

Strange Fiction

By

Frank

Martin



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The argument began heating up more than either of them expected. The teenage couple's shouts and screams were nearing deafening levels of anger and frustration. Their vicious back and forth had quickly degenerated into a series of name calling, each one more vulgar than the last. The young couple secretly knew they both were to blame for the problems in their relationship, but that didn't stop them from dredging up all of the many grievances generated in their brief time together.

For a short while the viciousness of their exchange was a joint effort. Together they shared in equal parts the argument's intense animosity. But with each insult thrown, the boy could sense that he was clearly at a disadvantage. After all, they were in her bedroom, in her house, with her parents just downstairs.

It didn't take long for the high school boy to realize this fight wouldn't end well for him. He tried to keep up with his girlfriend's remarks (or ex-girlfriend; that point hadn't been made clear yet). But her confidence overmatched his growing need to contain the situation. She continued to badger and antagonize the boy, pressing on further when she saw him preparing to retreat. The fuming girl perceived the worry on his face as weakness and elevated her voice, preparing herself for the killing blow to their short-lived romance.

As her voice continued to climb, the boy's concern and anxiety quickly spread into fear and panic. He frantically tried to calm her down. To quiet her already booming shouts. But she wouldn't listen. She wouldn't stop. Not until her father came upstairs with a heavy fist ready to pound him into submission.

And just as the girl's rising anger hit its crescendo, the boy's panic suddenly

transformed into a wave of frantic desperation. He lunged forward, catching the girl off guard by latching his hands around her throat. Shock and surprise quickly engulfed her face as it gasped out a final puff of air from her lungs.

Somewhere deep in the boy's mind he knew exactly what he was doing. That his stiff fingers, clenched around his girlfriend's neck, were squeezing the life from her tiny frame.

But the panic surging through his arms was too intense to ignore. It was almost as if the boy's hands were disconnected from his body. They just continued to tighten their grasp around the dying girl's throat, completely oblivious to her weak scratches against their skin.

She continued to fight. To flail her arms about in a desperate attempt to save herself. But the girl's spunky strength slowly diminished along with the life in her face. She continued to moan and groan, futilely trying to pull air into her lungs until they drained completely and rendered her body limp in the boy's hands.

Despite holding up a clearly lifeless corpse, the boy remained in the same position, most likely from a combination of shock, fear, and disbelief. He killed her. He really did it. But why? He didn't want to end her life. He just wanted her to be quiet. She was so loud and needed to be silenced. But she wouldn't listen. He told her to shush. To lower her voice. What was he supposed to do?

Not kill her, of course. But he was young, scared and emotional. She was his first girlfriend. He didn't know what else to do. His body just reacted on its own. It was an accident. But was that even an excuse?

The boy wanted to answer the question, but his mind wouldn't allow it. He was still frozen in place, paralyzed from fear. While his hands remained gripped onto the girl's neck, suspending her in air.

And that's when he heard the door to the room start to creak open.

Finally finished, I let out a much needed sigh as my fingers lifted from the old, worn typewriter keys. My arms then reached back, wrapping around the chair in a long, exaggerated stretch.

I'd been so wrapped up in typing the story I hadn't even realized I wrote straight through lunch. Now that I was finished my stomach started to grumble, forcing me to leave my home office and venture across the house into the kitchen.

My mind soon wandered as I began to make a sandwich, reminiscing on the truly interesting career I've had. Barely in my fifties and already a household name, a rare accomplishment among short story authors. But fiction writing hadn't always come easy for me.

Early on I was already dabbling in a wide array of genres. Sci-fi. Fantasy. Crime. Nothing stuck. And I had a large selection of failed novels to prove it. It wasn't until I turned to horror that my writing style finally found its home.

But even still, it takes more than just passion to find success in this industry. You need a hook. A catch. Something that sets you apart from the thousand other literary voices begging to be heard. And I found mine in the most pure and vile of human interactions: murder.

It took a lot of work to hone my craft. To be able to strip down a murder to its core. However when I did, I discovered a pure, honest act that transcended race, culture, and even time. Homicide was a lot like sex in that regard: a raw, unadulterated connection between two individuals that came in many forms but was always the same beneath the surface.

That's why I preferred writing short stories to full-length novels. Any attempt I made to wrap my killings into a compelling narrative diluted the purity of the sin. Death became dull and mundane. Murder doesn't need a backstory. It doesn't need flashy action or mystery. All it requires is two people and a spark. One moment in time where their fates collide in the chaotic destiny of the universe.

So I began the journey to the top of my profession one tale at a time. Like murder weapons, the relationships I chronicled were wide and diverse. A student and teacher. A cabby and fare. An athlete and coach. Differentiating between the killer and victim was meaningless. Because at any given time, under the right circumstances, when the correct amount of pressure is applied, even the sanest person could be driven to the edge of madness.

And the audience responded. Every collection of my short stories sold out quicker than the last. Bestseller lists. Literary awards. Talk shows. Who knew murder could bring such fame?

But it wasn't enough. Like all men with egos I wanted mine to be bigger. All I needed was one more book to push my name over the edge into iconic status. And now that the last story was complete, this collection will be my magnum opus. My

greatest gift to the world. Now I know that when I die I'll be talked about amongst some of the best writers in history. A legend. All because I had a knack for narrating death.

And on that glorious note, my sandwich was complete. I lifted it up ready to take a bite when I was stopped by several loud knocks on the front door. Can't I catch a break?

I'm too hungry to put my lunch down. So I strolled through the house to the front door, sandwich in hand, and took a bite as I looked through the peephole. It's Will. Or should I say Detective Helm. I could also see his unmarked cop car parked on the street. He must be on duty. But why the hell is he here?

I immediately unlocked and opened the door without much of a second thought. But as soon as the sunlight poked through the crack, Will immediately busted it open the rest of the way. "Harold, my boy! What's happening?"

His shameless entrance was followed by him ripping the sandwich from my hand and taking a bite. "Oh, I'm starving. Thanks."

I took a deep breath, trying to remind myself why I'm friends with this Neanderthal. Then I remembered all the tickets he helped me out of and figured one sandwich was a cheap price to pay. "Trespassing and lunch theft, Will? Police corruption knows no limits these days."

He let out a bellow of a laugh and I could see the half chewed white bread bouncing around inside his mouth. "Funny. Very funny, actually. Maybe you should start writing comedy now, too."

Ignoring the grumbled female dispatcher on his radio, Will made himself comfortable on the living room couch while I shut the door behind him. “What are you doing here? I thought I was going to see you at Marc’s card game later.”

“Oh, yeah.” As if he suddenly remembered that he showed up unannounced at my door, Will paused stuffing his face long enough to lean over, reach into his pocket, and pull out a rolled up pile of papers. “I wanted to show you something.”

He handed me the stack as I curiously sat down on the sofa’s armrest. The papers were crumpled and folded, almost like he had them stuffed in his pocket for weeks. I eventually flattened them out enough to realize they were photocopies of police reports. Several, in fact. All from different parts of the country.

Without bothering to look at the details, I turned to Will confused. “What is this? Trying to give me some inspiration?”

He answered me while his focus remained entirely on the sandwich. “Actually, the opposite.”

Now I was really confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Just read them, will ya?”

After an exhausted sigh, I turned my attention back to the coffee stained pieces of paper and scanned them without much interest. It didn’t take long for me to realize they were all homicide reports going back as far as a decade. And when my curiosity piqued, I began diving into the details. What I found there was shocking, strange, and even somewhat worrisome.

They were my stories. I mean, I never gave my characters any names. That

way they were just faceless actors who could be anyone. But everything else was the same. Murder weapon. Relationship. Motive. Time of death. It was almost as if the officers who wrote them were plagiarizing my imagination. No. They read more like summaries. Blow-by-blow accounts of the ingredients I used to cook up a murder.

I silently read until Will finished his sandwich, and I would've continued if his grown up ADD didn't need to be occupied. "So, Harry? Interesting stuff, huh? I never took you for the non-fiction type."

His accusation registered in my brain, but rather than address it, my mind had a more pressing question to ask. "Where...How did you get these?"

Will began his explanation as he stood and made his way into the kitchen. "I got a call a while back about some trial for a crazy lady who killed her cheating husband. The guy used to be a doctor here so the police department handling the investigation was looking for some medical records or something. I don't know. Boring stuff."

Then without bothering to ask (because why would he), Will continued his story with his head buried inside my fridge. "But the police report they sent me seemed very familiar. As if I read it somewhere before."

The story seemed familiar to me, too, and my eyes began to drift to the living room floor as I searched my mental database for a match. Will was silent from inside the kitchen, either to allow me time to think or because he was too busy raiding my food, but the details of his story began falling into place. "Wait a minute. Wife kills her husband for cheating with his patients. That was in my first

anthology.”

Will poked his head through the doorway and pointed to me with a bottle of iced tea in his hand. “Bingo.”

He then fully entered the room and sat on the sofa’s other armrest opposite me. “I didn’t think anything of it. Could’ve been just a coincidence. But I’m always looking for blackmail material for my friends, so I put it in a folder for a rainy day.”

I gave him a big, sarcastic smile of appreciation as he took a swig from MY iced tea. “Oh, gee. Thanks.”

But his story didn’t account for the others, so I pressed him on while holding up the papers in my hand. “And what about these? Where did they come from?”

Oozing with smugness, Will proudly puffed out his chest like the obnoxious prick he was. “Well, during the small amount of down time I have as a very busy police detective in a suburban community with an exorbitant amount of crime...”

“Just get on with it already!”

He flashed me a smirk and a laugh, showing that he was enjoying the upper hand he felt he had in our conversation. “I looked for others. Simple as that. Good ol’ fashioned police work.”

I rolled my eyes and went back to scanning the papers still in my hand. “I’m glad my tax dollars are being used wisely.”

After getting up and taking another quick sip of his drink, Will leaned over my shoulder to look over the papers as well. “But seriously, every so often I would come across a report that resembled a story you’ve written and made a copy of it.”

This was certainly a strange revelation, but I didn't know how to feel. Guilty? Embarrassed? Ashamed? I didn't copy any of my stories from real murders. I mean, I have written a lot. So there's obviously the bizarre possibility that some would be similar by sheer coincidence.

But I didn't know what Will was looking for. Was this supposed to be some sort of gotcha moment? That he caught me doing something I shouldn't have? I needed to know. "So why are you telling me this now?"

Laughing off my tone, Will innocently put his hands up with a big smile on his face. "Whoa. Easy there, partner. So you used some real life crimes as inspiration. I don't care. Your secret's safe with me."

He really thought my stories were plagiarized. That my whole career was built off the deaths of real people. I was almost insulted and quickly scanned through the reports in my hand looking for something, anything that could show he was wrong. "Here! See! Look at this one. The murder was committed back in June, the same month I wrote the story, but the body wasn't found until two months later. How could I've copied it?"

This was all a big joke to him, and it showed as he flaunted his smug grin with a big sarcastic wink. "I don't know. Maybe the killer tipped you off. A secret admirer."

But I was determined to establish my innocence. "Oh, please. All my stuff is original. I'll prove it to you. Right now. I just finished a story right before you got here. I didn't use any newspaper articles or anything. It's still in the typewriter."

I opened my body to welcome him towards the office when our trip was soon interrupted by the click of his radio. The police dispatcher's grumbled voice then echoed through the speaker. "All units, we have a possible homicide at 10 Hilbert Ave. I repeat: possible homicide at 10 Hilbert."

Will's step forward suddenly stopped before hitting the ground, and he looked up at me with contemplative eyes. We both stared at one another, neither saying a word, but it was almost as if our thoughts were aligned. As crazy as it seemed, we both knew what the other was thinking. But neither one of us wanted to admit it.

In some kind of odd standoff, Will and I were frozen in place, waiting to see who would move or speak first. Our eyes quickly darted over in the direction of the office, and I could see the typewriter sitting on my desk, the piece of paper still lodged in the carriage.

My eyes returned to Will, as did his to mine. And we each sighed in unison before simultaneously bolting towards the office. He dropped the iced tea and I could hear it splash against the floor. I never bothered to look back, though, or let go of the papers still clutched in my hand. I was much closer to the open doorway and stepped inside the office first. But Will's large stride and brutish figure easily pushed me aside, boxed me out as he took the paper from the typewriter and began reading it.

I fought with him at first but only for a second. It was childish. Squabbling over a piece of paper. Besides, what did I have to hide?

I could see Will's eyes quickly scanning the document, picking up all the important details. He then subtly brought the radio to his mouth and spoke into it without ever removing his gaze from the page. "Dispatch, this is Detective Helm. What's the condition for Hilbert?"

A second later the woman's voice returned, and the two of us listened intently to the radio's speaker. "Unresponsive female, Detective. Teens. Mother called nine-one-one after father walked in on the boyfriend with his hands around the victim's throat. She says the scene is safe, though. Boy's not hostile. EMS and patrolmen in route."

With every word she spoke I could feel my heart sink deeper and deeper into my chest. It couldn't be possible. But it was. How? Why? It didn't make any sense.

I was speechless. Dumbfounded. And I got the same bewildered glare from Will as his eyes slowly lifted from the paper to look at me, his whole face scrunched in confusion. "What she said...that's exactly what you wrote. Did you know this was going to happen?"

My eyes couldn't meet his. They darted around the room instead while my chest pounded in some sort of panic attack. "I...I...I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't! I just thought of a story and wrote it."

He held the paper out in front of my face to emphasize its importance. "As it was also happening in real life! Did you make this come true?"

"No. That's absurd."

“Then how else would you explain it?”

The frustration was getting to me, and I finally turned to him with an annoyed stare. “I told you: I don’t know.”

Will then put the paper down but used his other hand to point to the pages I was still holding, as if to add to my guilt and responsibility. “Well, the evidence is right here in our hands. It can’t be a coincidence.”

Our runaway imaginations were swirling in a pot of confusion and fear. I had to be the voice of reason and logic. And I could only do that by slowing it all down. “Ok. Stop for a second and think about this rationally. You’re saying that the stories I write come to life, and people actually commit murder because of them?”

I stared intently at Will and could see the gears turning inside his head. His eyes drifted to the floor as he tried to wrap his mind around the impossible. It was a lot to comprehend, and I could see it weighing on his slumped shoulders.

He finally shook his head, as if he had given up trying to understand the situation, and took a step towards the office door. “This stuff...this is out of my league. I gotta call the Feds.”

His words sent a lightning bolt down my spine, and I immediately stepped in front of him, cutting off his exit. “Wait. Why?”

He looked up at me, shocked that I would ask such a question. “A girl is dead, Harold! All those people you’ve been writing about for years are dead!”

“We don’t know that.”

“We know something, and their families have a right to know it, too.”

“Know what? That their loved ones died because I wrote about them? Think about how crazy that sounds.”

The conversation had once again grown heated, and Will calmed himself with a deep breath before speaking again. “Does that make it any less true?”

We were arguing in circles while dancing around the heart of the issue. There was a ramification to this information that neither one of us had yet to acknowledge, and my head lowered under the revelation’s burdensome weight as I finally addressed it. “Telling the world isn’t going to bring them back, Will. That story in your hand was my last. I’m done writing. After this book is published I was going to retire. Nobody else has to die because of me. But if you tell people about this...my legacy will be ruined. I’ll be finished. Ostracized. Probably investigated.”

I couldn’t even look at him. My eyes remained fixated on the floor, but I could feel Will move closer to me and place his large hand on my shoulder. “Harry, I know you didn’t mean for this to happen. And I’ll back you one hundred percent. I promise. But I’m a cop. I must report this.”

He waited for me to respond. For me to look up and say something. Anything. But I couldn’t. What was there to say?

When it became clear that he wouldn’t get a response, Will removed his hand from my shoulder and sulked his way out of the office. I could feel the pity practically radiating off him. He didn’t want to do this. It was just his job. His duty. But that didn’t make it any easier for him. Hell, he probably even felt responsible. After all, he only looked into this because he thought it was funny.

As the front door creaked open, I finally looked up and walked over to the office's doorway. From there I could see Will looking back into the house with his body just barely outside.

Through his face I witnessed the battling emotions tearing him in half. He still held my story in his hand. It was his evidence. But I could tell he wanted to crumple it up and throw it back into the house. To forget he ever came here. I knew my friend too well, though. His honor wouldn't allow it. And he told me as much in two short words. "I'm sorry."

The detective then put his hand on the knob and closed the front door behind him as left.

And that was it. In a matter of moments I went from completing the last work of fiction I would ever write to the beginning of my demise. Through the window I saw Will walking across my lawn to his car, my reputation leaving along with him. I couldn't possibly imagine what could come of this. Would I be a freak or a laughing stock? Maybe even a criminal.

Will said he'd protect me but he doesn't know that. How could he? Not for something this big. They'll say that I did this on purpose. That I somehow knew what I was doing. That I was purposefully sending all those people to their graves.

But how? Am I witch? Or was my typewriter cursed? No. Impossible. It was coincidence. Chance. A freak turn of events. Though that won't stop them from pointing the finger. Because if there's one thing I've learned as a writer, it's that the audience loves a good villain.

And a villain I will become. Everything I'd worked so hard to achieve will be gone in an instant. All the sleepless nights I spent researching, writing, and editing. The countless hours I put into book tours and interviews. Conventions and signings. Not to mention the personal sacrifices I made when I could've been raising a family or enjoying my life.

No! My dreams were supposed to come true! I was supposed to be one of the greats. To live on after death in pages that never went out of print. Like Dickens and Emerson. Hawthorne and Hemingway. Now I will be nothing. The obscure horror writer who stole his stories from life.

But the world doesn't have to know that, do they? Right now only one man is standing in my way. A man who believes I have the power to make murder a reality. And if I did...then I also have the power to insure my legacy will live on.

I turned my head back into the office and could feel the typewriter hungry for paper. The keys were staring at me, practically begging to be punched. I told myself I was finished writing. That I never had to come up with another story again. But one more wouldn't hurt. One more if it meant saving my place in history.

Without another thought I quickly fed a piece of paper through the carousel and watched my fingers come alive, dancing their way across the keys as the story began.

They always laughed at him. Told him he wasn't man enough. But the hoodlum made up his mind. Today would be the day he officially joined the gang.

All he had to do was kill a cop.

About the Author

Frank Martin is a comic writer and author that is not as crazy as his work makes him out to be...seriously.

Since his writing career began he's had multiple short stories published in horror anthologies by both Burning Willow Press and Stitched Smile Publications. Frank has also had comic shorts appear in the "fluff noir" anthology series Torsobear and the all-ages horror anthology Cthulhu is Hard to Spell. Frank also wrote and produced the comic anthology series Modern Testament, which featured a wide ensemble of artists throughout its four volumes. Frank's novels included the YA sci-fi thriller Predestiny published by Crossroads Press and the zombie horror Mountain Sickness published by Severed Press.

Frank currently lives in New York with his wife and three kids. To hear more about his work you can sign up for his mailing list at www.frankthewriter.com or follow him on Twitter/Instagram @frankthewriter.