

The First Two Pages of “Chefs” by Faye Snowden

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An Essay by Faye Snowden

I’m in love with words and images, so in love that I acquired a master’s degree in English on my way to building a career in IT. I’m also in love with stories, which is why that degree isn’t in Linguistics. This passion alone doesn’t necessarily make a great short story writer, or a great short story.

Let me illustrate: I wrote “Chefs” five years ago after reading an article about a woman who killed her husband and boiled him before alternately stuffing his remains down the garbage disposal and mixing them with Thanksgiving dinner leftovers. (Yes, it’s rumored that she did partake.) At first, I couldn’t understand all of the rejections I received after submitting the story for publication. How could readers not love “Chefs” as much as I did? In the end I figured it out. After all, I went to college.

In a short story, you have to capture the reader’s attention fast. Not only that, but I’m sure there’s a lost tablet somewhere out there that says, “Thou shalt not confuse thou reader.” One of the reasons the story had so many rejections is because I had too many things going on in the first paragraph. Here is the original:

She was not the misogynistic representation of the dime store novel *femme fatale* who corrupted a good man with her bad ways. He [Johnny] knew that he was not so gone in love with her that he would rob a bank or kill a man. She was only the woman who would

sometimes straighten her soft hair before winding it around her head until the ends glistened in wisps all around her perfectly symmetrical face. **At those times she appeared to be the geisha, the African queen, the Victorian lady with her throat collared and her sleeves puffed all wrapped into one as she floated towards him.**

Sometimes she would leave her hair natural so that he could hang onto it while they made love **and he could inhale the sweet smell of soap and hemp** as he thought about her husband.

The bolded text is what I eventually deleted. I hated doing it, but it had to go. This story is about a woman who uses her beauty to get what she wants. The phrases “soft hair,” “glistened in wisps,” and “perfectly symmetrical face” captures that picture of beauty. The reader doesn’t need the main character’s thoughts (Johnny) regarding the geisha, African queen, etc. to know that she’s beautiful. Not only are those images unnecessary, but they are so stereotypical that they make Johnny look like a jerk. I didn’t want him to look like a jerk. I wanted him to look like a poor sap who is lying to himself the entire story. He is already doing that quite well from the first sentence.

But the first sentence never changed since first lines drive my short stories. They seldom are edited out from the original draft. When I came across that article, I thought, “Okay, there is a story there,” and went about my business. I don’t remember exactly, but the first line probably came to me while I was driving or cleaning, and it stayed.

After I cleaned up the first paragraph, I turned my attention to the remaining images and detail. We’ve heard the old adage that the detail must be concrete,

meaning that they must involve one of the senses. Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French in the book *Writing Fiction, A Guide to Narrative Craft* remind us that the detail must also be significant. The reader must be able to make a judgement about the story and characters based on what they are feeling, hearing, seeing, tasting, or smelling. I felt that the details in the subsequent text on the first two pages were necessary to the story.

For example, the image of the busted pumpkins spilling their guts in the field along Highway 99 conveys elements of horror. Something terrible is about to happen. Anna's "slow, sexy smile full of confidence and promise" challenges Johnny's notion that he would never kill for her.

The reader can further judge that Anna will have her way by the images of Johnny acting like a child. He takes "an extravagant drag" from a cigarette like they did in the movies when he was a boy. He surfs the "cool air outside the open [truck] window" with his free hand like a twelve-year-old. And not only is Anna driving, she's the one who decides to exit the freeway, "shooting toward Riverbank," conveying a sense of inevitable movement and direction. Johnny, if he doesn't start acting, is about to be taken on the ride of his life.

I don't have many short stories under my belt as I'm primarily a novelist. Every time I finish one, I ask myself how in the hell did I pull it off. I have a better idea after completing this first two pages exercise. I believe good short stories

come from the bumpy marriage of passion and craft, and always, no matter how much it hurts, keeping the reader in mind.

The First Two Pages of “Chefs”

She wasn't the misogynistic representation of the dime store novel femme fatale who corrupted a good man with her bad ways. He knew he wasn't so gone in love with her that he would rob a bank or kill a man. She was only the woman who would sometimes straighten her hair before winding it around her head until the ends glistened in wisps all around her perfectly symmetrical face. Sometimes she would leave her hair natural so he could plunge his fingers through it as they made love, even though all he could think about was her husband the entire time. Yes, he knew what she was. But more importantly, he knew what he was. And what he wasn't.

They were driving past a field of pumpkins on Highway 99 toward Modesto, some so ripe that they had cracked, spilling pulp and seeds onto the curling green leaves. He hadn't talked since Oakland. He took a drag on his cigarette, a long, extravagant drag like they did in the movies when he was a boy. He blew out a stream of smoke and still didn't say anything. He let the hand not holding the cigarette surf the cool air outside the open window, his silver-tipped leather boots cocked on the dash.

Finally, she said, “I asked you a question.”

He looked at her. Straightened black hair whipped across her face in the wind coming through the open windows. She smiled, not looking at the road but with her eyes on him. It was a slow, sexy smile full of confidence and promise.

“Ask it again.” He took another drag of the Marlboro and turned to stare out the window once again. Late October and time, like the year, was running out.

“I asked if you had talked to him,” she said, before turning back to the road.

“No.”

“Johnny,” she said. “He knows.”

Johnny didn't bother to tell her that he had probably always known but had finally been confronted with a piece of evidence he could no longer ignore.

She exited the freeway at Kiernan, and now they were headed down the expressway shooting toward Riverbank. They wouldn't get there. He knew exactly where she would stop. He returned to his thoughts. Her husband had known almost the moment she and Johnny touched. Johnny was sure of it. He knew him as well as he knew his wife. Jonny had grown up with the man he was now betraying, joined the army with him. He had even saved his life once, but that was a long time ago.

"He's coming back tonight," she said as she exited the expressway.

She rolled onto a dirt road and drove behind an abandoned house so no one would see the Ford pickup from the street. She set the parking brake for no reason at all. The ground was flat and dusty all around. He could feel her looking at him again, but he didn't return her gaze. He opened. . .

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Faye Snowden is the author of noir mysteries, poems and several short stories. Her novels include *Spiral of Guilt*, *The Savior*, *Fatal Justice*, and *A Killing Fire*, a dark, southern gothic tale featuring homicide detective Raven Burns. *A Killing Fire* is first in a four-part series. The sequel, *A Killing Rain*, will be released June 21, 2022. Faye's short story, "One Bullet. One Vote" was selected as one of the best American mystery and suspense stories of 2021. The story was anthologized in *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2021* edited by Alafair Burke and Steph Cha. Her work has been called "intense," "pulse-pounding," and a "solid contribution to a genre lacking in Black women authors."

Faye has a master's in English Literature. She has been awarded competitive writing fellowships from Djerassi and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She is a member of Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime (SinC), where she serves as Board Secretary for SinC National. She has participated on many writing panels, appeared as a guest lecturer in several university writing classes, and taught information technology courses at the university level. Today, Faye works and writes from her home in Northern California. Learn more about Faye at www.fayesnowden.com.