

The First Two Pages: Separation Anxiety

By Angel Luis Colón

From *Meat City On Fire (And Other Assorted Debacles)*

One of the very first things I was taught as a writer (both creative and journalistic) is not only how important an opening is but how important it is to establish an engaging foundation for your reader. I think there's often an assumption that this means we try to catch the eye somehow—describe a location or a person in detail—but that doesn't always work, especially with short fiction.

When I sat down to write my Derringer-nominated story “Separation Anxiety,” I had two goals in mind. The first was to express a lot of the fears I had as a father and the second was to craft something that the reader felt could encompass a book without leaving them dissatisfied (which isn't necessarily the job of a short story but it's always fun to try). This means that word economy and trusting my reader to craft an image in their head without being hand-held was key. Let's take a look at the first few hundred words (which are my focus in this essay):

I'm up at five in the god damn morning. Too many pops and cracks narrate the trip from bed to my feet. Winter keeps it dark in the house, but I still close my eyes to adjust to hint of light around me.

I know she's gone before I bother to kick her bedroom door off its hinges again, before I bother to confirm that she's taken all my cash and credit cards, and before I bother to take a look out the living room window at an empty driveway.

I go into the kitchen and it's another part of the dance. On the old Frigidaire under photo magnets of a happier history she left a note:

I can't keep this up, Dad. Not in this house, not without Mom and not with you. Don't come for me again. Just let me go.

Katie doesn't bother to sign it or remind me that she loves me—she doesn't, not anymore. I take a breath and count to ten. I think about Tahiti five years ago, about tree-houses and birthday cakes. They say moving on is the best medicine, but dwelling on the past is the only way to keep the blood from boiling over and making a red-splotched mess of my face.

This is the third time she's run off—the third time she's gone back to the drugs and the streets. There's the lizard part of my brain that wants to scream and throw something at a wall, but I stick to routine.

I open the fridge and get my eggs out for breakfast.

I take my phone off its cradle and speed dial Larry.

"Hello?" he says—as awake as I am.

"Yeah, I need a ride to work today," I say with the calm of a crypt.

"When did she leave?" Larry's no slouch.

I fetch an egg from its carton and crack it into a bowl. "Probably a few hours ago. I'm pretty sure she's at that prick's place downtown high out of her mind."

"You want to go pick her up?" Larry asks. He's a good friend—my only friend.

"Nah, I ain't got any sick time left. Let her have her fun now.

We'll go down after work, if that's okay with you."

"Of course it's okay," he says, "I'll be over in a half an hour."

I hang up the phone and crack another egg.

In about 400 words I establish quite a lot in order to bring you up to speed with our protagonist's life without ever having to drill into a mountain of exposition. Look at what you know based off less than a page of writing:

1. Our protagonist is older, weary.
2. He is hip to the details and what they mean. It doesn't take him long to surmise his daughter is gone.
3. You know his daughter must have a bigger problem than we establish. This is a repeat offense.
4. We don't lose the thread that our protag cares but we can see he's almost at the end of whatever it is that's keeping him moving.

In this small space, I've laid down a base that allows me to stretch as far as I want—or really *can* stretch based on word count limits. A lot of that is down to word economy. It's okay to simply state facts. I even use common details (such as the pictures on the fridge) to immediately evoke a mental image without having to spend five paragraphs discussing every picture or magnet. You have a fridge at home and more than likely have pictures on it—you can do that work for me.

It also doesn't require adjectives or adverbs either. In fact, to me, lack of flowery prose or deep introspection helps to further establish my protag's voice and demeanor. What matters here is bringing you into the story as fast as possible so we can get to the meat together. To use the old saying: quality over quantity.

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