

The First Two Pages: “Shadow Man” by Bradley Harper

From *Deadly Southern Charm: A Lethal Ladies Mystery Anthology*

Edited by Mary Burton and Mary Miley (Wildside Press)

“Tell me a story, Grandma. I’d like one with a witch in it this time.”

Seven-year-old Tommy was bargaining with his Grandmother Buford, trying his best to hold off his bedtime. There was a monster under his bed, he was sure of it. Sometimes in the middle of the night, he heard a noise, like little claws scabbling on the smooth floor underneath. Once when half-awake, he thought he saw a claw peek out as he leaned over, but whatever it was had jerked back into darkness when he gasped. So the later he went to bed, the faster he would go to sleep and the less time there would be for the monster to get him, for it is well known that monsters who live in closets and beneath beds only feed on the waking.

He hoped that a good story would help him escape into dreamland as soon as his head hit the pillow.

“What story would that be?” asked Grandma. She sat in her creaking rocking chair, her faded black shawl around her shoulders, her wrinkled face pink and shiny from the fire. “How about Hansel and Gretel? That has a witch in it.”

Tommy’s lower lip protruding into what Grandma Buford called his “Liverwurst lip.” “*That’s* a children’s story, Grandma! I’m too old for that. Tell me a *real* story.”

Grandma spread her hands in mock surrender. “All right, Big Boy, a real story it is, but be careful what you wish for! Now go dress for bed, and I’ll tell you a true story about a robber who stole too much. It’s a family legend, and part of it happened in this very house, so I reckon it’s time you heard it.”

“In this house?” he asked, his mouth open, his lip back to its normal size. “Is there a witch in it?”

“Oh yes, Dear. A witch, a robber, magical potions, demons, and your great-great-grandfather. Now get ready, young man, before I change my mind!”

Tommy hurried up the stairs to his room, careful not to spill any wax from his candle on the carpeted staircase. Soon he was back, dressed in his red flannel nightshirt and thick woolen socks, his blue

eyes shining with excitement. “I’m ready, Grandma! Now start, please?”

Grandma smiled at his sudden outburst of good behavior. She poured herself a glass of elderberry wine from the dusty crystal decanter beside her. For her Rheumatism, of course. She studied the firelight darting through the dark liquid in her glass as she pondered how to begin.

“Long ago in the bayou there lived a highwayman ...”

“A robber, Grandma, you said a robber!” Tommy said, his lower lip peeking out once more.

“Yes, Tommy, a highwayman is a kind of robber, one who stole from travelers using his sword and pistol to make them give up their money or anything else of value when he stopped them on the road. Now, be quiet and listen, or I’ll stop right here.”

Little Tommy tucked his feet under him and held his knees tight, his eyes wide as his grandmother told her tale, the low fire casting her face in alternating shadow and light. Soon her soft voice carried him to a time before even this ancient storyteller was born.

“This highwayman was a very greedy man who took from everyone he caught. Others would not rob widows, or poor people, but this man would take the last penny from a starving child. He was hated, for he was cruel, but he was feared even more, because he was very cruel.”

“How was he cruel, Grandma?”

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“Tell me a story, Grandma. I’d like one with a witch in it this time.”

Immediately we know what to expect. A grandmother is going to tell her grandson (and us) a story. I used that intro to put the reader into a certain frame of mind, hopefully conjuring up images from their own internal library of being read/told stories when they were young. By enlisting their memories, I’m trying to fast track my story into making an emotional connection with the reader’s mind.

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He hoped that a good story would help him escape into dreamland as soon as his head hit the pillow.

As a child I went through a phase where I was terrified of the shadows in my closet or under my bed. In this paragraph I'm showing the reader what's at stake here, at least to Tommy.

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Here I'm showing Tommy's struggle. He's afraid, but he's ashamed to admit it. He's trying to face his greatest fear with the courage he imagines is required of him to become a “big boy.” This is his internal struggle. Grandma responds with a

preview of coming attractions. This will not be some fanciful fairy tale, but a bit of family lore, thus hopefully raising the tension and interest even higher.

“In this house?” he asked, his mouth open, his lip back to its normal size. “Is there a witch in it?”

“Oh yes, Dear. A witch, a robber, magical potions, demons, and your great-great-grandfather. Now get ready, young man, before I change my mind!”

If you’ve ever seen the movie *The Princess Bride*, you should recognize what I’m doing here. I’m making a promise to the reader that this story will have a lot of fireworks, so hang on! If I’ve got the reader this far, I should be able to hold onto their attention for the rest of the story, if only to see if I can back my claims.

“Grandma smiled at his sudden outburst of good behavior. She poured herself a glass of elderberry wine from the dusty crystal decanter beside her. For her Rheumatism, of course. She studied the firelight darting through the dark liquid in her glass as she pondered how to begin.

“Long ago in the bayou there lived a highwayman ...”

OK, I’ve told you what the story is about, now I’m settling you down, giving you a seat by the fire and an image of Grandma in her rocking chair with her glass of elderberry wine. I want you to hear her voice and imagine her face in the flickering shadows as the story unfolds. Here I’m stealing from the HBO series from years ago, *Amazing Stories*, with an ancient storyteller beside a fire who recites the tale. I want you to be both comfortable and spellbound, on a dangerous journey with a reliable guide.

Studies have shown that the average attention span in people today is about eight seconds. That's how long you have to get their attention and convince them to stay with your story. (A goldfish, by the way, has nine seconds.) So you have to hit the ground running. Always be economical in your writing, but those first two pages better grab your reader, or they'll slip away. Make every word count.

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Bradley Harper is a retired US Army Colonel and pathologist who has performed over two hundred autopsies and some twenty forensic investigations. A life-long fan of Sherlock Holmes, he did intensive research for this debut novel, *A Knife in the Fog*, including a trip to London's East End with noted Jack the Ripper historian Richard Jones. Harper's first novel was published in October 2018 and was a finalist for the 2019 Edgar Award by the Mystery Writers of America for Best First Novel by an American Author.