

The First Two Pages: “A Complicated History” by Daniel C. Bartlett

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An Essay by Daniel C. Bartlett

I worked on my story “A Complicated History” over several years, coming to it and going from it until I found the voice of the piece. I knew the premise of the story, the characters, and the world. I knew its essence and even the tone and feel of it. But it wasn’t until I found the narrator’s voice that I truly found the heart of the story.

I wrote and revised several versions of the opening scenes before I bumbled into the sentence that became the opening line: “I had no idea people like Domingo existed until he showed up at my apartment and invited himself in to stay.” I like an opening line that grabs you, that makes you have to read on. I like an opening that hits hard and fast, setting a scene but also raising a whole lot of questions. I want it to pique curiosity. Once I developed that opening line, I felt that I’d found the right way to open this story.

I’m not sure how someone invites themselves in to stay, so I think this opening raises the reader’s curiosity and reveals something interesting about the characters (maybe especially the narrator). My hope is that readers will be curious

enough to keep reading, to want to find out what's going on here. You have to wonder what's meant by "people like Domingo," as well as what's with the narrator who allows Domingo to invite himself in to stay. And the lines immediately following the opening statement give us additional insights while raising a whole lot more questions:

Domingo wasn't someone you refused. And back then as an eighteen year old kid who'd been kicked out of college and then my parents' house, I wasn't good at telling anyone no. We both worked at Sal's Grocery, a meat market where he trained me to grind, mix, and stuff sausage into tubes. That's where we met and how he knew where I lived. After we'd worked together three days that's when he knocked on my door knowing full well I'd let him stay. I was an easy target, and he was good at getting his way.

He had a gorgeous girlfriend, Melanie. She was the kind of gorgeous that made my insides ache just to look at her. He was in love with her. He didn't trust other guys around her, and he moved in and took over my life trying to hide away with her, to keep her to himself.

We learn a bit more about the narrator in those few sentences. Little details are revealed, adding layers of depth to the situation and revealing more about the characters. We now know the narrator is relating a story from his past; we know his age at the time of that story; we know he's been kicked out of college and his parents' house; and we know he's perhaps not all that assured, strong, confident. He's not good at telling people no. But he knows it, and he's openly telling us about it. To me, this reveals a narrator with decent self-awareness, though it's probably self-awareness acquired over time, since we know the narrator is looking

back. I wanted to achieve a sense of nostalgia, with a hint of sorrow, melancholy. I hope the opening scene helps evoke that sense.

I like how the opening establishes quite a bit but also leaves a whole lot unanswered. We have to wonder what's going on and what's going to happen, of course; but we also have to wonder why the narrator was kicked out of college and why he was kicked out of his parents' house. What did he do? We don't know yet, but teaser details like that should (I hope) make us want to find out.

The scene closes with a pretty solid hint of some conflict to come—the narrator tells us about Domingo's gorgeous girlfriend, as well as Domingo's jealousy and protectiveness about her. We already know that “Domingo wasn't someone you refused,” so while we should be curious about where this will go, we should definitely suspect that it won't be pretty. At least, that's what I hoped to establish in that brief opening scene.

This is first-person story, of course, so the voice is important. In fact, as I said previously, the voice drives this particular story. We can see how Domingo is the character of focus, but we're really learning a lot about the narrator. Of course, readers understand that a narrator can be reliable or unreliable (and all kinds of in-between). So in developing the story, I hoped to play with that. From the opening section so far, readers don't know how reliable the narrator is.

With first-person stories, I personally love a narrator who feels blunt, open, intimate. I also like when a narrator is brutally self-aware—even if we come to find out that they’re seriously confused or misguided. Is the narrator being honest? Is he deliberately misleading us? Or is he misleading himself? I can’t say that I intentionally toyed with these questions while writing this story. In my mind, honestly, I saw this narrator as sincere. To me, he’s not intentionally misleading. But as I explored and developed this story, I also found myself curious about how misguided the narrator might be. Oh, he’s sincere (I think), or at least he thinks he’s being sincere (again, I think).

The second section, after a space break, opens with another scene that’s intended to escalate the mystery and add depth to the situation:

Two cops were waiting in the parking lot after my second day’s shift with Domingo. This was before he moved himself in with me. We were walking out together and one of the cops called Domingo’s name. “Later, man,” Domingo said to me. He walked past the cops like they weren’t there. The cops exchanged smiles with one another and turned to me.

“Michael Larue?” one of them said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“New on the job, huh?” the cop said. The other cop leaned against their car, silent but watching me over the top of his sunglasses. “Just wanted to have a little chat with you.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt myself shiver even in the warm afternoon sun.

“You know him?” A nod over his shoulder, in Domingo’s direction.

I shrugged. “He’s training me.”

The cop nodded. He folded his arms over his chest. “What can you tell me about him?”

“I don’t know anything about him.” The cop waited, so I added, “His name’s Domingo. He’s pretty good at stuffing sausage.” Across the parking lot, Domingo got in his car and drove away, keeping a steady gaze over half-open black-tinted windows. A gaze not on the cops but on me. So far all I knew was that Domingo was fast at stuffing sausage and that he didn’t waste time talking. He got several calls or texts on his cell, answered with quick responses, then got back to work. I didn’t say that to the cops. From my experience, the best strategy for dealing with anyone—cops, parents, university officials, any authority really—was to answer questions without committing to anything specific.

“That all you know?”

I shrugged, meaning *I guess so*.

“Keep it that way. We’ll be talking with you.”

I like how this opens even further uncertainty, raises our curiosity, and raises the stakes. Now we have the police confronting our narrator. I like the understated threats established in this scene—the police warning our narrator, and Domingo giving the narrator a steady gaze. I like how we see a bit more development of the narrator’s traits. He tells us that his way of dealing with authority is not to commit to anything. In terms of character development, I hope this adds intriguing but subtle details. There’s tension, but I believe it’s understated, which echoes the narrator’s demeanor so far.

One element of this story that I worked and re-worked in order to achieve the effect I felt was necessary was powerful hook lines to either open or close scenes—preferably both, but I didn’t want to overdo it. So we end the brief second scene with the police warning our narrator to watch it with Domingo and leaving a clear threat that they’re not finished with the narrator, Michael. The scene ends

quickly, and the next one opens with what I hope is a powerful line: “The first time I was confronted by cops was when I shot and killed my brother.” By design, this statement is presented in such a way that it should leave readers breathless. Okay, “breathless” might be over the top, but I’m definitely aiming for a gripping hook here. I like how over the top this statement might appear, yet it’s casually thrown out there. I hope lines like this will drive readers forward. I’d certainly want to know more. That line is followed by this brief description:

I was fourteen. Derek was sixteen. We were hunting squirrels in the woods not far from home.

“What happened here?” I remember the sheriff asking.

I couldn’t seem to recall where I was. I blinked at the .22 rifle the cops had tagged and placed in a plastic bag. I thought it was my rifle, but I didn’t remember ever touching the trigger.

This new information about the narrator’s past nonchalantly reveals a shocking incident. Again, the narrator relates this information directly and without elaboration. We’ve learned something dramatic here, but somehow this new information only adds further layers of mystery to the story. Ultimately, I really like how the narrator reveals such personal, intimate details about himself, yet simultaneously leaves so much unstated. My goal is to present readers with brutal insights and details, and yet make sure it’s apparent that there’s much more beneath it all.

I wrote this story more by the seat-of-my-pants method, more by instinct than rigorous planning. I knew the overall essence of the story when I started

writing it. But mostly I followed the voice (once I found it), let it guide things. I think it's a moving and powerful story overall, but if this story works like I hope it does, it's because there's something gripping, something authentic, in the voice.

I'm grateful for *EQMM* and to Janet Hutchings, the editor at that time, for seeing something in this story too and giving readers an opportunity to find it. It's been one of my more successful stories so far. I hope new readers who see this essay might be enticed to find and read the story as well.

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Daniel C. Bartlett's short mystery fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Twisted Voices: Stories from Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* (Level Short), *Shotgun Honey*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Mystery Magazine*, *Thrill Ride: The Magazine*, *Crimeucopia*, *Yellow Mama*, and *The Yard: Crime Blog*, among others. The story addressed in this essay was cited among "Other Distinguished Mystery and Suspense" in *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2023*. He lives in southeast Texas with his wife and partner-in-crime (writing), author KT Bartlett, and their daughter (a poet)—yes, God help them, a family of writers—along with two dogs that feel more like four dogs, and a school of always hungry but otherwise pretty cool koi. He teaches writing and literature at Lamar University. <https://www.facebook.com/DanielCBartlett.writer>