

**The First Two Pages of “A Hazy Shade of Winter” by Frank Zafiro**  
From *Paranoia Blues: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Paul Simon*  
edited by Josh Pachter (Down and Out Books)

An Essay by Frank Zafiro

“Crime fiction inspired by the music of” anthologies have been the rage for a few years now. It makes sense that authors would be inspired by music. Hell, I have been. And when the combination works, it works well. My favorite thus far is Joe Clifford’s *Trouble in the Heartland*. Sure, this is due in no small part to my long-term, die-hard status as a Springsteen fan since 1978. But there are objectively great crime stories in that collection.

Someone once said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture. Unless I miss the point entirely, this was meant to highlight the difficulty of capturing the essence of one artistic medium within the confines of another. Music was meant to be experienced directly, not filtered through someone else’s words, right?

But this anthology (and all the others like it) are a step further removed from music criticism. The authors are interpreting a song through the lens of crime fiction, which is not just a different medium but a narrower one, too. Not an easy task, at least in terms of delivering something that is satisfying to the reader. Why? Because the reader knows the song, too. The reader has her own interpretation. And if yours doesn’t match, that creates dissonance.

Thank the music gods for ambiguity, then.

There are songs that might translate rather directly to the page. Something like Springsteen's "Racing in the Street" or Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville," perhaps. This also includes some of Paul Simon's tunes, though I won't say which, since it is a cinch that if I do, whichever author in this collection who had the song will prove me wrong.

But others are ambiguous enough to allow for a looser interpretation that may not jangle with the reader who knows that song. This is why I chose "A Hazy Shade of Winter" when Josh Pachter invited me to be part of this anthology. It seemed to me that the lyrics were poetically vague enough that I could try to capture the essence of the song without having to worry about matching to a narrative of actual events.

I tried to set that tone right from the jump. The first line reads:

"The days are getting shorter," Mr. Amato the grocer said, right before Floyd decked him.

I'm not one to crow over my own work. Like most authors, I tend to go too far in the other direction. But I do like this first line. For one, it is immediately recognizable as crime fiction, probably hard boiled. And two, the dialogue is a harbinger of the theme to come.

This moment is how we meet Floyd, our protagonist. He is a low-level enforcer for the mob, making his rounds collecting protection money. Within a couple of paragraphs, that is established. But right away, in the first line, there is a strong hint to what's in store. It is late in the year; it is late in Floyd's life. Even though it is another character that

expresses the sentiment, Floyd takes it to heart. He is, as another famous song from a crooner puts it, in the autumn of the year.

Time is slipping away. Things are changing.

And Floyd has regrets.

That is the bittersweet theme of the story and, I would argue, the song as well. The duality that we spend our days with repetitive, mundane tasks, and then we look up and suddenly it is autumn, with winter just around the corner.

Or already here.

Floyd laments that he's been collecting for years, that people like Amato—the grocer he hits in the opening line—knew the deal, and yet he still had to smack them sometimes. That's the futility of the daily grind, an element which is present in the lives of everyone from factory works to... well, mob enforcers.

After securing a promise that Amato will have the money when he returns the next day (all part of the grind), Floyd sets off to his next destination. The literal winds of winter cut into him, a physical reminder of the metaphorical place his mind is at these days. As he trudges down the sidewalk, people get out of his way. This is something that Floyd no doubt relished as a younger man. He was respected, or at least feared. He had status, and status equals achievement. But today, he doesn't even notice. He, too, has changed, and the reaction of bystanders has become just another part of the grind.

As he makes his way to his next stop, Floyd's thoughts shift to how the business side of things has changed in his world. How corporate culture has replaced one based in neighborhood. Identity replaced by a policy manual. I didn't state so explicitly, but the sentiment is that instead of a corner diner, there's a Starbucks.

This newer world isn't just strange, it is more and more homogenous. It is a curious conundrum; as the world gets smaller, large influences widen their scope. Places far afield begin to resemble one another. Ironically, the smaller the world gets, the less reason there is to leave home.

But while the reader may catch this concept, that isn't the point Floyd takes from all this homogeneity. Instead, he sees that he doesn't fit the new image. Neither do his ways of doing business. Sure, he's able to find short-term solutions to some of the problems—one corporate outlet takes him on as an assistant maintenance man to justify the protection money they pay out—but this way of life seems to be as much in the autumn of its years as Floyd himself. He sees its end, just like his own.

And so, Floyd becomes nostalgic. Only, for him, nostalgia is comprised largely of regret. The remainder of the story examines those regrets—largely concerning lost, unrealized, or damaged relationships and wasted time—while reinforcing the lateness of the hour. The story ends with a sort of surrender, a reluctant acceptance of the inevitable, as Floyd utters the same line again from the beginning of the story.

But in these first two pages, my emphasis was on establishing that late hour, and the changes around him that punctuates it. The emotion that Floyd feels is the same one I've always felt whenever I hear those opening lines of the song:

“Time, time, time... see what's become me...”

### **The First Two Pages of “A Hazy Shade of Winter”**

“The days are getting shorter,” Mr. Amato the grocer said, right before Floyd decked him.

The blow took the old man by surprise. They almost always did, Floyd had noticed, even though he didn't understand why they didn't see it coming.

This was what Floyd did: he collected money from those who had it and smacked those who didn't. He'd been doing it for forty-five years, so it wasn't like these facts were a mystery. Yet the people he smacked still stared back at him with surprise and hurt, almost every time.

Truth was, Floyd's smacks weren't skull splitters. He thought of them more as love taps, since he felt like a reluctant parent forced to discipline a wayward child for the kid's own good. He didn't *want* to hit Amato. The grocer had simply left him no choice. So he gave him the love tap.

Amato buckled and sank to the floor. Floyd stared down impassively as the old man moaned and wobbled on his hands and knees.

*Might have hit him too hard*, he decided. Maybe he didn't know his own strength. Or else Amato just couldn't take as hard a shot as he used to. This wasn't the first time the grocer “didn't have it all today.”

Floyd reached down and grasped him by the upper arm. “Here you go, old timer. Upsy daisy.”

Amato groaned and struggled to his feet. “I'm sorry,” he murmured. “I know.”

The grocer's eyes were still a little dazed, and Floyd waited for clarity to seep back into them. His next words came by rote. “When I come back tomorrow, you'll have it?”

Amato nodded. Not frantic, but definitely eager.

That was good enough.

Floyd patted the old man's shoulder. Then he turned and left the small corner store.

Outside, the winter air lashed at him. He drew his coat closed and strode down the street. He walked as he always did—steady and with purpose. People coming the other direction tended to peel off to the side to make way for him. He was used to that, barely even noticed. His mind was already on his next stop.

There were fewer *of* them, these days. Family stores like Amato's were becoming the exception. More and more of the businesses moving into the neighborhood were corporate, and getting a manager at one of those uptight joints to tap into the register to pay their weekly tax to Mr. Giordano wasn't as simple as it used to be.

Not that the managers weren't willing, especially after Floyd had made his point. Intimidation wasn't hard, never had been. But corporate bureaucracy was another matter. If anything ever broke up Mr. Giordano's hold on the neighborhood, Floyd suspected it would be some kind of policy manual that finally did the trick.

Still, life finds a way. One of the chain stores had figured out they could hire him on as an assistant maintenance man. Strictly a no-show gig. But Mr. G got the forty hours of pay from the position and Floyd got health insurance, so it worked out for the both of them.

Today, though, was for the old standbys. The neighborhood institutions. Maybe that was what had him feeling nostalgic.

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Frank Zafiro is the crime fiction pen name for Frank Scalise, who was a police officer in Spokane, Washington, for twenty years, retiring as a captain. Frank writes gritty crime fiction from both sides of the badge, including procedurals (River City series), private investigators series (Stefan Kopriva mysteries, Jack McCrae mysteries), and hardboiled (SpoCompton series, Ania series, Bricks and Cam Jobs). In addition to writing, Frank hosted the crime fiction podcast *Wrong Place, Write Crime* from 2017-22. He is an avid hockey fan and a tortured guitarist, who lives in Redmond, Oregon with his wife, Kristi.