

## Beginning with Backstory

B.K. Stevens

We all know we're not supposed to do it. But I did it anyway.

Almost all Creative Writing 101 classes caution us against beginning with backstory, and so do most books on writing fiction. In *Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel*, for example, Hallie Ephron offers a definition and a warning. "Backstory is information about how a character arrived at this particular place and time," she writes. "It's a sure sign that the novel is written by a novice when a load of backstory is dumped into the opening chapter." I don't doubt she'd say the same thing about a load of backstory dumped into the first two pages of a short story. In *Telling Lies for Fun & Profit*, Lawrence Sanders credits his agent with giving him "the best advice I ever received": "*Don't begin at the beginning.*" These "five precious words," Sanders says, made him decide to switch around the first and second chapters of *Death Pulls a Doublecross*, so that the novel now begins with the protagonist lugging a body wrapped in an Oriental rug through the streets of New York City, with not a word of explanation about how he came to be in possession of the body in the first place. Now, *that's* avoiding backstory.

And I agree that, in general, avoiding backstory in the opening pages is a good idea. Usually, I begin a story or novel by jumping into the middle of a scene, being a bit mysterious about what's going on and why. My goal is to get readers caught up in the action before I start weaving in bits of background information about the characters and situation. That's what most of us do most of the time.

But sometimes, I think, we have to break the rules. That's what I did in "A Joy Forever," a short story that appeared in the March 2015 *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and is now a nominee for the Agatha award for Best Short Story. In my first drafts of the story, I tried to begin with the narrator's arrival at Mike Mallinger's house in Boston, six years after Mike's marriage to Gwen Harlowe, two days before the story's climax. It didn't work. It was confusing, and the narrative couldn't move forward at a lively pace because it was weighed down by all the crucial background the reader absolutely had to have. So I decided to defy what has come to be conventional wisdom and to begin with the beginning, with the day Mike and Gwen meet.

It's a risky strategy. We have to make the backstory itself so interesting that readers want to keep reading, even without the promise of a quick payoff. We have to make the backstory move quickly. And in this case, I decided, I also had to make the backstory sound ominous. Here's the opening paragraph I came up with:

Gwen Harlowe had been a florist, my mother said, and had met Uncle Mike when he came to her neat, brisk Beacon Street shop to order flowers for his first wife's funeral. Automatically sympathetic to widowers, she'd helped him choose

between carnations and chrysanthemums, between irises and gladioli. Something must have blossomed, for barely six months later he invited us to Boston for the wedding.

I hoped mystery readers would perk up at the reference to Mike's first wife's funeral. How did she die? Might foul play have been involved? Might Gwen be in danger? In fact, all that is a cheat. We never hear anything more about Mike's first wife. Presumably, she died of natural causes—although after we get to know Mike, we might suspect he destroyed her will to live or irritated her to death. But if the reference to her funeral intrigues readers enough to make them move on to the next paragraph, that's good enough. The statement that Gwen "had been a florist" might also sound ominous: Readers might infer she's no longer a florist, and might wonder why. And the paragraph does move quickly—only three sentences from funeral to wedding—and I hope it gives readers strong initial impressions of the two central characters. Mike loses his wife and waits just six months to remarry—what a cad. Gwen's "neat, brisk shop" suggests she's a hard worker, and her automatic sympathy for widowers suggests she might be lonely. I hope readers will feel compassionate and wish her well. Also, the references to flowers introduce imagery that will be developed throughout the story, as a sometimes flourishing, sometimes wilting reflection of Gwen's independence and creativity.

The next two paragraphs jump ahead to the wedding, confirming readers' initial responses to Mike and Gwen and introducing another image central to the story:

Though I was still in college and a long way from being a professional photographer, Uncle Mike had me take the wedding pictures—good experience for me, he said, and less money wasted for him. In some ways, the challenge proved too much for me: I had a hard time finding backgrounds the bride didn't fade into. She was small, quiet, and pale, at least ten years younger than my uncle but no match for his energy. Whenever I posed them together, she seemed diminished. In every picture I took, from whatever angle I tried, she looked like his sandy-colored shadow.

But she adored him. At the reception, she welded herself to his arm, her blushes a shy hint of glow against beige as she gazed at him with joyous gratitude. It was poignant. Even at twenty, I knew it was poignant. When my mother wished them happiness, I choked up. Since I didn't know Uncle Mike well yet, I thought they had a chance.

Just as flowers mirror Gwen's nature and desires, the quest to become an excellent photographer helps define the narrator. At the wedding, the narrator tries but fails to take a good photograph of Gwen. Not until the last paragraphs of the story, many years later, does the narrator finally succeed in taking a picture that does her justice.

The paragraphs about the wedding should also reinforce the reader's sense that Mike is a less-than-nice guy, one who thinks having a family member take the wedding pictures

will mean “less money wasted for him.” If he regards any money spent on wedding pictures as money wasted, he’s not exactly a romantic. So readers have to wonder about his reasons for rushing into a second marriage. Gwen’s reasons for marrying, by contrast, are too intense to hide, and they tug at the heart. She adores her new husband, he fills her with joy, and she’s grateful to him for marrying her. But he overshadows her—his very presence makes her seem “diminished.” The contrast between his cool calculations and her powerful emotions should, I hope, contribute to the sense of coming disaster, a sense that should grow still stronger when the narrator thinks Mike and Gwen might have a chance at happiness only because “I didn’t know Uncle Mike well yet.”

By the time they finish the first two pages, readers know the marriage has not turned out well. The narrator knows it, too.

One year later, I knew better. I spent the summer in Boston, working at Uncle Mike’s used-car dealership, so hard up for cash that I often accepted his invitations to have dinner at their house. That’s when I learned just how miserable a marriage can be. I sat at their table and cringed.

“I could get a better meal at McDonalds,” he said, bouncing his fork against a leathery grilled chicken cutlet, sinking it into a too-soft Brussels sprout. “I could find cleaner bathrooms there, too. You waste hours puttering around in your damn flower garden, and meanwhile you let the house go to hell.”

“I’m sorry, Mike.” Aunt Gwen’s blushes looked nothing like those of the happy bride of just one year ago. These were pained, embarrassed blushes. “I’m trying to make a comfortable home for you. Really, I am.”

“It sure doesn’t look like you’re trying. Remember what you said the first time we talked about getting married?” He raised his voice in a high-pitched, simpering parody. “Oh, Mike—I just want to make you *happy*. I just want to take *care* of you.” He lowered his voice again. “But you haven’t done it. You don’t know how. You spent too many years in that stupid flower shop, fussing over bouquets and boutonnieres and I-don’t-know-what.”

The flower shop, I now knew, had been the motive for the marriage. The gossip at the dealership was that Uncle Mike had been critically short of cash, in danger of losing his business. Then he met Gwen Harlowe, eager for marriage and owner of a solid little shop with a paid-up mortgage. It hadn’t been hard to persuade her to sell the shop, turn her assets over to him, and trade her lonely independence for the glory of being Mrs. Mike Mallinger. Within months, his business was thriving, and she was desperately trying to become an acceptable drudge. She didn’t have a penny of her own now. She was utterly dependent, utterly helpless.

It made me feel sick to see one human being so thoroughly subdued by another. At the end of August, I drove away, sure I'd never return. Now, six years later, I was driving back.

Only now do readers realize just how far back the backstory goes. Six years—quite a distance from the main action of the story. But we've covered that distance in only two pages, and I hope some interesting things have happened along the way. We've moved from a meeting to a wedding to an unsatisfying marriage, we have a strong preliminary sense of the central characters and the central conflict, and we've been introduced to two patterns of imagery that will become increasingly significant. The account of the narrator's summer in Boston provides further backstory, confirming suspicions about Mike's reasons for marrying Gwen. Now the story can move ahead steadily, without pausing from time to time to fill in necessary information. It's hard—maybe impossible—to be objective about one's own writing. But I think these first two pages work.

I understand why Lawrence Block treasures his agent's advice so much. Most of the time, it's good advice. Sometimes, though, beginning at the beginning makes sense. As writers, we all need to know the rules. But I think we also need to know that, as writers, we're free to decide when it's smart to follow the rules—and when breaking them is the best, most natural way of telling the stories we want to tell.



B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens is the author of *Interpretation of Murder*, a traditional whodunit offering insights into deaf culture, and *Fighting Chance*, a martial arts mystery for young adults. She's also published over fifty short stories, most in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. Some of those stories are included in *Her Infinite Variety: Tales of Women and Crime*, a collection being published by Wildside Press. B.K.

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