

The First Two Pages Blog, by Wendy Hornsby

The most challenging part of writing a story, whether it's a short-story or *War and Peace*, *the Sequel*, is getting the opening just right. Editors and the reading public are a tough audience that wants immediate reading gratification. In the first few passages, if the writer doesn't dazzle the reader while setting the tone, identifying the stakes, placing the tale in time and place, and delivering some beguiling characters, then the reader will move on to something else. So, how to begin?

Over lunch in Toronto, when Ken Wishnia asked me to contribute a story to an anthology titled *Jewish Noir*, I immediately knew some aspects of the story I would write. The noir genre, whether film or literature, has certain conventions. There would be menace in the story, and a flawed protagonist who accepts the call to right an injustice created by corrupt officials. Happy ending optional. Ambiguous future implied.

I love treasure hunts, so the story I wrote for the anthology involves a mysterious treasure. And because traditional noir has tough guy protagonists and wicked babes with great gams, I wanted my tough guy to be a tough-enough woman. The time period is post-World War II, the depths of the Cold War, a time full of intrigue and uncertainty. I chose to open the story in a bucolic small town in the agricultural San Joaquin Valley because I wanted to contrast the apparent quiet of the place with the universal *sturm und drang* of that era.

To introduce the protagonist, Elena, I took pains to show that she was resourceful, in danger, and also that she had travelled a great distance to arrive at this juncture. Without revealing any of her back story, I have her get off a train, alone, at night, out in the farmland a distance from her

destination, check to make sure no one is following, and then walk through the dark toward the lights of town. As she walks, bits of information about where she has been and the peril she may be in are dropped into the narrative. It would have been easier to just let Elena lay out the issues while she was still sitting in the train, but it would have created a passive, and deadly dull, opening. (For an example of a passive opening set on a train, read the first chapter of *Go Set a Watchman*, the book rejected by Harper Lee's editor.) Instead, I dribbled the essential information into an action scene, setting the tone of the story, its locale, the time period, some danger, and introduced Elena.

So far, I've said nothing about the MacGuffin, as Hitchcock referred to the thing of value, e.g. a Maltese falcon, that everyone is trying to either keep or get their hands on, and that has brought Elena to this place. One thing the reader knows from the beginning is, whatever the MacGuffin is, if it's in Elena's possession, it has to be small. My strategy to build suspense is to keep dropping in beguiling, or maybe just intriguing, crumbs of information to lure the reader deeper into the story until the time is right for the great reveal. And when the reveal comes, it must be worth the wait or the reader will hate you. And if you hint at peril, you must deliver some.

Let's look at an early passage from "The Legacy." By this point in the story, Elena has reached town. I hope the reader has inferred that Elena has traveled from somewhere across the Pacific to get to this place because we were told that she is hungry because she hasn't eaten since breakfast on the boat before it docked in San Francisco that morning.

The tracks crossed a bridge over a broad, sluggish river and then coursed between a dirt levee and the scruffy backside of town: four blocks of railway and farm worker shacks, the decaying remnants of an old Chinatown, and a few shops, most of them shuttered for the night. The smell of food wafting through the open door of a chopsuey house nearly made her faint, she was so hungry; she hadn't eaten since breakfast on the ship before it docked in San Francisco

early that morning. Maybe, if service was fast, she could get a bowl of chowsuey, though she was already late for her meeting.

Elena took a long look around before she made her way down a steep embankment to the street below, stumbling in the near-dark over rocks and refuse and gopher holes, weighing the risk of being seen by the wrong people against the demands of an empty stomach.

In shadows beside the restaurant, she set down her case to dump gravel from her shoes and get her bearings. When the front door opened, shooting light across the broken sidewalk, out of habit she edged deeper into the dark. Two men wearing farmers' denim coveralls and chambray work shirts came outside carrying beer bottles by the neck. They picked a place to lean against the stucco wall no more than ten feet from her.

"Damn good thing Eisenhower got the nomination," she heard the closer of them say as he pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes from his pocket. "Gonna need a general in the White House if the Russkies decide to invade us like they did Korea."

"That was the Chinese that invaded Korea," the other said, accepting a cigarette. "Not the Soviets."

"Same damn thing. You ask me, a commie's a commie. All o' them need a twelve bore to the brainpan." The first man paused to flame the end of his smoke. "The Reds, you know, they're like polio. They go after the young, suck 'em right in before they know any better."

"I don't know about that," the friend said. "But the guy riding shotgun for Ike this election, this Dick Nixon fella, he's a farm boy from downstate. That can only be good for guys like us."

"Nixon looks too soft to be a farmer. But he's a commie-hating vet, just like you and me, and that gets my vote."

When the first man flicked his match to the gutter, he spotted Elena and took a step toward her.

"Hey, girlie, kinda late for you to be out all alone, ain't it?" He gave her a good looking over, from her plain black oxfords to the dowdy cotton dress she found in a bin at Refugee Relief in Singapore. "You lost, honey?"

In the first three paragraphs of this excerpt, I wanted to define the place Elena has taken some effort, at a risk, to get to. First, it is clear that she is a stranger here. If she were coming home, for example, I would have her recognize landmarks, remark perhaps on the familiar smell of the river, know street names, maybe recognize the men from the restaurant, or be able to get a meal from the back door. Instead, I leave everything anonymous, as alien to the place and its people as she is to them.

To convey a sense of menace and the stakes if Elena is found by the wrong people, she sneaks into the “scruffy backside of town: four blocks of railway and farm worker shacks, the decaying remnants of an old Chinatown...” and stays in the shadows. So far, she hasn’t spotted a tail.

In the third paragraph, a pair of locals walk on the scene. Through them, I want to define the time period. They reveal some of the issues of the day through their ordinary conversation about Russkies and Commies and that nice commie-hating veteran from downstate who’s running for vice president, Richard Nixon. The exact year, then, would be 1952, though it doesn’t matter to the story to have more than a general idea about the time frame. It’s post-World War II, the Korean War is still going on, Stalin is still the head Russky, as the men might label him. Clearly, it is an unsettled time, and that is important for the reader to know.

The last paragraph above, more of Elena’s back story is revealed. One of the men looks her over “from her plain black oxfords to the dowdy cotton dress she found in a bin at Refugee Relief in Singapore.” The key words are Refugee Relief and Singapore; clearly, Elena has had a rough time, in a far distant place. My intention when I wrote that passage was to move the scope of the story beyond the little town of Marysville, and by doing that raise the stakes for Elena. For my protagonist, this is pivotal scene. To find out why, you’ll have to read the rest of the story.



WENDY HORNSBY won the Edgar Allan Poe award for her short story, “Nine Sons.” She is the author of the Maggie MacGowen Mystery series and many short stories. According to a feature on NPR, by day Wendy is a soft-spoken, genteel Professor of History, emerita, but by night she is a purveyor of fictional murder most foul. Her most recent mystery is *The Color of Light* (Perseverance Press, 2014) “The Legacy” appears in *Jewish Noir*, edited by Kenneth Wishnia and published by PM Press.