



## Fiction critique

### 40-point rubric

#### Orientation

A faint clinking then shuffling footsteps announced Horace's return.<sup>1</sup>

Horace placed a small canvas bag onto the desk-dresser as I sat on the edge of the bed. He unfurled a white towel beside the bag, then ducked into the bathroom. The splash of running water was a happy surprise. My mood shifted to apprehension as he brought out what appeared to be surgical tools along with gauze pads, a small bottle of purplish liquid, which he shook.

He knelt beside me and didn't ask permission or warn of a little pinch. I guess only doctors do that.

I drew a quick breath. Horace drew back. "Put up your other hand if something hurts. I'll stop right way."

"No, I'm fine. We have to do this, so keep going."<sup>2</sup>

"I was an EMT for a while," he said, dabbing painful purple stuff where the glass had cut deepest.

"Sometimes I think I should've stayed in it."

"How come?"

"It was the Vermont winters. It's okay pulling people out of cars in the summertime, but I remember finding a drunk kid was trapped under a snowmobile. I crawled through four feet of snow in a ditch to reach him. I don't think he was feeling too much. He kept laughing and apologizing for bleeding on me."<sup>3</sup>

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1 Sound often precedes sight. That can be a good way to raise the curtain on a scene.

2 This tells us of Chas's determination and willingness to endure pain. That begins to put us on his side as he responds to future challenges.

3 Now we know Horace, too, is resilient. The toughness he reveals here has him speaking bluntly about blood and crawling through a ditch.



The needle descended, and black thread was pulled. I looked away. “Vermont is beautiful.”

Horace stopped. “Would you like to be an EMT there?”

I winced, not just from the needle. “That’s a different kind of experience than being a Finance Intern. Of course, it does pay. I was at Adventure World because I wanted to know how everything worked. As a kid, I broke half of my toys, taking them apart. Now I’ve done the same thing with my career.”<sup>4</sup>

“The suits are good at that.”

“I don’t blame management. They aren’t the ones who cut my student loan program. That ended my enrollment, so I had to leave the program mid-semester, before any chance of going perm.”<sup>5</sup>

“That’s typical,” Horace said, pressing gauze over the nine stitches. He applied tape, zip-zip, and stood to admire his work. “I pulled an exec out of a mangled Ferrari once. That’s what it takes to get a paying job. I thought I had a career in pyrotechnics until I got droned out.”<sup>6</sup>

“Droned out?”

“Yeah. They’re reusable, and nothing catches fire if a drone goes off course.”

“And fireworks do that.”

“Oh, yeah,”<sup>7</sup> He stepped back and rolled the tools and bottle of painful purple liquid into the towel.

“Let’s go. It’s time for your tour.”

I didn’t immediately stand.

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4 It seems like Chas dodges Horace’s question. He could say that he would be a terrible EMT, and that being in Finance wasn’t right, either.

5 Neither Chas nor Deidra blames Adventure World for their homelessness. In contrast, Horace resents “the suits.”

6 As an alternative to Horace saying he had been “droned out” of his job, he could grumble about being “chased out by drones” or the fact that “drone shows got cheaper.”

7 To add drama, Horace could relate a fireworks mishap, such as a popcorn wagon being set on fire.



Horace held the door open. “Come on. It gets you two free tickets to Adventure World.”<sup>8</sup>

How could I refuse that? I quickly learned that Horace’s property tour was also a damage inspection. He pointed out cracked pavement, broken roof tiles, and termite holes that riddled the Cane Palm Village sign.<sup>9</sup> Our tour next brought us to a breezeway where a young woman and a girl were sorting through a box of canned goods.

“Deidra Patel,” Horace said. He nodded toward the 20-something woman, then to the willowy preteen. “And Morgan Patel. Sisters.”

Deidra and I extended our right hands in a little wave at each other.<sup>10</sup> At least it wasn’t a handshake. With introductions concluded, big and little sister squatted down beside the cartons and cans.

“Deidra was a Culinary Assistant in the college program,” Horace said. “Now here she is, another castoff.”

“It wasn’t the company’s fault,” Deidra said, squinting at the “best by” date on a can before wedging it into a carton of dusty and dented cans. Then she stood at almost my height. Her blue eyes zapped me at that instant, but it was a one-way shock. She spoke of her student loans being canceled and that maybe that was for the best.<sup>11</sup>

I always liked hearing a deep, steady voice, and there was depth in Deidra’s response to misfortune.

She gave a gentle tug to Morgan’s shoulder. “It worked out well for my sister. Once I was off property, she could bid her stepfather a fond farewell.”

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8 Horace’s wry remark to Chas further reveals his attitude toward their former employer.

9 These descriptions have the reader looking up to the roof, down to the pavement, and over to a termite-riddled sign. That’s immersive detail!

10 Here, the choreography between Chas and Deidra could be trimmed to a quick nod or tense smile. The sentence after that, Chas’s relief over “not a handshake,” conveys emotion.

11 While focusing on Chas’s emotional response, it’s good to compress dialogue into a sentence as you have done here.



“Not so fond,” Morgan, was a junior version of Deidra, with a much different attitude.

"And not always happy away from her friends. I don't think she enjoyed keeping our apartment clean while I job-hunted."

"Maybe it was too clean. Maybe that's why they raised the rent."<sup>12</sup>

“We looked at other places.”

Morgan scowled. “Landlords are all the same.”<sup>13</sup>

“Did your friend Floyd tell you that?” Horace asked, then explained to me that Floyd Lincon, now residing in a third-floor unit, had known many landlords as he bounced from trailer to apartment to trailer. “He’s another castoff. He stumbles into his nest up there every six weeks or so, then stays just long enough to sober up.”

Deidra brushed a ladybug from Morgan’s shoulder. "What did Floyd do at Adventure Worlds?"

"Floyd is not my best friend. He doesn't tell me everything."

Deidra breathed in slowly, her smile holding.

With the wave of a hand, Horace signaled that she and Morgan were to join us now as the tour continued. The four of us processed over asphalt in silence, then across the sports court where weeds curled through the cracks. The scallop shell pool held two feet of algae-thickened scum. Then sunlight finally broke through the clouds to illuminate the decay.<sup>14</sup>

The tour returned to the room I had broken into. CAT-3 winds had done some redecorating in our

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12 We’ve just met Morgan, so it would be good to describe something about her. Her posture, facial expression, or voice could show us how she felt about the rent being raised.

13 Morgan’s bluntness and childlike generalizations distinguish her as a character.

14 The algae pool and cracked pavement are vivid, but the last sentence is abrupt. You might have Chas notice a smell of decay (e.g., like the beach at low tide), and at that moment, the sun breaks through. Sunlight just illuminates the decay.



absence. The curtains and curtain rod had dropped onto the air conditioner. Carpet squished underfoot.

Horace surveyed the damage and sighed. "You might do better than this."

We followed. The unit next door was no palace, but it was dry. The mirror had been decorated. Cartoon stickers of a killer whale and a dragon clung at child-height. At that moment, I saw small hands, placing them there.<sup>15</sup>

This would be home for a little while. Deidra and Morgan each took one of my shopping bags, placing them on the king bed. I did the same with the bulkiest one.

I mumbled thanks and assured them I'd move on in a few days. Just as so temp work could add up to a deposit.

"No." That was almost a command, coming from Horace. "You don't need one. None of us pays rent." He quite emphatically tapped the dusty surface of the desk-dresser, glanced toward the breezeway. "Learn to ignore Zito. He may have owned Palmtree, but now his bank owns it, and we got through their fence."<sup>16</sup>

I heard Deidra's quiet sigh. These days, there seemed to be plenty of sadness for all, but for the first time in days, I felt something like relief. You wouldn't call this home, but it was at least a beginning.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Readers familiar with Central Florida theme parks will recognize the icons. This gives "Sleeper Cell" a distinct, but clearly fictional setting.

16 Class isolation is a theme with potential to further explore.

17 Closing line offers quiet resolution and thematic closure. If this concludes a chapter, "at least" could be dropped for a better-defined ending.