

The First Two Pages of “Perfect Strangers” by Tilia Klebenov Jacobs
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An Essay by Tilia Klebenov Jacobs

Here is the opening line for my story, “Perfect Strangers.” I’m rather pleased with it.

I am not good at armed robbery, but when Dougal told me about the new cannabis dispensaries, I figured third time was the charm.

Does it make you want to read more? If so, then I’ve done my job. Here’s how I came up with it.

In 2019, Mystery Writers of America (MWA) put out a call for an anthology whose title and theme were *When a Stranger Comes to Town*. The book would contain about twenty stories, half of which would be penned by well-known writers (aka “the reason you pick up the book”); the other half would be culled from submissions sent in by any interested member of MWA in good standing (aka “people who *want* to be the reason you pick up the book”). The submissions could be no longer than six thousand words and had to explore the idea of, yes, a stranger coming to town. Being both an MWA member and an academic at heart, I love an assignment with a deadline, and I decided to enter. Now all I had to do was figure out what to write.

I had published several murder stories, but I was tired of killing off characters, so I decided to craft a tale that would be clever rather than gory. At the time I was reading about a con man-turned-memoirist, whom I found to be both horrifying and

wildly entertaining. One thing that jumped out at me was that for most of his criminal career, the scam artist believed that because his crimes were nonviolent, he wasn't hurting anyone—even when he bilked his victims out of their life savings, for example. As a reader, I was aghast; as a writer, I loved the intricacy and audacity of his schemes. I decided to adopt them and this mentality for my protagonist.

The next step was my character's voice. I spent a number of years teaching in state prisons in Massachusetts, so I know some of the ways that convicts and soon-to-be-ex-cons talk. They often have a fairly wry sense of humor about their circumstances, and, contrary to the cliché about entire prison populations who assert their innocence, the inmates I have met are fairly candid about the fact that they're guilty. Since I wanted my story to be on the lighthearted side, I decided to take these aspects of a convict and douse them with a Runyonesque sensibility, giving my guy a mix of formal speech and colorful slang that would allow him to comment on the world around him while remaining firmly on its margins.

Now all I needed was something for him to do.

At the time that I was casting about for story ideas, Massachusetts had recently legalized recreational marijuana, with medical cannabis having been permitted for several years before that. I decided to read up on cannabis dispensaries, thinking that a recently legitimized industry might provide me with some ideas for an enterprising felon to exploit. And indeed it did, for it turns out that the owners of pot dispensaries

have a real problem: since marijuana is still illegal at the federal level, and since banks are regulated by the federal government, all proceeds from legal cannabis are deemed illegal funds. As a result, cannabis dispensaries cannot take credit cards (issued by those banks which are overseen by the feds) or deposit their earnings (banks aren't allowed to take money from illegal activities). This means that pot shops deal largely in cash which they then can't deposit, which is a serious public safety hazard, because people like my protagonist might very well decide to rob them.

Houston, we have liftoff!

I outlined my story and wrote character bios for the main characters, because that's how I roll. Now, with the anthology deadline a tad closer, it was time to start typing. But how to begin?

Writers know the importance of a good opening line. An endless parade of instructors and manuals has exhorted us to "Use a hook!" and "Grab your reader!" and "Keep your audience's attention!" and so-forth. This is the worst kind of advice. First, it is so vague as to be useless. Has any writer ever deliberately crafted a boring opening, designed to repulse readers?

Second, the "Hook your reader" trope, absent any supporting details, plays into the toxic notion that writing is a mystical gift, dependent on luck rather than craft. Certainly, good fortune may be a factor in any creative process, but unlike luck, craft can be learned. Furthermore, craft is what you lean into on those days when your muse

is out getting a mani-pedi and can't be bothered helping you with your manuscript. Or, as Pablo Picasso put it, "Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working."

What, then, are the craft elements of a strong start for a story? Most good ones contain some or all of the following:

- Characters with agency
- Details about the setting: the time, place, and culture of the story
- An indication of the arc of the story
- Actions with consequence
- A suggestion that we are on the brink of change

Many famous opening lines meet these criteria. Consider, for example, Jane Austen's off-the-bat observation in *Pride and Prejudice* that "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," which tells us that we are about to enter into a moneyed society full of people seeking mates. That we know this before we meet a single character or see their well-heeled lifestyles is a testament to Austen's adeptness with pen and prose.

Artistic disclaimer: it is equally true, if not universally acknowledged, that exceptions exist in glorious abundance. For example, you might elect to start with a setting that lays out the themes of your story, as Isak Dinesen did so beautifully in *Out of Africa* and John Steinbeck did equally well in *Of Mice and Men*. Choose what works best for you, your story, and your muse. It is worth noting, however, that in a

book-length work, the writer can take a few pages to establish the necessary elements. This is one of the things that makes novels a bit easier, in some ways, than short stories. But I had six thousand words, and “Perfect Strangers” eventually clocked in at 5,999. I had not a word to spare, and I wanted my opening line to do its job as elegantly as possible. With all that in mind, then, here’s what each word or phrase did.

“I am not good at armed robbery” tells us who this guy is: a violent criminal who is a failure in his field. The fact that he says he is not good at it tells us he has some self-awareness; he has likely been caught; and he is invested in being good at something, probably something criminal. Thus do we now have a character with agency, meaning a reason to act.

The next part of the sentence—“but when Dougal told me about the new cannabis dispensaries”—tells us that someone named Dougal will likely figure in the story. It also tells us that cannabis dispensaries exist, and that they are new. Since marijuana has been legalized only in the past few years, these words establish that the story takes place in the real world and in modern times, making it a work of realistic fiction rather than, say, science fiction or fantasy. Readers like to know this sort of thing so they have some sense of what to expect.

“I figured third time was the charm” does several things. First, I like to think this is funny, and it certainly underscores what kind of a person is narrating. He really doesn’t have any intention of becoming honest. Moreover, we now know that our

narrator has failed twice, and that he is going to try again. These final words of the opening sentence indicate the arc of the story and suggest that we are on the brink of change, at least in the mind of the protagonist. Finally, the fact that the narrator has this view indicates that much of the remainder of the story will be taken up with that third time. Thus do we have actions with consequences—or a hint that such will be forthcoming.

Trusting something as important as the first line of your story to a series of bulletpoints can seem artificial or mechanical. Happily, though, it works. It gives us structure and helps us craft the subsequent narrative, becoming a serving platter for everything else that is engaging about a good story: an exciting plot, compelling characters, a magnetic setting, and more.

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