

The First Two Pages: “Ridgeline”

By Peter W. J. Hayes

From *Malice Domestic: Mystery Most Geographical* (Wildside Press)

I began to write *Ridgeline* after waking up one morning with a fully formed paragraph in mind. In my notebook, the paragraph reads as follows:

I remember how we crossed the ridgeline at dawn. What was ahead of us. How the snow crunched under my boots and the cold ached in my chest. The sweet smell of woodsmoke. But that’s the thing. I should have remembered more.

I liked this paragraph for several reasons. It put me directly into a (yet unnamed) character’s head. It gave me a sense of place, it had a certain rhythm and style, and the last sentence suggested a conflict. I also liked how niftily it solved the problem of starting a story.

Of course, I should have known it was all too good to be true.

Early into my first draft, the strengths of that opening paragraph turned on me faster than an entitled teenager: the first person was too limiting, I couldn’t think of a historical context for the cold weather, carrying the rhythm and style through the story was a tight-rope act, and I wasn’t quite sure what to do with the last sentence.

It turned out that last sentence was the key. By focusing on it, I realized that the story wasn’t about someone crossing the ridgeline, it was about the character’s

memory of crossing it. I understood that “Ridgeline” was set in the present day and involved a character obsessed, and damaged, by memories. That immediately led me to wonder how, over the years, that person’s obsession might affect those closest to him. And that’s when the story snapped into place.

Years ago, a creative writing professor explained to me that the start of any story is a contract between writer and reader. The writer codifies a promise of who and what the story will be about—and how it will be told—while the reader chooses to accept or reject that promise. With “Ridgeline,” I needed to introduce the main characters (Jeff, Emily and Duvan), the location (Nicaragua), and the reason why Emily and Jeff were visiting. But most of all, I wanted to show how Jeff’s obsession with his memories was putting his marriage at risk. The story opens with this passage:

“Tell me about Duvan.”

Emily wondered if she pronounced Duvan’s name correctly. From Jeff’s terse explanations she understood that he was from Jeff’s past, the years before they were married—or had even met, for that matter.

“We need to talk about this.” She was angry and a bit scared. A single letter from Duvan and Jeff called off work and booked a flight to Nicaragua, as if that country was his bedrock, as if the twenty-six years of their marriage were an afterthought.

I didn’t mention Jeff’s obsession with his memories for a specific reason: I thought the idea was too abstract. Instead, I embodied Jeff’s obsession in Duvan, his friend in Nicaragua. Using a character to represent the force and pull of Jeff’s

memories offered several benefits: it gave flesh and blood to Jeff's obsession, it provided a character Jeff could physically interact with, and it created a more tangible and understandable threat to Jeff and Emily's marriage—as if Duvan was the third person in a love triangle.

Also, I switched from first person to third person. Given that the story was about the state of Jeff and Emily's marriage, I wanted the option to present both of their points of view.

The passage then continues:

“Duvan,” he repeated. The SUV's engine strained, pulling them higher into the thin air of the Cordillera Isabelia mountains.

“Yes.”

She waited while he negotiated a switchback. In the distance Lake Managua looked as inert as a fragment of blue tile.

“You have to understand the time,” he said finally. “Nicaragua in the 80s.” She heard the distraction in his voice, as if he was unpacking long forgotten items from a storage box. “The Mendoza family ruled for decades. They controlled the wealth. Duvan's family was connected to them, until the Sandinistas overthrew the Mendozas. Afterwards the Contras challenged the Sandanistas. Duvan was a Contra.”

“And that's when you met?”

“Yeah.” Jeff's eyes didn't move from the road. “Duvan's family owned mines, he trained as a geologist. His father placed Duvan with the Contras, the middle brother with the Sandinistas and sent the youngest brother to Miami.”

“Do people actually do that stuff?”

A rare smile played over his lips. “I guess so. His father wanted the family's power back. He put money into the Contras. The same way the U.S. did.”

“Part of which was you.” She drew in a breath, trying to relax, because it wasn't only the letter. Even before their wedding Jeff's aloof, wary silences and bursts of anger worried her. For a time,

thanks to the buffer and diversion of their growing sons, she thought it was behind them. But the arrival of Duvan's letter brought it all back, as if a hard-bitten dog had slipped his leash and was gnashing inside him.

My goal in the passage was to introduce the reader to the deeper historical contexts, including Nicaragua's history and Jeff and Emily's marriage. This passage also foreshadows future events. Duvan's training as a geologist is critical, as is the fact that Jeff understands how Nicaragua's civil war was really fought over wealth and power. But the story is about Jeff and Emily's marriage, which is why she continues the passage by saying,

After a moment he said carefully, "I know."

She stared at him, relieved. "How many years is it since you were in Nicaragua?"

A slow breath slipped between his lips. "Too many to count."

She touched his arm, the muscle still lean and hard from twenty years of leading work crews for the local electric company. She wanted him to know she needed an answer.

"Thirty-one," he said finally. "I was army for six years."

Hopefully, the contract with the reader is now complete. The reader understands that Jeff's obsession with his memories—as embodied in Duvan—is in critical danger of destroying his marriage unless he confronts and comes to terms with them. To do that, he and Emily are visiting to Nicaragua. Whether they are successful, well, you have to read the story. Of course, another advantage of

embodying Jeff's obsession in the person of Duvan is that people are less predictable than obsessions, and they will do unexpected things.

Oh, and that original first paragraph that started everything? In slightly different form it still appears in the story. About halfway through the reader finds this paragraph:

Three hours later he crested a ridge higher than the rest and heard the distant murmur of a stream. He stopped, staring at the way the pathway angled over the ridge and down into the forest. He shuddered as a train of memories passed through him: crossing this same ridge at dawn, the rustle of the forest floor underfoot, birdsong, the sweet smell of wood smoke.

Which just proves the old adage that writers are the greatest environmentalists (because we recycle everything).

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