

The First Two Pages: “Crow’s Nest” by John M. Floyd

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The idea for this story came to me in strange way. It began with a single scene from a Western movie I saw long ago, *Quigley Down Under*, where an injured and stranded hero had to make a long-range, life-or-death rifle shot to stop a fleeing villain from getting away and returning with his villainous friends. Something about that tense scene stayed with me, and all these years later I decided to write a modern-day story that would include a similar kind of situation, near its end. A backward way to cook up a piece of fiction, I admit—but it’s something I wanted to do.

In crafting the story, I decided to go with two protagonists and to introduce them right away, along with an early mention of impending danger and several elements of foreshadowing. As for the lead characters, I wanted to show one of them to be male, elderly, married, rural, straight-laced, and local, and the other his total opposite: female, young, single, urban, more worldly, and an outsider. I also needed to include in the opening paragraphs a disabled vehicle with mysterious cargo in the trunk, a radio report of a nearby crime that took place earlier in the day, the mention of a shady local real-estate firm, a row of innocent-looking mailboxes mounted on a crosspiece as they sometimes are in rural areas, and a remote home on a tall hill at the end of long, straight road. All five of these things would turn out to be essential to the plot, later in the story. In addition to all that, I wanted to begin the development of a

close and platonic and playfully bickering friendship between the two protagonists and make them equal enough in importance to the reader that I could alternate between their two viewpoints throughout the story.

With all that in mind, here are the first two pages of “Crow’s Nest”:

Amos Garrett had switched off his dashboard radio, ejected Willie Nelson, and plugged in Tammy Wynette when he looked up and saw the little white car pulled over on the grassy shoulder of the road just ahead. He was surprised a bit to see an unfamiliar vehicle on this little backwoods two-lane, especially this late in the day, and surprised more than a bit by the tall brunette in sweater and jeans he saw standing there with both fists on her hips, staring down at her back right tire.

Amos pulled over as well, cut his engine, and climbed out of his pickup. Like his truck, Amos had been around awhile—he was pushing seventy-five, and happily married for almost fifty of those years—but he still appreciated an attractive young lady when he saw one. Besides, his mama hadn’t raised him to pass up a damsel in distress.

“Flat tire?” he said to her.

She gave him a sad smile. “I was told this was a shortcut. Thanks for stopping.”

“Name’s Amos Garrett.” He stuck out a hand, and she shook it.

“Wendy Lake,” she said.

Amos grinned. “You’re serious?”

“Sounds like an apartment complex, right? It gets better. Maiden name’s Wendy Valli.”

“Like Frankie Valli?”

Her eyes widened. “You remember him?”

“Sure—The Four Seasons. ‘Big Girls Don’t Cry.’”

“Well, this one did, when she got out and saw this tire.”

Amos chuckled. “It’s no problem. If you’ll pop the trunk I’ll change it for you.”

“Can’t. I don’t have a spare. My no-account brother borrowed it, a month ago.” She stayed quiet a moment, thinking, then said, “Oh well. My cell phone’s in the car, and my insurance includes roadside assistance. I’ll just call them and—”

Amos shook his head. “Not out here, you won’t. No reception.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It’s the reason my wife and me don’t own cell phones. But we got a landline, and my house is less’n five miles from here. Come on, you can call from there.”

She hesitated. “Well . . . maybe I better wait with my car.”

“I wouldn’t do that, missy. Not today.” Amos took off his hat and sighed. “Look, I mean you no harm—but there are folks around who might. I just heard on my radio that two guys named Lee Montana and Victor something—Edwards, I think—just escaped from the state pen and stole a lot of money from a real-estate outfit not far from here.”

“Real estate?”

“The Blackthorns. It’s a long story. My point is, it’s almost dark, and you don’t need to be out here alone in the middle of nowhere.”

She studied him a moment in the last rays of sunlight. “That really is a kind offer.” “It’s my pleasure.”

“Think my car’ll be all right here?”

“For a while. You can make your call and I’ll bring you back when your tire’s fixed.”

“Okay. Thanks.” She fetched her purse from the front seat, locked the car, and followed him to his truck. He got in first, mindful of his bad knee, and cleared a place for her to sit. When they were underway and had gone a few miles she said, “Is that really a cassette-tape player?”

“Yep.”

“I haven’t seen a lot of those, lately.”

“Bet you haven’t seen a lot of those either,” he said, pointing through the windshield. Just ahead was a row of half a dozen mailboxes mounted on a wooden post and a crosspiece like something out of *The Andy Griffith Show*. He braked to a stop, opened the box that said GARRETT—16 WOODWARD LANE, and took out several letters and a rolled-up magazine. He held them in his lap as they turned onto a dirt road beside the mailboxes and headed north. This road stretched arrow-straight ahead of them for at least three miles. At the very end, high on a wooded hill and tiny in the distance, stood a tall white house.

He glanced at her profile as he drove. “Wendy Lake,” he said. “I do like that name.” After a pause he added, “Like Muddy Waters.”

“Or Stormy Daniels,” she said. That made both of them laugh aloud.

Amos Garrett’s truck roared along the dusty track for several minutes in the glowing twilight before the road angled off to the right, at the foot of the hill below the white house. It circled around through the

trees, climbing steadily, and ended in a gravel driveway. Amos parked, looked up at the house, and smiled.

“Welcome to my home,” he said.

Unlike I’ve done in some of my stories, I did *not* include the piece of action sometimes called the “inciting incident”—or Plot Point 1, or “the first point-of-no-return”—in these opening pages. That happens just afterward, at Amos Garrett’s house, along with the first major plot reversal. I also didn’t attempt any early references to the mysterious title of the story; I wanted its meaning to remain hidden for a while. My purpose in these first paragraphs was to (1) introduce the players, (2) establish the setting, (3) insert a hint of conflict and peril, and (4) plant several facts in the mind of the reader that would make later events believable and satisfactory.

I hope I accomplished all that, and I hope that if you read the story, you’ll like it. It was great fun to write.

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John M. Floyd’s short fiction has appeared in *AHMM*, *EQMM*, *The Strand Magazine*, *Mississippi Noir*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and many other publications. Three of his stories have been selected for inclusion in *The Best American Mystery Stories*, five more have made *B.A.M.S.*’s “Other Distinguished Mysteries” list, and another was recently optioned for film. A former Air Force captain and IBM systems engineer, John is also a four-time Derringer Award winner, an Edgar nominee, and the 2018 recipient of the Edward D. Hoch Memorial Derringer Award for lifetime achievement. His ninth book is scheduled for release in late 2020.