

Prelude to a prelude

This opening to a novel wins points for mood and atmosphere, but falters on point of view

An unnamed woman of indeterminate age—who has either survived a broken love affair or is poised to embark on one—settles into her shabby beach-front apartment. Based on the title, we may reasonably assume the latter.

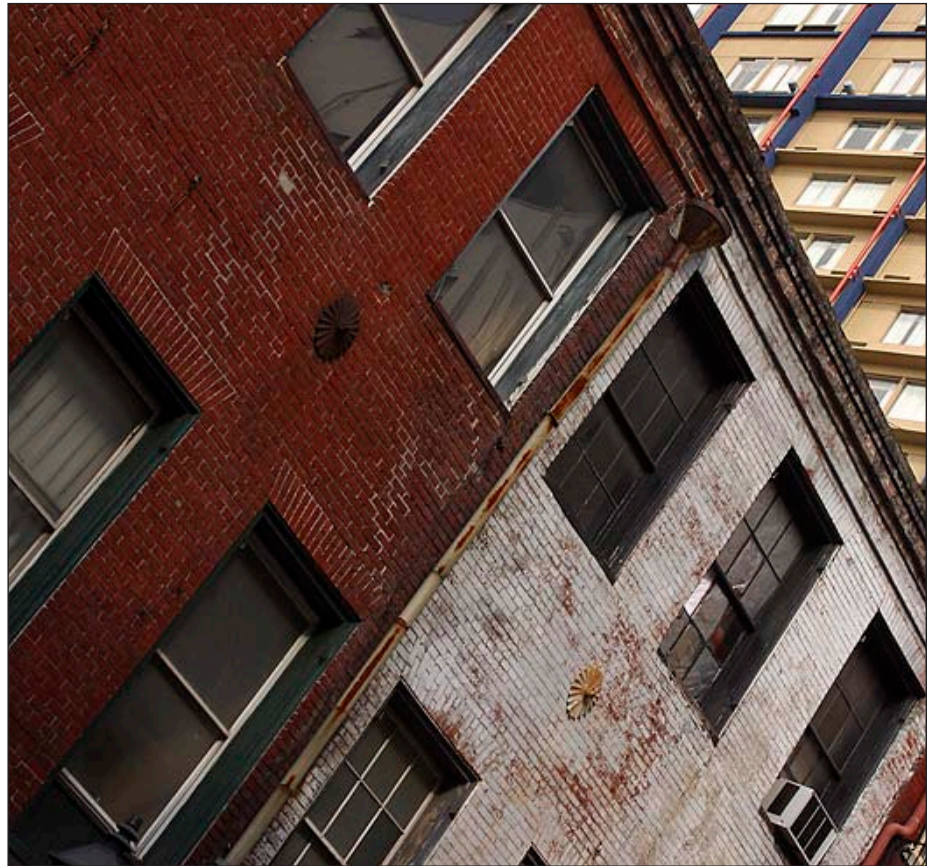
The title raises other issues. Though a title is unprotected by copyright and there's no law requiring one to be original, you want to take into consideration whether a title has too much wear on it. A quick search at Amazon reveals no fewer than 49 products with this title, the best known being playwright Craig Lucas' 1988 drama, irrespective of which the phrase itself is common enough so that—unless used ironically—it may strike some readers as trite.

Like the title, the direct, inviting first line promises a love story. By making the sentence its own paragraph, the author increases its portentousness, suggesting that this meeting will be fateful and may result not only in one or more broken hearts, but in tragedy.

The implied point of view in the second paragraph is that of the protagonist about to park her car in front of the cigar shop housed in the building where she lives. But the sensory details provided here are not, or would not seem to be, part of her experience of the present moment: i.e., can she be parking her car and hearing the “clacking of the wind” simultaneously? Does she see “neat white boats bobbing” as she maneuvers her Ford?

If fiction's purpose is to create experience for the reader, it's important for the author to know whose experience is being reported. Is it that of an omniscient, objective narrator, or that of a specific woman parking her car? It can't be both.

In the third paragraph, with the point



As this month's story opens, a small, shabby apartment in Atlantic City is the setting for the prelude to what is apparently a romantic encounter. Our critic was willing to keep reading.

of view settled into that of the main character, we are able to enjoy the wealth of sensory details—the clicking of sandals against pavement, the color of the evening sky, the calm “rushing” of the bay. Sounds, sighs, smells—all generously and judiciously evoked. The writing is richly atmospheric. At the end of the same paragraph, however, the POV slips again, with the reader being *told* about the quality of the apartment beyond the “cheap and thin door,” though the protagonist has yet to open the door and enter that experience. Why not describe the interior

of the apartment from her POV once she has entered it, and not before?

The third and fourth paragraphs build on the sense of mood and atmosphere established in the second, with details of setting grounded in the character's sensual experience: She sees the sun setting, she smells the salty air, she hears the lapping of waves. So far, beyond the vague, rather coy reference to “all her worries,” nothing in the way of a conflict or plot has been suggested. Which is all right, provided that the writer does indeed have a story to tell us about this woman, and

THE EXCERPT

Prelude to a Kiss

The first time they met was in Atlantic City.

She had a small and shabby apartment above a run-down cigar shop across from the marina, the rows of neat white boats bobbing and clacking in the wind, the evening hot and sultry, water whispering at the bay. She parked her little old white Ford Cortina in the little parking space in front, the thudding of the car door and the click of the lock interrupting the silence of the evening. Her sandals echoing loudly on the pavement in the peaceful azure of the early evening, she slowly made her way to the back door, clambering over the overflowing rubbish bins and listening to the calming rushing of the bay that was just a few hundred yards in front of her. She fumbled with her keys in the lock, before stepping into the cool dimness of the storage room behind the main shop; taking the stairs two at a time, she finally reached her destination, a cheap and thin door that led into a poky and sparsely furnished apartment.

The familiar calming scent of tobacco wafted lazily through the still open windows, thrown wide in the stifling heat of the day. The sun was beginning to sink on the New Jersey coastline and she breathed in the sticky, salty sea air with relish. A gentle warm breeze played on the faded burgundy curtains, fluttering flirtatiously with the windowpanes, the sounds of the lapping and onrushing of waves lulling her mind; for all her worries, all her past and future misdeeds, this city would always live long in her heart, longer than the ones she had left behind—the others, those that held memories she would rather not recall.

She stepped out onto the tiny balcony, a glass of cheap chilled white wine in hand, and sat down on an elderly chair and table ensemble that nearly filled the petite balcony, her feet up on the dusty table. She watched the clear waters of the bay for a while, sparkling in the receding daylight, and the lights blinking on the coastline.

provided the status quo of her daily existence, so lovingly established here, is disrupted in the next few pages, as readers have every right to expect.

Which raises several questions. Is this where the story begins, or where it ends? Has the fateful meeting already occurred, or does it lie in store? The implication of the opening sentence is that we will soon bear witness to the fateful encounter by way of a dramatic *scene*. What has just been stated or summarized will now be shown or *dramatized*.

If that's the case, unless the doorbell is about to ring (with our protagonist sipping Chablis on her balcony), perhaps it would be wiser for the author to state more specifically in that first sentence the circumstances of the fateful meeting ("They met in a bar in Atlantic City"), and start her tale accordingly: not with the protagonist wallowing in her apartment, but at a bar the evening in question. What's being dramatized here? A fateful first encounter, or a woman's routine life in her shabby Atlantic City digs?

Or has that fateful meeting already occurred, along with the attendant love affair, in some past to which this scene is about to flash us back? If so, then what we are being presented with here is the frame of a story, and not the story itself. And that flashback will have to be motivated.

In any event, based on the quality of what I've read so far, I would keep reading.

Peter Selgin

Peter Selgin is the author of *Drowning Lessons*, which won the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, and *Life Goes to the Movies*, a novel.

This is the original opening page of *Prelude to a Kiss*, which was intended as "a long saga-novel." The writer is a student who lives in England and is studying geophysics at the University of Southampton. Find many more of Peter Selgin's analyses of story openings at his website, peterselgin.com. Click on "Blog" and find the link to "Your First Page."