

**The First Two Pages: “Lady with a Fan” by Avram Lavinsky**  
From *Friend of the Devil: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the Grateful Dead*, edited by Josh Pachter (Down and Out Books)

An Essay by Avram Lavinsky

So many openings explored in *The First Two Pages* seem effortless and yet deliberate, as if the author’s subconscious carried some germ of a design, a powerful armature of the completed work. Maybe for some stories, it’s true.

“Lady with a Fan” is not that kind of story. The opening is the product of a great amount of trial and error as well as a great amount of input from the editor, Josh Pachter.

Early on, I sent Josh a draft sequencing the story as a tale told backwards, but the format felt forced to him, so I gladly moved on from it.

In a later revision, the opening scene depicted a minor character apparently destroying the story’s MacGuffin, the portrait *Lady with a Fan* by Gustav Klimt. When Josh cut the scene, I emailed him to respectfully ask if we could restore an abbreviated version of it.

Avram Lavinsky  
September 30, 2023, 3:52 PM

In the attached document, I propose some very minor line edits and one moderate additive change. I would like to reinsert a version of the opening scene trimmed down to 250 words. My very subjective justifications for this request are:

- It provides a much stronger opening line.
- It raises questions, hopefully hooking the reader.
- It rapidly establishes subgenre and setting.

- It contains three Easter eggs from the song lyrics.
- It establishes an element of surprise, a twist, by implying, without authorial confirmation, that Klimt's *Lady with a Fan* has been destroyed.

Josh Pachter

October 10, 2023, 8:13 AM

We continue to disagree about your opening scene. I've considered your reasoning, and in another context, I might agree with you. In the context of the book I'm editing, however, the scene simply doesn't work: it makes De La Cour out to be an important character in the story, and he isn't. His appearance later in the story makes sense, but opening with him is, in my opinion, a mistake.

One key phrase is *in the context of the book*. Short story beginnings are usually more than just beginnings. They are middles or endings too, in the context of a magazine, a collection, or an anthology. In fact, this story ended up being the final story in *Friend of the Devil*.

In this case, there is another context as well. The story must share emotional truth with the song that inspired it. "Lady with a Fan," part of the Grateful Dead's suite of compositions known as "Terrapin Station," is a transcendent piece of music. Its mood is subdued and hypnotic. Not exactly a song that inspires a grab-them-by-the-throat opening.

Having cut the scene with the art dealer, we are left with the following opening scene, which takes place at closing time in a Paris night club.

It had been a relatively slow night at Amethyst. The music and colored lights went off at four in the morning. The fluorescent lights

came on. One bouncer unlocked the main entrance for the last of the stragglers, then locked up again behind them, while the other checked that the bathrooms were empty.

Her feet sore, her energy drained, Safia finished wiping down the last of the tables and flipping over the chairs for the cleaning crew.

The opening paragraphs have enough detail to set the scene and, hopefully, capture the reader's interest.

With some more scene-setting detail mixed in, we learn, over the next four short paragraphs, that Safia is an escort. (Yes, a bit of a casting cliché, but she's not without agency, and later we introduce a strong female antagonist to round things out.) We then meet her boyfriend, Tomi, who is mysterious to the other employees at the bar and, hopefully, to the reader as well.

Antoine was balancing the register, while behind him Chloé the barback scrubbed down the ice well and the metal speed rack. "That investment banker, Lambert." He looked over his shoulder at Safia. "He sure is into you. For a while there, he wouldn't take no for an answer."

On the other side of the bar, Delphine stared into her phone's calculator app, determining the splits on the pool of server tips. "Our cruel Safia, stealing half an old man's heart."

Antoine slipped a rubber band over a stack of bills. "Not sure he has much to steal. She could have taken half his wallet, though. He was up to eighteen hundred euros by the time I had him tossed."

"Business is business," said Delphine, frowning at her phone. "Love is love. She has a love date tonight."

"We finally get to meet the mysterious Tomi, then," said Antoine.

Delphine slid a small stack of bills toward Safia, mostly ones and fives.

Safia pocketed the money. "Never."

Delphine stared at the entrance. "Well, now. I can see why."

Masked by reflections, haloed by a streetlamp, Tomi's perfectly proportioned form filled the frame of the glass door.

In keeping with Josh's structural vision of the story, we have established our two main characters quickly and yet with a more reserved pace consistent with the song.

Seeing him, Safia's spirits lifted, and a surge of energy erased her weariness. She trotted to the door and unlocked it.

Slipping out into the predawn air was like slipping into another universe. She flew to Tomi and placed her hands against his chest. His arms encircled her, and his laugh vibrated beneath her palms. She ached to kiss him but not with the others watching through the door. She took his hand and pulled him toward the Rue de Belleville and her apartment in Ménilmontant.

He asked her how work had been, and she surprised herself by her need to tell him about it. She said nothing of Lambert, the investment banker, but the bussers had been so slow and the businessmen so rude. She found herself cursing and gesturing wildly. Then turning to Tomi, she saw nothing, only her own shadow. He'd vanished.

"Up here."

She looked up.

Tomi sat on one of the limbs of a branching streetlight, an ancient iron structure four meters high, with three hexagonal lamps that cast his fair skin in a tangerine hue. He kicked his legs as a toddler might in a chair sized for a grownup.

Like a trapeze artist, he stood, folded, and swung down, hanging for an instant, then dropping to the pavement in perfect balance.

Also in keeping with Josh's editorial input, by focusing on our main characters, we establish early that Tomi is no ordinary boyfriend. He resembles a superhero as did the real-life art thief he's patterned after, Vjerman Tomic, whom the French press nicknamed the Spider Man.

She leaned a shoulder into him as they walked. “Where did you learn to climb like that?”

He placed an arm gently around her waist, and they ambled past shops with their security gates rolled down, the windows on their upper levels dark. “All kids climb, but I got serious about it right here in Père Lachaise.”

“The cemetery?”

“When I was thirteen, we spent most of our time there. We started competitions, balancing on the tombstones, jumping from one stone to another.”

“I think I know who won.”

“Always. We turned the place into a parkour playground. We climbed statues. We did tricks on the roofs of the mausoleums. I used to land flips jumping from one burial vault to another.”

“Didn’t it bother you, knowing what was at your feet?”

“Not really. I didn’t see it as disrespectful. Sometimes I’d read the epitaphs. There was one; it was in Italian, a painter, if I remember: *Morte lo colse quando giunse alla gloria*. ‘Death overtook him when he came to glory.’ I remember thinking, *Yeah, that’s what it’s about. That’s all that matters. Taking your one chance to do one thing, something truly special.*”

Here again, though the words are mine, the shape of the story reflects Josh’s input. At the end of the second page, though we have yet to reveal the central crime, we are able to introduce some theme in the form of Tomi’s philosophy, which we soon learn does not align with Safia’s.

Although I’m quite proud of the story in this final form, leaning on an editor’s guidance to this extent requires some caveats. Most editors would have simply rejected my first drafts of “Lady with a Fan” and selected someone else from the pool of authors thrilled to fill the vacant slot in the anthology. Although I submitted very early, months ahead of deadline, every author races against two

clocks. The deadline is one, and the editor's bandwidth is another. Josh Pachter is a highly respected author and a preeminent editor constantly juggling multiple projects. His patience may be nearly infinite, but his available time is not.

Thankfully, Josh saw enough promise in the story to work with me over several revisions. It's my sincere hope that you enjoy the result of our shared vision.

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A recovering musician with one gold record on his living room wall and countless unsold records in his attic, Avram Lavinsky has been shortlisted for awards including the Brooklyn Non-Fiction Prize and the Al Blanchard Award for New England's best crime story. His recent publishing credits include *Best New England Crime Stories 2022* and *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year 2023*. He's also earned starred reviews from the nation's toughest critics, his three teenage sons, although not often.