

## **The First Two Pages: “Mud Season”**

By Su Kopil, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*

Suspense, character, and setting. These are the three essential ingredients that I try to pour into the first two pages of my mysteries. Suspense to hook a reader. Character to draw them in deeper. And setting to immerse them in the fictional world.

My story “Mud Season” is built upon the relationship between two elderly sisters, Masie and Emmaline Finch, and the mystery that surrounds them. The setting is a run-down B&B in Londonderry, Vermont.

Every year on the anniversary of their parents’ death, Masie Finch and Emmaline left town. It didn’t matter where they went or what they did for those three days. Not to Masie, anyway. She just wanted away from the gossip. As the years went on, the speculation dwindled, finally sputtering out altogether around the tenth anniversary. But by that time, the annual trip had become a habit.

The opening paragraph produces a question in the reader’s mind. Why do the sisters leave town every year on the anniversary of their parents’ death? It’s the spark that made me want to write the story in the first place. Two siblings who lost both their parents at such a young age. What happened to cause a town to gossip to the extent that the sisters felt compelled to escape each year? It’s the question that drives the story. A promise to the reader that must be answered by the end.

The second paragraph gives us insight into the sisters' relationship. It defines their differences and shows the reader how they relate to one another.

Although Emmaline eventually married and buried three husbands, it was clear to Masie that her younger sister couldn't manage the intricacies of life without her. Simply put, Emmaline needed to be taken care of, something Masie had been doing since before they were teenagers. She sometimes wished she could live in her sister's version of reality, but Masie's feet were firmly planted in the ground.

By having Emmaline, the younger sister, marry and bury three husbands, I hope to show that she isn't capable of being alone. Something her sister Masie understands. And something I hope the readers can relate to. Enough so that they will want to know why Emmaline can't take care of herself. And why Masie feels responsible for her sister even at this stage of life.

The story's question is important to keep readers reading. Character relationships are there to create empathy and an emotional connection.

By the third paragraph the sisters have arrived at their destination, and the setting begins to come to life always with an eye for creating atmosphere. In this case, the run-down conditions of a B & B on what's supposed to be a maple sugar farm.

"Emmaline, are you sure this is the right address?" Masie hesitated in front of the two and a half story colonial farmhouse. The warped clapboard siding had a yellowish-tinge beneath the patched shingle roof. Lower windows peeked out from a tangle of shrubbery. The entire house had a neglected sunkeness about it.

“Don’t tease, sister, of course this is it.” Emmaline put a finger to her lips. “At least, I believe it is.” She brightened and pointed to the faded wood sign hanging from a single rusted chain. “Yes, see, Maple Forest Farm established 1910. The nice man on the phone said he’d be here to welcome us.” She looked around, the bewildered look returning to her face. “I don’t see the man, sister. Has he been here already?”

“Not yet. Come along, Emmaline.” Masie pulled her jacket collar up against the March cold, and lifted her bags.

My goal while writing the story was for the setting to create an unsettling atmosphere and an underlying tension that all is not right, which, hopefully, adds to the mystery.

The trick, of course, is to combine all of these elements, suspense, character, and setting, into a seamless whole.

“If the mountain won’t come to Moses—we’ll go to the mountain.” When Emmaline made no move to follow, Masie nodded at the canvas bag sitting in the mud at her sister’s feet. “It won’t carry itself, Emmaline. Best get a move on.”

“Oh yes, sister. But I don’t think the man I talked with was called Moses.” Emmaline lifted the bag and climbed the cracked steps after Masie.

“Watch yourself.” Masie set her luggage down on the crumbling stoop. She pushed the doorbell, half expecting it to be broken. From inside they heard a faint chiming.

Masie checked her watch, waited exactly three minutes, then pushed the button again. This time scuffling noises followed the chiming. A face appeared in the side panel then quickly disappeared. More scuffling and muffled conversation. Masie lifted her hand to knock when the door swung open and revealed a girl of about fourteen.

“Welcome to Maple Farms.” The girl stuck a smile on her rather long face. “I’m Molly. You must be the Finch sisters. We’ve been expecting you.” She gestured briskly to someone out of sight. “My brother, Jacob, will take your luggage.”

A boy, older, but with the same long, pale look about him, appeared with a beat up ball cap pulled down low over his eyes. He slipped between them, scooped their bags off the stoop, and, without a word, disappeared inside.

If this were a novel, this would be the end of Act 1, where our characters leave their ordinary world and cross the threshold into a new world that will challenge everything that came before. A new world that if I've done my job right, readers will follow them into.

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