

The First Two Pages: “Ticket to Ride”
by Dru Ann Love and Kristopher Zgorski
From *Happiness Is a Warm Gun:*
Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the Beatles,
edited by Josh Pachter (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Dru Ann Love and Kristopher Zgorski

In true collaborative spirit, we structured this essay so that we both could highlight points we found significant. You will notice that **Kris’s comments are in brown, **Dru Ann’s comments are in blue**, and the actual text of the story (the first two-pages of it) remain in black.**

KRIS: Imagine you have spent more than a decade writing reviews of crime fiction and then choose to expose your own creative writing to the community you have been critiquing. This daunting task is exactly what Dru Ann Love and I decided to do. What would have been difficult for each of us individually was even more challenging in collaboration; however, in some ways it also manifested as an advantage as we embarked on a new journey with a fellow traveler.

DRU ANN: The early stages of discussing the story involved many false starts. Our original concept conceived in April 2022 had the female character, Agatha, on the subway with her Louis Vuitton tote and arriving home where she found a block of cash hidden in the bottom of her bag. We didn’t pursue this scenario further. In May 2022, we changed the character’s name to Liz, she still had her Louis Vuitton

tote, but this time she was jostled on the subway. Again, we didn't pursue this setup.

NOW

Perhaps Lizzy's recent doctor's appointments are weighing on us. Whatever the reason, this morning I feel an overwhelming sense that I am losing her, that she is drifting away, and my usual melancholy descends deeper into sadness.

The ancient television on our chipped Formica kitchen countertop flickers into life. Its black-and-white picture rolls, then comes to rest.

DRU ANN: In August 2022, we came up with the scenario you will be reading in *Happiness Is A Warm Gun*. This time, we changed the female character's name to Lizzy because The Beatles album we selected (*HELP!*) contained another song called "Dizzy Miss Lizzy."

KRIS: From our earliest discussions, Dru Ann and I knew that we were more interested in examining the ramifications of crime rather than the crime itself. This immediately set up the necessity for a dual timeline—the past where the inciting incident occurred and the future where our characters are forced to deal with the aftereffects of that trauma. Readers will immediately expect this when they see the subhead NOW.

DRU ANN: We intentionally included details like the ancient TV and chipped countertop to show that our main characters were not rich but had a working-class

life. They are living in Brooklyn, New York, which proved to be the perfect setting to tell this story since the visuals of Coney Island (which will be evident later in the story) perfectly depict the clash between the past and the present.

KRIS: The first-person narration here was actually a later development. “Ticket to Ride” was originally written in third-person, but our editor—Josh Pachter—made the wise suggestion to try it in first-person (to better echo the song itself). And that was the right call. The NOW sections were always in present tense to highlight their immediacy, while the THEN sections were written in past tense to add a feeling of distance for both the characters and the reader.

DRU ANN: So, you will note that it takes a while before the reader learns that our narrator’s name is Lester. That is just the nature of the first-person perspective. At one point, I felt that Lester needed a last name as well, so Lester Jones was born.

“... a memorial will soon be erected to honor the thirteen individuals who lost their lives on that tragic day in 1993. Later in this special edition, we’ll talk with several experts who will explain how a senseless act of violence changed the city of New York...”

I snap off the set in disgust and shake my head, the only sane response to the naiveté of these clueless newscasters.

I mustn’t let today’s anniversary get to me. Lizzy will know something is wrong, and that’s the last thing she needs in her condition.

Though I know I shouldn’t, I let my mind drift back thirty years....

KRIS: Even though the major trauma occurs very early in the story, I felt it was important to give readers a hint of that as early as possible, so the inclusion of the newscaster's words in the opening paragraphs serve that purpose. I hope it helps to clue readers into the fact that the upcoming THEN timeline will be tied to this particular event.

DRU ANN: I agreed that a hint of the crime that will be explored as the story unfolds on the pages was necessary.

THEN

The Monday-afternoon humidity followed me like a shadow, coating my dark brown skin with a sheen of moisture, like dew on morning leaves. I was on my way to a job interview, and it was hard to tell if the sweat was from nerves or the weather. A teaching job at one of Manhattan's prestigious high schools would be great—I'd always wanted to make a difference in the lives of young people. At my current school, I was little more than a glorified babysitter.

I darted down the subway stairs, found a token in my pocket, and passed through the turnstile. I felt the breeze of the approaching train and smiled as its sliding doors stopped right in front of me.

A crowd streamed from the train, and I pushed against the flow like a salmon swimming upstream and made it aboard before the doors closed. I found a seat next to a young woman about my age. Her alabaster skin glistened in the dim lighting.

KRIS: As you see, we did ultimately keep the subway setting Dru Ann alluded to earlier, but in a very different way than originally conceived.

DRU ANN: Because I live in New York City and take the subway, we felt I could provide on-the-ground research as to being on the subway with the bustle and

hustle of other subway riders. Our hope is that the experience becomes real for the readers with the words that we use to describe that atmosphere.

KRIS: We needed to show readers what Lester's life was like before the trauma, so we included some details about his morning and job hunt in this early THEN section.

DRU ANN: In identifying our two main characters, we decided the story has more of a punch if we made them an interracial couple.

KRIS: I had actually just recently re-read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and one of the major criticisms of that novel is that its portrayal of Black men is almost universally negative. With that on my mind, I thought it might be interesting to center a story around a Black man who handles things very differently. At one point in the writing process, the *Loving v Virginia Supreme Court* case factored into the story, but that has since been cut for concision.

“Do you happen to have the time?” I asked. I almost shook my head at the triteness of the line.

“It’s one twenty-five.”

“Thank you,” I said.

At the next stop, several people got off, leaving the half-full car with some breathing room. A young man stood by the door as if guarding it. I had a weird feeling that something wasn’t right. There were empty seats, so why wasn’t he sitting down?

“A warm day, isn’t it?” I asked, attempting to prolong the conversation with the beautiful woman seated next to me.

Before she could respond, the young man began pacing up and down the aisle, mumbling angrily. I locked eyes with him, and his stare was intense and erratic. The woman beside me wrapped her arms protectively around her black purse. Was it possible that her white skin had become even paler?

I was leaning over to assure her that things would be okay when I heard a *pop-pop-pop*...

KRIS: This first encounter between Lester and Lizzie almost mirrors a typical meet-cute, only we had already set our readers up for a major incident here. You can see that the time between their meeting and the traumatic incident is very brief—this was intentional to highlight humanity’s ability to adapt quickly to new situations.

DRU ANN: Although the traumatic event only begins here, you can no doubt guess that the 1984 Bernhard Goetz subway shooting was forefront on our mind. Since we needed a different outcome for our story, we created a fictional mass shooting incident for the purpose of “Ticket to Ride.”

KRIS: It is worth noting here at the conclusion of this piece that Dru Ann and I are very much aware of the fact that this is a FIRST story. The fact that we have been asked to give some insight into our process is an honor, but we also realize we have no business giving advice at this stage in our creative writing “careers.” We took a leap of faith, had a ton of fun. If any of this information is useful to someone else, we can only wish them the best and say enjoy the ride—We sure did!

DRU ANN: As Kris mentioned, we are bloggers, reviewers, musers, and newbies, but the one piece of advice I can give is this. When you have the opportunity to step out of your wheelhouse, take the chance and run with it because you never know what will happen. I never thought I would write any fiction, but here I am, because I took that chance and indeed, I enjoyed the ride.

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You can find out more about **Dru Ann Love** at Dru's Book Musings (<https://drusbookmusing.com/>) and **Kristopher Zgorski** at BOLO Books (<https://bolobooks.com/>)