

## Incorporating the Inciting Image

by Paula Gail Benson

Sometimes a strong image inspires me to write a short story. Watching a PBS cooking program where the chef tied his meat with twine, placed it on a spit, and roasted it over the blazing fire in his kitchen's wall-length hearth resulted in "Only the Sacrifice Knows," a Thanksgiving mystery published online by *Kings River Life*.

I wondered what kind of modern family might prepare their Thanksgiving feast in that manner. My story began with a scene beside a kitchen hearth. The cook, Tante Juliette, muttered in French while preparing the main course. Marguerite, the teenaged narrator and POV, observed the process, knowing if she failed in her unnamed task, she could be next year's sacrifice.

The unknown meat and unknown task were crucial elements in building the story's suspense. I felt I had to provide a detailed description of the image that intrigued me in order to fascinate and hook readers.

I was surprised when my critique group told me my preoccupation with the meat preparation bogged down the story. Not until Lorie Ham, the wonderful editor and publisher at *Kings River Life* said her first reader made the same comment, did I take my story back to the chopping block and cut the description to the bone.

How could I emphasize this image that had made such an impression upon me without burdening readers with unnecessary description? My solution came by juxtaposing tidbits about the meat over the fire with hints at the situation and character motivations. By layering these aspects of the story, I found myself discovering ways to insert clues concerning the story's resolution.

To establish that the story takes place in modern times, rather than being historical, Marguerite mentions that she is in the kitchen instead of her more usual Thanksgiving post before the television watching the parade. Considering the "ancient" process taking place before her, she ponders the true mystery of the story: exactly what meat is being roasted?

Her brother Ramon enters and frightens her. His "boo" shows his playful nature as well as lightens the mood concerning the ominous question about the meat.

As Marguerite and Ramon discuss why he has arrived early rather than traveling with his twin, John Paul, now engaged to Ramon's former girlfriend Izzy, they watch the meat being cooked and feel the heat from the fire. What Marguerite and Ramon see and feel provides some insight into what they are thinking in addition to helping maintain the atmosphere of suspense.

I hope you'll enjoy these first two pages from "Only the Sacrifice Knows." Here's a link, if you would like to read the full story:

<http://kingsriverlife.com/11/26/only-the-sacrifice-knows-a-thanksgiving-mystery-short-story/>.

Happy Thanksgiving!

*This Thanksgiving, I promised my family I would be a different person. From the moment I woke on Thanksgiving Day until—well, until—I agreed to be the new and improved me. If I failed, I would not be trusted again, and next year, I could be the sacrifice.*

*Since Tante Juliette had been among us, my Thanksgiving morning perch was sitting on the long bench beside the picnic style wood table just beyond the wall-sized brick fireplace, watching Tante prepare the roast. Not in front of the T.V. looking at the parade with its balloons and marching bands, but here in the monstrous kitchen of the family's nouveau chateau observing an ancient ritual of meat being scored, bound with an oiled string and rotated over a raging fire. And wondering, as I watched, what we would be eating.*

*“Boo!”*

*I jumped, then clasped my throbbing chest as my brother, Ramon, plopped down on the bench beside me. Tante jabbered at us in French, making clear by hand motions that Ramon had frightened her, too. Ramon greeted her cheerfully, then turned his attention with ghoulis fascination to the fat dripping into the fire from the trussed meat.*

*“When did you arrive?” I asked.*

*“Last night.”*

*My eyes narrowed. “I thought you would ride with John Paul and Izzy.”*

*He rested his arms on the wooden table and placed his chin on top of his folded hands. “Three’s a crowd, sister dear.”*

*“But you could have harassed them the whole way home!”*

*He shook his head as he continued to watch the drippings on the hearth. “Just exactly what we need to avoid. No antagonism. They are engaged, Marguerite. She’ll be part of our family. We need to welcome her and get her acquainted with our,” he paused, “customs.”*

*I felt the heat from the flames turning my face sunburn red and wondered how Ramon could bask in its glow, like an actor in the limelight. “How can you be so calm about Izzy dumping you for John Paul?”*

*Ramon actually smiled. “If I can’t have her, why shouldn’t my twin?”*

*“Just give me an hour alone with him and I’ll knock some sense into his head.”*

*He gave me a scrutinizing look. “I think our tennis prodigy can handle you, a mere fourteen-year-old slip of a girl. Despite his full scholarship, John Paul will probably quit college*

*and go straight to the professional circuit. But, then, it doesn't really matter, since he'll inherit the house and all the property, thanks to Papa's plan for preserving the estate."*

*"Which is why Izzy wants him instead of you!"*

*He stared into the hearth. I saw the hint of a tiny spark of jealousy in Ramon's eyes and I knew it wasn't just reflected fire-light.*



A legislative attorney and former law librarian, Paula Gail Benson's short stories have appeared online in *Kings River Life* and the *Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*, and in print in *Mystery Times Ten 2013*, *A Tall Ship*, *a Star*, and *Plunder*, *A Shaker of Margaritas: That Mysterious Woman*, and *Fish or Cut Bait: a Guppy Anthology*. With Robert Dugoni, she wrote "A Matter of Honor," which has just been released in *Killer Nashville Noir: Cold-Blooded*. She regularly blogs with others about writing mysteries at the *Stiletto Gang* and *Writers Who Kill*. Her personal blog is *Little Sources of Joy* and her website is <http://paulagailbenson.com>.