

FIRST DRAFT

A published author compares a segment of her book to an earlier draft, discussing how – and why – she made her editing choices.



PHOTO: KATE ESHELBY

Chelsea Cain:
Grisly by design



Excerpted from
Heartsick
(Macmillan, £6.99)

The work

'Heartsick is, at its heart, a twisted love story between a cop, Archie, and a serial killer, Gretchen. It takes place two years after Archie has been kidnapped by Gretchen; she nearly kills him – and then mysteriously turns herself in. In this scene, Archie, who has been on medical leave, is examining one of the victims of a new serial killer.

I was reading the first draft to my writing group. One of the people in my group is Chuck Palahniuk who wrote *Fight Club* and he just looked at me and said, "No, no, no, no – you can't do that!" He felt that it was such a cheat to have this huge elephant in the room, to have a dead 14-year-old and to talk around that. It's horrible, a girl raped and murdered and dumped on the beach – I mean that's horrible. So it should be horrible. If it's not – well, that's more sick than actually describing the horror.

Chuck is from a school of writing called "dangerous writing." The idea behind it is to write whatever makes you feel uncomfortable, getting to that point where you, as a writer, sitting at your keyboard, can feel your cheeks grow hot, you get a little nervous and giggle to yourself and think, "I should cut that, I shouldn't write that." That's dangerous writing. That's the stage you want to get to. And I've found that to be true, not just with the violent scenes, but also with the sex scenes in my second novel, *Sweetheart*, scenes that I promised myself I would cut later, that made me think, "I don't have to leave that in, some grownup along the way – my editor, my publisher – will cut that, even if I don't." But those are the best scenes – the ones that make you mortified, the ones you don't want your grandmother to read.

In the early draft, the whole description of the girl is barely there. Then there's a conversation around her – and it never goes back to the girl. The final draft catches details like the flecks of nail polish on her hand; it humanises her, makes the horrorbleness of it that much more. It's disturbing because you see her as a murdered girl, not just as a corpse.

If you're going to write a crime scene, photos help a lot. There are a lot of great pictures of really terrifying crime scenes. And the idea is to get technical enough so that it feels like there's an authority to it: the cop is going to use phrases like *livor mortis*, but, at the same time, you don't want to just sound like a medical examiner's report. So it's finding the right mix of language to project the authority without sounding overly technical. That means creating the picture, the image of what you're seeing, and finding the tiny things that the reader can relate to. So for me, in this scene, it's the glitter nail polish. We don't know what *livor mortis* looks like, but we know what nail polish looks like. It's a really useful gimmick in crime writing to find really ordinary, recognisable images that can ground a very foreign, technical world. If you manage all these tiny true details, people will buy all of the stuff you make up.'

1st draft

Squatting there beside Kristy's body, Archie felt a calmness and focus that he had not experienced in two years. His head was clear. His gut relaxed. His concentration uninterrupted. It was the first time, he realized, that Gretchen Lowell had completely left his mind. He had missed this.

She had been strangled, like the others. He noted the blood at her nose and mouth, and swollen tongue, and the same horizontal mark low on the neck, indicating the use of a ligature they thought was a belt. A greenish-red coloration had started to bloom around her abdomen.

'He dumped her on the beach,' Archie theorized aloud. 'Nor in the water.'

'How do you know?'

He looked up at Susan. Her face was pale and her body stiff, but she was holding together better than he had that first time. 'She'd still be out there,' he explained. 'Corpses sink. They surface three days to a week later because of gases released in the body. It's only been two days since she disappeared.' Archie looked up and down the beach. 'No. He dumped her out here last night, while it was still raining. Early enough that the rain and tide would wash away any trace evidence he'd left on the hike.'

'Why is she like that?' Susan asked, her voice quavering for the first time just a little.

Archie looked down at the body, the twisted yellow hair, the reddened eyes, the blistered skin. All identical to the crime photographs of Lee Robinson and Dana Stamp. 'He bleaches them,' he said quietly. 'He kills them. He sexually assaults them. And he soaks them in a tub of bleach until he decides to dump them.'

He saw Susan waver, just a small adjustment in her stance, a catch. 'You haven't released that.'

Archie gave her a tired smile. 'I just did.'

'So he kills them right away,' Susan said almost to herself. 'Once anyone knows they're missing, they're already dead.'

'Uh huh.'

'What a sick fuck.'

'Uh huh.'

'If he did dump her here,' Henry said to Archie. 'He must have parked where we did. Used the same path. He couldn't have carried her from any other point.'

'Go door to door. See if anyone drove by, noticed a vehicle. Also have The Hardy Boys canvas the area for condoms. He may not have been able to resist.'

'You know how many condoms we're going to find up there in the brushes?' asked Henry dubiously.

'I can imagine,' Archie smiled. 'Send anything you find to the lab, then run the DNA through COIDUS. Maybe we'll get lucky.'

Published version

Squatting there beside Kristy's body, Archie felt absolutely lucid. His head cleared. His gut relaxed. His concentration focused. He realized that he'd actually gone a few minutes without thinking about Gretchen Lowell. He had missed this.

She had been strangled and then soaked in bleach, like the others. She lay five feet from the water's edge, on her back, head to the side, one plump arm tucked behind her torso, skin and hair coated with sand, as if she had been rolled a few feet. The other arm was delicately bent at the elbow, her curled hand resting just below her chin, chewed nails still flecked with glittery polish. That arm made her look almost human. Archie continued, taking in every detail, working his way from her head to her toes. One leg was slightly bent, the other straight, tangled in riverweed. He noted the blood at her nose and mouth, and grotesquely swollen tongue, and the same horizontal mark low on the neck, indicating the use of a ligature they thought was a belt. The underside of her neck and shoulder showed the purplish stain of livor mortis, where her blood had settled after she died. A greenish-red coloration had started to bloom around her abdomen; her mouth, nose, vagina and ears were black. The bleach had slowed down the decomposition by killing some of the bacteria that caused distension and rupture of the soft tissues, so he could still see something of Kristy in the corpse. Something recognizable in the cheek and profile. But the bleach had not deterred the bugs. Tiny insects batted at her mouth and eyes and swarmed over her genitals. Crabs scrambled through her hair. Dark jelly was all that remained of one eye socket, the skin on her forehead and cheek torn from where a bird had stood, hooking its claws in the meat for leverage. Archie looked up to see a gull standing watchfully a few feet beyond the body. It met Archie's stare and took a few impatient steps before flapping back to a safer position.

Henry cleared his throat. 'He dumped her on the beach,' he theorized, 'not in the water.'