

## **The First Two Pages: “Better Together” by Delia Pitts**

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### **An Essay by Delia Pitts**

Setting a table is easy—plunk down a few plates, some tumblers and sharp utensils, and you’re ready to eat. Building the table is far harder. Measuring, sawing, nailing, glueing, sanding, varnishing. Lots of work to create even the simplest four-legged object.

Writing an effective introduction for your story is as simple and as hard as that table. All you have to do is undertake four tasks: 1) build a world; 2) establish a voice; 3) set a problem to be explored if not utterly resolved by story’s end; and 4) capture your reader’s attention. Gigantic challenges and precious little space to work.

These four tasks galvanized each line of the first two pages of my detective duo story, “Better Together.” As an example, here’s an early version of my opening paragraph:

Arriving at the old YMCA after nine at night, I pushed through the twin glass doors and into the yellow light of the reception area. The sharp talons of Harlem’s fall weather scratched at my neck as I shoved the doors shut. The gray-flecked white linoleum tiles were dingy with prints of a thousand shoes. The stench of liniment and dirty leather hung in the air as I approached the desk for directions.

These were four decent sentences to launch the story. Okay but not enough.

With a few additions I crafted a clearer picture that illuminated the physical, weather, and emotional setting of the story. Here is the final version of that lead paragraph with changes in italics:

Arriving at the old *Harlem* YMCA after nine at night, I pushed through the twin glass doors and into the yellow light of the reception area. The sharp talons of *gusty March* clawed my neck as I shoved the door shut. *The lobby was empty, but I could hear cheers and shouts echoing in the distance. My muddy sneakers added to the thousands of shoe prints embossed in the grey-flecked linoleum tiles. When I lowered the wool scarf from my face,* the stench of liniment and sweaty leather swabbed my nose. I approached the reception desk *to ask a Black man there* for directions. *My mother was in here, but where? I was a grown man, at least passing for one, so, of course, that's not how I'd put the question.*

What do we gather from this first paragraph? In both versions, the first-person point of view is established from the lead sentence. This choice is crucial to orienting the reader in the story. We also learn the geographical and seasonal location of the story. By having the narrator use not only his sight but his senses of hearing and smell we get a richer idea of the setting we are approaching.

We also get an immediate glimpse of the narrator's imagination and mindset: sharp talons of wind claw his neck; shoe prints are embossed; sweaty stench swabs his nose. His voice is introduced through word choices which underscore his poetic, sensitive, and observant nature. Right away we know the speaker has several of the key tools in the private investigator tool kit. Then the last two

sentences deliver the wallop. This is a person on the verge of adulthood, grappling with issues of identity with particular reference to his mother. He asserts he is a grown man, then undercuts that claim with the phrase “at least passing for one.” A key problem of the story has been launched in the first paragraph: How will the narrator deal with the transition from adolescence to manhood? Will his mother assist or trample that shift? We don’t know if this complicated issue will be thoroughly resolved by the end of the story, but we certainly expect the layers to be tugged apart for examination. Here is the emotional hook which, I hope, engages reader attention and sympathy for the young detective even before he is confronted with a crime to solve.

The rest of the first two pages amplify the four main goals. We learn the narrator’s name is Roland and that he is reluctant to share his last name because his mother is a “neighborhood famous” private investigator, Fabrice Peters. Here the story’s second PI is indirectly introduced by her son as both a source of pride and frustration. Roland notes the wound of his father’s recent death which has affected both the professional and personal fortunes of the Peters family. By the end of this first segment, we also have Roland’s physical description, delivered through his assumptions about his mother’s disappointment and estrangement.

The second important element of these opening two pages is the presentation of the key characters and setting of the story. We don’t know what the crime will

be yet, but we do have a picture of the physical layout of the interior of the Y and an overview of the occupants. No cast member is there by chance. Each person super-observant Roland notes as he tours the building will have a role to play in the drama.

The first two pages of the story wrap on a melancholy note as Roland admits his mother is a mystery to him. He feels she withdrew from him after the death of his father and as a result Roland is adrift, wanting to prove himself as a detective and as a man. Will this case provide the opportunity he has sought?

Scene-setting, voice, emotional problem, grabbing reader attention. A lot to tackle in such a brief span. But now the table is built, discover the crime, and dive into the meal.

Here are the First Two Pages of “Better Together.”

Arriving at the old Harlem YMCA after nine at night, I pushed through the twin glass doors and into the yellow light of the reception area. The sharp talons of gusty March clawed my neck as I shoved the doors shut. The lobby was empty, but I could hear cheers and shouts echoing in the distance. My muddy sneakers added to the thousands of shoe prints embossed in the grey-flecked linoleum tiles. When I lowered the wool scarf from my face, the stench of liniment and sweaty leather swabbed my nose. I approached the reception desk to ask a Black man there for directions. *My mother was in here, but where?* I was a grown man, at least passing for one, so, of course, that’s not how I’d put the question.

The dun-colored skeleton behind the Formica countertop rattled to life and greeted me like a long-lost cousin. “Welcome! How can I help you?”

The man’s badge read “T. Hadley.” He’d been dozing, but his reedy voice piped a cheery salute. Despite his sunken eyes and

yellow picket fence teeth, the receptionist was as chatty as a kindergarten teacher. “It’s late, so there’s not as much activity to see at this hour. But you’re more than welcome to check out the place.”

He peered at his cell phone, hoisting it close to his nose. Then he hacked the nap-time loogies from his throat and launched into hype mode before I sputtered a word. “If you come back tomorrow during regular business hours you can meet with someone from our recreation staff to sign you up for membership. This your first time here at the Y, Mister...?”

“Roland.” No need to give him my last name. My mother was neighborhood famous. If I said our shared name this skeleton would recognize me as the child of the local private detective Fabrice Peters. “I’m meeting a, um, friend. Maybe at the pool.”

Friend was a casual way to bracket our complicated relationship. My mother ran the security company, F.J. Peters, Investigations. The firm was named after its founder, her late husband, Franklin Peters. My father died four years ago, when I was sixteen. Leaving behind a struggling enterprise and a wounded family. Fabrice and I were still stitching together the pieces.

Like a twitchy cheerleader, Hadley the manager led me on a roundabout journey through the building. We wandered past the basketball court, locker rooms, and a tiny snack bar served by four vending machines. A weight room stacked with barbells against the back wall was next to a door marked “Office.” Though the hour was late, teams of Black boys thundered around the court, a crowd of parents bouncing on the riser benches. A burly Black man pumped iron in the weight room and two giggling kids – Latino boy, African American girl -- in giant satin shorts and hoodies held hands in front of the vending machines. I wondered how bags of Fritos were romantic, but Romeo and Juliet seemed glad to escape their families’ smothering supervision for the evening. Their giggles over a shared cell phone tickled the walls of the tiny alcove.

Three Black women in leggings and T-shirts propped their feet on chairs in the lounge. Beads of sweat at their hairlines, plastic water bottles in hand, and pastel-colored mats rolled up on the floor suggested they’d just finished a yoga class. They were puffing hard, but their chatter never faltered as they powered through a week’s worth of gossip.

Hadley had skipped the pool, so after eight minutes of this tour, I asked directly. Three more minutes for my guide to shuffle me to a regulation-size Olympic facility. Fabrice was in the lap pool, alone.

Hadley eyed her, then turned his lantern gaze on me. “Is Ms. Peters your friend? Is she expecting you, Mr. Roland? She didn’t mention anything when she arrived.”

I shrugged, eyes wide to convey she was a mystery to me. Inside, I was certain why she never mentioned me. *Well, she wouldn’t, would she?* My mother was embarrassed by me. By my gangling arms and pigeon toes. By the way my shoulders jutted like rake handles beyond the collar of my track suit jackets. By the fact that my brown skin and hazel eyes were daily reminders of the man who’d abandoned us by dying. Was Fabrice sad to be widowed? Ashamed, stymied, angry? She never shared with me. Never tried to comfort or calm. Bottle up and push on was her style. So, I stewed alone. Until I managed the sadness by refusing to go to college. Dumb move, but withdrawal felt like a way to punish the world, myself, and my mother in one stupid swoop.

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Born and raised in Chicago, Delia Pitts graduated from Oberlin College with a Bachelor’s degree in history. After working as a journalist, she earned a Ph.D. in African history from the University of Chicago. She is a former university administrator and U.S. diplomat. Her newest book, a contemporary noir mystery, *Death of an Ex*, was published by Minotaur Books in 2025. Featuring a Black woman private investigator, this novel is the sequel to *Trouble in Queenstown*, published in 2024 by Minotaur. Delia is also the author of the Ross Agency Mysteries, a series set in Harlem. She has published several acclaimed short stories, including “The Killer,” which was selected for inclusion in *Best American Mystery and Suspense 2021*. Delia is an active member of Sisters in Crime, Mystery Writers of America, and Crime Writers of Color. Delia and her husband live in central New Jersey and have twin sons. To learn more about Delia and her books visit her website, [deliapitts.com](http://deliapitts.com).