

The First Two Pages: “Wildfire” by Kathy A. Norris
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An Essay by Kathy A. Norris

One of the challenges I face as a short story writer is describing my protagonist (e.g., name, age, gender, physical description, sense of humor or lack thereof) without resorting to an information dump. This is how I approached the challenge in “Wildfire.”

There are two mental checklists at the beginning of the story, allowing me to provide essential information about the protagonist (Jessie Cole) and her love interest (Chief Curry) in a fresh way. The fact that Jessie’s checklists are brutally honest allows the reader to infer something about her character as well. The lists include primarily tangible characteristics, giving that one intangible item on Curry’s list (i.e., emotionally unavailable) extra punch. Finally, I hope the reader finds the additional white space around the centered columns visually appealing.

The first two pages are below. I look forward to hearing your thoughts!

The First Two Pages of “Wildfire”

A comedian once riffed that California has four seasons: Earthquake, Flood, Drought, and Fire. I can’t speak to the first three, but as an arson investigator for the Los Angeles County Fire Department, I’m a fire expert.

My name is Jessica Cole, but everyone calls me Jessie. In 2002 the County hired me as a Firefighter II because I checked all the Affirmative Action boxes:

African American	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Minimum 18 years old	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
California Drivers License	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Certified Paramedic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

It didn't hurt that I come from a family of firefighters. My grandfather was a founding member of the Stentorians, the fraternal organization of African American firefighters, and both my grandfather and my father were assigned to historic Fire Station No. 30, one of two segregated fire stations in South Los Angeles between 1924 and 1956.

Firefighting is in my blood.

Keep up the good work, Station Chief Tom Curry tells me, and I'll be the first African American woman to lead the LA County Fire Department.

I'm wide awake at 4:00 AM, unable to sleep because the hot, dry Santa Ana winds buffet my Marina del Rey bungalow all night long. I push clammy bed sheets to the floor, exposing both me and the man sleeping beside me to the stifling air. I'm reconsidering my refusal to install air-conditioning when my cell phone rings. I assume it's my Aunt Ruth, so I answer without checking caller ID.

But it's another woman's voice I hear on the other end of the line. Younger. Angry.

"Put my husband on the phone," the woman says. She's got the imperative and possessive thing down cold.

I pause, glancing at the naked man planted face-down in my bed. Technically they're separated, so does the term "husband" still apply? An image of my Aunt Ruth, the Morality Police, pops into my head. Aunt Ruth rolls her eyes.

Thin as a whip, skin the color of walnuts, and a crown of wispy white hair, Aunt Ruth is 80 years old. She still takes the bus to her midnight janitorial shift at LAX. She likes to keep busy. She also likes to point out the error of my ways.

"Hel-lo?" the woman says.

“You forgot to say the magic word,” I say, scanning the man’s body. Long legs. Trim waist. Nice ass for a man in his early 40’s. Women frequently mistake him for Denzel Washington in his prime. He pretends to find this annoying.

It occurs to me that Tom Curry checks off most of the boxes Aunt Ruth has warned me against:

Married	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Young Kids at Home	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
My Boss	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Emotionally Unavailable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

The woman hangs up.

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Kathy A. Norris is an African-American novelist whose works are informed by coming of age during the civil rights and feminist movements of the 70’s. Kathy lives in Los Angeles and relishes the extra time retirement affords her to read and write.