

The First Two Pages: “Backstory” by Charles John Harper

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An Essay by Charles John Harper

Simply put, the first sentence of a story is critical. It’s the gateway into your story, and a writer’s job is to make that gateway as inviting as possible. So inviting that the reader cannot help but be drawn in, compelled to discover what lies beyond its threshold.

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula for writing a strong opening. It really depends on what kind of story you are writing. For a novel, you may be able to take your time setting the scene or establishing a voice. But in a short story with limited space, you need to start strong, preferably in the middle of some sort of action, while laying the foundation in that single sentence for as many elements of storytelling as possible.

To do that, at minimum you need to know what kind of story you want to tell and what kind of mood you want to establish.

The inspiration for “Backstory” came from an open call for short stories from the Mystery Writers of America for an anthology entitled *When a Stranger Comes to Town*. The premise was just as the title implies: what happens when a stranger shows up unannounced?

That simple question resonated with me because my family has owned a cabin on a lake in Minnesota for over fifty years. It sits within a remote compound with three other cabins—all owned by relatives—bounded on both sides by thick woods. It is accessed from the highway a half mile away by a single-lane gravel road that comes to a dead end behind our cabin.

Usually whoever drives into our compound is a relative. But because our gravel road resembles many others along the lake, strangers have been known to drive down our lane by accident. I have been at our cabin many times—alone, at night, with no one else around—when mysterious headlights have pulled in. Typically, the stranger will roll to a stop, then sit there for a moment with their lights on, trying to figure out where they are. Meanwhile, I will be peeking out a window with the hair standing up on the back of my neck, trying to determine if they are friend or foe. To date, any rogue vehicles have either turned around and left or were relatives arriving late.

But what if—always the first three words present at the birth of a story—it was a stranger who had driven down that road and it was no mistake?

That's what inspired the first line of "Backstory":

I watched from the kitchen window at the back of the cabin as a pair of headlights crept down the gravel road and turned in behind my Maserati.

What I like about that sentence is that it checks off several storytelling boxes at once:

- *Setting*: a cabin implies a remote place.
- *Time of day*: night because all the narrator sees are headlights.
- *Mood*: “crept” implies something predatory.
- *Action*: someone is doing something that has captured the narrator’s attention.
- *Point of view*: first person narration, implying a more intimate experience.
- *Character*: he just had to mention the Maserati, didn’t he?
- *Intrigue*: who has driven in and what do they want?

With those fundamental elements of storytelling established in the first sentence, I wanted to continue developing the character of the narrator by demonstrating his arrogance and showing his anxiety at the stranger’s arrival.

To try to convince himself that everything is going to be okay—his form of nervous laughter—the narrator begins to frantically rehash just how special he is as a celebrity author, implying that he doesn’t believe that bad things can happen to important people. He goes into great detail about who he is, where he’s from, why he’s so successful—he name-drops his hugely popular YA series and movie franchise, *The Adventures of Tommy Lockhart*, seven times in three paragraphs!—

and why a stranger showing up is nothing to worry about. Probably just an annoying fan, which the reader can already guess is not going to be the case.

But there was also another reason I wanted to drop in more backstory than usual—seven paragraphs of it—so early in the story. It served, along with several subsequent flashback scenes, as a red herring to disguise the true meaning of the name of the story, which pops up near the end.

Finally, since a key theme in the story is memory and its fluidity, I wanted to establish some of the narrator's memories as a baseline for the questions that arise later on: How accurate are our memories? Can two people have different memories from the same event? If so, whose memories will history reflect?

I will admit that most of that rationale was not there in the first draft. The theme of memory showed up in subsequent drafts once I had begun to understand what was percolating beneath the surface of that first sentence and the initial scenes that followed. But that's what makes writing fiction so much fun. Not just telling a story but discovering what that story is telling you.

The First Two Pages of “Backstory”

I watched from the kitchen window at the back of the cabin as a pair of headlights crept down the gravel road and turned in behind my Maserati. The backyard light was on, but the vehicle—a pickup truck, based on the height of its headlights—sat on the periphery of the floodlight's reach. With its passenger side facing me and its cab dark,

the pickup idled in the cool autumn darkness like a sullen, steaming shadow.

I wasn't expecting any guests. And despite being famous, no one knew I was here. Not even my agent.

The week before on my author Facebook page I had added two updates. First, that my legions of fans could expect a new *Tommy Lockhart* release in December. Tommy Lockhart being my alter ego and the teenage sleuth—along with his trusty bowie knife and his intrepid friend, Curt Summers—in my best-selling YA mystery series, *The Adventures of Tommy Lockhart*.

And second, that I, Thomas Abbott, having wrapped up my October media blitz for my cleverly-titled memoir, *The Autobiography of Tommy Lockhart*, was taking time off at an undisclosed location. Truly undisclosed because this time I had offered no hints as to the city, state, or even country. Nothing to indicate that I was at our secluded family cabin in Minnesota, a place I hadn't visited in over forty years.

The last time was in 1978, the summer before my sophomore year in high school. I hadn't intended to stay away that long, but summer jobs and four years at the University of Kansas had kept me busy after that. And once the Tommy Lockhart series had taken off and drawn me to L.A.—where I helped produce several Tommy Lockhart movies and the Tommy Lockhart TV series, all while writing a book a year—there just hadn't been any time for going home again.

But in that time, my mother and father had both fallen ill and passed away. And then, a year ago, just shy of her 60th birthday, cancer had taken my only sibling, my sister, Jan. I hadn't been there for any of them during that time and my father had cut me out of his will for being what he called, “an absentee son.” As punishment—in his mind, anyway—he'd left everything to Jan, including the family cabin.

Jan had always been thrilled by my success and had done her best to defend my absenteeism to my parents. But then, over the last two years of her life, she had stopped speaking to me. I never found out why, but in her will she had bequeathed the cabin to me, leaving me to wonder if she had done it out of a forgiving kindness or an unforgiving spite.

So the cabin and the thick woods surrounding it were all I had left of my family. Of my old life. That and the memories. Memories

of childhood adventures on the water and in the woods that had inspired me to create Tommy Lockhart, all-American boy.

But I still hadn't decided if I would keep the old place. Not long before the mysterious pickup had driven in, I had been considering my options—with the help, of course, of a bottle of Chateau Lafite Rothschild and a cloudy wine glass I had found in a musty cupboard. As cabins go, the place needed work—a teardown, really—and I could certainly do much, much better. But the gauzy memories that kept flooding back to me made me think twice. Something I had never really done before.

I kept my eyes on the pickup. The cab was dark, so I couldn't see who was driving or if the driver had company, but the headlights stayed on, as if he might be thinking that he'd driven down the wrong gravel road. I held my breath, hoping that the truck would back away from the Maserati and drive off in the direction it had come.

But then the engine switched off, the simmering exhaust vanished, and the headlights went dark.

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Charles John Harper is an attorney and an Edgar Allan Poe Award nominee who has had several short stories published in both *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. In 2023, "Backstory," which appeared in *AHMM*, was nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story by the Mystery Writers of America. Prior to that, his story, "Lovers and Thieves," was selected by John Sandford for *The Best American Mystery Stories 2017*. A review of that anthology in *Publishers Weekly* declared that "Charles John Harper's hard-boiled yarn, 'Lovers and Thieves,' will make fans of the subgenre hope that its PI lead, Darrow Nash, will walk the mean streets of L.A. again." He lives in Minneapolis with his wife, Dana.