

**The First Two Pages of “The Only Living Boy in New York” by Tom Mead**  
From *Paranoia Blues: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Paul Simon*  
edited by Josh Pachter (Down and Out Books)

An Essay by Tom Mead

Being asked to contribute to an anthology of the calibre of Josh Pachter’s *Paranoia Blues* presented me with a remarkable and daunting challenge. Firstly, I had never tried writing to a musical prompt before. And secondly, while I knew I would be writing a crime story, I also knew that it would be unlike any I had written before.

The resulting story, “The Only Living Boy in New York,” is indeed highly unusual—at least to me. As a general rule, I write whodunits in the vein of John Dickson Carr or Ellery Queen, and this is very far from that. Instead, it was my effort to distil the essence of the collection’s title—*Paranoia Blues*—into a tale that also reflected the bleak lyrics of my chosen song. I wanted to set it in the same era that Paul Simon produced the music in question, and as such it seemed only right to focus on the key paranoias of the time.

The early 1970s, much like today, was an era of profound civil unrest and widespread discord. Some of my favourite movies from this period reflect their times with a grime and grittiness that would never be permissible in today’s Hollywood. I’m talking about movies like *The French Connection*, *Marathon Man*, *Three Days of the Condor*, Arthur Penn’s *Night Moves*, Sidney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Network*, to name but a few. The latter title is the most

relevant in this instance, as it provides not only a satiric portrait of cynical media sensationalism (inspired by news anchor Christine Chubbuck's horrific on-air suicide) but also features the "Ecumenical Liberation Army," a parody of the real-life Symbionese Liberation Army, which was responsible for the kidnapping of heiress Patty Hearst.

It's no coincidence that the first two pages of "The Only Living Boy in New York" contain references to "the nail bomb debacle in Greenwich Village" which occurred in 1970, as well as the notorious "Days of Rage." And needless to say, the "St. Louis Six" is a very thinly veiled analogy for the real-life Chicago Seven. But this isn't a story about politics; rather, it's about the way in which ideologies can become warped. How even the best intentions can lead to mayhem and disaster. In that respect, it's pure noir.

With that in mind, I chose to reread some of the bleakest, most nihilistic noir authors of the period to help me achieve the necessary tone. I started with George V. Higgins (whose novel *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* was made into another low-key cinematic masterpiece of the era, with a career-best performance from Robert Mitchum) and Donald Goines, whose novels are crammed with graphic violence and informed by their author's remarkably bleak worldview. I concluded my melancholy odyssey with Jim Thompson's *The Grifters*—all while listening to the bittersweet songs of Paul Simon.

When I finally got down to the business of writing, I knew that my story would be a neo-noir about a plan gone wrong. I also knew that it would feature

misguided idealists and a particularly shocking crime. “The Only Living Boy in New York” begins with Judge Shapstein falling foul of “The Organization,” a domestic terrorism cell which serves as an amalgam of several real-life clandestine groups. In retaliation, “The Organization” has his infant grandson kidnapped. That’s the premise, but the narrative actually picks up *after* the kidnapping has taken place. Our protagonist is a nameless librarian from Lincoln, Nebraska (“M. March,” the name she uses to check into the hotel in the first paragraph, is an alias “cribbed from *Little Women*”) who is also a sleeper agent for “The Organization.”

“Peggy,” as she likes to be known (which also happens to be the name of Paul Simon’s first wife) presented another considerable challenge, and again I delved into some of the controversies and long-held paranoias of the era to assist with her characterisation. In particular, I was influenced by my fascination with the psychology of the so-called “Manson girls,” acolytes of lunatic murderer Charles Manson. I’m still haunted by the famous footage of them laughing, singing, and skipping on their way into court. Of course, it was also essential to provide a few tips of the hat to Paul Simon’s lyrics in the story, which here take on a certain malevolence which is naturally absent from the original recording. “What else could she do but smile?” is an interesting line, and one which can be read in many different ways. Here, it reflects Peggy’s obsessive loyalty to her cause which blinds her to the horrors which she herself has wrought—just like Manson’s acolytes.

This, in turn, brings me to another key influence on the *style* of these first two pages. This author has remained a constant, unwavering chronicler of her times, and is perhaps America's greatest living writer: Joyce Carol Oates.

Oates's short fiction is a rich and heady concoction. Her prose is like piano wire, slowly tightening. She writes about desperate people: victims, obsessives, neurotics, stalkers, deviants, serial killers—but she does it with a sense of lyricism that enhances rather than undermines the gravity of the crimes which are such a prominent feature of her work. She has written several pioneering revisionist works which fictionalize real-life crimes such as the Chappaquiddick incident and the Black Dahlia murder. Works like *Zombie* and *The Corn Maiden* place the reader in the shoes of dangerous psychopaths, and as such they make for considerably uncomfortable reading. Uncomfortable, and yet *essential*. Oates's shorter works skirt a fine line between noir, gothic, and horror, but they are also indelible reflections of the respective periods in which they were written.

With this at the forefront of my mind, “The Only Living Boy in New York” is my attempt to capture and distil the pervasive social unrest (as well as the indomitable yet somewhat misguided optimism) of the late '60s and early '70s. Fiction, like music, offers us not only a “bridge over troubled water”—a respite from the onslaught of the world around us—but also a new lens through which to view the world. That's what Paul Simon does with his lyrics and music, it's what Joyce Carol Oates does with her fiction, it's what all the neo-

noir authors and filmmakers I admire have done. And it is this quality which I have endeavoured to honour with “The Only Living Boy in New York.”

### **The First Two Pages of “The Only Living Boy in New York”**

At the front desk, she checked in as “M. March.” M for Margaret, *but you can call me Peggy.*

The clerk didn't bat an eye. Didn't even wonder what she might be carrying in that canvas bag of hers. When she got to the room (a damp cube with dingy views of Washington Square Park), she tossed the bag on the bed and undid the clasps. She had gotten used to treating this bag as though it were her own. After all those hours of driving through relentless heat, with the road wavering and rippling in front of her tired eyes, she could no longer bring herself to think of it as a living thing.

He was sleeping. She thought he must be sleeping. He wasn't moving, anyhow, and those little eyes were closed. A miracle, really, that the kid could sleep through all this. To begin with, he had cried. Terrible gut-wrenching shrieks from the back seat, muffled by the bag, but they had tapered off eventually. He had not uttered a peep since. Peggy was grateful for that.

She turned on the tiny gray TV screen and watched flickery images of a woman standing on stone steps. Even with the sound off, Peggy knew what she was looking at. She smiled. What else could she do but smile?

Less than two days had passed since the bag was handed to her in a gas station parking lot outside of Topeka, Kansas, but it might have been a lifetime. She had driven nearly two thousand miles since then, swapping out her car from time to time so there was no danger of looky-loos latching onto the license plate. She was zigzagging her way across the United States, taking no chances. And everywhere she went, she was just Miss Peggy March and her canvas bag.

She thought about the weirdness of it; a living thing in a bag. A tiny human being. It was an interesting Schrodinger type of conundrum- the sort of scenario she might have discussed and debated back when she was a philosophy major. But that was a while ago now. The would-be intellectual was long dead.

She looked at the kid's pasty face. He had inherited Shapstein's sullen, slack jaw. That was enough to keep Peggy's hatred bubbling. If this were just an ordinary baby, wrenched from its mother's arms and carried across the continent in a canvas bag, she might have felt something. But the shape of that sleeping face was a perpetual reminder of Judge Shapstein. Like this kid was a wax effigy in the great man's image.

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Margaret March was just an alias cribbed from Little Women, but in her daily life, Peggy used a different name. She was a librarian in Lincoln, Nebraska. Young and pretty- like a Homecoming Queen- but retiring; even shy. Unassuming, in those big, thick spectacles of hers, with her hair pinned back. She was careful never to let the mask slip. All the same, she had come pretty close on the day she heard about the St. Louis Six.

Six men (though some were only eighteen), prosecuted for their part in the “Days of Rage” debacle. Mass protests, riots, destruction of property. The voice of a nation, brutally silenced. And these six men were the martyrs. When she saw their photographs on the cover of the New York Times, she had excused herself from the library front desk and retreated to the bathroom, where she sobbed for a full five minutes. Then she went back to work as though nothing had happened.

Judge Shapstein was a ballbreaker, everyone knew that, and he'd been waiting for a chance to really stick it to the no-good beatniks. Here was his chance. The trial had only been in process for three days and already the defense team had been held in contempt. Peaceful protests outside the courthouse were stamped out with unprecedented violence. Broken bones, bloodied noses. Three dead. Every day brought a fresh atrocity, and those six defendants could only sit in their cells and pray. Two had resorted to hunger strikes, and were growing weaker with each passing hour.

Shapstein was the obvious target. But the days of hitting the obvious target were over. The Organization had been forced to adapt its methods to suit the changing times. The nail bomb debacle in Greenwich Village last year had necessitated a change of approach. The frontal assault was getting them nowhere- it had forced them back into the shadows. And as much as it pained Peggy, she had to concede that Shapstein himself was untouchable.

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Tom Mead is a UK crime writer whose first novel, *Death and the Conjuror*, is a locked-room mystery in the Golden Age tradition of John Dickson Carr. It was named a “Buzz Book” by *Publishers Marketplace* and “Debut of the Month” by *Library Journal*. *Publishers Weekly* named it one of the best mysteries of 2022. Tom's short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and various others. He is also an active member of the UK Crime Writers' Association and the International Thriller Writers' Organization.