

The First Two Pages: “Tonight” by R.D. Sullivan

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Edited by Holly West (Down & Out Books)

When I try to visualize my efforts in the opening to “Tonight,” I see an attempt to establish a checklist with an empty box next to each item. I wanted to invoke a curiosity in the reader by presenting an interesting and intense situation that inspires them to ask, *how did we get here?* And, hopefully, leaves them thirsting to know how it all resolves.

We’ve all been stuck at that red light when we’re stressed and late for something, right? We meet our protagonist, Benicia, as she taps on a steering wheel and urges, “Come on, come on, come on...” Yet in the same breath it’s established she’s driving a stolen car, and she watches the empty street in its rear-view mirror for a threat the reader can’t yet know.

There we have our first three questions. Why is she in a hurry, whose car did she steal, and what unknown threat is lurking behind her?

Then at the end of that paragraph:

She tried to ignore what the pit bull had done to her leg but it screamed with pain, and blood puddled in her shoe. There wasn't time to deal with it.

Two more questions: How did she tangle with a pit bull, and why isn’t there time?

If I did my job well, I've sunk the hook deep in the reader and started reeling them into the story that follows and towards the answers they crave.

Early on in approaching this story, I knew I wanted to set it in the town where I live. I love rural fiction but for a long time disliked our own rural surroundings until it occurred to me that I was looking at this land, far northern California, through the wrong lens.

We're a cow and agriculture town. Our jobs are the wood mill and a distribution center for Wal-Mart. We're high-poverty, high-crime, and a foreign, feared mystery to the tech riches of Silicon Valley and the bright lights and big names of Southern California. Our biggest event is a rodeo, and we have only two police officers on duty through the long night.

My little town *is* the rural community I like in fiction, personal and inescapable, a place that launches only boomerangs out into the world, because we all left yet wound up right back where we started.

And when you set out to define this little town, there's a few hallmark characteristics. First, being Northern California, you have to talk about the heat. My grandparents drove through this town before my family moved to California and recall wondering how anybody survives here in the summer.

We wonder that every year, too.

And it doesn't stop. Though the scene in the stolen car takes place at night, "The heat of the summer night pressed in from the open windows, oppressive and dry." It can be three in the morning and temperatures still hover around ninety degrees. There is no relief. It suffocates you, panics your system, and this protagonist suffers even more for this tale taking place here.

Also, it being night, the streets are deserted. "All of Red Bluff shut its doors and called it a night as soon as the sun set..." It was important that this character be alone in her crisis. So much as a soul on the sidewalk would alter the desperation of her act, give hope where none should live. True to its rural nature, we roll up the sidewalks and turn off the porch lights at dusk.

Not even the junkies were out. With as hot as it had been, hitting 112 today, they were likely hunkered by the river that bisected town, trying to stay cool enough to sleep.

Two more important notes about this area. First is that we have a multi-layered, intricate issue with drugs and the homeless population, exacerbated by parole laws, poverty, a lack of (and refusal to implement) relevant services, and repeat offenders being shipped from big cities to our rural communities. The drugs, especially, are important to this story, as they provide the catalyst that gets us to this opening. Second, in the summer, one entire riverside park is inhabited by our trapped homeless and the transient population, the cool banks of the Sacramento River the only place to get nature-provided relief from the punishing heat.

Eyes on the red light.
Eyes on the mirror.
Light.
Mirror.

A reminder. Now the reader knows where they are and what it feels like, and it's time to recall the fact that something is coming.

That's when the first answer arrives, though it leaves more questions in its tire-smoking, motor-revving wake.

The white pickup screamed around the corner, tires slipping for a heartbeat before grabbing road and accelerating. She couldn't see their faces but she could picture them, how angry they'd look. Angry at her.

Sitting anxiously at a red light is okay as an opener, and good for generating interest. But without a solid threat, that tension goes nowhere. The introduction of the truck gives something tangible to fear, something churning and racing, reckless in its pursuit, with an undefined *them* at the wheel gunning for the woman in the stolen car.

One question answered. What was she watching for in that mirror? This truck. Yet why is it after her? What has she done? Who is inside?

A series of questions, each with a blank box next to it, waiting to be checked off as answers become apparent.

Then one more for the road, one last amuse-bouche to whet the appetites before launching into the true meat of the story:

She put a hand on the two bags in the passenger seat and ran the red light.

With that, the car chase is on, and so is the unfolding of all the answers which, if I've done my job well, the reader now craves.

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R.D. Sullivan is a writer of fiction, comedy and letters to the editor. She lives in Northern California with her family and two solidly mediocre dogs, where she runs a subcontracting business. Her work has been featured in *Fireside Fiction Magazine*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Killing Malmon*, and *Murder-A-Go-Go's*. She is also proud and ashamed of her most recent novella, *Hotties and Bazingas and the Murder Cult Murders*. You can track her down on twitter @RDSullyWrites or over at govneh.com.