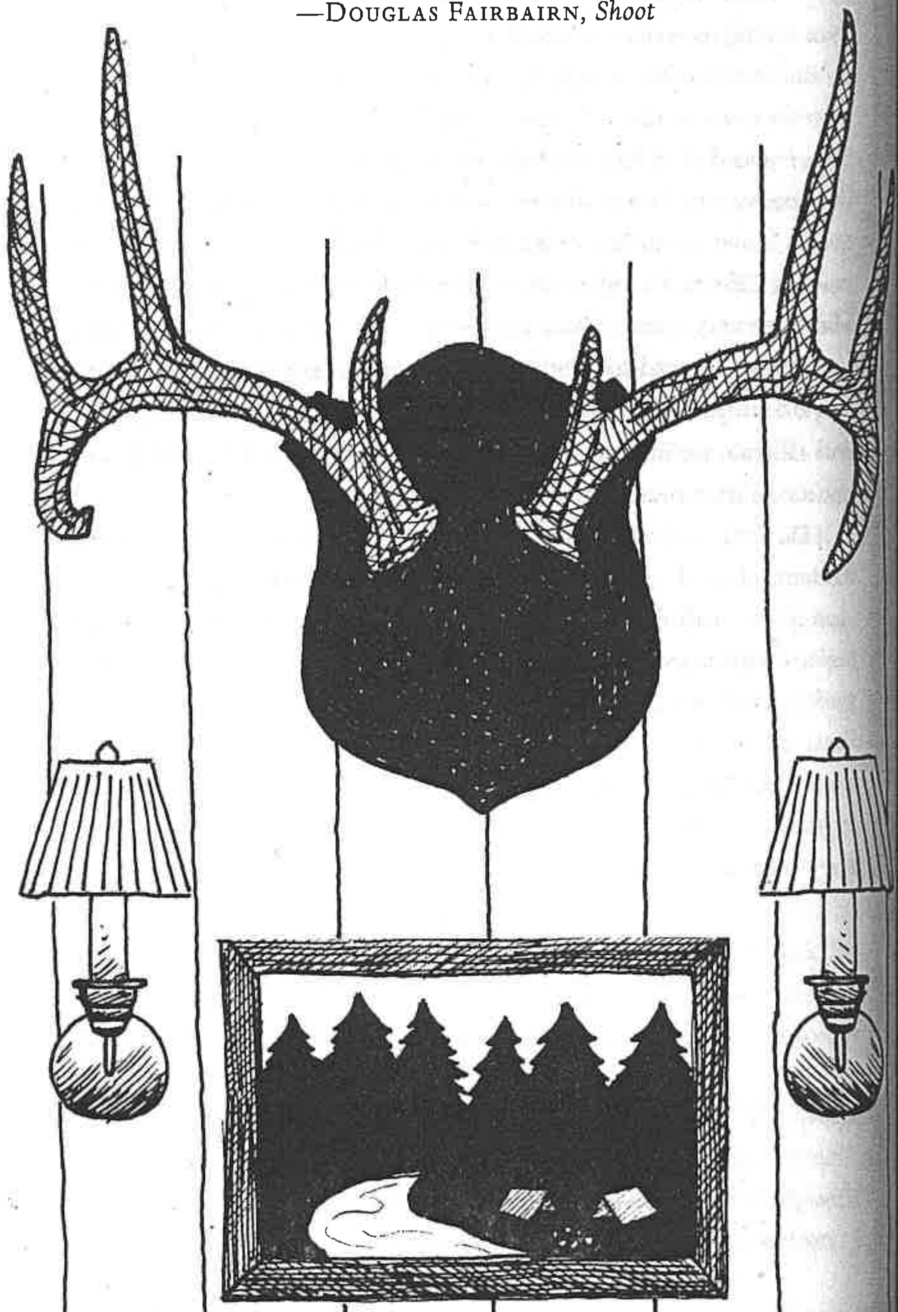
This is what happened.

—Douglas Fairbairn, *Shoot*



STEPHEN KING

You've Been Here Before

There are all sorts of theories and ideas about what constitutes a good opening line. It's a tricky thing, and tough to talk about because I don't think conceptually while I work on a first draft—I just write. To get scientific about it is a little like trying to catch moonbeams in a jar.

But there's one thing I'm sure about. An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this.

How can a writer extend an appealing invitation—one that's difficult, even, to refuse?

We've all heard the advice writing teachers give: Open a book in the middle of a dramatic or compelling situation, because right away you engage the reader's interest. This is what we call a "hook," and it's true, to a point. This sentence from James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* certainly plunges you into a specific time and place, just as something is happening:

> They threw me off the hay truck about noon.

Suddenly, you're right inside the story—the speaker takes a lift on a hay truck and gets found out. But Cain pulls off so much more than a loaded

setting—and the best writers do. This sentence tells you more than you think it tells you. Nobody's riding on the hay truck because they bought a ticket. He's basically a drifter, someone on the outskirts, someone who's going to steal and filch to get by. So you know a lot about him from the beginning, more than maybe registers in your conscious mind, and you start to get curious.

This opening accomplishes something else: It's a quick introduction to the writer's style, another thing good first sentences tend to do. In "They threw me off the hay truck about noon," we can see right away that we're not going to indulge in a lot of foofaraw. There's not going to be much floridity in the language, no persiflage. The narrative vehicle is simple, lean (not to mention that the book you're holding is just 128 pages long). What a beautiful thing—fast, clean, and deadly, like a bullet. We're intrigued by the promise that we're just going to zoom.

Of course, it's a little do-or-die here for the writer. A really bad first line can convince me *not* to buy a book—because, god, I've got *plenty* of books already—and an unappealing style in the first moments is reason enough to scurry off. I'll never forget the botched opening lines of A. E. van Vogt—a Canadian science fiction writer, long dead, who liked to effuse a little bit. His book *Slan* was actually the basis of the *Alien* films—they basically stole them to do that, and ended up paying his estate some money—but he was just a terrible, terrible writer. His short story "Black Destroyer" begins:

> On and on Coeurl prowled!

You read that, and you think—my god! Can I really put up with even five more pages of this? It's just *panting*!

So an intriguing context is important, and so is style. But for me, a good opening sentence really begins with voice. You hear people talk about "voice" a lot, when I think they really just mean "style." Voice is more than that. People come to books looking for something. But they

don't come for the story, or even for the characters. They certainly don't come for the genre. I think readers come for the *voice*.

A novel's voice is something like a singer's—think of singers like Mick Jagger and Bob Dylan, who have no musical training but are instantly recognizable. When people pick up a Rolling Stones record, it's because they want access to that distinctive quality. They know that voice, they love that voice, and something in them connects profoundly with it. Well, it's the same way with books. Anyone who's read a lot of John Sandford, for example, knows that wry, sarcastic amusing *voice* that's his and his alone. Or Elmore Leonard—my god, his writing is like a fingerprint. You'd recognize him anywhere. An appealing voice achieves an intimate connection—a bond much stronger than the kind forged, intellectually, through crafted writing.

With really good books, a powerful sense of voice is established in the first line. My favorite example is from Douglas Fairbairn's novel *Shoot*, which begins with a confrontation in the woods. There are two groups of hunters from different parts of town. One gets shot accidentally, and over time tensions escalate. Later in the book, they meet again in the woods to wage war—they reenact Vietnam, essentially. And the story begins this way:

> This is what happened.

For me, this has always been the quintessential opening line. It's flat and clean as an affidavit. It establishes just what kind of speaker we're dealing with: someone willing to say, *I will tell you the truth. I'll tell you the facts. I'll cut through the bullshit and show you exactly what happened.* It suggests that there's an important story here, too, in a way that says to the reader: *and you want to know.*

A line like "This is what happened" doesn't actually *say* anything—there's *zero* action or context—but it doesn't matter. It's a voice, and an invitation, that's very difficult for me to refuse. It's like finding a good friend who has valuable information to share. Here's somebody, it says,

who can provide entertainment, an escape, and maybe even a way of looking at the world that will open your eyes. In fiction, that's irresistible. It's why we read.

We've talked so much about the reader, but you can't forget that the opening line is important to the writer, too. To the person who's actually boots-on-the-ground. Because it's not just the reader's way in, it's the *writer*'s way in also, and you've got to find a doorway that fits us both. I think that's why my books tend to begin as first sentences—I'll write that opening sentence first, and when I get it right I'll start to think I really have something.

When I'm starting a book, I compose in bed before I go to sleep. I will lie there in the dark and think. I'll try to write a paragraph. An opening paragraph. And over a period of weeks and months and even years, I'll word and reword it until I'm happy with what I've got. If I can get that first paragraph right, I'll know I can do the book.

Because of this, I think, my first sentences stick with me. They were a doorway I went through. The opening line of *11/22/63* is "I have never been what you'd call a crying man." The opening line of *Salem's Lot* is "Almost everyone thought the man and the boy were father and son." See? I remember them! The opening line of *It* is "The terror, which would not end for another twenty-eight years—if it ever did end—began, so far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain." That's one that I worked over and over and over.

But I can tell you right now that the best first line I ever wrote—and I learned it from Cain, and learned it from Fairbairn—is the opening of *Needful Things*. It's the story about this guy who comes to town, and uses grudges and sleeping animosities among the townspeople to whip everyone up into a frenzy of neighbor against neighbor. And so the story starts off with an opening line, printed by itself on a page in 20-point type:

> You've been here before.

All there by itself on one page, inviting the reader to keep reading. It suggests a familiar story; at the same time, the unusual presentation brings us outside the realm of the ordinary. And this, in a way, is a promise of the book that's going to come. The story of neighbor against neighbor is the oldest story in the world, and yet this telling is (I hope) strange and somehow different. Sometimes it's important to find that kind of line: one that encapsulates what's going to happen later without being a big thematic statement.

Still, I don't have a lot of books where that opening line is poetry or beautiful. Sometimes it's perfectly workman-like. You try to find something that's going to offer that crucial way in, any way in, whatever it is as long as it works. This approach is closer to what worked for my book *Doctor Sleep*. All I remember is wanting to leapfrog from the timeframe of *The Shining* into the present by talking about presidents, without using their names. The peanut farmer president, the actor president, the president who played the saxophone, and so on. The sentence is:

> On the second day of December in a year when a Georgia peanut farmer was doing business in the White House, one of Colorado's great resort hotels burned to the ground.

It's supposed to do three things. It sets you in time. It sets you in place. And it recalls the ending of the book—though I don't know it will do much good for people who only saw the movie, because the hotel doesn't burn in the movie. This isn't grand or elegant—it's a door-opener, it's a table-setter. I was able to take the motif—chronicle a series of important events quickly by linking them to presidential administrations—to set the stage and begin the story. There's nothing "big" here. It's just one of those grace notes you try to put in there so that the narrative has a feeling of balance, and it helped me find my way in.

Listen, you can't live on love, and you can't create a writing career based on first lines.

A book won't stand or fall on the very first line of prose—the story has got to be there, and that's the real work. And yet a really good first line can do so much to establish that crucial sense of voice—it's the first thing that acquaints you, that makes you eager, that starts to enlist you for the long haul. So there's incredible power in it, when you say, *Come in here. You want to know about this.* And someone begins to listen.