The First Two Pages of "The Party" by Lia Matera

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An Essay by Lia Matera

My short story "The Party" is set in 1920. I chose 1920 because it was a fascinating year, rattling with aftershocks from the Great War and the Spanish Flu. It was Dickens' now-proverbial best of times and worst of times, as the young threw off a stifling mantle of Victorian values and the rich clutched at receding coattails of the Gilded Age. It saw a renaissance of music, art, architecture, motion pictures, and it also saw discharged soldiers clashing with the women, immigrants, and minorities who'd taken their jobs, previously open only to white men. My characters would not be dancing with flappers or rioting with mobs, but they couldn't fail to be changed by society's new possibilities or the "sedition" politicians found in meeting places and newspapers, tenants' associations and labor unions.

To my mind, it didn't make sense to set "The Party" in 1920 only to have an occasional character mention it in passing. I wanted it to be as much a part of the setting as the country house where the story takes place. I wanted to show the tensions of the era reaching into the genteel parlor to bedevil my protagonist, a Chicago marshal who appeared in my novella "Champawat" (*Ellery Queen*

Mystery Magazine, Sept/Oct 2012). I decided to introduce this in the very first paragraph, as I introduced the character:

> Killy felt a tap on his arm and turned, trying to wipe vexation from his face. He'd had his fill, and more, of politicians' glib notions and swaggering certitude. The Great War had made generals of them all, determined to crush dissent to "insure the fruits of peace." They saw mild heterodoxy as sedition in the bud, street violence as tendrils of the Bolshevik Revolution. Adding to his chagrin, they kept quoting his oldest friend, once like a brother, as if to please him.

I also wanted to give an immediate sense of the marshal's surroundings, a lavish event for potential Democratic presidential candidates. To contrast his mood, I highlighted the gracious ease of a mansion where political strings got pulled and deals made. I began with a quick sketch of the hostess, in her expensive but outmoded attire. I continued with a few sentences describing her drawing room, based on my research of what was fashionable in stately manors:

> He watched Jeanette Duran take a backward step, her gloved hand flying to the Dutch lace and seed pearls of her bodice. He bowed slightly, redoubling the effort to iron his brow.
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> His hostess had backed herself into a table that would shame a museum, with samovars from the household of Peter the Great, Favrile punch bowls, cameo glass decanters, Meriden goblets. A vast mirror behind it reflected several men from the shoulders up, the gilt frame angled to reflect a *quadratura* on the high ceiling. Dimpled cherubs, lit by golden rays through clouds in a turquoise sky, seemed to reach for French doors that opened onto a veranda the size of a ballroom. Most of the guests were out there now, fanning themselves in the heat of a summer still clawing the air in mid-autumn. Maids in uniform poured water and champagne, placed and replaced silver trays of appetizers at tables set for an al fresco dinner. Screens from porch rails to roof held back a determined curtain of mosquitoes.

> "Forgive me, Jeanette," Killy said, feeling his face grow hotter, something he didn't think possible in this air like boiled molasses.
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> That morning, he'd left an oven of city streets, glad to flee the stink of auto exhaust and steaming tenements. He'd hoped the countryside would offer respite, but he'd stepped off the train into a miasma of blown flowers and decayed greenery. In what his Irish father used to call St. Martin's summer, rural Virginia, like nearby Washington, remembered it had once been swampland.

Then, trying for a flavor of the party beyond its physical trappings, I took a look at its modish company, including famous politicians, with a smattering of conversation:

> "Not at all, Marshal. You have so much on your minds, all you gentlemen." She waved vaguely around the room. A few voices punched through the murmur of diffident aides and assistants: Ohio Governor Cox's staccato, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt's booming laugh, former Treasury Secretary McAdoo's description of pogo sticks. "Ever seen them? Infernal devices. Turned my brood into kangaroos." He was the President's son-in-law, so people listened when he talked about his children. Killy's man, Attorney General Alexander Mitchell Palmer — Mitchell to his friends — was sitting outside with his new protégé. That was the reason Killy remained in this sweatbox of a parlor.

I set up these broad strokes of setting—what the room looked like and who was in it—as a prelude to a glimpse of life outside its bubble of cheerful wealth and apparent camaraderie. For a marshal from Chicago, where politics played out on rough and rowdy streets, the dissonance would be pivotal later in the story. For that reason, I didn't want to delay showing the real-world stakes of decisions made in the halls (and parlors) of power. I closed my first two pages by moving from the immediate setting to the larger picture:

"Mr. Gray, my dear butler, you know, says there is a telephone call for you. Long distance. I had him tell the operator to keep your party on the line, and I came straight in to fetch you. In case…" She would not expect Killy, an unmarried man without siblings or living parents, to dread news of a death in the family. Her worry, he knew, was about his city, that it might explode into another race riot. It had taken almost two weeks for his marshals, city police, county sheriffs, state militia and national guard to quell the last. It had left 40 dead, 600 injured, and nearly 2000 homes and businesses torched. And every week since the tumult of the so-called Red Summer, there had been more bombings, more beatings, more shootings.

With worried glances at him over the spray of flowers on her shoulder, Jeanette led him to the telephone. It had a place of honor in her entryway, on a gilded table beside a staircase broad enough for a horse parade. Its white marble caught the colors of a two-story Tiffany window.

The voice in the earpiece was all too familiar to Killy. It was down low, the way it got when the boys were in the gun locker on their way to something big.

"Boss, it's Connell. We got a problem."

"Are you at home?" Meaning their offices in the Courts Building.

"Yes." Connell spoke louder now, remembering this was long distance. "Armed fools out in force, breaking windows, setting fires in Russian and Polish neighborhoods. Drunks driving through trying to shoot people on the street, but nobody hit yet. A lot of shouting — down with Reds and Bolshies, you know the kind of thing. Groups piling into cars, on their way to Little Italy, 'deport the Anarchists' and so on. Waving newspapers open to that speech of the Attorney General's." There was a pause Killy interpreted as reluctance, which wasn't like Connell. "You're there with the Attorney General tonight? Old friend of yours? You think maybe if you ask him to get on the radio? A few of these guys have crystal sets and maybe if he told them to—"

"No," Killy cut in.

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Lia Matera is the author of twelve crime novels in two series, one featuring politically conflicted lawyer Willa Jansson and the other, high-profile litigator

Laura Di Palma. Matera has also published twelve short stories and a novella. She is a graduate of Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. Two of her novels—*A Radical Departure* and *Prior Convictions*—were nominated for the mystery genre's top prize, the Edgar Allan Poe Award. "Dead Drunk," first printed in Scott Turow's Guilty as Charged, won the Private Eye Writers of America Shamus Award for Best Short Story of 1996. Her story "Snow Job," in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* (Jan/Feb 2019), was nominated for a 2020 International Thriller Award.