

## **The First Two Pages: “The Dunes of Saulkrasti”**

**by William Burton McCormick**

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I think the best way to start any analysis is to get immediately to the text of the manuscript itself, allowing readers of The First Two Pages to make their own impressions unbiased by knowing the author's intent. Then we can compare notes after the excerpt.

Therefore, without further delay, here is the opening of “The Dunes of Saulkrasti”:

The old man dug deep into the dunes.

Hidden by a screen of fir trees, far back from the beaches, no one disturbed his shoveling. He knew the grunts of his efforts, the sound of his spade splitting the sands and the occasional moans of the dying body beside him were too faint to be heard by the revelers along the seashore. Their laughter and singing barely carried over the white dunes that stretched inland for a quarter kilometer to this spot. If those festive celebrations remained dim and indistinct at this distance, his own solitary work must be unheard.

But the old man was realistic. This freedom could not last. Someone would blunder by eventually. It was the eve of Latvia's most important seasonal holiday, *Jâni*, the summer solstice and the beaches were full of merrymakers, drinking, jumping over bonfires and preparing for the midnight swim, when all sins were purged for the year.

The old man was comfortable with his sins. Secretly enjoyed them. He felt no need to skinny-dip in the Baltic Sea with a hundred strangers.

He had other dues to pay.

Movement caught his eye. His captive had rallied from death's door and slipped away, crawling up the side of a ghostly white dune,

seeking escape, reprieve or an audience with the perpetual solstice sun.

Whichever. The old man pulled out his pistol fitted with an antique KGB silencer and sent three bullets through his target. The body rolled down the dune to his feet. Dead.

He tucked his gun in his trousers and went back to digging. Soon his spade struck something solid. His hands trembled with excitement. He tapped again, heard the sweet echo of a hollow compartment below.

That which they'd buried decades ago was here, undisturbed. Riches all his own.

Then he heard it. Below, from within that sealed compartment, a voice said:

“Open up out there.”

Well, did it work? Hopefully, a reader will be enticed to continue onwards.

Let's now go through this passage in a little more detail as I explain my thinking.

Pardon my reuse of textual quotations, a necessary evil needed to make my points.

The intention of any opening is to establish the tone and setting of a piece and, of course, draw readers into the story. We start “Dunes” *in medias res* or in middle of the action. Other scenes will take place before, after, and concurrently with this one. Within the story's first three paragraphs, we establish the foreign location (Latvia), the holiday (the summer solstice), that a man is digging in the beach sands, and that this man wishes his work to remain undetected—most probably because of the dying body next to him! These are all designed to generate reader interest quickly. Latvia is a place everyone's heard of, but most readers know little about. Ideally, it will seem exotic or at least unusual. The holiday of

*Jâni*, a celebration of the solstice in a foreign land, adds flavor and a touch of mystery, a hint of primordial pagan activity remaining in modern times. And the old fail-safe of guys mysteriously digging holes for bodies never hurts (it worked for *Goodfellas*, it works for me). At 150 words into the story, we've (hopefully) piqued our reader's interest. But there's more work to be done.

One thing readers may notice is the deliberate lack of description of the "old man." More on that later, but for now we get here the slightest hint of the man's character and possible motivation.

The old man was comfortable with his sins. Secretly enjoyed them. He felt no need to skinny-dip in the Baltic Sea with a hundred strangers.

He had other dues to pay.

Minimalist to the core. How can we add more tension? How about a murder? Those are always a hoot.

His captive had rallied from death's door and slipped away, crawling up the side of a ghostly white dune, seeking escape, reprieve or an audience with the perpetual solstice sun.

Whichever. The old man pulled out his pistol fitted with an antique KGB silencer and sent three bullets through his target. The body rolled down the dune to his feet. Dead.

While detail is added to the "ghostly white dune" and the pistol's "antique KGB silencer," as mentioned before, the description of murderer and victim are almost nonexistent. We know the former is male and old—though "old" can be a pretty relative adjective, so what does that tell us? For the latter, we know even

less, not even gender. This is done to setup one of the central mysteries of the greater story, namely, the identities of the murderer and victim. As characters are introduced in passages set earlier than the opening, the reader is tasked with figuring out who is who and who will kill who. In an opening, this lack of establishment detail is a delicate undertaking for me as the writer. Too much information, and the identity game is unsatisfyingly simple. Too little and the reader will feel the author is withholding information from the reader, a tactic that often feels unfair and annoying and takes them out of the story. My solution is to make the opening brief enough (316 words) that the reader is less likely to become agitated by my selectivity in identifying these characters. Whether I've succeeded is a matter of taste. Descriptions are hearty and full-bodied throughout the rest of the piece.

Back to the opening. Now that our murder has finished off his captive, he returns to his digging. It becomes clear this is more than burying a body. He's also out to unearth some treasure.

Soon his spade struck something solid. His hands trembled with excitement. He tapped again, heard the sweet echo of a hollow compartment below.

That which they'd buried decades ago was here, undisturbed.  
Riches all his own.

So, we've got a foreign land, beaches, murder, and buried treasure. Robert Louis Stevenson may sue. But let's throw another, hopefully unexpected hook, to

keep those pages turning? What would you definitely not expect from something buried decades in the sand? How about....

Then he heard it. Below, from within that sealed compartment, a voice said:  
“Open up out there.”

Ideally, this will be enough to force discerning mystery audience to read on.

At least that’s the plan!

How well did the “Dunes” opening work? Good or bad, please let me know in the comments. Many thanks. And a special thanks to Art Taylor for hosting this article.

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William Burton McCormick writes historical fiction and thrillers set mainly in Europe. In addition to *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, his work has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The CWA Anthology of Short Stories: Mystery Tour*, *Black Mask*, *Malice Domestic 13: Mystery Most Geographical* and elsewhere. His novel of the Baltic Republics, *Lenin’s Harem*, was published in both English and Latvian, and became the first work of fiction ever added to the Latvian War Museum’s permanent library in Rīga. William has lived fifteen years in Eastern Europe, including four years in Latvia, the setting of “The Dunes of Saulkrasti.”