

The First Two Pages: “Dixie Quickies”

By Michael Bracken

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The twelve-room Dixie Motel, sandwiched between the Dew Drop Inn and the Rodeo Bar and Grill on the outskirts of Chicken Junction, Texas, did most of its business on Friday and Saturday nights, when inebriated couples were willing to spend as much for a one-hour room rental as they would spend for an entire night the rest of the week. Weekend encounters at the motel were known locally as Dixie Quickies, and Mr. and Mrs. Smith were the most frequent motel guests, occasionally occupying all twelve rooms at the same time. Even Carlos Rodriguez checked-in as Mr. Smith, but the bottle-blond who checked in with him as Mrs. Smith left behind no clue to her identity other than the cherry-red lipstick imprint of her kiss on the deceased’s forehead.

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott wrote, “Very few writers know what they are doing until they have done it.” She accurately describes my process, and the first paragraph of “Dixie Quickies” (*Black Cat Mystery Magazine* #1), quoted above, demonstrates that quite clearly.

I was driving through Central Texas one afternoon, saw a run-down motel next to a honky-tonk, and wondered how any motel guest could possibly sleep through the noise. A few minutes later, I realized they couldn’t. When I then imagined one of the motel rooms containing a dead body, I pulled off the road and thumb-typed the opening paragraph of the story into my cell phone. That paragraph was published exactly as thumb-typed that day because, in only three sentences, it establishes the setting, shows how it has become unbalanced, and sets the hook:

Who is Carlos Rodriguez, how did he die, why did he die, and what role, if any, did the mysterious Mrs. Smith have in his death?

The following three paragraphs further establish the setting and introduce the point-of-view character (Maria de Jesus) and the protagonist (Tiny Campella):

Guests paid cash at the Dixie Motel, and only the first rental of the evening for each room was recorded in the official ledger. The owner kept a second set of books to track the additional income, and both the night clerk and the overnight weekend maids were paid in cash. Two maids, both wearing pink-and-white uniforms and neither with green cards, quickly changed the sheets, towels, and other necessities each time a guest checked out. They wore latex gloves to protect themselves from whatever diseases might be lurking in the effluent of the motel's guests.

Maria de Jesus, the younger of the maids, had seen dead bodies before, so she did not scream when she found Rodriguez, and she did not leave her fingerprints on the dead man's black snakeskin wallet when she emptied it of three twenties and a pair of singles before pulling the door closed and walking to the office. She drew Tiny Campella's attention away from the tattered paperback he was reading and said, "Mr. Tiny? Mr. Smith in Room 12, he is dead."

Like most men named Tiny, Campella was anything but. A high school and junior college defensive tackle long past his prime and recently retired after twenty years of government service, he carried even more weight on his six-foot-four-inch frame than he had back then, and when he stood his low-heeled ropers added another inch to his height. With all his weight stuffed into a pink T-shirt with the motel's logo printed on the back, he resembled a walking billboard for Pepto-Bismol. As he stuffed the paperback in the left rear pocket of his jeans, he said, "That ain't good."

Maria's status as an undocumented worker, her experience with dead bodies, and her lack of compunction about stealing from the dead foreshadow later events that drive the plot. Tiny Campella is also part of the underground economy, though

for different reasons than Maria, and his background is deceptively traditional and middle class. High school, junior college, and government service precede his taking a low-key job that allows him to enjoy his favorite pastime.

These three paragraphs and those that follow also establish the relationship between Maria and Campella. She presents him with problems; he addresses them.

The motel consisted of two buildings separated by an asphalt parking lot. One building housed the office and guest rooms one through six while the other housed the laundry and guest rooms seven through twelve. Even though the motel parking lot was rarely full on Friday and Saturday night because most of the guests walked over from one of the adjacent nightclubs, employees parked on the hardpan beyond the buildings, leaving the paved lot for the guests who did drive.

Maria's white running shoes squeaked ahead of him as Campella followed her past the four cars on the lot back to Room 12. She opened the door, showed him the body, and said, "His name is Carlos Rodriguez."

Campella looked down at the diminutive maid. "You know him?"

Maria shrugged, not willing to admit she'd cleaned out the dead man's wallet.

The following paragraph reintroduces the recently deceased, establishing—through a detailed description of his apparel—that Rodriguez began the evening prepared for a good time, not for his last evening on Earth.

Like any good cowboy, Rodriguez had died with his boots on. He was, in fact, fully dressed for an evening out in a white three-point-yoke snap-button western shirt, dark-wash denim jeans held in place by a wide black leather belt with large oval silver buckle, and black high-heeled, needle-pointed cowboy boots embellished with a snakeskin pattern and silver boot tips. He had shaved earlier that day, his finger-length black hair had been slicked back, and his strong

hands displayed evidence of a recent manicure. Rodriguez appeared as if he had sat on the side of the bed, died, and fallen backward. There was no indication that anything untoward had happened in the room, and a quick once-over revealed no obvious trauma to the dead man's body.

Though many readers might not notice its absence, a Texan will wonder why an important piece of the dead man's apparel is missing from this description.

Additionally, the lack of obvious trauma to the body leaves doubt about whether Rodriguez died of natural causes or if the mysterious Mrs. Smith mentioned in the first paragraph had something to do with his death.

The following paragraphs establish the true nature of Campella's position at the Dixie Motel, and he demonstrates his ability to make a problem disappear.

Campella had been hired as nightshift clerk to keep trouble away from the motel, and more than once his size had been sufficient to do just that. Size alone would not resolve the current problem, so he stepped outside, grabbed a pair of latex gloves from Maria's housekeeping cart, and pulled them on. Then he rolled the dead man in the bedspread, hoisted the body over his shoulder, and carried it to the door. "Anyone out there?"

Maria poked out her head and scanned the parking lot. "No, Mr. Tiny. Nobody."

"Rosanna?" he asked, wanting to know the location of Rosanna Cuellar, the other weekend night maid.

"In Room 4."

Campella handed Maria his car keys, carried the body around the building to where his aging Ford LTD was parked alongside the maids' two vehicles, and waited as she opened the trunk. He dumped the body inside, closed the trunk, and took his keys from the younger woman.

After removing the dead body, Maria and Campella return to their respective

duties, but there's one last twist in this scene. Having already established that Maria would steal from a dead man, her taking his Stetson—the one piece of apparel missing from the detailed description of the deceased's apparel—is not out of character, though her reasoning appears altruistic.

While Campella returned to the motel's office, Maria returned to Room 12 and stripped the bed. She replaced the sheets, even though they had not been used, and replaced the spread. While doing so, she found, in the darkness on the far side of the room, a white shantung straw Stetson sporting a rattlesnake skin hatband and an eagle feather. Valuable items found in the rooms were tossed in the lost-and-found box, but she knew the Stetson's owner would not be returning for his hat, and she knew a young man living down the street from her who had lost his during the trip up from Mexico a few weeks earlier. So, she stuck the Stetson on her housekeeping cart to take home at the end of her shift.

Less than thirty minutes after Maria discovered the body, a new couple who also registered as Mr. and Mrs. Smith occupied Room 12, and Maria changed the room's sheets three more times before sunrise.

At the end of the opening scene of "Dixie Quickies," equilibrium has returned to the Dixie Motel—but there's a dead body in the trunk of Campella's LTD, Maria has plans to give the dead man's Stetson to a fellow undocumented immigrant, and we realize the stakes have been raised for both of these characters.

And we still have no answers to the questions raised by the hook set in the first paragraph.

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