

The First Two Pages of “Long Time Coming” by Gale Massey

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An Essay by Gale Massey

There’s always some heavy lifting in the first two pages of any piece of fiction but especially in a short story. Character, theme, and intrigue have to jump off the starting block to provide enough interest for the reader to continue beyond the entry point. This first paragraph of “Long Time Coming” introduces Dory Hastings, and right away it’s clear she’s seen her share of trouble. By revealing her injuries and the mystery of the old ranch house, that she doesn’t remember but had been born in twenty years prior, I am able to reveal her age and introduce the story’s theme of hard times and lost connections. My intention here is to begin an emotional journey for the reader, to let them know that we are beginning somewhere close to the end and that the story will be circular and whole. The story starts out with the main character struggling to accomplish the simple task of getting out of bed but poses a larger question of deciding the direction of her future.

From the opening:

Dory Hastings stirs as the first light of sun lifts the edges from a cool spring night. The curtains in the window shift slightly; a dream recedes. She rotates her left foot clockwise then back around the other way, rolls stiffly to her good side to sit up on the side of the bed and wrestles the cast on her left arm into its sling. The old ranch house is

unfamiliar, though she was born here nearly twenty years prior. The smell of coffee wafts up from the downstairs kitchen and she figures her aunt is already working through the task of putting breakfast on the table. She'll have to stay here until she finds work or decides about school.

Dory is waking from a dream, and this sets the tone which I wanted to be melancholic and bittersweet. It also provides the opportunity to explain how her personal history leaves her with a sense of being lost and longing for connection.

The hazy image of the dream reappears. Though his face is obscured she knows this is her father. He is walking toward her through a thick morning fog. If she closes her eyes maybe she can coax the next frame from its sleepy hiding place. He stops a few feet before her and she sees the horse sliding out of the fog, a black mare graying along the length of its nose, led by a simple leather cord. Her father doesn't speak but his meaning is clear. She takes the lead from him, her fingers brushing his. The fog curls around his legs, his arms, his head, finally reclaiming him totally. Only the horse remains, waiting patiently, eyes brown and serene. It's the only dream she's ever had of him and she wants to hold on to it, put it inside a locket and wear it against her heart. But dreams are like a morning breeze that float around of their own accord and there's nothing she can do to draw him out. Still, she is suffused with pleasure.

She shuffles to the bathroom and turns on the tap, splashes water on her face. The rehab therapists taught her how to get a t-shirt on over the cast. It's difficult and time consuming but she gets it done and then yanks on a pair of jeans and her old sneakers with the Velcro closures. Downstairs, Brenda pours her a cup of coffee and wants to know if she slept well, if the bed was comfortable. Her uncle appears behind the back screen-door, stomping his boots to get the muck off, sees her and asks if she's ready.

She looks beyond him to where the old black mare is saddled and waiting, and gives him a doubtful look.

"It's a place to start," he says.

The first few paragraphs turn out to be a prologue, which is seldom done in short stories and usually advised against even in novels. I wanted to try it anyway. As a writer, it felt like a treat to open this way, something different and hopefully enticing. I meant for the opening to encompass the whole story and then fill in the missing pieces as the story expands and unfolds. The dreamlike quality adds to the tone of loneliness and longing. Stories are emotional journeys that the writer creates for the reader. This is accomplished by posing questions in the reader's mind and hinting at the answers, as well as creating space for the reader to relate to Dory's feelings. She longs for family connection, specifically for her father, who she doesn't know and can't remember.

As the prologue concludes, the story returns to a more traditional form and the reader is clued in as we learn the circumstances of Dory's birth and her parent's shotgun marriage.

To put it plain, Burdine and Clara married too young, a ranch boy and a town girl, neither of them yet eighteen. They'd dated a few months in their senior year, got drunk on prom night and made a baby that bound them together. Love not being the deciding factor, their parents took them to the courthouse. The wedding picture shows tall Burdine in a stiff white shirt, black tie, and Stetson, holding the hand of curly headed, blue-eyed Clara in an already too-snug yellow dress. Someone has reminded them to smile at the camera. They named the baby Dory, after his mother, because she was the one to deliver the girl during a thunderstorm at the Hastings' ranch house.

Burdine opened a produce market in town and set up a simple one room apartment over the store. Clara tended the store while the baby slept behind the cash register, tucked in a sturdy apple crate lined with a pink chenille bedspread, a wedding gift from his mother.

Burdine drove up and down I-75 in a beat-up pick-up truck buying produce for the store.

In truck stops and at highway gas stations, dark-eyed, lanky Burdine made friends easily. He was swiftly absorbed into a subculture of men, married and not, who introduced him to a host of previously unknown pleasures. After a year on the road, Burdine had come to terms with his deeper predilections and they had nothing to do with women. Clara regretted that drunken prom night and the baby she was saddled with, but agreed to let Burdine go his own way in exchange for the store. There were plenty of produce truckers and they were happy to keep the store's bins filled. Before the baby was two-years old, Burdine was on his way south to Key West. He visited the family ranch one last time. His parents, stubborn in the ways that ranchers are, made no attempt to hide their disappointment in their son. It wasn't long before Burdine was dead from a disease that, in his mother's words, "afflicted his kind."

We often talk about the main character's deepest desire. The story is built around the character striving—and repeatedly failing—to get the desired object, be it love, money, or to save the ranch. At this point it's clear that Dory will never be able to reunite with her father. This universal experience of loss cannot be overcome, so the story question transforms to: If Dory can't get the thing she wants, will she at least get what she needs?

There is also the question of the unexplained injuries. There's no explanation of Dory's broken and stiff bones, but the injuries are debilitating and possibly life-altering. Withholding this information draws the reader in to a mystery. How did a twenty-year old orphan get so banged up? So, in these first two pages we have a compelling and sympathetic main character who is in trouble and injured and recuperating in a house with people she doesn't know. These questions

create a proposition between the writer and the reader with the promise on the writer's part that all will be answered by the end of the story. If I've done my job, the reader will leave having had a complete emotional journey worthy of the time they spent with Dory.

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