

Backstory perspective

Memories of the layoff

The memory of this event occurs soon after Chas breaks into a room at the abandoned Palmtree timeshare resort, where he is unpacking the three large shopping bags decorated with Five Worlds logos.

Chas, an always-calm, unrelenting optimist, crunched numbers in the Parks Finance Office at Five Worlds resort. He loved working there, especially being able to walk from his office and through a back entrance door to a busy theme park.¹

It wasn't convenient working there, especially since annual raises weren't keeping up with rent and food price increases. He had to give up his car and endure long bus rides to and from work. The inconvenience was worthwhile just to be a part of Five Worlds.²

In his Parks Finance job, Chas saw declining numbers month after month, but when his manager called him in to tell him his job had been cut, that shocked him. She hands him three large shopping bags with the Five Worlds logo.³

1 This backstory element could add more emotion to events or dialogue involving Five Worlds. Chas's enjoyment of easy access to the park shows an emotional connection to the company that could persist after being laid off.

2 When you're writing this into the narrative, "it wasn't convenient..." could be rephrased to further reveal Chas's emotional link to Five Worlds. He might tell another character that it isn't easy working there, and a long bus ride from home every day.

3 Before a rewrite, consider whether the manager's gesture will be perfunctory, awkward, or kind. It then becomes easier to add dimension to an otherwise forgettable character.

He returned to his cubicle and stared at the desk clock he'd recently been awarded for three years of perfect attendance. Just after 2:00 p.m., that meant three hours left in the day. He pulled belongings from his desk and the filing cabinet. He took the coffee mug but left the desk clock and the card from his coworkers.⁴ The selected items half-filled only one shopping bag, but he took all three bags with him.⁵

In the weeks that followed, even after unemployment funds ran out, he wandered the city, applying for jobs that no longer existed. Eventually, he stopped carrying his clipboard. It felt like a prop in a play no one was watching.⁶

Morgan explains why Zito is aloof

When Chas, Deidra, and Morgan are foraging for nonperishable food in Palmtree Resort's 455 units, Horace Smith and Kee Bradstock are elsewhere, obtaining meat and produce in ways Chas doesn't want to think about, probably through theft.⁷

4 Selective packing, especially his exclusion of a service award and coworker token wishes, artfully reveals his state of mind.

5 The image of taking all three bags could reflect hope, denial, or a need to appear prepared. Again, that's an author's decision to make before writing a scene. Whenever a character is about to act or speak, knowing the "why" is just as important as knowing the "what."

6 This is a quietly devastating "tell", but a metaphor worth telling as Chas reflects on his increasing peril.

7 Consider revealing whether Chas feels complicit, uneasy, or resigned to Horace and Kee's methods. Another character could see Chas's unease and ask him about it.

The talkative 12-year-old Morgan, Deidra's likeable and inquisitive little sister, has befriended the sixth member of their group, the reclusive Zito Ramirez.

Zito had been a partner in the real estate investment company that owned Palmtree before it was abandoned, with fences placed around the perimeter. Zito had claimed that a bank had caused him stress over a "funds allocation concern."⁸ Morgan snorts. She had read about the embezzlement of Palmtree funds. Now she knows why Zito keeps to himself and doesn't like neighbors other than Morgan.⁹ Deidra commands Morgan to stay away from him. Morgan sarcastically agrees to "mommy" Deidra's instruction.¹⁰

Horace and Chas share their Five Worlds work stories

These pivotal facts are brought out when Chas is helping Horace, the resourceful repair person, repair and fuel a generator in one of the restaurant kitchens.

Chas shares about having to ride the bus to work 90 minutes each way, because his car had been repossessed after his rent was raised ten percent, but his annual raise at Five Worlds was two percent, and a promised bonus had been canceled, so he could no longer afford to pay all of his bills.

8 This is interesting! Zito's word choice, "fund allocation concern," is almost certain to be a euphemism. Zito is concealing something about his past, so the reader must turn more pages to learn the truth.

9 Here's an opportunity for a beat revealing any internal conflict Morgan might have concerning Zito's murky past.

10 A clever and sharp-tongued character like Morgan adds an edge to dialogue, potentially keeping it lean.

Author: Ward Rangler
Work: Fiction
Title: Sleeper Cell



Horace shares about working in Fireworks Inventory Management, also at Five Worlds, responsible for ordering and storing fireworks for nightly displays.¹¹

Horace holds up a key ring with three differently-shaped keys. He explains they are supposed to be for three people who must go together to gather the next day's pyro. Chas wonders why Horace has all three keys but doesn't ask.¹²

¹¹ You could add a line about whether Horace enjoyed the fireworks job. Was it thrilling, tedious, or dangerous?

¹² An unasked question adds quiet tension and hints at deeper dynamics.