

The First Two Pages: “Fire Drill” by Lisa de Nikolits

From *The Best Laid Plans*, edited by Judy Penz Sheluk (Superior Shores Press)

Fly under the Radar. That was my plan. *Don't lose your cool.* That was my mantra. I told myself I could do it. I'd made it this far, hadn't I?

My mirrored reflection stared back at me in the elevator. I was ridiculously exhausted and it was only seven a.m. I counted the red numbers as we passed each floor. Going up, when my whole life was going down. Down the tubes, that is. What with the shrinking industry, tenacious Shar-Pei lines etching their way into my cheeks, my teeth like old corn on the cob, the gums receding as fast as the prospects for my future, the prognosis wasn't good. And what was with the steel-wool hair sprouting up around my ears like some crazy old guy's sideburns? No one, had ever mentioned that was in my future.

I stood on the gray diamond centre of the elevator floor and stared down. If the elevator got stuck, I wouldn't even be able to lie down and sleep. The floor was too filthy. But my diamond was still there, under the salt grime and shoe dandruff. The diamond, my magic place to make a daily wish. Keep me safe. Let me last out this day. It had worked for nearly eighteen years. It would work today. It had to. Chester, my aging Weimaraner, needed me.

I was the first one at my desk. It was a military strategy, get the lay of the land, see what emails had come in, prepare the necessary weaponry. Make oatmeal and get a big mug of decaf sweetened with stevia. I couldn't handle caffeine anymore and sugar was the devil in a blue dress. Gone were the days I could down three double espressos with nary a flutter in my veins. Nowadays I was as twitchy as a rabbit at Eastertime and god knows it didn't take much of anything to get me all fired up.

Ah frig. I peered at my screen. A meeting request flashed: **ICONS, FURTHER DISCUSSION. ACCEPT WITH COMMENTS, ACCEPT WITHOUT COMMENTS, ACCEPT WITH NO RESPONSE.** Not a request, a demand. I accepted without a response although I wanted to reply *seriously, not another meeting about the icons, how many meetings can we have?* The icons would be the death of me.

I worked in a marketing firm and my new boss had insisted on “elevating the brand” by introducing “navigable, user-friendly, iconic pathfinders”- tiny illustrations littering the brochure pages in case the dumb, dumber, and dumbest out there couldn't find the prices and noteworthy features of the products we told them they couldn't live without.

But I'm not an illustrator and the free vector art I found was, according to my boss, just wrong, wrong, wrong. I couldn't get the formula right and not for lack of trying. This had been going on for months, ever since Princess Tight White Pants in Red Stilettos had taken over.

Yep. I'd been hanging on by my fingernails, dangling over a cliff, with bits of scrub and brush falling onto my upturned face as I tried not to lose my grip. I was doing kind of okay until our primo client decided they hated Alice A. It broke my heart to watch my friend and former boss being marched out, tears streaming down her face, her purse hitting her thigh like a sack of old fruit. But I blew my nose and counted my blessings that I was still there. I had to keep fighting, had to carry on.

But then the stiletto-heeled supermodel from Mars came back from maternity leave to take her place at the throne.

When the call went out for submissions to *The Best Laid Plans*, I leapt at the chance to write a new story, one that had been kicking around in my head for a while.

I wanted to open the story with an introduction to the protagonist's psyche. The tension is created by foreshadowing—all Miranda (protagonist) wants to do is make it safely through the day and the reader immediately knows that this is not going to happen.

Dashiell Hammett's Flitcraft Parable in *The Maltese Falcon* inspired “Fire Drill.” Sam Spade tells the story of a man who sets off to work with the intention

of having a normal, regular day at the office. And then a beam falls from a great height and crashes onto the sidewalk next to him, causing him to re-evaluate his entire life. However, ironically, the man ended up creating the same life for himself all over again.

With “Fire Drill,” I wanted to explore what would happen if a malevolent opportunity raised its head in an innocuous environment, in a modern-day office. And, if any of us were pushed far enough, how would we react, if we were given an unexpected opportunity to exact revenge? Each of us has a breaking point, there’s no denying that.

I wanted to get inside the head of a lonely, aging woman, a woman with few friends. Her job is her life, her job and her dog. She has nothing else to live for. She is safe when driving within the lanes of her routine.

The idea for “Fire Drill” was also largely inspired by a recent situation at work. I work in an office tower and I was in a meeting when the fire alarm went off. The team leader persisted in trying to keep the meeting going, despite the fact that I couldn’t hear a word she was saying! My day wasn’t going so well and when we exited through the stairwell and it was only the woman and myself, I thought hmmm, imagine if...

In “Fire Drill,” the fire alarm is akin to the falling beam.

Which led to the story but I wanted more, consequentially, than a simple

linear tale of murder and revenge.

The heartbreaking desperation of Miranda's life is so beautifully reflected in *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith with this line: "It would be like all the fifty-year-old faces of women who worked at Frankenberg's, stricken with an everlasting exhaustion and terror..."

I read these words after I wrote "Fire Drill," but my intention was exactly that, to show the exhaustion and terror of trying to survive the daily grind, handicapped by the scars and baggage of life. But I wanted to have fun with it too.

As I say, the day of the real fire drill at my day job, I was having an awful time of it, and there's no better escape from reality than to turn a tedious, tiring experience into a fun one by writing about it. Of course the real thing was very dull, but writing "Fire Drill" certainly cheered me up! And although the stiletto-heeled supermodel from Mars bears no resemblance to the real-life team leader, every time I see her, I give her a great big grin. As far as I am concerned, she gave me a gift!

I had a lot of fun with Miranda. She sees herself very clearly and tells her tale with self-deprecating humor and an almost stubborn sense of self. She is dispassionately objective about her desire to survive at any cost and she seizes the moment with devastating consequences.

I used the siren sound to mirror the escalation of the situation, the chaos, the

inability to remain calm and rational and objective when we don't have control of a situation.

And are there any among us who haven't sent an email to the wrong person or a text message and, the moment you have pressed *send*, thought oh no, what have I done? I wanted to use that as a plot point, something we can all relate to.

Not to create any spoilers but, like the Flitcraft parable, Miranda's life, in the end, becomes much as it was before. But, like Howard Ingham in *The Tremor of Forgery* (also by Patricia Highsmith), the reader is left with many questions about morality. Miranda seizes the moment and commits a crime of passion but, since few people would react the way she did, there's moral ambiguity, which holds such fascination for readers and writers alike. The characters who leave us wondering live longest in our heads.

The best laid plans. Such a fitting title for so much of our lives and how perfect for a crime anthology!

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Lisa de Nikolits is the award-winning author of eight novels: *The Hungry Mirror*, *West of Wawa*, *A Glittering Chaos*, *The Witchdoctor's Bones*, *Between The Cracks She Fell*, *The Nearly Girl*, *No Fury Like That*, and *Rotten Peaches*. *No Fury Like That* was published in Italian in 2019 by Edizione Le Assassine under the title *Una furia dell'altro mondo*. Her ninth novel, *The Occult Persuasion and the Anarchist's Solution*, is scheduled to be published in 2019 by Inanna Publications. Her short fiction and poetry have also been published in various anthologies and journals across the country. She is a member of the Mesdames of Mayhem, the Crime Writers of Canada, Sisters in Crime, and the International Thriller Writers. Originally from South Africa, Lisa de Nikolits came to Canada in 2000. She lives and writes in Toronto.