

The First Two Pages: “The Chair Thief”

By Robert Lopresti

They say you can judge people by the company they keep. I am proud and honored to have shared pages with some great writers, and that includes the latest issue of *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, where you will find me (again) with B.K. Stevens.

Besides being a terrific writer, B.K. came up with the wonderful and generous idea of this blog. I wrote here about the first two pages of my novel *Greenfellas* and learned a few things about my book in the process. So, let’s see what I can figure out about “The Chair Thief.”

The first two pages of my story are mostly dialogue, which means they are mostly about character. That’s the main thing dialogue in fiction should be about: telling you about the people who are talking.

My story is about Nate and Larry, two office mates. Since they will be doing a lot of talking I want the reader to be able to tell them apart by their voices. Here’s how we meet them:

“I can’t stand that guy,” Larry said.

“Who can?” asked Nate. He slumped in front of his computer, typing notes on the status meeting.

Larry tapped his fingers on the desk, not very rhythmically. Nate had assumed Larry had just dropped by on his way to the cafeteria for lunch, but apparently he had something else in mind.

“I *mean* it. Franklin has gone too far this time.”

Nate sighed. “We’ve been over this a hundred times. Franklin *always* goes over the line and he always gets away with it. Because—” He started counting on his fingers, methodical as always. “Paulson likes him. He’s glib. He’s socially adept, which we are not.”

“I am.” Larry glowered, daring him to disagree.

“Compared to me, yes. Compared to Franklin, no. And Paulson despises you.”

“It’s not fair. One stupid remark at a Christmas party.”

“About Paulson’s *wife*. And that’s not the only reason he feels that way.” Nate raised his hand again but Larry interrupted him before he could start counting.

“We have to do something about Franklin. Taking Tammi’s chair was the last draw.”

“It’s not like she needs it anymore.” Tammi was one of the Division’s best project managers, but she took early retirement after her husband had a stroke.

“I should have gotten it. Or you. We both have seniority over that clown, and even his old chair was better than yours or mine.”

Nate sat back in his office chair. One of its rollers was definitely sticky. The right arm was a little loose. Tammi had somehow wangled a Gaines Executive Model X7, in black leather, the only one ever seen in the Division. Now it was pampering Franklin’s skinny behind.

“That’s all true. But what are we supposed to do about it?”

Larry ran a hand down his necktie, a flaming red one today.

“We get rid of him.”

So the immediate crisis that causes this small conspiracy is a co-worker named Franklin wangling the best chair in the office. Does that seem like a shallow cause for an internecine feud? Well, exactly. That’s part of the point of the story: that humans everywhere engage in stupid battles like this one. I’m hoping it will feel painfully familiar to some of us.

But let's look at the conspirators. Nate is the viewpoint character, we learn almost immediately ("Nate had assumed Larry had just dropped by..."), but his friend is the instigator, trying to coax Nate into action.

And Larry succeeds. As the story develops we will see how the call to action changes Nate, and to make that work I used the first two pages to show where Nate is now. And that is: in a rut. Slumped in his own crummy chair, analytically (obsessively?) making his lists.

I must say my favorite line in the story is Larry snarling about how highly socially adept he is. Clearly this is a guy without much self-awareness. You will learn more about that later in the story.

That is, you will if the first two pages tempt you to keep reading. And that is their real purpose, isn't it?

#

Robert Lopresti's most recent book is *When Women Didn't Count*, a nonfiction analysis of how women have appeared (and disappeared) in federal statistics. His latest novel, *Greenfellas*, is a comic tale of mobsters trying to save the environment. His latest short story, "The Chair Thief," is his 27th appearance in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. His stories have won the Derringer and Black Orchid Novella Awards and been reprinted in *Best American Mystery Stories*. He blogs at SleuthSayers.