

The First Two Pages: “A Nice Pair of Guns”

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From *ThugLit*, January/February 2016

With short stories, space is always at a premium, and you must often use that limited word-count to convey an immense amount of information—all while making sure the narrative itself doesn’t slow down overmuch. It’s a tricky balancing act, one that’s often caused me to tear my hair out (metaphorically speaking; I’m bald, and not because of word limits!).

When I wrote the first draft of “A Nice Pair of Guns,” a short story that appeared in the late (and very missed) *Thuglit* magazine, I made the initial mistake of opening *in medias res*, at a moment of high tension and danger for the main character, a bounty hunter trying to recover a pair of assault rifles stolen from him by the local meth kingpin. As any writer will tell you, there are times when you’ll finish a draft and know there’s something fundamentally wrong with it—but you can’t quite figure out why.

In the case of “Guns,” I eventually decided that opening in mid-story, with a lot of action, forced me to push way too much plot into the middle and end of the tale; I might have succeeded in grabbing the reader’s attention at the outset, but the story as a whole felt profoundly unbalanced. So when it came time to write the

second draft, I decided to discard my fears about my hypothetical reader's attention span, and begin at the beginning. Yes, this new opening was slower, but it also allowed me to layer in character and exposition that I had previously crammed into the later parts of the narrative. Here's the first page, roughly 400 words or so:

We came home from the movies to find our front door kicked open, both floors ransacked, half the food in the fridge missing. My five-year-old daughter ran into her bedroom, screaming, to make sure her toys were safe. Kelly loved her two Pink Princess dolls, which I won for her at the trick-shooting booth at the state fair. Her toys were safe, but when I went into my bedroom, I found that the frisky varmint had stolen my favorite playthings: a pair of AR-15s with expensive scopes.

First thing, I called the cops. While I waited for them to arrive, I phoned my former brother-in-law. His voice came over the line raspy and slow, and I had to talk loudly to prevent him from nodding off. I had no compunctions about treating him a little rough, not when I paid his sister Janine a grand every month in child support, a big chunk of which probably ended up in his veins.

"Rick," I said. "You tell any of your fellow scumbags about my guns lately?"

"Nuh-uh, I swear."

If he kept to his old habits, he was in one of those crack shacks in Garden City, near the river. "I don't believe you," I said. "Activate that chunk of meat you call a brain and think again."

I took his silence to mean he was trying his hardest. Rick had an outstanding warrant, and he knew I would roust him for it, no matter how much my ex-wife screamed at me. "Zombie Bill," he finally said.

My skin tingled. "Zombie Bill what?"

I could practically hear Rick shrug. "I told him you had a couple nice rifles. I'm sorry?"

I hung up without bothering to reply. A couple of meth freaks stealing my guns was one thing. Ten out of ten times, they would try and pawn the hardware, and end up busted. But Zombie Bill, the crazy bastard, would use those beautiful AR-15s to fill as many people with lead as possible. And that blood would be on my hands.

A police cruiser pulled into my driveway, and I walked outside to meet it, Kelly crying in my arms. The cops were polite as they took the report, and promised to do their best, which meant exactly squat. Roger, my neighbor, was another firearms enthusiast. “They broke into your gun locker?” he asked, as I handed him a nylon bag loaded with enough toys, books, and snacks to see my kid through the night and the next morning.

I shook my head. “I was an idiot,” I said. “I keep them in a wooden cabinet, locked.”

He offered me dead eyes. “Got to get something tougher, man. Steel. Like a big safe.”

“I know.” I shrugged, which felt dismissive and weak. “Kept them unloaded, under lock and key. Figured that’d be enough.” A gun safe with enough room for my arsenal might cost more than a thousand dollars, if I wanted a good-looking one—well outside my monthly budget after I paid for the mortgage, food, gas, and the kid.

This opening accomplishes several things from a character perspective. It establishes the tumultuous family life of the protagonist, which comes into play later, and it shows that he’s comfortable in two worlds—one in which he threatens a junkie to give up the location of a meth dealer he knows well, and the other in which he files reports with the police, makes sure his daughter is okay, and worries about his mortgage.

And yes, those elements were all present in the old, action-forward version. But by taking the time to establish the characters at the beginning, the action (when it happens) makes a lot more sense, and you have some built-up sympathy for the protagonist when he does some morally questionable things in his quest to fix his life. Even when your word count is limited, sometimes it really pays to stick to the

traditional narrative structure, and take things a little slow. You build the foundation for a stronger work.

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