

The First Two Pages of “First You Dream, Then You Die”

by Donna Moore

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An Essay by Donna Moore

In March 2021 I read a Facebook post from Cornell Woolrich aficionado and anthology editor extraordinaire Maxim Jakubowski, casually announcing that he was considering putting together an anthology of new noir stories influenced by, or in homage to, Cornell Woolrich/William Irish/George Hopley and asking if there were any Woolrich fans who might fancy writing a story for it. The comments were full of some of my favourite writers saying that yes, indeed, they were most definitely interested. So I simply responded saying, “I absolutely love Cornell Woolrich.” I was utterly thrilled when, a couple of months later, an invitation came to write a story.

With it came all the usual doubts that I couldn’t do it. I was never going to be able to do justice to the wonderful, tortured genius of Woolrich: a man who had written nearly thirty dark and twisted crime novels, along with hundreds of short stories, and whose works had been turned into films that had haunted my nightmares—Robert Siodmak’s *Phantom Lady*, François Truffaut’s *The Bride Wore Black*, and, of course, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*. I tortured myself in a very Woolrich-ian manner, to-ing and fro-ing about the form I wanted my story to take. I didn’t want to do a Woolrich pastiche, and there was no way I could come close to his style, but I wanted to register my love for some of the things that make Woolrich’s

stories so memorable. When I read his novels and stories, the familiar themes, recurring elements, and discomfiting mix of chance and fate give me a deliciously noir glow.

I spent delightfully terrifying hours revisiting the avenging angels, the ticking clocks, the inescapable fates, the waking nightmares, the races through darkness, the savage forces, the disappearing women, the blackouts, the amnesia, the loneliness, the fear, and the impending doom that make up a Woolrich work. I couldn't choose one thing over another, so I decided I was going to take wee bits from various places: a plot point here, a prop there, a description, a mood. As an example, all the names in my story are Woolrich character names, including the protagonist Alberta, her deceased husband, Jimmy, and the nickname he has for her: Angel Face. When I start writing I seldom have any idea as to where the plot will go. But I do need my protagonist to have a name. Other than that, sometimes I only have a beginning. Other times I have the beginning and a rough idea of the ending, but in order for me to keep the excitement when writing the story, I need to find it out as I go along. I often wish I could set out a plot before I start—it would make it so much less likely that I would write myself into a corner—but I find that if I know too much about where I'm going, I don't want to make the journey any more.

Another thing I need before I start writing is a title. In Francis Nevins' brilliant biography of Woolrich, *First You Dream, Then You Die*, he cited a list of titles which Woolrich had written down but never used: *Alice From Dallas*, *Dead Earnest*, *They Died Like Flies in Valparaiso*. For his biography, Nevins chose the only one he felt

“catches the dark spirit at the heart of the Woolrich world.” I cannot disagree, so I’ve taken it as my title, too.

The first line of the story had been lurking in my head for a couple of years, awaiting the perfect opportunity. Talking about languages one day, my partner said to me, “I know how to say ‘sorry’ in seven languages,” and we talked about how polite we are in other languages as we learn the pleases and thank yous that ease our way abroad.

“I’m stealing that idea,” I said. “I want to write a character who only knows how to be grumpy in several different languages and isn’t bothered about being polite.” That was just perfect for Alberta, who really doesn’t care what others think of her.

In my story, Woolrich’s bleak cityscape becomes a crumbling Scottish seaside town that no one visits any more, and his Depression-era timeframe is reflected in the harsh economic realities of a dilapidated amusement arcade whose attractions have been surpassed by sophisticated mobile devices and package holidays to the sunshine. I like the nostalgia of faded glamour and childhood memories. Every summer when I was a child, we would go camping in what was, essentially, a field with a tap in it. But nearby was holiday heaven to a five...six...seven year old: an amusement arcade with its garish gilt décor, neon lights flashing from within the mysterious windowless space, the sounds of competing fairground tunes and coins dropping into trays, and the strangely attractive scent of candyfloss mixed with disinfectant. In there, the British summer rain would be forgotten.

My joy in faded glamour also includes people. My mum lives in a retirement community full of elderly women with bad hips and bad perms, where the main focus seems to be on which of their neighbours has won a wee packet of biscuits at the weekly bingo. However, if you chat to them for long enough, you discover that one of them was a Codebreaker at Bletchley Park. Another was a Land Girl who danced with Clark Gable, and one of them—a tiny woman with bright red lipstick and matching fingernails—ran a haulage firm and had a great knack for taking mechanical things apart and putting them back together. I gave Alberta her engineering skills.

Several of Woolrich's stories have ticking clocks, and I wanted one too. As well as being a nod to Woolrich, and a handy countdown of the time left until Alberta is set to lose *The Rainbow's End*, the clock also meant that I could show something about Alberta and her relationship with her husband, whose pride and joy the clock was. He would wind up the clock every day and, along with it, wind up Alberta. "She hated that fucking clock." Yet, since Jimmy's death, she has carefully wound it up every day, just as he did.

Strong, no-nonsense, and unsentimental, Alberta also has a soft side. She's lived a life she didn't want, because she was busy loving someone who had big dreams. They weren't Alberta's dreams, but she was the one who'd ended up with them, and her life has faded along with the amusement arcade. By the time she considers selling up, it's too late to follow her own dreams, whatever they may have been.

I had a lot of fun writing this story. Seeing it nestling there amongst the pages of what is a fabulous anthology between some of my favourite authors is a real joy and

I'm very grateful to Maxim Jakubowski and Titan Books for taking the chance on "First You Dream, Then You Die." I'm flabbergasted and chuffed that it was nominated for an Edgar and hope that people enjoy reading about Alberta just as much as I enjoyed writing about her. And thank you, Cornell Woolrich, for the inspiration.

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Jimmy always used to say that Alberta could say 'out of my fucking way' in six languages, and 'excuse me please' in none. He was wrong, of course, they didn't teach languages at school when Alberta went and, even if they had, she was unlikely to ever have turned up at lessons. But she got the sentiment. Jimmy Galbraith had told her again and again, "Bertie, you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. Try and be nice, will ya?" Alberta had never really understood that. After all, when it came down to it, flies were more attracted to shite than they were to anything else. Besides, what good had being nice ever done for Jimmy?

Alberta carefully replaced the heavy clock on the fake mantelpiece. "That's an Ansonia, Angel Face; it'll be worth a fortune one day". He'd said that every morning when he wound it up. "If anything ever happens to me, you look after that clock." And it *had* happened, and she'd dutifully looked after it. She'd wound it up every day since Jimmy died, dusted the bevelled glass, polished the brass and carefully taken it apart and put it back together on the occasions it had stopped working. She hated that fucking clock. She checked its time against that of her watch. Two o'clock exactly. He'd be here between two and three, he'd said. Squint Harman was always on time, the bastard. Always kept his promises.

Alberta walked over to the window. It was a dreich, December day; a day that no-one in their right minds would want to spend in a crumbling Scottish seaside town and even less in that town's dilapidated amusement arcade. Grey clouds, grey sea, grey rain, grey streets; all blending into each other like a Rothko painting as seen on an old black and white TV. Even the flickering neon sign that jutted over the canopy below the window looked grey. "*Rainbow's End*, we'll call it, Bertie hen. Our wee pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; a lifetime's dream." Well, it hadn't been *her* dream, but she'd gone along with it for his sake. Forty years ago next summer it would be since they'd bought it, just before the arse fell

out of the Scottish seaside. Not all of it, of course, not the posh bits where men in upturned collars and red corduroy trousers and women with puffy jackets and even puffier ankles carry tiny, beribboned dogs into cafes where they sell artisan vegan cakes and overpriced coffee made from beans that some animal that looks like a ferret has shat out in a tropical rain forest. No, those survived and thrived. But towns like this, with its brash amusement arcade, kiss-me-quick-hats and grim B&Bs run by even grimmer landladies; well, they became gaunt and ill and died a slow, lingering death, after which nobody could be arsed to bury the bodies.

Jimmy and her had laid out all their savings and more for this place and, by the following summer, it seemed that everyone decided they wanted to eat their sausage and chips on the Costa Brava rather than at home in Scotland. The dodgy tummy was worth it for the guaranteed sunshine and cheap booze. And then Jimmy, too, had become gaunt and ill and died a slow, lingering death. He hadn't even seen out their second summer at Rainbow's End. Some pot of gold that had been. First you dream, then you die. Out of some ridiculous sense of loyalty she'd kept going on her own, struggling on with an ever-increasing overdraft, a six-year-old son and a growing sense of despair.

The overseas package holidays had been joined by the rise of games consoles. You could play Space Invaders and Asteroids and Pacman and ever more complicated games from the comfort of your own home, twenty-four hours a day if you wanted. And you could bet on the bingo and roulette on your telly or your phone, the promise of riches at your fingertips at the press of a button. Then the Budd Report and the Gambling Act had sealed the deal. Arcades like Rainbow's End became neon-encrusted dinosaurs. When she'd finally seen sense and decided to sell, it was too late. Her son had never wanted the place and had kept after her to get rid of it. Stephen had been bitter in his teenage years that his mum ran a ramshackle eyesore in a no-hope town, then sneered his way into adulthood with the same disdain and kept away from both her and Rainbow's End as much as he could. She should have sold the place then. She wouldn't have got as much as they'd paid for it, of course, but enough to buy a flat somewhere and get herself a wee job. But she hadn't, because Danny had come along. Her grandson, who looked so much like Jimmy and who she loved with the same overwhelming sense of joy. It was a feeling she'd never had for Stephen. Even as a baby, Danny loved the Rainbow's End with its flashing lights and its beeping and jingling and music. It was one huge plaything to him, one of those things you put on a pram, that the baby could press and poke and squeeze and rattle. The love affair had continued as Danny grew and, as much as his father stayed away, wee Danny wanted to spend time with his gran. Well, with the machines more like. And, just like her, he was fascinated with their

insides. He'd spend hours running tiny fingers over their workings as she took them apart to fix them. She couldn't afford professional help so had taught herself from the manuals and, later, from the internet.

She'd also learned to 'fix' them, to make the machines more favourable to the house. Every tiny bit of income helped when your supposed livelihood was haemorrhaging money. She'd learned all the tricks and even invented some of her own. It didn't matter what sort of a wrist flick you used, or how you timed the drop when sending your ten pence into the Penny Falls, Alberta could fix those machines so that they reluctantly spat out the most meagre of pay-outs. The slots at the sides where her profit fell through were invisible to the player and, if they were stupid enough to put any coins other than a 10p piece... well, hell mend them when it went into the drop tray.

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Donna Moore is the author of crime fiction and historical fiction. Her first novel, a Private Eye spoof called *Go To Helena Handbasket*, won the Lefty Award for most humorous crime fiction novel, and her second novel, *Old Dogs*, was shortlisted for both the Lefty and Last Laugh Awards. Her short stories have been published in various anthologies. In her day job she works as an adult literacy tutor for marginalised and vulnerable women. She has a PhD in creative writing around women's history and gender-based violence, and her third novel, *The Unpicking*, a trilogy of novellas set in Victorian and Edwardian Scotland, will be released later this year. It spans three generations of "hysterical women" who experience systemic corruption and injustice. She is also co-host of the CrimeFest crime fiction convention and is a fan of film noir, 1970s punk rock, and German Expressionist artists.