

THE FIRST TWO-(ish) PAGES OF THE INTROVERT

by Michael Paul Michaud

I want to thank B.K. Stevens for inviting me to take part in her innovative blog series “The First Two Pages.” My entry will actually examine the first 877 words of THE INTROVERT – the entire first chapter - allowing me to analyze not only the opening of the book, but also the close of the first act. Let’s get right to it...

“Sir, I’m afraid we require a second form of identification before we can proceed. If you’d like to come back another time, perhaps?”

She was still smiling, but now the smile was waning.

The Introvert begins with a seemingly innocent exchange between a woman and a man. Neither is named, which is a hint of what’s to come, not only in the opening chapter, but throughout the novella. I wanted the focus to be on the characters’ actions and personalities, and to not influence the readers’ perceptions by foisting a name on them. It is also consistent with the sparse nature of the cover, and with isolation/anonymity generally.

I am also setting up tension in this scene, and an obstacle for the introvert, mild as it may be, and it will build from here.

I turned to look at the line behind me that snaked back to the door where I’d first been standing when I’d come in almost forty minutes ago. Then I turned back to face the clerk, but for some reason my eyes caught again on the cardboard container of Chinese noodles and the white plastic instrument peeking up over the edge, and it made me nauseous just to see it.

It is revealed here that the story will be told in the first person. The introvert has yet to speak, but the reader sees the first glimpse into his wandering thoughts and the type of minutiae that draws his concentration. I wanted to immediately convey to the reader that the protagonist was different, particularly with respect to his thought process.

“Sir?”

When I looked back up, I saw that her smile was all the way gone.

“My license expires tomorrow,” I said, looking again at the noodles.

Here we have the first glimpses of fixation. In this short scene he has already returned a second time to a) the clerk’s smile, and b) the clerk’s noodles. You still don’t know the character’s name nor do you even know what he’s there for, but I’ve conveyed to the reader that repetition/fixation/obsession will be important. What I’m building chiefly is the personality and behavior of my protagonist. This will become significant, not only in this moment, but throughout the entire first chapter and beyond.

I needed my license to drive my car legally. It wasn’t much of a car, but I still needed a valid driver’s license to drive it.

For me, this was the first indication something is a bit ‘off’ with the protagonist. It is supposed to be subtle, but noticeable. I’m attempting to demonstrate how structured he is, with an almost childlike or mechanical approach to rules and law. At the same time, we see that he doesn’t think his car is “much of a car.” This apathy towards certain objects and a general matter of fact attitude toward

people and things not only becomes a common theme through the book, but it lays the groundwork for some of the more comedic elements in the book.

“I understand that, sir, but I’m afraid we do require a second form of identification.”

I brought my eyes to her face and stared blankly at the fat sphere in front of me and noticed that the lipstick on her lips was red and the mole on her neck was brown, and though both were hideous they at least made me briefly forget about the Chinese noodles. “I have credit cards,” I said.

Third mention of the Chinese noodles. Again he is in his mind for most of that paragraph, and the reader will recognize the disproportionate time that he spends there. He has also transitioned to a new fixation: the clerk’s physical attributes.

I could hear people grumbling behind me when I said this.

“I’m afraid that isn’t sufficient, sir.”

It was the third time that she’d said she was afraid, only she didn’t seem afraid. I’d seen people afraid before and their eyes usually went wide and open and white and their mouths gaped sloppy or crooked.

This is the first time that I reveal the protagonist may be dangerous. Again it is meant to be subtle, but perceptible. He has seen people afraid before. In person? By his own doing? It’s left purposefully vague at this point. But I meant to elicit at least a “Hmm...” in the back of my reader’s mind. To plant the seed.

“I have to be at work in ten minutes.”

I wasn’t exactly sure why I said it since it didn’t seem entirely connected to what we were talking about. But then if she’d have just allowed me to renew my driver’s license then I probably wouldn’t have been worrying about being late for work, so then I thought that maybe it was a little bit connected after all, if not all the way connected.

Again I’m showing how he ruminates. This particular thought was intended to be humorous, given the circular reasoning. There’s much of this in the book, and it becomes more pervasive (and, I believe, funnier) the more familiar you become with the character.

“Sir, perhaps if you came back another time?” □

I could tell that she was trying to get rid of me.

“Why would someone who isn’t me ever want to renew my license?”

“Sir, I can’t comment on that. But we do have our regulations...” □

I could hear the sighs and the grumbles growing heavier behind me so I fished in my wallet for some other form of government identification though I knew it was hopeless even before I tried.

When I looked back up I could see the clerk staring at me and the smile was back on her face now and even enhanced in a way that it hadn’t been before, as if perhaps with more fake friendliness I might go away faster and then she could take another bite from her container with the plastic fork or move onto the next customer or both.

Again with the smile and the container of noodles. He is also now fixated on the woman's sincerity.

A man stepped up to the wicket to my right. He'd been one of the people staring at me when I'd last turned around so I was relieved that he was now being served, but then I figured there were many others still staring just as intently so I didn't feel relieved for very long.

The clerk continued to smile at me, and I thought again how she wasn't much of a clerk. It wasn't very professional to have opened food at the counter. It wasn't very nice to smile at people when you didn't really mean it. Finally, she apologized once more and slid my expiring license back toward me on the counter.

Up to this point, it all seems innocent enough - perhaps even mundane - which was meant to make the upcoming transition more stark, and therefore more powerful. I've attempted to set up a mild obstacle with rising tension/embarrassment for our protagonist while also giving insight into how he thinks, speaks, and behaves. I've dropped nuggets that he is different, but not *too* different. This changes in the very next line.

That was when I noticed the letter opener.

This is the second, stronger suggestion of violence. I left this sentence on its own so that the reader would be forced to pause and consider it before moving down to the next line. I wanted the reader's imagination turning to violent, uncomfortable thoughts, and perhaps uneasiness about what lies ahead.

It was resting in front of her, long and steel and quite clearly sharp at one end, all shiny and polished and silver. It was easily within reach, and before I knew it I was again thinking of how she was making me late for work and how the boss wouldn't like that. Then I imagined picking up the letter opener and stabbing down viciously into her plump pasty white neck and how I wanted more than anything in that moment to see her red and open.

The subtle references before have now been suddenly and immediately displaced by overt thoughts of violence. This transition and sudden contrast was meant to shock the reader, and though the reader has likely not heard the phrase "red and open" before, they will immediately recognize what it stands for, given not only the context of the paragraph, but the oddities in the introvert's language leading up to this moment. This moment also removes any doubt that the introvert is (potentially) a very dangerous man.

Red and open.

Like the letter opener line above, I dangle this on its own so the odd phrase can be better absorbed and considered.

And I thought that I'd have to thrust the opener with real force to pierce the thick layer of fat around her neck and I imagined how the blood would be gushing out red and wet and slide down over her hideous brown mole and how then she really would be afraid with her eyes opened wide in fear and her mouth twisted apart and how people would be running in fear behind me and there would be screams and gasps and commotion all around and how the clerk would be wishing she'd have just let me renew my driver's license before she succumbed to the attack only by then it would be too late.

More violence, all in his mind. A return to the eyes and the mouth and the mole. A return to fixation, which may also now include violence.

“Sir?”

It felt good to think it, but instead I just picked up my driver’s license from the counter and turned away because I knew that she didn’t deserve it.

She wasn’t much of a clerk, but she certainly didn’t deserve it.

The chapter ends in something of a cliffhanger. He does not kill the clerk - though he seemingly did in his mind - and “it felt good to think it.” I’ve illustrated how the introvert deals with obstacles/frustration, at least internally. The cliffhanger is the final sentence, leaving the reader to wonder what the introvert might do if he does, in fact, meet someone who “deserves it.” What would it take to deserve it? Is the violence all in his mind, never actually to be acted upon? Are his odes and urges to violence real or apocryphal? Is he a reliable narrator?

877 words. The first chapter.

I invite you to read on.

You *definitely* deserve it.

~MPM



An American-Canadian citizen, Michael holds a B.A. in English, Honors B.A. in Political Science (summa cum laude), and a J.D. in Law. He is employed as a Crown Prosecutor in the Greater Toronto Area.

Michael is the author of BILLY TABBS (& THE GLORIOUS DARROW) - (2014 - Bitingduckpress) and THE INTROVERT - (2016 - Black Opal Books). He is a member of Crime Writers of Canada, and International Thriller Writers Inc.

You can follow Michael on Facebook at www.facebook.com/michaelpaulmichaud and on Goodreads at <http://bit.ly/2ml5tnW>

You can purchase The Introvert here—> <http://amzn.to/2ml7oZt> and it is also on Facebook at www.facebook.com/theintrovertbook