

**The First Two Pages: “Girl of Gold” by Emilyya Naymark**  
From *Killin’ Time in San Diego: Bouchercon Anthology 2023*,  
edited by Holly West (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Emilyya Naymark

I have a confession. “Girl of Gold” rattled around the submission process throughout the pandemic, unsuccessfully. Last summer, I decided to rewrite it. I gave it a long, hard look, and concluded that the original version was just a touch too ethereal, too removed from visceral human experience. In other words, the exact opposite of the kind of story that grabs a reader and keeps them reading. One semi-interested editor asked if the main character had dementia. (No, but it gave me a clue as to where I was going off the rails with him).

The origins of the story arose from my husband’s decades-long metal detecting hobby and the people he’s met along the way. He has metal detecting “buddies” who get jealous if he goes off “hunting” with one but not the other. He goes to conventions and club meetings, where people try to outdo each other with their monthly finds. The entire subculture struck me as absolutely ripe for, er... mining.

But the story itself came out of a random writing prompt at one of my in-person writing groups. I wrote about this young man, already named Martin, who goes “hunting” for treasure, alone, at night, on a mountain. Why? I didn’t know. But I felt his pain and alienation, and I kept writing.

I believe in specificity in writing. The more details you can give, effortlessly, the more vibrant your story becomes. If I can visualize it, then, hopefully, so will the reader.

Martin hunted treasure every day, even (or maybe especially) on the day he retrieved his wife's ashes from the Chula Vista crematorium over on F Street. The ashes came in a clear plastic bag which fitted snugly into a black plastic box, and he held the box on his lap as he drove east to Mount Laguna.

He parked just as the sun began to sink. The trails closed at dusk, but no one was there to stop him, it being cold and a Tuesday. This high above sea level, snow covered the hard ground in grayish lumps, promising a difficult hike. He wanted difficult.

I knew from the very first draft that his pain came from a terrible loss.

Martin is just about suffocating with it. I wanted to show him clinging to the routines of his life, but skew it. He goes metal detecting, as he usually does, but this time it's at night, and difficult. And he has his wife's ashes with him. Not normal.

It'd been a week since the hit-and-run. A week of howling loneliness where there'd once been a wife and a dog. A week of nobody to touch, of the type of silence that kept him awake through the night and anywhere but home in the daytime.

I also wanted to show the magical thinking that a person experiences after a great loss. To Martin, his wife is still herself, albeit in a different form. He wants her to be comfortable.

His first impulse was to move Elena into the trunk while he hunted. But she always hated small, dark spaces, and after a moment's pause, he put her down on the back seat and covered her black box

with the blanket they'd kept there for when Barney traveled with them. Barney, in his own tiny black plastic urn, was right now sitting on Martin's bedside table, awaiting funerary decisions.

But Martin was nowhere near any kind of shape to be deciding. Additionally, he'd spent the entirety of his paltry savings on the two cremations and couldn't afford a proper urn, much less a burial plot.

Never underestimate the power of guilt in motivating a character. Martin doesn't just have survivor's guilt, he's devastated he can't give his wife a proper burial. He can't afford it. In this case, a failure to provide is taken to an extreme by a mind in crisis.

Instead, he opened his trunk and retrieved the Garret AT Pro, secured his headphones over his ears and strapped his torch around his head. An hour's hike up a pine-bordered trail placed him on a sloping hill, all scrubby grasses and snow, the sky a murky charcoal. The metal detector pinged and cheeped at him as he walked, singing of things hidden and lost.

To set the mood and continue making connections between the dead and the living and loss, I used words I think of as being in a "minor key": *scrubby*, *murky*, *hidden*, *lost*. But there is also a hint of salvation in that *cheeped*. This is a story, after all, and in a story, everything turns and turns.

Some people hunted for fun, on weekends, at the beach. But ever since Martin lost his job (okay quit, he quit, couldn't hack the eighty-hour weeks anymore, felt he was dying), he hunted for practical reasons. He conducted nightly sweeps of playgrounds, parks and beaches; sometimes walking away with twenty dollars in coins, often quite a bit more. If he found jewelry, he sold it. He had a knack. Elena used to say he had a divining rod for metal inside his skull, which he thought was terribly corny and also cute, because they met at a Slipknot concert, both of them in black clothes and black nail polish, both metal fans since forever.

Details, details, details. I went on metal detecting forums and websites in the San Diego area and researched locations detectorists frequented, as well as what they usually found. Lastly, you don't need to know Slipknot as a band, because it's clear enough from the context, but it being a real band, and from a decade that matched Martin's and Elena's earlier years, made this real to me.

The signal coming through Martin's headset told him something interesting was at his feet.

Could be gold. Could be nothing. But could be gold.

He knelt and drove his serrated shovel into the stubborn ground.

"You got something?" Martin heard the man's voice despite the headphones, so startling it took all his self-control to stay still. He turned his head, his eyebrows climbing with disbelief.

Gerry, the newest member of the San Diego Metal Detectorist Club, stood not six feet away, holding his own Garret, his headlamp making Martin's eyes water.

Uh-oh! Martin's lonely quest is about to be turned upside down. In the first two pages, I introduce my protagonist, show his "need," or, as some outlines phrase it, the thing that is missing in his life that needs to change. At the end of the two pages, we have our inciting incident. Martin finds something and, at the same time, discovers he is not alone on this dark, cold mountain.

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