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COLLOFF'S BACKGROUND

Pamela Colloff: Maybe I can start out just by telling you how I came to *Texas Monthly* if that would be at all helpful.

So I grew up mostly in New York and went to Brown, and when I was in high school, I thought that journalism might be interesting. And so I started a newspaper with some friends at the school, and that was a really interesting experience. In college, I started working for the school newspaper and ended up doing this investigative piece that got a lot of attention, and that was really interesting to see that you could write something and affect campus-wide change. But I didn't really enjoy the type of storytelling I was doing with newspaper writing, and I wanted to do more narrative-type stuff. Originally, when I was younger, I really wanted to be a fiction writer, and then I realized I was not good at writing fiction. But if somebody gave me the characters and the general plot, my job was to figure out how to tell the story, how to craft it and how to make it dramatic, and what points to accentuate. I was better at that, and then I enjoyed that more.

Brown, at the time, had a joint monthly magazine, and we could sort of do whatever we wanted. I'm not sure we had an academic adviser. It was whatever we wanted to make it, we could make it. I don't think I knew the term longform journalism then, but I had read articles in that mode, and I really liked that sort of thing. So I started trying to write that way, having no idea what I was doing. Brown was great in that there was no journalism major, but they allowed me to do independent studies. So, for several semesters, I would get credit for writing two or three longform pieces, and that was considered a class with an adviser. So that let me sort of start to figure out how to do this. Then I moved here, and I was just gonna live here for a year and not be serious about any career stuff. I didn't know anything about *Texas Monthly* when I came here. The plan was that I was gonna spend a year waiting tables, and I was gonna go back to New York, and I was gonna be a journalist.

And so I discovered *Texas Monthly* and started sending them queries, but I didn't have enough clips for anything to get work. I got in the habit of coming up with story ideas every week and then sending out at least one query letter—and at the time they were "letters," sadly—to every magazine I was reading and that I liked. I got nothing for a really long time, except for assignments from—

Sky Chadde: What were those magazines?

PC: I did everything. I sent stuff to *The New Yorker*. I think one of the great things about maybe being 20 or 22 or whatever is you're not afraid, and you don't know how impossible

it is. And so it makes you reach higher for things. I had a good idea—why not send it to *The New Yorker*? From everybody from *The New Yorker* to, at the time what was a great magazine, *Details*—I haven't looked at *Details* in a long time. But *Details* was sort of more like maybe *Rolling Stone* or *Esquire* is now. I got a call back from *Texas Monthly* at one point, but it didn't result in an assignment. And the work I was getting was just for...terrible stuff. They were the very, very beginnings of online publications, and I wrote for a local environmental magazine. I can't even remember what it was called. One of the many things I was doing at that time to make money was working at a trade magazine called *On Patrol* magazine. It was a law enforcement publication—which actually was great training for what I do now. I always tell people don't dismiss trade magazines as a great place to start.

But anyway, so I finally, finally got a bite from *Details* on a story idea that I had and got a feature assignment from them, and Conde Nast paid, too, which was sort of eye-opening, like, "Oh, you can make money doing this." It's not \$200. At that time it was—almost 20 years ago it was \$4,000, which seemed like a lot of money then.

So I wrote this story in *Details*, and I'd been querying *Texas Monthly* for two or three years at that point, and the deputy editor at the time, Evan Smith—he's in charge of the Texas Tribune now—saw the story. I had sent him a query at the same time, and all of a sudden, he was like, "Who are you? Come into the office. I want to meet you. This is fantastic stuff." And the whole conversation changed because of this one piece. He gave me a couple freelance assignments, and there were several staff writers who had recently left. I was 25—they gave me a position here for...no money. I had no idea what I was doing. I would have panic attacks coming into work every morning. I was like, *They're gonna figure it out*—like, I have the dream job, and I'm in the place that I wanna live in. I'm at this amazing magazine with all these—at the time, the writers were all so much older than me—these amazing, legendary writers. And I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing. So it was sort of on-the-job training, I guess. And it was really hard. But that was sort of how I got going here.

ADVICE—STORY IDEAS

But if any lessons can be drawn from that, I'd say trade magazines—don't turn up your nose at trade magazines, because they can be great. By the time I came here, I had a lot of experience having spent time with people in law enforcement, and I had done every aspect of the job. I had done fact-checking, copy editing. I had edited. I had rewritten people's cover stories. I had written feature articles. So that was one thing. And then just getting in the habit of coming up with story ideas constantly. That was the hardest thing starting off. It's really intuitive now, and I tell you that because that was the thing I struggled with more than anything—more than writing, more than reporting—was just how do you come up with ideas that people want? How do you come up with ideas that not everyone else is coming up with? How do you come up with a steady stream of ideas, and how do you pitch them? If you force yourself to come up with a minimum of a good story idea a week, as impossible as that may sound—maybe you guys already have this going—but it took me years and years.

SC: Still struggling with that. It's the hardest part.

PC: It's so hard. But if you sort of make that a priority—and it'll be really bad at first—it just becomes something you don't even—I don't want to say you don't think about it anymore. I definitely have periods where I'm sort of flailing around for something, or everything I look into the timing isn't right, the trial's the next year or whatever. But you just get in the habit of doing it. And then you have this just incredible archive of stuff that you can rely on and pitch. So I can't recommend that enough—whether it's the moment you have an idea, or hear something vaguely interesting, writing it in your phone or in a notebook. I always think of things in the shower or when I'm brushing my teeth for some reason. I have all sorts of insane emails or lists to myself. But I just cannot recommend that enough—and just being persistent in pitching to people and sometimes pitching to the same person over and over and over again. It's really hard. It's hard on your pride. But it can eventually pay off.

But tell me about story idea struggling.

SC: Just really trying to come up with stuff. One of the things my journalism professors always talks about is noticing what you notice, which sounds pretty simple. But at the same time, it's like something you just gotta train yourself on. Like if you notice, I don't know, skateboarders a lot, it's like, "Oh, they're skateboarders." But then you don't think, "Oh, I could turn that into a story." So it's just kind of having that process that I'm still kind of struggling with, though, to get down pat, you know?

PC: It's so hard. And, I mean, this is obvious, but to me, the more you're out in the world talking people and doing things, the more you hear about and discover. I remember one of the early stories I did here—it wasn't a feature, it was a department, which we don't have anymore—but I went over to someone's house for dinner with a large group of friends and acquaintances, and there was a guy at the table who said that his mom wrote romance novels. And I knew he was from Corpus, so I go, "Wow, really?" We started talking about his mom, and quite a while into the conversation he mentioned there were a couple other women that she was friends with in Texas who wrote romance novels. I called or emailed her after that and asked her about it. And Texas was like—I can't remember now what it was—but it was like the most people writing romance novels at that time. And Sandra Brown—I don't know if you know who she is, but she's like the Tom Clancy of romance—she had been on the bestseller list for like 20 years. But because she was a romance novelist, we'd never written about her. So I did this whole story on these women who often have kids running around, and they're in their nightgown, and they're writing these romantic love scenes, and it was just totally random. It was just listening to someone say something and asking a couple more questions.

SC: Exactly. And that's just the thing that: asking those couple of questions in that mind. You're always a journalist, and it's not an on-off switch. You just always have that.

PC: Which my husband finds very annoying, because wherever we go, I'm like, "Tell me more about that." And then obviously reading. This used to be a lot easier to do, but reading small-town newspapers and reading as much as you can. So many of the small newspapers now, if they have an online presence, they'll have like the sports stories online and some ads. They don't have a lot of stuff in them. So that's hard. I used to go to the Austin Public Library, and they had this whole area where they had papers from all over Texas. Sometimes they'd just have the Sunday edition. I would sit there for an afternoon and just go through them and find tons of stuff. I do a lot of Google alerts on stuff that I'm vaguely interested in—which can be really dangerous. I'll open up my email and there'll be 20 different things. Sometimes I'll have a Google alert on and I'll forget about it. And then some very small, weird thing will happen related to that subject, and it will pop up in my email, like, "Oh! A story! That's so great." So, I don't know if that's helpful.

SC: No, that is helpful. That helps a lot.

PC: But I swear it gets easier and more intuitive. But it's like a muscle—I have to use a dumb metaphor—it's like you have to be using it all the time. And don't be afraid to come up with just atrocious story ideas just to get in the habit of it, and you'll know which ones are good to pitch and which ones aren't. One of the things that Evan used to say to me when I would pitch story ideas to him is "That's a subject, not a story." It sounds so obvious, but I think that, along with coming up with story ideas, is the other big hurdle I had starting out, was "Skateboarders! I wanna write about skateboarders." You know, it's just something like that.

SC: Right, you don't have the characters. The second hardest part is just finding the characters who'll actually make the story come alive.

PC: Right. Or just what is it about skateboarding right now or skateboarding in Austin that sort of goes to some larger plan? I had so much trouble with that. I would go into him and I would say—this ended up being a story—but I would say, "Teenage rodeo pageant." And he'd say, "What about a teenage rodeo pageant?" I'd be like, "What does it matter? It's a teenage rodeo pageant. It would be a great story!" He's like, "I'm not seeing how this is a magazine story." So I did a lot of things like that, where I would go into something that was just inherently fascinating, and he'd be like, "I can't give you an assignment based on that." So I'd have to go out and actually do the legwork. And it's especially hard when you're freelance, because you're not getting paid to put that time in for your travel necessarily, and sometimes it takes so long. And sometimes nothing—often—nothing comes of it, which is awful.

REPORTING "THE INNOCENT MAN"

SC: I was wondering about "The Innocent Man." I'd never heard about the case before, but apparently it was really well covered. Like there was the *60 Minutes* thing and apparently a lot of coverage down here. So what are some of the challenges of writing/reporting a story that's so well known—finding new angles and all that.

PC: I like to write about stories or cases either while people are paying attention to them or after people have forgotten them. I think a lot of people rush into their work, because their editors are telling them to do it. They have to do it. Something big and newsworthy happens and all the reporters run there, and then different reporters are competing to get the first this or that. I just don't—I won't do that. To me, I'll either wait—and sometimes it's hard to wait when you miss stuff. Like the Chris Kyle shooting: I was sort of watching that from a distance, and I was thinking, well, maybe when the shooter goes to trial or afterward, I'll go and watch the trial and approach his family afterward and do something. Well, *The New Yorker* did a piece this spring. So there are inherent risks in doing that. But that's unusual that something like that happens. So I generally like to wait and come in on the backend. With criminal cases, most of the people I always want to talk to can't talk to me until the trial's over anyway. And I can't get the documents that I want and all that.

With the Morton case, two things were made the exception to that. One was that, when I started working on it, there was daily newspaper coverage, but there wasn't anything else happening. I don't mind competing with daily newspaper coverage because what we do is so different. So I didn't feel hampered by that. And the story was just so mindboggling. A lot of the action had already happened. His trial happened. His incarceration had happened. He was free when I started working on it. So it seemed like it was mostly over. It fit my template. Then *60 Minutes*, NPR, The New York Times was all over it. He did a bunch of other TV shows. It was awful. I knew I had more stuff than anybody else, but time was—it took me a very long time to write that story—so time was going by, and all these things were happening. As far as finding new stuff, I didn't worry about that because Michael was talking to me in a lot of detail. Unless someone was writing at the same length as me, which I knew wasn't possible. I mean, he was telling me if he was talking to—probably *The New Yorker* is the only other magazine that would do something that long in a case like this—he would tell me if someone else was doing that sort of thing. So I didn't worry about that too much, because I knew what he was telling me was so much deeper or detailed, or whatever the word was, than these excellent, excellent daily newspaper writers were doing—through no fault of their own. It's just they have 800 words, and I had 28,000 words. So there was that. And I was able to access the entire case file, which no one else had, which I couldn't say in the story that I had for reasons I can explain later. And I knew I had made some connections between things that, again, one could only make if they had eight or nine months to work on the story exclusively.

SC: Is that how long you had?

PC: It wasn't planned that way. At the length it's at, it's the length of four feature stories that I would typically do. So when you think about it that way, time-wise, it makes a little bit more sense. But there was another story I worked on part of that time and wrote.

But anyway, I just had a lot of material that I knew other folks didn't have. And I also thought that the father-son story is what made it not unique—other people had gone down that road—but made it fully a narrative piece. And so when Eric agreed to talk to me, which was really late in the game, that was good for me. I don't know how I would've pulled it off

without him, honestly. So there was that. But I think, also, just because everyone was talking about this story—it was in the paper every day here when I was working on this—everyone was talking about it. It was on the front page all the time. That sort of upped my own expectations for myself of what I needed to deliver, and that was, I think, good in the end. But it was not a fun process to work on this.

Meagan Flynn: Just curious, how many documents do you think you studied and how many interviews would you say you did?

PC: You know, I tried really hard not to show—I don't have language in there like "according to the police report on such and such." So hopefully you're not thinking about all the documents. But it was many thousands of pages of stuff, because the case file alone was at least 1,500—maybe 2,000 pages. Now a lot of that was duplicates of things. But nothing was in order. It was just this pile of stuff. Certain things were handwritten and hard to read. Really, the problem with this story, even with the crazy length it's at, was focusing it. Because there was so much. There were so many rabbit trails that the cops went down initially that were fascinating. And there were so many wrong turns all along the way, and I just—I couldn't go into all of them. There was something I cut from the piece before it went to press. It was about 1,200 words that I cut about this other almost identical murder case that everyone thought was connected to this case and all these sort of strange revelations about that that gave you insight into the characters in this story. It was really interesting, but my big concern with this length was just keeping it moving. And so when we went through it—I think it was pretty close to the end—I told Jake [Silverstein, *Texas Monthly* EIC] that I wanted to take that material out of it because I wanted to make it a fast read, which I know is funny for that length. So honing it down was really hard.

ADVICE—SIFTING THROUGH REPORTING

And I guess another thing—sorry, I keep spouting random advice—another thing I found very difficult early on was I would go and I would do all this reporting, and I would be so proud of all the reporting I did, and I would come back, and I would want to show it off in my writing. You know: I talked to 40 people, so even if one person wasn't that important to the narrative, I'd make sure to definitely put a quote in from them so you'd know that I had talked to that person. I've had to unlearn that, because I think you want to make it look easy. You want to make it just look like you know all this stuff, and you want to have a voice of authority. And if you're constantly quoting this person or quoting that person or quoting this document, it's not pretty writing, first of all. It's more in the vain, I think, of daily newspaper writing—the way it can be where it's very, you know, "according to so-and-so." You have that voice in it. Often you have just great, great, great stuff, and it doesn't belong in the story, and you have to just make peace with that and tell your friends about it. Chad, my husband, I'll always tell him those little tidbits. Then he reads the story. He's like, "I can't believe you didn't put that thing in the story that was so interesting."

CHOOSING DETAILS IN "THE INNOCENT MAN"

Abby Meredith: I read that bit about that plane going around—what part was that?

SC: [Sheriff Jim]Boutwell?

AM: Yeah. And I was like, you must have learned hundreds of things like that. How do you choose?

PC: That was such a great detail. I also wrote a huge story on the Charles Whitman shooting, so I'm way too interested in that whole chapter of things. But that, to me, that was important. Here's this guy, there's someone shooting from the tower, and he commandeers a plane to go take pot shots at him. That tells you a lot about him. But there were so many other fascinating, fascinating details about people or things that either they were distracting, or if they're in there, then it opens up this whole other avenue of questions. So really streamlining things and not being showoff-y, if that makes sense, with how many people you've talked to or what you're quoting from I think often leads to better narratives.

The Boutwell stuff, I mean, I did a whole section on him, and that was nothing. The guy—just him alone—could be a book. And all of it is crazy. He was just this larger-than-life bad cop. The number of stories about all these things that he did was sort of incredible. In that story, I really focused on, I thought, the most egregious example of that. I didn't go into, you know, "And in this case he did this crazy thing, and in this case he did—" I feel like, once you know about the Henry Lee Lucas case, which, when I was first here, that was a huge story. So anyone reading this who knows about Henry Lee Lucas knows what a big case that was. Bush commuted his sentence. That doesn't happen. It was a very strange case. But that would represent sort of all the different problems of this guy, if that makes sense.

ORGANIZATION OF "THE INNOCENT MAN"

AM: So kind of going off of that, my biggest question—because this is what I struggled most with—is just how did you come up with the organization of this? There's so much—and you do it beautifully—in the different sections. And I was studying it like, OK, so this how... And it makes sense to me post, but how do you decide beforehand how you're gonna—

PC: That's a great question. I can tell you how this one came about, if that's helpful. At one time, this was gonna be one piece. And then it just grew and grew and grew, and we couldn't figure out what to do with it, and I was still writing the second half when the first half went to press. So it sort of got split in two, not at the last minute, but well into what we were doing.

I always knew generally the structure for the first half, and I'll go into that in a second. The second half I was just baffled by, because I have to describe 25 years. The first half, I knew that I had to frame the entire story with the father-son story. So the beginning of the story and the end of the story has to be about the father and son. The natural place to start,

because it's in Michael's words, is starting the piece with Michael's own words talking about this horrible situation that he's in. I was able to frame it with the father-son story, but then enough has happened in his case at that point that I can backtrack and the reader can be interested in what happens. But not so much has happened that I have to write 20 paragraphs explaining everything. And I knew I didn't want to write a lead that was, you know, "*As Michael Morton walked to the courthouse a free man...*" That was way too late in the narrative.

MF: Did you have any alternatives that you considered?

PC: I really didn't. The moment that it clicked for me, where in the father-son story to begin with, is my son, at the time I was writing this, was the exact age that Eric was when Michael went to prison. He was 4. So Michael was describing the early visits, and he talked about he'd bring his Matchbox cars, and he sort of did this demonstration: He'd drive his Matchbox cars along the tabletop in the prison. My son did that all the time, and I just got goose bumps. On the one hand it's such a normal parent-child moment. He's a boy, he's got his little cars, he's hanging out with his dad. He's totally oblivious to—or not; I don't know—to his surroundings. But then it's this crazy situation. His mother died. His father is in jail. So I knew that image, or something like that, was the general place to begin. To me, the moments in interviews or research that I keep thinking about or obsessing about or telling friends about, they become what I structure things around. Does that make sense? So from that Matchbox car moment, you know, well how do I bring people in? Well if I introduce Michael's voice up top, that's so compelling. And then have the image of him with his son. The first section spans almost 10 years, because you begin with the time that Eric's 4, and you end when he's about 15 and he's saying goodbye to his dad. But it just seemed to perfectly frame everything that was coming.

And then the story, from that point on, is told mostly chronologically—or it looks that way. There are devices I did in there. I read the trial transcript, and I saw all the things that the prosecutor tried to use to make him look evil and diabolical. And I first presented them within their normal context within the narrative, so that when you get to the trial, and you read those things, you're like, "Oh...the marigolds...That doesn't mean what the prosecutor thinks it means." I'm always really struck in wrongful conviction pieces when, if you don't know the case, and you just sit down and read the transcript, often, I would convict based on what had been presented without the context or other information. Sounds pretty bad. So it's told chronologically, but there are little tricks I'm doing. To me, it seemed very obvious. You have this setup, and then you go back: This is a normal family, and they live in this normal place. And then you get to know them so that everything you read that follows you are able to connect with them and empathize with them. Putting things into context—he was not a great husband, but he was a great dad. He was human—you know, explain that. I didn't want to not talk about how he'd been kind of a lousy guy to be married to, which hadn't been talked about before. All the newspaper coverage was "Saint Michael." Because you needed to know that to understand what followed. So setting up who is this family, who are they, who's this kid, how does this man and this woman relate to one another, what do people think of them? And then when Christine's murder happens, I think

you as a reader, hopefully you feel that more than you would if that's where the story began, because you know who these people are now.

And then everything that follows, again, is pretty chronological. There's some steps back I take to introduce people. Boutwell—there's a section on Boutwell where I introduce him, and then another where I introduce [DA Ken] Anderson. And my intention with doing that was, if you take a step back and look at who Boutwell is, and then the next section is "This guy arrives at the crime scene," what I'm hoping you as reader think is "Oh, shit." That was the intention. And then, when you get to the section about Anderson, you take a step back and learn about Anderson, and you learn that he's very, very close to Boutwell and that he's very young and eager to please. I'm sort of laying the groundwork of what's to come.

So when this was all one piece, we didn't need the cliffhanger after the trial because people were still hopefully gonna be reading the story. But Jake's idea, when we decided to split the story was, "Well, if we split this into two pieces, if people have to wait a month for the second part, we need to really amp it up." I still worry it's a little hokey—I hope not.

SC: It's like when J.R. was shot.

PC: Yeah, exactly. I used to watch a lot of soap operas when I was younger, and it was always like when it was holiday weekend, they would do the cliffhanger.

But what Jake had me do that was really great was he had me draw out a moment—and this is, again, something I can't recommend enough with magazine writing in general. It wasn't just guilty verdict, Michael says he didn't do it, his lawyer is haunted by what happened, end. I think I had a paragraph like, "He was taken to the county jail and transferred to prison." That was it. And Jake said, "You need to really draw this out and go in there and have this be a whole scene. Go back, ask him how did he get from the Williamson County jail to Huntsville. When he first got to jail, what did it smell like, look like, feel like?" That was really smart, and I think a lot of time with magazine writing, there's certain key moments. On the one hand you have to pack all this information in very, very, very tightly and streamline it. But when you find those really important moments in the narrative, you have to slow it down, and you have to draw it out and make it very detailed and vivid to the reader. And I think that that...that's what makes it narrative.

So after Jake gave me those instructions, it was great, because I got to go back to Michael, and the guy has the most incredible memory. So he just remembered everything about those first few days.

But the second half was completely baffling to me as to what to do because it was such a huge amount of time, and just describing 20 years in prison, to me, was a book. So how the hell do you do that? And I had corresponded with all these guys he'd spent time with—this is what I'm talking about with reporting: You just chuck. That's great. I had a lot of information, but it was becoming a book, and it wasn't a book. So I realized, OK, well the first half begins with Michael's voice. The second half should begin with Michael's voice. I have these letters, and if I frame his entire time in prison through the letters—and you

know he's not telling his friend everything. You know he's putting a sunny face on things. He's making his little jokes about how much things suck. But he's "ha-ha"—hopefully that comes across, how he's very jokey in those letters.

SC: The brown storm?

PC: Yeah, exactly. He's describing these horrible things, but in this sort of flippant way. If I narrated it in my own words and I just go through years really quickly, the reader's gonna be like, "Well...what was going on, and what happened? Who was his cell mate?" So by deliberately limiting it, I think it works, and it just contains it to this one section.

Everything that followed is really the legal drama, and then coming back to Eric at the end and framing that. Eric was the last person I interviewed, so it was sort of easy to have that material at the end. Sorry, that was a really long answer.

WRITING "THE INNOCENT MAN"—GRAY AREAS

SC: I have a question. One of the things I love about this piece is that the description of Michael is so in the gray—it's so nuance. You start off, and you feel sympathy for this guy because he's in prison, he's not having that relationship with his son—I'm a sucker for father-son stories—and then you realize he's a shitty ass husband. That note, I sent my dad the story, and when he read that note, he texted me like, "If you ever write a note like that to your wife, I will whip you." And that's something you don't get with 800-word stories, and that's something my journalism professor's always stressing. It's not black and white. There's always tons of gray. It's hard to reach that. So I was wondering how you got that nuance in there. I know it's really long, but there's still other stuff that you can do to make sure you flush out that stuff.

PC: That's a great question. This was really tricky in that—I'm just speaking truly from a manipulative, narrative viewpoint—but I had to show enough of him not being a great husband for you to understand how investigators even started going down the path of suspecting him. And the strange things he did: sleeping on the mattress afterward. I think he was in shock, and so there was some strange stuff he was doing. But also making sure that he's sympathetic enough to get a reader through 28,000 words. It's a very careful balance. But to me the nuance stories are the interesting stories. I don't want to read a story about the perfect guy who—even if it were true—who was the perfect husband. Life isn't like that. People are messy. Their personal lives are messy. To me, I almost think you have more empathy for someone if you kind of know the messy details of their life. But as for how to do that, I think... that's a really good question. I think context is key. And I think I probably could have developed this a little bit more. But there was a lot that Michael told me that...I think it was mostly on the record, but I didn't know how much. People tell you things on the record, and it's like, does he really want to see me write all this stuff about his sex life? I don't know. But he was frustrated. He had fallen in love with this woman, and they had this great life together. Then their son comes along and he's so sick, and all the sudden there's no romance and there's no sex. I think, hopefully, sort of anyone can relate

to some aspect of that, like your relationship changes, and that's hard. If you just have the note, and you just know that he slept on the mattress and the few other things the jurors know about him, he's a monster. But if you fill in the details of who he is and where he came from and what his relationship was, how their relationship had shifted, it's richer. Do you know what I mean? I'm not sure I'm answering your question.

SC: Yeah. Because there's things people aren't proud of.

PC: The tricky thing with that is getting people to go on the record with things.

SC: Is that just being persistent, to get people to be on the record?

PC: Yeah. Sometimes it doesn't happen. In the last story I did, which is about the trial of Mark Norwood, there was a detail that the prosecutor told me about sort of the personal toll that the case had taken on her and the stress that it had involved, and it was such an amazing detail. And I emailed her and emailed her and emailed her and asked her repeatedly if I could include it in the story, and usually if I do that, people will eventually give in. But she didn't. So I of course respected that.

The thing that was complicated about this and with wrongful conviction stories, in particular, in presenting that nuance view is— You know, when I was interviewing his friends and the people around him, it was 25 years later, and they had viewed him for 25 years as a murderer. So sometimes it was hard to separate out...how bad was he at the time? Or how much has been sort of overlaid over time with people's memories? And what was fascinating to me was everyone who has read this story who I've talked to has read that note totally differently. Jake read it as this is a man who feels big emotions. He had a very sort of sympathetic take on it. He was this very emotive, wounded, frustrated guy. And I remember when I first read it thinking, I don't know if I can do this story. This is gonna turn so many people off. But then the more I read it, I was like, that isn't the note you leave to throw the cops off with the fact that you killed your wife.

SC: It's a very personal thing.

PC: You were just like, "You have hurt me, and I'm mad at you," and that's just not what you would want the cops to see. So that was interesting. I think context matters—and those little details that balance each other out, like not being a great husband but being a great dad. He sleeps next to him at the hospital at night. He takes off three weeks of work. He is totally present and devoted to his son. I think those things help to just make someone real. He's bringing Christine flowers every day, and he's sleeping in the hospital, and you're like, "I don't know anyone like this."

INTERVIEWING MICHAEL MORTON

MF: When you first sat down with Michael, how did you sort of ease into it at first, and then eventually get to the meat of things?

PC: This I lucked out on, because what I didn't know when I had started working on this story is he had signed an agreement with *60 Minutes* at his lawyer's suggestion to do an exclusive with *60 Minutes*, meaning that, until the *60 Minutes* piece airs, no one else can interview him. At first, that was like the worst that ever happened, and I was beside myself about that. And then it wouldn't air, and didn't air, and didn't air, and I thought, I'm gonna be in a lot of trouble at work, because I have spent all this time on this piece, and I can't write it until I talk to him.

But it ended up being a really great thing because there was six months—I mean, think about this. This guy's been in jail for 25 years. He's wanted to tell his story to anyone who would listen. He wrote to this magazine, by the way, we now know, to another writer who's not here anymore, telling him to write about his case, and he never got a letter back. So he had wanted to tell people about his story for all that time. And then he's muzzled for six months. So I sat down with him. He came to Austin, and he met all day Monday with my friend Brandi Grissom at the Tribune. And then he gave me Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and then he did the newspaper stories. I didn't have to do much. I just would guide the conversation by time period, and each night, I would make these lists of follow-up questions based on wanting to know more about something he had said that particular day. So it was a very lucky situation. And it was fresh. Now, he's told these stories so many times that, like anyone, he tells them the same way.

So that I don't know is instructive for anything. That was just random luck. Though a lot of prison interviews I've done have been in that mode. They're not as long. But you're by yourself for all this time, and you want to tell somebody something. That can also be challenging, because you, as a reporter, you need to know certain things, and sometimes what you want to talk about and what they want to talk about are different, and they're just so excited to talk. So I don't know if that's helpful. That was just lucky.

MF: Yeah—that's just how it was.

PC: And he actually came here to do the interviews, and he was on the front page of the paper every day. We walked in, and everybody was like, "....Hello!" It was like a celebrity had arrived. It was really funny.

ADVICE—CONTACTING SOURCES

SC: What about source fatigue—do you ever deal with that? That's something I have a problem with.

PC: Tell me what you mean—that they'd been interviewed too many times?

SC: No, like I'm afraid to contact them three or four times, just to keep asking questions. Because I'm afraid they'll get turned off and be like, "You know what, I don't want you using me in the story anymore." I constantly worry about that.

PC: I wouldn't underestimate how much people like to talk about themselves and feel important in some way. I always bend over backward with the kind of thing that you're talking about. What people don't realize when they sign on to do a story with us is—OK, so there's the first time you go out to interview them. Then there's probably the second time you go out to interview them. Then, you know, in Michael's case, multiply that by however many times. Then there's the follow-up emails and phone calls. Then I'll start writing the story and realize I forgot to ask them something, and I'll call them back. Then there's fact-checking. Then there's a photographer. So I think a lot of it is—this is sort of a weird word to use, but—sort of managing your sources. I just keep in touch with people. I'm working on things for a very long period of time, too, so there's that. But I check in with them. I let them know what's going on, keep them in the loop. So if I do have to call them back for a question, it's not like, oh, you just poured out your guts to me, and you haven't heard from me in two months. And now I'm calling you back to ask you some very personal questions. So I form relationships with people. And I find almost always, at least with the crime stories, that people want to know—they have questions. And you, in a good way, can become a source of information for them.

Michael, for example, when I contacted friends of his, he wasn't in touch with anybody because nobody believed him except for his friend Mario. So I would interview someone, and they often would say at the end of the interview or a follow-up email, "Would you be comfortable putting me in touch with Michael. And then I would talk to him. So there were lots of different things like that. "I always had a question about the case. What did it say in the trial transcript about X?" And I would send it to them. Or anything I felt would reciprocate what they gave me. They gave me all this time. They opened their hearts up to me about different things. So whatever it is that I can be helpful with to them, do that—and everybody wins, and I'm in communication with them.

I think what's hard is when someone was really hesitant to talk, and they do talk, but it wasn't maybe the greatest interview or it was by phone. Or, a lot of stories I work on, people don't necessarily have email. It's a very rural area or...there are all sorts of reasons for that. Those are more challenging. So sometimes I'll keep in touch in a different way. Maybe I'll send them a copy of the magazine with a note attached, saying "Thank you again for talking to me. I'll be calling again next month." I don't know if that's helpful.

SC: No, that helps.

PC: And I think just being incredibly polite. I'm like, "I know you're very busy." I'll say things like, "I know you may be too busy to talk during the work day. I'm more than happy to talk during the evening or weekends if that's easier. Just let me know." Anything like that.

REPORTING "THE INNOCENT MAN"

MF: Who was your toughest interview?

PC: For this story? I think just getting the interview with Eric was the biggest challenge. As far as the toughest interview...I mean, they're all hard in different ways. I'm sure you've run into this. Michael's attorney, John Raley, was just the greatest guy. There was so much information in his head that it took a couple interviews just to get to where we could talk about things in a slightly linear way. The first time I talked to him, I was like, I don't understand anything he's telling me. It was very flattering: He thought I knew much more about the law than I did. He was using all these terms in Latin, and nothing was chronological. So I tape-recorded it, and I literally spent a week just like, "What was that? What? OK," and just sort of making a list of questions for a more linear interview. There were a lot of people who wouldn't talk. That was tough. John Bradley wouldn't talk. Ken Anderson wouldn't talk. Boutwell was dead. Christine was dead. Christine's family wouldn't talk to me. So that was also very alarming, like, wow, there's a lot shut off from me that I'm gonna have to figure out some other way.

AM: Did you feel like you were able to?

PC: I think mostly. I thought about, in retrospect, if John Bradley had talked to me—and I'm actually glad he didn't, because now, seeing him testify and the way that he spins things, talking to him would not have been illuminating. I would have had to have quoted one of his things that he says that is—what's the way to put it? It's spin. It's like what you see politicians doing. It wasn't based in reality or fact, necessarily. It wasn't as accurate as I would want it to be.

So sometimes someone not talking to you gives you a little bit of freedom. I try to say it that way. It's always so awful when person after person after person won't talk to you. We have this amazing program called Due Diligence that allowed me to find everyone who lived on their street at the time of the crime and where they had moved. They're all divorced. Where they had moved to, what the women's last names were now—it was amazing. So I contacted, I don't know, probably between 20 and 30 neighbors and friends. And almost no one would talk to me. There were people who were still afraid of him. There were people who still thought he had done this. There were people who were reading between the lines—I think extremely embarrassed that they had either testified against him or believed this about him and didn't want their names associated with this. So that was incredibly frustrating. I was like, "What do all these people know that they're not telling me?" That's a scary feeling. So that was hard.

ADVICE—RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOURCES

Abby Gilman: Sort of backtracking, when we were talking about relationships, how do you form the relationships while still staying detached enough?

PC: I'm not sure I do stay detached enough, is probably the answer. It's interesting: I spoke at a panel a couple weeks ago with Tom Junod, which was fascinating, and he said about this piece, he said something like, "You sort of package the story in such a way or your language in such a way that you are appearing to be neutral. But if you look at the

information you're presenting and the order you're presenting it in and what you're saying, it's not neutral at all." And I think that's probably true. I think most of my stories have a pretty distinct point of view. I guess what I would say is, sometimes when you've interviewed enough people about the same events, you begin to realize who are your reliable narrators and who are your unreliable narrators, because things won't match up to documents or evidence or what everyone else saw. Because of that, I may spend more time with certain people or focusing on certain people in my reporting. And I think just always trying to stay true to the facts of the case and what things we know are true—you know, staying true to those things and not getting sort of sidetracked by what other people think.

But I struggle with that. These are relationships you form with people, and sometimes they—I don't wanna say they're close relationships. That's not the right way of putting it. But I've interviewed parents about the loss of a child and these very intimate things. So how do you get that information and not get emotionally involved with who you're talking to? Or what if someone who views you very sympathetically, if you have to say something about them in the story that you know is going to be hurtful to them, I still really struggle with that. I leave certain things out if they're not absolutely essential to the narrative. Because I've seen the harm and the hurt that the written word can cause in someone's life. So I really weigh that before saying something difficult about someone. Sometimes I go over it with them ahead of time. "I want to give you a heads up. The piece is coming out in a month. There's gonna be some information here about....you know, your daughter and how many people—" I don't know how to put it. But things about preparing them for things that will come out that they're not gonna be happy with. Skip Hollandsworth is really, really good at that. And I think it works better for everybody. You can talk it out with the source ahead of time: "OK, this is gonna be public information. How can we present this information in a way that you're comfortable with? If you're not comfortable with that, let's talk about that and why." And sometimes it ends well, and sometimes it doesn't. And that's hard.

In this piece, there was a person who wouldn't talk with me on the record who talked to me on background and sort of managed the way I was describing her. It was sort of an interesting collaboration, and not everything that I wrote about her was flattering. But we sort of came to agreements about certain things. I don't know if that made any sense at all.

AG: No, it did.

PC: I don't have the answer. I really struggle with that. The main thing I come down to about what I was just saying is how can I, when the story comes out, feel good about it? And feel like, OK, I can look myself in the mirror today, and I'm not scared of what that person's gonna say when— I never send something to someone and it's like a bomb, like this huge revelation.

WRITING "THE INNOCENT MAN"—SUBTLETY

MF: I think one of the best things that I noticed about the piece was your use of subtlety and self-control as a writer—

PC: Thank you—people keep saying that. It's very nice, but I'm not sure what they're talking about.

MF: You know, like letting the scenes speak for themselves instead of trying to overblow them or “make people feel it.” How did you do that?

PC: That's so funny, because I actually worry that parts of it were too overblown. There's a couple different points where I have to talk about what Michael's feeling, and it just always felt kind of dumb. Of course he's shell-shocked, and of course he's devastated, and of course—how do I describe that? To me, that's always what the best writing is, is just...showing not telling, obviously. But to me, a scene is more powerful—like there's a scene in there where his son turns to him and asks him if he's seen the man in the shower, and Michael realizes, “Oh, my son witnessed this—at the very least, my son saw this man who did this.” There's so many different ways you could write that scene. But to me, just telling the facts of it: He's on his knees; he's scrubbing the bathtub. It's a totally ordinary moment. Any parent can relate to it. Your kid wants to talk to you, and you're like, “I'm trying to do these chores. And then he says this thing that's so shocking. And I think just describing Michael being taken aback by that and what Eric said is more powerful than...I don't know how you would overwrite that. *“Michael thought for days and days about what his son had said and tossed and turned in his bed”*—you don't need that. It's so horrifying that it sort of speaks for itself.

ADVICE—RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOURCES

PC to AG: I'm still worried I never answered your question [about staying detached].

AG: I mean, I also don't know how you form a character when you have—if you meet, like you met with him, what, three days straight? So obviously you would have formed a relationship with him. And you have feelings you feel about him, but want to let people decide for themselves how they feel. So how do you stay true to who he actually is as a person but not feel like you're doing it wrong?

PC: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think the one thing I didn't manage well with this that I hadn't thought about is he was really taken aback when the first half came out because no one had written anything but positive things about him. I mean, at the time of the trial, it was all terrible. But in the past couple years, no one had written anything negative about him, and I think the portrayal I gave of him as a husband was painful for him to read. And he sent me this—he's an amazing person—he sent me this long email about “When I first read that, I was very frustrated and angry, and it was very difficult for me to read that, and it was very difficult for me as a different person, now, to realize that actually that was an accurate portrayal of me at that time.” It was very, very thoughtful. But coming from a different person, it could've gone in a bad direction. He had so many bad things said

about him, but it didn't occur to me, in a story about his innocence, saying that he wasn't a great husband would still be very painful to him. So I didn't do that right.

But yeah, when I met with him, he's such a charming, incredibly likable, charismatic person. So I did have to set that aside, because the person I was meeting was a different person than the person I was writing about in the first part of the story, if that makes sense. I mean, think about who you were 10 years ago. And now think about 25 years ago and think about all the things that he's gone through. So I was very aware that the person I was meeting was not someone who would've been convicted of this crime. He would've testified totally differently. He would've been more in control of the situation—all these different things. So I tried to think of it as Michael of the mid-'80s and then Michael present-day were almost two different people. I still don't think I answered your question. I don't know. I struggle with it because I really have a lot of affection for people who— Anyone who gives me time, even if they're like the worst person in the world, if they will give me interviews and they will answer all my questions and will let me talk to their family— I mean, people have done horrible things. I have this sort of affinity for them by the end of the story because, well, that's very nice that they did that. But I have to balance that out with, obviously, the facts. So, I don't know.

But I'll say one other thing. I did write a story a long time ago about a teenage rodeo queen pageant and wrote a story after that about a teen beauty pageant. And I think, with the beauty pageant story, I really got a good lesson—a painful lesson—in the power of what we write and how it can affect people and really hurt people. I feel like I learned a lesson doing that. There was one girl in particular who I wrote about who was devastated by the piece who was 16. And that's just a terrible time in life, anyway—so to have this magazine that everyone's reading write these things... I try, now, to sort of manage expectations and talk to people more before something's gonna come out if something's gonna be negative.

CURRENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH PAST SOURCES

SC: Are you in contact with some of these people? Like are you still in contact with Michael or the Overtons or Anthony Graves?

PC: Yeah, all of the above. The relationships change, too. With Michael, I was in daily communication with him while I was writing the story, and now I try not to bother him—but will occasionally be like, “So what's going on?” But yeah, Anthony has this amazing life now. He's on Facebook and all these things I could not have imagined when I first met him. And so we have lunch a couple times a year. He keeps me updated on things. And then the Overtons, that's still ongoing. The Court of Criminal Appeals hasn't ruled in that case yet. So, again, on Facebook, I sort of follow what's going on with Larry [Overton]. I try not to bother Larry too much, because he has so many kids and a job. But I keep in touch with Larry's pastor. He sort of keeps me in the loop about things. And Hannah's attorney in San Antonio.

MF: Do you think you'll be doing a follow-up on that?

PC: Definitely—I think no matter what happens. Everyone thought there was gonna be a ruling a year ago. So I don't know what that means. I'm going to see her attorney next Friday in San Antonio, so hopefully we'll know more about it.

ALTERNATIVE ENDING IN “THE INNOCENT MAN”

SC: I was wondering if—I think on the Nieman Storyboard annotated version of this, you said that if you didn't have access to Eric, you'd still try to write it. But obviously, the emotional payoff at the end is just so great. So how would the second part end if you hadn't had access to Eric?

PC: That's a great, great question. I think I probably would have written about Eric and Michael's relationship using information I had from Michael and a couple other people. But it would've been harder to do because Michael has always, I think, felt that their relationship was in a better place than Eric has. And so that uncertainty I don't think would have been there. It wouldn't have been as good as an ending, I know that.

SC: That's such a great ending line: “Her name is Christine.” I was blinking back tears the first time I read it.

PC: Thank you. I was trying to make you cry, so— It was very moving just in person—and again, this is my own personal life going into it. But my children factored into this story a lot just in how I thought of it, and I was on maternity leave with my second child when Michael got out of prison. So I had a little baby at the time that I met Chrissy, this baby. It was just a very powerful moment, literally in person. I don't mean that it presented itself as like “this is the obvious end.” She was like, “I'm gonna go get the baby,” and then she comes back and gets the baby and she's just sitting there. But it was just so moving to be sitting there—you know, life goes on. All this horrible stuff happened, and life goes on. It was fascinating.

ADVICE—ANONYMOUS SOURCES

SC: Also, in that story you wrote about—“Whose side is God on?”—you used some unnamed sources. So I was wondering, what's kind of just the process of behind going with unnamed sources? Is that up to you, or do you talk to the editor?

PC: That's a really good question. I probably should talk to an editor more about that. I mean, in this story, there are so many unnamed sources that you're not even aware of who told me things and didn't want to be quoted and all that. So that is a common occurrence in almost every story, and I think, again, sort of once you immerse yourself in the facts of the case, you can have a better sense of who's giving you good information and who's not. But I'm comfortable when what someone's telling me can either be verified by someone else or stuff that I'm reading. I'm totally comfortable not quoting them by name or just weaving it

into my own narrative—which, newspaper writers don't have those liberties necessarily. And you can definitely get in trouble that way. So that's something that, you know, I try to watch.

With Holly, that's a pretty common occurrence, that there'll be these certain negotiations that take place. She wouldn't write or call me back. And then I eventually got her on the phone, and we spent a couple months just talking about the case—just me answering questions of hers before she would agree to an interview. And at first, the interview, I think, was on background, and it just kept changing. Things were also happening in the case. Seeing the *60 Minutes* piece I think was helpful to her in feeling more comfortable speaking about all this. Then she and Michael starting talking. So there was this sort of evolution. And then she was comfortable being a source but not having her name in it. I said to her, "You're really the only person—it's gonna be obvious who you are. But if I just say 'Christine's best friend,' a lot of people are already gonna know who that is. It's gonna seem strange that your name isn't in it." And she was really concerned with her privacy and people not contacting her, and I said, "Why don't we just go with what your name was when you testified in the case?" And she was OK with that.

I'll kind of do whatever I need to do to get someone's voice into the piece and to make them comfortable. And then if that's not possible, I'll try to take them into consideration, like, "Well, is this person playing me and trying to get me to say things? Why do they not want their name in there?" So, no, there's no—

SC: It's kinda like a case-by-case basis?

PC: Yeah. I think at newspapers it would be a very rigid policy about unnamed sources or what kind of relationship you can form with somebody.

SC: Yeah, that's most of the writing I've done up to this point.

PC: Yeah, that sounds really bad that it's a case-by-case basis, but it kind of is.

WRITING INFLUENCES

SC: Yeah. I was wondering who your writing influences are.

PC: Recently it's been David Grann at *The New Yorker*, whose work I just love so much. His stories always have these twists and turns to them that, even if you think you know what the twist is, then he surprises you with some other crazy thing on the backend. And his writing is very understated, which I really like. I read a ton of people, but he's the person whose work I really study when I'm sitting down to write. I also read a lot of Lawrence Wright's old writing. When he was doing—

SC: Like his *Rolling Stone* stuff.

PC: Mhm. Yeah, which is a lot shorter. But I just love his writing. It just totally depends on the story. I love Katherine Boo's writing a lot. But sometimes, like when I'm writing this kind of story, I'll see movies or read articles that are sort of in that vein. Maybe the writing isn't my style, but I like immersing myself in the subject or, you know, "How did someone make that into a narrative?" Film is always helpful to watch, too.

I read a lot of *The New Yorker*. The two magazines I read the most are *The New Yorker* and *New York* magazine. *The New Yorker* I read and I study, and *New York* I just—my husband and I fight over that magazine. We just love that magazine.

We can do about two more questions.

USING DIRECT QUOTES

SC: You waited to almost halfway through the second part to have a quote from Michael himself—like Michael today. And I was wondering why you decided to—maybe you already kind of answered this, because, you know, who he was in '86 is a lot different than who he is now.

PC: I hadn't thought it out that way, but I think part of that is why I did that.

When I wrote the Anthony Graves story, he gave me so much information, and I originally wrote it with lots and lots of quotes from him and lots of his perspective in things, and it didn't work. Like, it was so obvious from the outset who the story was aligned with, and it wasn't based in facts. It was based in his perception of things. He narrated how terrible things were. There were even things he told me that were fascinating but I left out. It was just too much about...some of the things that the cops said to him when they were bullying him early on that I have no doubt happened after I've met all of the characters involved. But at first glance, we're like, "Do police officers say things like that?" And in fact they do. But it was sort of like too much too soon. You know, like, "I was innocent, and I couldn't believe they were asking me this."

I think these sorts of narratives work better if you're hiding the ball a little bit. (It's named "The Innocent Man," so we weren't hiding the ball too much.) But introducing him through the facts of the case and how other people saw him and sort of shifting perspectives with how people saw Michael I thought just worked narratively better to engage you and have you strangely empathize with him more if you're not saying at the outset everything he's feeling and thinking. But I also knew I had to have his voice in the piece for when he's released. And so I was really wrestling with, "Well how do I just suddenly introduce this voice or a quote?" And his whole description of the religious experience he had, I wrote it a bunch of times in my own words, and it just didn't work. It was, you know, "*He saw a bright light...*" I mean, it just sounded so dumb. So I had written a story probably about 10 years ago where the main moment in the story was entirely narrated by one person from his perspective, and it was a freestanding section. It was about this town in west Texas where 46 people went in on lottery tickets, and they won a huge amount of money. And so this

awful little town in the middle of nowhere was suddenly full of millionaires. And the story of how they had won, I just had this one guy say it. He just had this great, colloquial way of speaking, and it just worked better. You could hear his excitement instead of me being like, *“And then, they sat there and they looked at the numbers and they all—”* It just didn’t work.

So Michael had delivered a speech to his parents’ church about this moment he had. And so between that and talking about it and me writing about it, I sort of cobbled that section together from—

SC: Oh really?

PC: It’s not a continuous quote. --Cobbled together things we had said about it, and we worked on it together and crafted it. Again, with newspaper writing, you couldn’t do that. But it was all his words. The speech he’d given to his parents’ church was probably half an hour long, so we worked on that and got it to a place where it felt, you know, organic, and from then on out I felt comfortable quoting him. But that seemed like the moment—it’s the lowest moment of the story, and you’ve heard his voice in the letters.

SC: I almost feel like that was the best way to do it, because that’s his come-to-Jesus moment. That’s how he changes, and to have that just stand out, also in the story but also kind of, I guess, schematically—

PC: Well I hadn’t thought about this until we were talking about this, but that moment is sort of when he became Michael of today. That’s the guy I met—that person who had that experience. You have to use it sparingly, but I think sometimes, if someone is incredibly articulate, and if it’s a really dramatic moment, it can be really powerful to hear it in that person’s voice. And I think you can craft it a bit, with shaping and cutting.

WRITING PROCESS

SC: Sorry, one more question. What’s your writing process? I’ve heard that you hate writing.

PC: Yeah, that’s true. Did Spong tell you that?

SC: I think I read it.

PC: Poor Spong. We sit next to each other, and he has to listen to me. I’d love to hear how you all do this, because I still do not have a very healthy process. I love reporting, so I always report for too long. And then I panic, because there’s not enough time to write the story. The healthy way of writing, which seems like what a lot of the *Esquire* guys do, is you write a first draft, and it’s all over the place, and it’s a mess, and you go back however many times—three or four times—and then you show it to your editor, and then you totally rewrite it again. I’m a chiseler. I can’t do that. To me, it’s like building a house: Until you

have the foundation exactly level and exactly right, then everything's gonna fail that you put on top of it. So I spend almost all my time on the first section, and then way too much time on the second section, and then basically the rest of the story is written in a sleep-deprived panic. But with the first two sections in place, it goes very quickly for me. But I'm talking like 80 percent of my time is spent on the first section. I don't know why. And then the ends are really easy for me. The end I always know before I start writing. But the beginning is just the worst.

SC: That's interesting. I know Justin Heckert, he can't write the rest of the story until he has the first line down, and he says he'll stay up until like 2 in the morning unless inspiration strikes, and that's when he'll start writing.

PC: Yeah. And I think sometimes you have to put in those hours. It feels like you're not doing anything. Sometimes going for a run makes everything start working. I keep a Word document—I call it “leftovers”—for each story, and it's for whenever I decide something doesn't work in the story, and I take it out of the document and I put it into that document, and it's hilarious to go back and read—just so bad. You can't believe that anyone who makes a living writing could have possibly written these sentences or these paragraphs that you're reading, 'cause they're just atrocious.

A lot of times I'll be sure that a story is gonna start a certain way, and then when I actually write it, for whatever reason, it sucks, and I have to figure out why it sucks, and, “Well can I make it better? Or do I need to go in some other direction?”

[Enter John Spong, who deserves some credit here for being a great internship coordinator.]