

## **The First Two Pages: “Moe’s Seafood House”**

By Ramona DeFelice Long, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*

Everybody has an agenda.

This was the controlling idea for “Moe’s Seafood House.” I wanted to write a short story that would incorporate my love for unreliable narrators and ethical dilemmas, but I didn’t want to launch it with darkness and noir. I wanted a soft opening in a safe, comfortable setting where I could steadily develop the niggling discomfort that all is not what it seems here.

What’s more comfortable and safe than an old-fashioned, family-owned and -operated seafood joint in a small town near the Chesapeake Bay?

Moe’s Seafood House is a local institution. The restaurant’s founder, Grandpa Moe, is long gone, and now the place is run by three siblings: the hostess, the bartender, and their brother, a town cop who moonlights as bouncer. The characters are so familiar they’re almost clichés, and so is their absolute, undying loyalty to Moe’s. The siblings want you to have a pleasant dining experience so you’ll return with your family again and again.

The reader learns this background information early on. What the reader eventually discovers is, if you act badly at Moe’s, you might wake up with a horse’s head in your bed. That comes later in the story, after the benign opening turns dark.

It's a challenge to grab a mystery reader with an opening where menace is not obvious. The trick is to plant a seed of unease, and then another and another, until the competing agendas are revealed. This was my goal in the first two pages: to show a story world that's both mellow and highly charged.

A short story needs conflict from the get-go. What typical conflict happens at a restaurant on a busy Saturday night? A patron with no reservation makes a fuss about the wait time. This is how the story opens:

The hostess asks the man's name and says it will be a half hour.  
The man says, "You say that, but you really mean an hour, right?"

The hostess's face morphs into a mask of politeness. Overhead, Calypso music plays, and the air conditioning sways the fishing net and fake seashells hanging on the rough planked walls.

"It's Saturday night, Ken," the man's companion says. "We don't have a reservation. Even an hour's not that long to wait."

The hostess waits. Next to her, a waitress watches with a mixture of amusement and contempt.

Ken says, "Fine! A half hour, an hour, whatever you want. There's nowhere else to go in this crummy town." He spins around and stalks toward the bar.

The hostess holds her pen over the waiting list. "Your name, ma'am?"

"Amanda."

The hostess activates a square black beeper.

"I'm sorry," Amanda says. "He's just impatient sometimes." As she speaks, she turns the beeper over and over in her hands while the hostess watches.

The waitress chuckles. "Men," she says. "Can't live with 'em, can't dispose of the bodies properly."

Foreshadowing? Of course. I used the old mystery writings saw—if you show a gun in a drawer, someone must fire it before the story is over. In this case,

mention a body and a character has to drop before the story is over.

First seed planted.

The story depends on character tension rather than high action for suspense. It's obviously not the first time Amanda has apologized for Ken's bad behavior, but will Ken's truculence escalate? The staff at Moe's is unflappable, but Moe's is their livelihood, and family comes first.

In the bar, Amanda and Ken watch the bartender joke and serve patrons as if they're all old pals. The bartender discovers it's Amanda's birthday, and now her drink is on the house. Free drinks on your birthday! That's how customers are treated at Moe's.

This annoys Ken, but annoyance is passive. How do you make a sulking character interesting? Ken needs to step up and be unpleasant again. It's also page two now, and time to plant another seed.

The bartender asks what Ken would like to drink:

Behind the bartender, the mirrored wall is lined with taps and bottles. To the side, a wooden sign lists beer brands in faux-burnt letters.

"I'll have a beer," Ken says.

"What kind of beer?"

"What kind you got?"

The bartender takes a step back. He puts his hands behind his back like a soldier at ease and, his face deadpan, rattles off beer brands in alphabetical order. When he finishes, there is a scatter of laughter, of applause. When it silences, a voice says, "You forgot Rolling Rock."

“You forgot to bite me,” the bartender responds. He glances at Amanda and one side of his mouth quirks up. “My brother. Who is a smartass.” His voice rises on the last word.

Amanda looks over her shoulder at the brother. He’s standing where the bar meets the wall. He’s also wearing a Moe’s t-shirt. He doesn’t look amused, or like a smartass.

Another seed. Is the bartender joking, or is the big happy family vibe at Moe’s a front?

This is where the first two pages end. So far, all that’s happened in terms of action is that a patron is acting like a jerk in a family-run restaurant.

I had my own agenda as a writer—to start with a soft opening and let the menace creep in slowly. To create intrigue without overt danger, I had to fill Moe’s with seeds about what’s not easily apparent, to reveal that each character has his/her own annoyances and peeves.

After two pages, the reader should be wondering the following:

Why does Amanda put up with Ken? Is he upset about the wait, or is there something else going on between them? Could he be dangerous? And that brother—is he really a smartass, or is the bartender one for calling him that? More importantly, does it matter to the story? Is this story about Ken and Amanda? Or is it about the siblings at Moe’s? Or both?

It can be dangerous as a writer to move the goalposts in a story, but that’s what happens in Moe’s. What seems to be the primary conflict keeps changing. This is why—I hope—what lingers in the reader’s head is the waitress’ comment

about disposing of a body.

Someone in this story is going to die. That's the promise made on page one.

Who, how, and why—that requires turning the pages.

When you write a story with action that builds slowly, you have to plant a lot of seeds and trust that the reader will turn the pages as secrets, agendas, and old grudges are exposed.

“Moe’s Seafood House” was a challenge to write, and get right, but holding back for a slow exposure was fun. I am pleased that Wildside Press appreciated the nuances and selected it for publication.

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