

The First Two Pages: “A Bitter Thing” by Mark Stevens

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I knew this story would feature senses.

Specifically, taste.

Secondarily, instinct.

Why?

Because I wrote it originally as a submission for a Mystery Writers of America anthology called *Odd Partners*, edited by Anne Perry. (Obviously, it didn’t make the cut.)

I had protagonist I had rolled out with a short story called “Shaky Ground” (published online by Hex Publishers). I liked him. I wanted to get him back in action.

His name is Wayne Furlong. He’s a private detective in Denver. But in his former career, he was the longtime former restaurant critic at *The Denver Post*.

Having been jettisoned due to newspaper downsizing, Wayne opted for the Sherlock Holmes thing to make ends meet. At the same time, he still writes food reviews on a popular, anonymous restaurant blog.

So pondering *Odd Partners*, I thought: What could be more opposite than for someone who relies on his sense of taste to work with someone who has zero sense of smell?

Anosmia.

Now, I don't know if it's old wives' tale or if it's science but I have long heard that if you are lacking one sense, the others step up.

So I figured that Wayne's temporary partner would supplement/complement Wayne's skills—and might put the right key in the lock when the time came.

All this sounds terribly analytical, as if I sat down and roughed this all out before writing word number one. The truth is I'm an organic writer. I believe in the moment and then moving to the next.

But I did have this rough equation in mind—master of taste meets someone with none.

I decided to set the case in the world of rock and roll, because it's colorful—and already chock full of posers, wannabes, hype, ego, and (of course) real talent. I'm a big music fan. Also, Wayne Furlong also knows a bit about public guises and private selves, just like rock stars.

I also had the idea that I wanted this story to be quick—a brief encounter. Because Wayne is so focused on food and flavor, I thought, he might overlook a key something about his new partner. So what if his partner (had to be a female, by

the way, for more contrast) provided the time limitation? A break in her tour schedule?

Ashen Weeps was waiting and she wasn't hard to spot.

She was taller than Wayne Furlong expected and she dressed with a rock star flair—a brown bomber jacket, oversized sunglasses, camo pants, and lace-up ankle boots with two inches of heel.

“I told you my ride wasn't much,” said Furlong. Mini Coopers had good leg room, at least in the front. “Your flight must have been right on time.”

“Shocking,” said Weeps. “But true.”

Furlong headed out from the dark pick-up lane at DIA. Jets sniffed nose-to-tail in a long line, a blur of dull metal and hazy fumes.

The narrative is close third-person, the way I like to write. The description of rock star Ashen Weep's clothing is only a touch more detailed than an average joe might notice (ankle boots, two inches of heel), but Furlong of course imagines the jets having noses and he sees the fumes. (He'll soon have his head over a bowl of steaming soup.) Two mentions of smell right out of the gate.

Furlong felt like things were looking up. First, he was driving precious cargo. Based on all the buzz, Weeps was about to be rock royalty, if there was such a thing anymore in this era of Spotify and free downloads. And second, Furlong had a job at his top-shelf rate of pay, \$1,500 plus expenses. It was true what they said: you never knew when you were having a good day.

He would need to find a way to stretch this case out.

“I only have forty-eight hours,” said Weeps, as if reading his thoughts.

It's a cliché. “As if reading his thoughts.” It's a toss-off line but not wasted here. Ashen Weeps turns out (much later) to have a keen sense about the people around her.

Furlong shrugged. "I can't guarantee it will go that fast."

"That's okay. The band starts the next leg of the tour in Athens, G-A." She spelled it out. "So I just have this little window of time to get you on the right track. Jimmy Archer didn't kill himself. No way."

Going up against the medical examiner's high-stakes conclusions on the fate of Jimmy Archer, whose body was found in a dry bathtub in a boutique hotel on South Broadway, was something that Furlong imagined to be daunting, to say the least. Furlong needed to hear more from Weeps before deciding on his first move.

"You hungry?" he said.

"I'm fine." Weeps applied patchouli with a bucket. "But stop if you want to."

True confession: When I wrote my first, terribly amateur mystery novel some thirty years ago it must have included twenty scenes in restaurants and coffee shops. I had no trouble describing all the noshing and sipping! To this day, I can yawn just thinking about the utter monotony of the damn thing. (Of course, it was never published.) I really think one restaurant scene per mystery (or any novel) is plenty.

In a short story? It better deliver.

Wayne feels like he can do double-duty—take some notes on a favorite eatery while quizzing Ashen Weeps about her theory on the case. Plus, what better place for someone to reveal she has anosmia?

(Oh, back to the patchouli. Wayne of course notices the overdose of the ubiquitous essential oil. He will soon know why she doesn't know how to properly dose.)

Furlong knew the perfect spot. Arun's Thai was a hole-in-the-wall joint in a strip mall in Green Valley Ranch. In his previous gig, which lasted twenty years, Furlong was Denver's hardline restaurant critic. He wrote under the nom de food Timothy Powers. After being flushed from the newsroom staff in the fourth wave of buy-outs, Furlong began work as a P.I. Five years later, he still posted his reviews on Denver's most popular food-related website.

His own.

This last paragraph before a break in the story reveals Wayne's preference for unpretentious food joints (this should, I hope, make him more likable) and also that he is familiar with being anonymous—and traveling the world on his own terms. This is a big theme in “A Bitter Thing” (title and critical Ashen Weeps talent inspired by a famous Shakespeare quote).

Yes, *bitter*.

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Mark Stevens grew up in Massachusetts. He was raised by two librarians. By law, he was required to grow up loving books. And writing. He writes the Allison Coil Mystery Series—*Antler Dust*, *Buried by the Roan*, *Trapline*, *Lake of Fire* and *The Melancholy Howl*. *Trapline* won the Colorado Book Award and The Colorado Authors League Award in 2016. *Buried by the Roan* and *Lake of Fire* were finalists for the same award. Kirkus Reviews called *Lake of Fire* “irresistible” and *The Melancholy Howl* “smart and indelible.” Mark was the 2016 Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers' Writer of the Year.