

Read Like a writer with a Focus: Suspense

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Broken Bird

by Debbie Kinsey | Read author interview | April 20, 2015

It was unusually, uncomfortably warm for October. The air seemed to become thicker the further south I drove; it bled into the car and pressed me down. It didn't take long to get there. It was over six hours to my parents' house, but the dread of visiting always stole the time away. Every



art by Karen Prosen

time I pulled into their drive I wondered if I'd killed a child on the way. I could never remember. I call it "my parents' house", but it's rightly mine now. Dad died six years ago. Mother died three weeks ago. At her funeral, the priest thought I turned away from the coffin with grief. It wasn't. It was fear. Fear that the moment I saw it I would know for certain what I suspected—her death was no relief. There would be no release, no weight lifted. She was haunting me still, as she always had. I would not keep the house.

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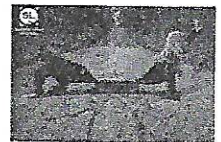


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This story appeared in Issue Forty-Eight of SmokeLong Quarterly.



Other stories in this issue:

Word Choices begin to create suspense. The reader immediately feels something negative is coming

disturbing statement creates suspense

Word Choices continue creating suspense
unusual response to death of a parent creates questions about the relationship

<http://www.smokelong.com/broken-birds/>

The plan was to stay for a week, gut the place, hand the keys to the estate agent, and never set foot in it again. Exorcise my demon. I decided to start with my childhood bedroom, untouched in the twenty years since I'd left for university. Dad had redecorated it every two years when I was living there—he'd change the wallpaper or make me special furniture. I would have preferred something a little more...adult...but he appeared to believe girls really were made of sugar and spice and all things nice, not a dark shade permitted. He wanted my life to be filled with light, he'd said, hoping that during my sleep I could absorb what he'd made and carry it through my day. The rest of the house had been stripped of him the very day he died. It was as though he had never been. Mother had always been distant, insisting on the formal. Too cold to love, really. She was always stiff with him, and looked at me when I was with him with the kind of watchful glare usually reserved for an unexploded bomb. I think it got in the way; he didn't hug me either. I'm sure he wanted to.

I started with my bedroom so I'd have a place to sleep without her—a safe zone I could use and then clean outwards into the house so I would never again step in her territory. I opened the window to let the outside in but the thick air was worse. It took a day to sort my old things into boxes (keep, sell, charity shop). "Keep" was for the handmade cards and toys from Dad. He always sewed or stuck my name on everything. I put each one in the box as though caring for a broken bird, and carried it into the hallway.

The next morning, I could see where an old leak had damaged the wall by my bed. I tied my hair up into a bun, put on a bandana to make me feel like cleaning, and pulled at the corner of the wallpaper. Slowly, in one large piece, it peeled away, revealing the stained plaster behind and a note painted in black across the wall—"You are not wanted here." I wasn't afraid. I knew it wasn't a ghost. It was my father's handwriting. I took everything apart. It was behind each individual shelf, under the outside of the windowsill, on each of the wooden slats of the bed, on the inside of the plug sockets. I carried my box of broken birds back into the room. There, behind each name label. Over and over. My father's handwriting.

Again, the writer makes the reader wonder about the narrator's relationship to the mom. What caused the negative thoughts?

More unusual, seemingly unrelated detail — helps build questions + tension

Everything shifts here → surprise twist that her father was the cause of the tension in the family rather than the mother ties the details from before differently together than first thought!

The writer presents a detail from the narrator's childhood to create questions: Why would her father keep changing the wallpaper? Why didn't he want her to grow up? Why did her mother remove all signs of him when he died? Why did her mom watch her with her father with such emotion?

About the Author:

Debbie Kinsey lives in Yorkshire, UK, on a diet of tea and cake. She has previously been published in *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears*, and *The Pygmy Giant*.

Take-aways:
 1. Word choice is key to developing suspense
 2. Use unique, unusual details to create questions in the reader's mind