

The First Two Pages of “Last Bite” by Rhoda Berlin
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An Essay by Rhoda Berlin

I learned early on how unpredictable human beings can be. Someone would repeatedly act a certain way, so I’d anticipate certain things, then BAM—surprise! A whole new aspect of this person would be revealed and mess with my head. The less I came to rely on my own expectations, the easier it was to see others more multi-dimensionally.

This was reinforced by my years as a marriage and family therapist, during which I worked with a wide range of people experiencing a wide range of situations. Many of my clients had immigration in their recent family histories, and they shared countless stories about their expectations of others—and life in general—being flipped back and forth. As a second generation Korean American, I have personal history playing cultural ping-pong.

Culture is now at the heart of my writing, so when a call went out for cozy holiday-themed mystery stories by writers of color, I was in. For our purposes, let’s consider “culture” as much more than ethnicity or nationality; it includes the roles, relationships, actions, and other conditions that shape our lives.

My goal with “Last Bite” was an allegory about something within each of our family histories, namely migration and acculturation. Migration can mean

moving from one part of the world to another, or across town. Point being, uprootedness as shared human experience is often discounted, ignored, even forgotten.

The acculturation process can take generations, and there's not just one way to get through it. "Last Bite" depicts members of an immigrant family adapting in different ways, at different speeds. In other words, some are more American than others. This cause friction. Thanksgiving, with all its built-in traditions and expectations, seemed the perfect setting for a healthy dose of interfamilial holiday intrigue built around these differences.

Since we're talking acculturation, it made sense for the story to introduce someone caught between cultures. To fit that bill, I zeroed in on a common life experience that compels us to reexamine our origins, namely the awkwardness and anxiety that comes with first introducing a significant other to our loved ones. This can be even more nerve-wracking when we know the new person doesn't fit the expected mold.

Thus, the story's narrator, Emily, and her fiancé, Isaac, were created. As the bridge between the other characters, Emily views her family through a whole new lens, namely Isaac's. This strains both her loyalties and perceptions. Writing from Emily's point of view allows readers, in turn, to see through her eyes.

With the theme and background set, it was time for another key element: every mystery story requires suspense. Keeping in mind Emily's topsy-turvy state, I scribbled a series of *what if* questions. The one that stuck was: What if Emily thinks she knows the family rules, but she really doesn't? From there the task was to show what that would look like and what could unfold. A mystery was born.

THE FIRST TWO PAGES OF "LAST BITE"

"Would you prefer to watch football?"

My father teetered uncomfortably on the sofa's edge as if he couldn't commit to actually taking a seat. Observed from behind, his rigidity was striking. And contagious. I had to remind myself to breathe. The combined scents of roasting turkey, soy sauce, and red pepper were effective aromatherapy.

Isaac sank into the sunshine yellow plastic Adirondack chair. My little sister Ann plopped into its turquoise partner.

"Relax, Daddy. He doesn't bite." She spotted me and added, "Or does he?"

I aimed a fake chomp at her.

As he walked past to the kitchen, my brother John raised his eyebrows at me as if to say, "You volunteered for this?"

Isaac kept his attention on Dad. "No, thank you, sir. The parade is fine."

"It's the same thing every year," said Dad. "She always wants the parade." He meant my mother, who'd retreated to her domain soon after Isaac and I had arrived. From my vantage point between the kitchen and great room, I knew she hadn't so much as peeped at the TV in all that time.

The initial introductions had been painful. I'd only informed my parents about us and our engagement a day earlier. They'd acquiesced to our visit because a late cancellation meant forfeiture of two airline tickets and a night's hotel stay. The prospect of such waste easily outweighed their shock and indignation.

"Did you say you like football?" Dad switched channels, wielding the remote as deftly as he handled his trusty box cutter.

“No, sir, I’m not into gladiator sports.”

“Gladiator?”

Ann leaned forward. “In ancient Rome, Dad. You know, like in that movie? Their whole purpose in life was to kill each other for the crowd’s entertainment.”

“I know gladiators. But I thought you would like them.”

Dad was over-enunciating to compensate for his immutable Korean accent, each syllable drawn out just a tad to give his brain time to formulate full sentences with proper grammar. But then, it could also have been the effects of the soju that had washed down his sour cream and onion potato chips.

Of course Dad wanted to impress Isaac. But I also knew this came from his insecurities. When we’d first arrived in the States, he’d struggled. He had faithfully attended weekly ESL classes, retraining his tongue to generate the complicated foreign sounds that made up the English language. The resulting frustration had made him brittle and argumentative.

Mom had had it easier. She’d stayed home with me, studying on her own. My six-year-old brain had picked up English quickly. My mother showed her encouragement by having me teach her, saying this would make me learn better, faster. The dictionary and television became our fast friends. While Dad was at work, Mom and I watched cartoons, sitcoms, and commercials to learn how to live like the new Americans we were. Our teamwork ceased when Dad grew angry and suspicious every time she and I discussed why Spot ran or played with newly acquired vocabulary words like ‘ignoramus’ and ‘eejit’.

Having a newcomer in the house was not a common occurrence. Thanksgiving with my family had been Isaac’s idea. Before agreeing, I prepped him as well as I could, warning that Dad was no good with either strangers or change.

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Rhoda Berlin is a second-generation Korean American who grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles during the Vietnam War era. Her thirty-year career as a marriage and family therapist included co-writing the non-fiction book *Mixed Blessings: A Guide to Multicultural and Multiethnic Relationships*. Now folding her knowledge of human nature into her writing, Rhoda recently completed her first novel, a multicultural mystery. She is a member of Crime Writers of Color, Sisters in Crime, and Mystery Writers of America.