

The First Two Pages: “Bad Man Down” by Victor De Anda

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An Essay by Victor De Anda

My story “Bad Man Down” takes place at the Salton Sea, which is a unique area in Southern California just outside of Palm Springs. A man-made lake created in 1905, the Salton Sea became a resort destination in the ’50s, with hotels, yacht clubs, and homes built on the North Shore to take advantage of the growing tourism. Acts like Frank Sinatra and The Beach Boys performed there.

By the ’70s and ’80s, the salinity in the lake increased due to farm runoff and other minerals in the ground beneath the water. The fish in the lake began to die off, and the entire area began to stink. The North Shore, once a popular spot for boating, hotels, and clubs, became a ghost town.

Last time I visited the area, there was still a trailer park off the water, but it’s mostly abandoned motels and buildings now. People still live nearby, no doubt individuals who just can’t leave or don’t want to be found. The entire area is reportedly a hotspot for meth cooks as well.

Since I was a kid traveling to Southern California on family vacations, the Salton Sea has always fascinated me. Hence the inspiration for “Bad Man Down.” Previously, I’d attempted a short story set in the ’50s about a man having an affair

with the wife of a Palm Springs land baron. They'd escape to the Salton Sea for their trysts. Then I ran into a roadblock with the story. I set it down and worked on others instead.

Several years later, the idea came to me: What if a couple of goons were tasked with disposing of a body in the Salton Sea?

Now let's get into the nitty-gritty. In my short fiction, I like to tell the reader very quickly about where the story takes place, the characters we'll be following, and the time period it's set. I can get time and place out of the way with just one no-nonsense sentence—much better, in my opinion, than some info dump or slow reveal of corded telephones or other antiquated devices that indicate the time period.

The first paragraph also helps set up the story locale, giving just enough details for those readers who don't know what the Salton Sea is.

North Shore, Salton Sea, Riverside County—1999

The early summer morning reeked of humid garbage. Roepp and Ramon stood shoulder to shoulder, their knees kissing the back bumper of the '96 Buick Park Ave. Ramon's neck was damp with sweat. Another hour and the sun would creep up over the horizon. Out here in the low desert, the sun wasn't your friend, it was your vengeful ex-lover. Not even the nearby water cooled things down. The Salton Sea was where everything came to die.

So this opening paragraph hopefully gives you all the info you need about the time, place, and people involved—and that the Salton Sea is dead in many ways. I also mention the weather, since that adds some tension too. In my opinion,

fiction, especially short fiction, should be about some kind of tension. A push and pull with the reader, grabbing their attention and yanking them along for the ride. At least that's my goal.

This first paragraph also introduces us to our two main characters, Roepp and Ramon. They're in the middle of doing something. I often like to start my stories with some kind of physical movement or action. This is writing advice I gleaned from Chuck Palahniuk's craft book, *Consider This: Moments In My Writing Life After Which Everything Was Different*. Great book, if you want to give it a read. I believe it helps pull a reader into the story.

Ramon stared down into the open car trunk at the motionless body inside. The stiff's name was Grisby. He was a tall and lanky guy, but now he looked like a crumpled up marionette with a giant head, his strings cut. To make him fit into the trunk, Roepp had to break the guy's arms and legs. Next to Grisby's head laid a stick of dynamite.

"Why the fuck have you got a stick of dynamite in the car?"
Ramon said.

Roepp shrugged. "I was a Boy Scout, believe it or not."

"Shit," Ramon said. "Always be prepared?"

Next, I introduce a third character—Grisby, the dead guy. If you're a film buff like I am, the corpse's name might ring a bell. I stole it from the Orson Welles film *The Lady From Shanghai*, a favorite of mine.

By now, I hope it's obvious to the reader what Roepp and Ramon are here to do. The graphic description of Grisby's crumpled body also gives the reader an

indication as to what kind of people Roepp and Ramon are and what they're willing to do. Characterization without too much info dumping is always my goal.

There's also a "Chekov's gun" object that's introduced here—the stick of dynamite. Like in any good storytelling, I believe in setups and payoffs. Yes, I realize this screams "setup." But I also like to stay ahead of the reader just a smidge, which is why Ramon even asks Roepp about the dynamite.

It adds a bit of humor, which is important in my writing. Even the most dead serious situation often has some comedy in it. My brand is the dark humor variety. If you've read any of my other work, you've seen it on display. So I like to pepper my stories with it if I can. Most times when I'm writing, the humor presents itself. I'm not trying to tell jokes, I'm just paying attention to the situation. Again, I feel like there's humor in even the most dire circumstances. How could there not be?

"Damn straight," Roepp said. "Let's finish this shit and get some breakfast."

Roepp grabbed Grisby's ankles while Ramon tugged on his arms to pull him out and get a hold of his upper body.

"Damn," Ramon said. "Forgot how heavy this guy was. I hate doing this shit."

Roepp got Grisby's legs out of the trunk. "He's tall, that's why. And his head's the size of a watermelon. Are you going to keep talking or you going to help?"

Ramon dropped his side of the body back into the trunk. "Let's switch," he said. "You're stronger than I am, always have been."

It was true, Roepp was the big, beefy guy. Ramon was the slender, stealthy one.

"Now you want to fucking play musical chairs?" Roepp said. "Jesus." He let go of Grisby's legs and they draped over the back bumper so he was half in, half out of the trunk.

Now here's a little more humor. And some physical descriptions of Roepp and Ramon. In my short fiction, I don't like to describe the characters with too much detail. Just enough to paint a picture with broad strokes. Hopefully the reader fills in the blanks and they all recognize someone like Roepp or Ramon.

Another basic component of storytelling is motivation. The best-written characters should want something, even if it's just crossing a room to get a glass of water. In this section, I introduce the fact that Roepp is hungry and wants to finish disposing the body so that he can get breakfast. The two have no doubt been up all night taking care of business and they just want to be done. Ramon expresses his disdain for this part of the job as well, which sets up what's to come for him.

What also comes into play here is another thing I try to apply to my stories—status play. In some ways, I'd already been doing this in my writing, but I really understood it better when I took a class with Craig Clevenger (*The Contortionist's Handbook, Mother Howl*). Characters should always be pushing to achieve status over the other. Whether it's a parent and a child, or a boss and their employee, that tug of war should be constant. This adds more tension and “stickiness” to a story.

“Breakfast is on me,” Ramon. “Anywhere you want. Name it.”
Roepp relented. “That's easy. Elmer's.”
“Sounds good,” Ramon said. “Know what you want?”
“The Clubhouse Omelet, what else?” Roepp said.
Ramon nodded. “You got it.”

Another thing I like to do with my fiction is insert real places to lend some authenticity. Elmer's is a real diner in Palm Springs, I've eaten there before. For even more atmosphere, I will often research restaurant menus for these places. The Clubhouse Omelet is a real item at Elmer's. Again, I feel like these little touches make it specific and real. Specificity is king, in my mind.

They swapped places. Ramon grabbed Grisby's ankles and Roepp grabbed his armpits. After a three count, they heaved the body out of the trunk. They moved towards the water, Ramon shuffling backwards, Roepp pushing forward like they were moving a busted-up couch into a friend's apartment.

This section took a bit of revision for me. Describing physical action in a brief way can be difficult. Scene geography is also important to my writing. I want the reader to know who's standing where and how they move, so as to avoid any confusion like, "I thought this guy was across the room, now he's here?" At least that's my goal.

The last sentence in this section was also tough. I was trying to describe what it's like for two people to move a busted up dead body. After several drafts, it came to me—it was like moving an unwieldy couch from one place to another.

This brings up another writing goal of mine—metaphors that work the best for a situation. Mine may not always be the flashiest or the most lyrical metaphors, but I try to reach a middle ground there. I also try to pepper them into a story and not overwhelm the reader. But I can go overboard sometimes. It happens.

“Slow down,” Roepp said. “This guy’s built like a Charms Blow pop. It’s his damn head that’s so heavy. Should we just cut it off?”

Ramon stopped moving. “That’s not what Derek said to do. He had very specific instructions for Grisby, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s got to go in the water,” Roepp said. “We could just bury him. Who’s going to know?”

Ramon cocked his head and raised his eyebrows at Roepp. “Derek would find out somehow. He always does.”

“Right,” Roepp said. “Let’s finish this, my stomach’s rumbling.”

More dark humor here. We find out more about Roepp’s character. He’s got candy on the brain. And he’s not above decapitating a corpse to make his life easier. Who wouldn’t do that, right?

Ramon, on the other hand, is more like a “by-the-book” kind of guy. He doesn’t want to disappoint their boss, Derek. Again, I’m playing with tension here, that fight for status. Throughout the story, Roepp and Ramon trade rabbit punches, each fighting for status.

Sidenote: Most of my 1999 L.A. short stories all take place in the same universe. Roepp and Ramon’s boss Derek appears in several other stories. If you want to play “Where’s Derek?” and look for his cameos, please do.

And so we come to the end of the second page. Roepp reiterates his motivation—hunger. He just wants to be done and sidle into a booth at Elmer’s for his omelette. Ramon wants to finish the job the right way. In the rest of the story, we soon find out about the tribulations that await them both.

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Victor De Anda is an author living and writing in the Philadelphia area. His story “Bad Man Down” has been included in *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2025*, edited by Don Winslow and Steph Cha. His novelette “They Eat Their Own” is part of the crime/thriller anthology *Myopic Duplicity*. Other stories of his have appeared in *Dark Yonder*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Dark Waters*, *Yellow Mama*, *Mystery Tribune*, and *Punk Noir Magazine*. You can find him on most social media as @victordeanda or at his website, <https://www.victordeanda.com/>