

**The First Two Pages: “What You Know, What I Know” by Michael Kardos**  
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An Essay by Michael Kardos

I usually don’t have a very good answer for what inspires my fiction.

“How’d that story come about?” someone will ask. And my answer will usually be something about overhearing a conversation or stumbling across something in the news that sparked an idea. But nothing’s unusual about that. I’ll often borrow from my own life for setting, or for smaller details that give texture to a story—how to tune a snare drum; what it’s like when a seagull steals your French fries. But the big things, like plots and characters, rarely come from my own history. Which is to say, my fiction doesn’t usually come with a cool origin story.

This one was different. I dreamed it.

Seriously. It had never happened before, and I suspect it will never happen again. Most of the time, dreams that in the moment seem coherent and exciting and even profound are revealed, upon awakening, to be a collage of the absurd, and not in an interesting way. Or at least not interesting to anyone else.

This one time, though, I dreamed a sort-of narrative that, even once I woke up, made a bit of sense. The dream even unfolded with some baked-in dramatic irony.

Did I mention this happened 23 years ago?

So the nice thing is that the initial idea for “What You Know, What I Know” came to me with no effort on my part. The less-nice thing is that it took me two decades to figure out how to write the story. I say this without hyperbole. I wrote the first draft in 2000.

Here’s how it began:

After drawing closed the heavy curtains to Mrs. Schottenfeld’s downstairs windows, the thieves went off to their pre-assigned locations: Reynold and Buck upstairs—one to the master bedroom, the other to the guest room—Ray to the kitchen, and Dustin to the living room.

Over the next 20 years, I revised the story again and again. I told it in straight chronology, backwards, in big sections, and in piecemeal form with many itty-bity sections. I added characters and took them away. The story stretched and shrank and stretched and shrank like an accordion playing “What the Hell Am I Doing?”

In the end, what intrigued me—in the initial dream, and in the final, final draft—was the notion of telling what seemed almost like two separate stories with two casts of characters. The characters in each half would be ignorant of the whole story, yet would profoundly affect the other half. By the end of the story, only the reader would have all the pieces—an idea that I hope is reflected in the story’s title. (The original title was “Unbreakable.” I wrote the first draft of this story *before* the M. Night Shyamalan movie. Also before the existence of camera

phones, flash drives, YouTube, Facebook, and most of the cast of *Stranger Things*.)

For the first two pages of the final version, I ended up going back to the approach of that original draft, with a fairly objective depiction of a robbery-in-progress being perpetrated by an experienced group of house-robbers. Initially, they're merely a collective—"the thieves." Then they're named. Eventually, one of these thieves comes into tighter focus as a POV character.

The objective point-of-view can feel distant and detached but can also have lots of authority. So I figured (or felt, or dreamed) it would be interesting to begin the scene with that sort of apparent objectivity, which, I hoped, reflected the thieves' authority as thieves, only to show, later, the cracks in the robbery's execution.

Although the final draft of the story is quite different from the original, my approach to the opening sentences didn't change fundamentally in 20+ years. Or rather it changed a lot, but ended up close to how it began.

### **The First Two Pages Of "What You Know, What I Know"**

After entering through the screened-in porch, Ray Contaldi drew closed the curtains to Mrs. Schottenfeld's downstairs windows. The three thieves then went off to their pre-assigned locations: TJ and Buck upstairs—one to the master bedroom, the other to the guest room—and Ray to the kitchen, where he bagged the good silverware. In the living room, he carried an old stereo and TV to the screened-in porch. The rest of the downstairs was worthless: drab furniture,

chintzy figurines, nothing valuable on the walls. Today's job wasn't about high yield, but safety: secluded house, old resident. Mrs. Schottenfeld lived alone and left home each day at exactly eleven a.m. She'd hobble to the corner, white cane clicking ahead of her, and wait to board a bus marked "Gaston Seniors." The three men waited until the mail carrier had come and gone, around 12:30. Now it was 1 p.m., and the house was quiet. The woman's bus wouldn't bring her back until sometime between 3:00 and 3:15.

Back in the living room, Ray noticed a couple of photographs of little girls—grandchildren, he assumed—as he listened for tremors and creaks. For a few seconds, he heard the *ping* of a basketball being dribbled outside. He heard, faintly, a jet flying overhead.

Nine minutes after going upstairs, Buck and TJ came down again, each carrying a partly-stuffed pillowcase.

"Anything good?" Ray asked.

"Old lady jewelry," Buck said, going to the porch. "Coupla diamond earrings. Coupla watches. Pearls. Some gold."

Old women kept a lifetime of jewelry in their bedroom drawers and hardly ever locked any of it up. The jewelry was the point, TJ had told Ray back when he first joined the group. For a long time, TJ had Ray selling weed and narcotics, collecting cash from teenagers. Ray knew nothing about TJ's house jobs until six months ago, when he was invited to join in. Today's job was low risk: get in, get the jewelry, get out. Anything else was a bonus.

Buck and TJ set the pillowcases on the ground by the screen door. "How'd you make out?" TJ asked.

"Mostly junk," Ray said. "The silverware looks kind of nice."

Another plane overhead, louder than the first. They weren't so far from the airport.

"So what do you think? TJ said. "Time for the fun?"

Buck nodded, an eager puppy dog.

"Not really," Ray said.

"Oh, don't pretend you don't live for it, big guy," TJ said, and smacked Ray on the shoulder. TJ's hands were thick, the knuckles bulbous and scarred. He was a mover for one of the van-lines. Despite his small frame, he'd strap a refrigerator to his back as if it were nothing, haul it up flights of stairs.

"How about don't give me shit right now?" Ray said.

TJ flashed the big, fake grin of a six-year-old who'd been told to say "cheese." He glanced at his phone. "Meet back here in seven. And keep it down."

"Same rooms?" Buck asked.

"Same," TJ said.

You *had* to trash the house. Trashing the house made it harder for the cops. They'd have to rely on the memory of an old woman who, after coming into her house and finding it destroyed, would be too shaken up to remember who was President let alone sort out what was ruined and what was taken.

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Michael Kardos is the author of the novels *Bluff*, *Before He Finds Her*, and *The Three-Day Affair*, an *Esquire* best book of the year, as well as the story collection *One Last Good Time*, which won the Mississippi Institute of Arts & Letters Award for fiction, and the textbook *The Art and Craft of Fiction: A Writer's Guide*. His short stories have appeared in *One Story*, *The Southern Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and many other magazines and anthologies, and have won two Pushcart Prizes. Michael grew up on the Jersey Shore, received a degree in music from Princeton University, and played the drums professionally for a number of years. He has an M.F.A. in fiction from The Ohio State University and a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri. He currently co-directs the creative writing program at Mississippi State University, where he received the Grisham Master Teacher award, the university's highest teaching honor.