evaluation at every turn—from that first "eyeing him, toe to head" mentioned above and what she sees:

...the man before me looks fresh, like he's taken his time. Polished wingtips, crisp gray slacks, black sport jacket, no tie. He's left the top two buttons of his shirt undone—one too many maybe, struggling for some balance between sharp and sexy. But he fills the shirt nicely, and there's a playfulness in his eyes, and I do so love those chiseled cheekbones. Freshly shaven, too, and the lightest layer of cologne, just enough to draw you in.

She judges his drink next—the martini he orders with a specific gin, specific garnish:

"Martini," I say, after the bartender steps away. "And *very* specific. Stuck in some Mad Man '50s or trying to be James Bond?"

"License to kill," Shane says—that same playfulness lighting up now. No problem seeing how easily he might seduce someone.

"A lady-killer, huh?"

And hopefully the last action of *hers* I already quoted above also reinforces the intensity with which she studies him. It's not just her methodical pause as she

lifts her nearly empty glass and takes the last sip, it's also the importance of how she's peering over the glass, "my eye steady on his."

Throughout the first two pages, the narrator is watching both herself and the man who's joined her—attention in both directions—and I hope that the readers own attention to some of these details and nuances will pay off as the story shifts in various directions en route to its ending—an ending which, honestly, might be what some readers *kind of* expected from the start, but perhaps not *quite* on the terms they anticipated these events might play out.

I'm including the full first two manuscript pages below—and hope that you might look for the rest of the story in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

### **The First Two Pages of "We Are All Strangers Here"**

I've been nursing an Amaretto Sour for nearly fifteen minutes at the hotel bar, phone in hand and my purse on the empty stool beside me, when his voice leans in. The noise of the convention crowd overflows in all directions, the clink of glasses, the hum of conversation, some rumble of laughter, the low drone of '80s pop, and then—

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?"

I close my Instagram feed, lay my phone beside my drink, my e-cigarette at an angle on the cocktail napkin. I take my time eyeing him, toe to head, slowly.

Along the bar, throughout the lounge, spilling into the lobby, businessmen loosen their ties, businesswomen kick off their heels, try to shake off the day's roundtables and workshops and PowerPoints. After the slog through that schedule, their outfits are rumped, stewed with sweat.

But the man before me looks fresh, like he's taken his time. Polished wingtips, crisp gray slacks, black sport jacket, no tie. He's left the top two buttons of his shirt undone—one too many maybe, struggling for some balance between sharp and sexy. But he fills the shirt nicely, and there's a playfulness in his eyes, and I do so love those chiseled cheekbones. Freshly shaven, too, and the lightest layer of cologne, just enough to draw you in.

"I think you'll do," I tell him.

His laugh is warm. "For a second I worried I wasn't making the grade."

"A woman should know what she wants." I remove my purse from the seat, hang it from a hook under the bar. "And I do."

"Shane," he says, holding out his hand.

"Charmed." I offer my own hand if not my name.

The bartender steps up, slides a napkin Shane's way. "What can I get you?"

"Martini," Shane says. "Dry. Tanqueray. Lemon twist instead of olive. Charge to my room." He gives the room number, gestures my way. "And can I get you...?"

"I'll have another, yes, please. But I don't let strangers buy me drinks." I've already pulled out a twenty. I lay it on the bar.

Shane and the bartender exchange glances. Empathy, I'm sure, and solidarity, and a side-eye of judgement my way in the crossfire. I ignore it.

"Martini," I say, after the bartender steps away. "And *very* specific. Stuck in some Mad Man '50s or trying to be James Bond?"

"License to kill," Shane says—that same playfulness lighting up now. No problem seeing how easily he might seduce someone.

"A lady-killer, huh?"

"Truth is, I like gin, but I don't like olives." A loose shrug. "I am who I am."

"Aren't we all?" I layer my agreement with a touch of world-weariness.

"You're here with the convention," he says, not a question.

"Yes," I lie, though I seem dressed for it: wrap blazer with a ruffle back, pencil skirt. The slit along my thigh would be a little much for the office, but I'm not in the office, obviously. "But I don't remember seeing you in the meetings."

Shane shakes his head. “Business trip, but not...” He waves his hand to the crowd. “I don’t mind travelling for work, a meeting or two, but better part of the day, I want my own time. You having fun?”

My turn to shrug. “Everybody needs a change of pace, right? Change of scenery? A break from the same four walls, same routine, same everything.” I raise my nearly empty glass, peer over it, my eye steady on his. I take the last sip before answering. “Break from my husband too.”

His brow crinkles. “Your husband?”

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Art Taylor is the author of the story collection *The Boy Detective & The Summer of '74 and Other Tales of Suspense* and of the novel in stories *On the Road with Del & Louise*, winner of the Agatha Award for Best First Novel. He won the 2019 Edgar Award for Best Short Story for "English 398: Fiction Workshop," originally published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and he has won three additional Agatha Awards, an Anthony Award, four Macavity Awards, and four Derringer Awards for his short fiction. His work has also appeared in *Best American Mystery Stories*, and he edited *Murder Under the Oaks: Bouchercon Anthology 2015*, winner of the Anthony Award for Best Anthology or Collection, and *California Schemin': Bouchercon Anthology 2020*. He is an associate professor of English at George Mason University.