

The First Two Pages: “Cleansing Soil”

By Charlie Hughes

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I began writing “Cleansing Soil” whilst on holiday in the U.S. in 2016. I travelled with my wife and two kids from our home in London to San Francisco for a once-in-a-lifetime journey down the coast of California. About a week into the trip, whilst we were staying in Sequoia National Park, I stayed behind in our hotel room to look after our boy, who was unwell. Later, when he’d fallen soundly asleep, I did some writing.

The idea for the story had nothing to do with California or Sequoia, but instead came from the sleepy rural towns and villages where I grew up.

I’ve always been fascinated by people who metal detect. I remember seeing them in the fields around Warwickshire as a boy and asking my Dad to explain what they were doing. For some reason that stuck with me. The idea for the story was to depict something similar to a metal detecting “club,” but with a much, much darker objective than a few Roman coins.

“Cleansing Soil” is a story which cuts across genres. There are elements of suspense/mystery, but the subject matter strays into horror and dark fiction. I like to see that in the stories I read and want it to be part of my own work. The tone had to be dark and brooding from the start. The opening line was added later in the writing process, in an attempt to achieve this:

I followed Gethyn through the door, and the heat of the pub smothered me. A blanket of warm, stale air draped over the sepia decor.

Having just reread the first two pages of the story, I can see the driving force is to tempt the reader with a question: "What are these guys into?" My main character and narrator has arranged to meet the club members in a pub having been "picked up" in an online metal detecting chatroom. It's important to the success of the opening that he doesn't yet know the answer to that question. He suspects, but he doesn't know.

The main technical challenge of the opening scene was to introduce the reader to five characters without losing the momentum of the story or making it confusing. I'm still a relatively new writer and I overcame this obstacle only through trial and error.

I recently read a piece about writers either going through drafts or tinkering constantly as they go (on Sleuthsayers, I think). I am certainly in the latter group, perhaps to an obsessive degree. I don't want to admit how many times I edited that opening page. Think of a number and double it.

One technique for re-enforcing the separation of the characters is to use distinctively different names or nicknames. If I'd called them Ted, Bill, Bob, Dave and Alan, this would've added to my problems. So instead, I went for Gethyn, Christopher, Jinks, Gino and Fenton.

By the end of my first page, I've got them all talking, and Gino is probing them for details, but I need to push the story on. Obviously, I couldn't just stop them mid-conversation, so I left a promise to Gino, and the reader:

"We could tell you, but where's the fun in that?" He downed the remains of his pint and stood up. "We'll show you."

This sets up the second scene, which begins with Gino and Gethyn talking in the car, following the others, on their way to be shown some terrible secret. I used this short section to give some backstory for my main character. Gethyn asks him if he's got anything better to do, and the narrator muses:

Once, I'd been the guy who jumped at the chance to share my plans. Science Museum with the kids, a surprise birthday dinner with my wife, a weekend away with the boys. I was Mr. Nauseatingly Fucking Conventional, and I didn't mind letting you know it.

That was Before.

Before, I didn't need to scout around on internet chat boards for the pleasure of human company.

Hopefully, this strikes a balance between backstory and the dreaded information dump. I always find this a tricky line to walk. The story never explains what it is that happened in the past, but creating a vague sense of unease about the main character was important. Given the subject matter of the "club", it was the only way to explain his behavior. This is not a story for bright-eyed heroes.

By the end of the two pages, I have the group marching through the woods, shovels in their hands and the light fading. It finished with the leader, Christopher posing a question to Gino:

"Gino," he said, the others gathering around, "Let me ask you a question. What's your greatest discovery? Metal detecting or otherwise. What's given you the biggest buzz?"

This sets up the reveal, through conversation between the two characters. Christopher doesn't just tell Gino what's going on, he connects with him, emphasizing the similarities between Gino's obsession (which is within the law) and the club's objective (which is not).

Reading it back, I like this approach because it helps to normalize what comes later. That's important because the plot of "Cleansing Soil" is outlandish. Most crime, horror and suspense plots are, when you stand back from them, ridiculous. But a writer can always bring the reader along by highlighting just how strange real life is.

Metal detecting still strikes me as an inexplicable way for a person to enjoy themselves, but then, so is taking time out from a holiday to write a story like "Cleansing Soil." Who am I to judge?

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Charlie Hughes writes dark suspense, crime and horror short stories from his home in South London. His work has been published by *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, and numerous anthologies. His horror short story "The Box" won the 2016 Ruth Rendell Short Story Competition. You can find his website at <https://charliehugheswriting.blogspot.co.uk> and he tweets from @charliesuspense.