

The First Two Pages: “Marley’s Mistress” by John C. Boland

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There’s a reasonable question whether the first two pages of “Marley’s Mistress” do in fact “work”—at least in the sense of inviting a reader to stay around for more. The opening sentence is orotund. It conveys several bits of information about a man named Preston, plus the information that an observer named Cliff Rowles who is assessing Preston is a cynic. That’s a burden for one sentence. It might be an interesting experiment to try to rewrite this opening in shorter bites. I gave no thought to doing so because the oratorical tone seemed to fit the story’s location, Washington, D.C.—a little gassy, with perspective that twists: a man is seen as less a national danger because he is corruptible. Right away, in the second sentence, Preston who is corruptible, hands something to Cliff—drawing Cliff into his corruption?

This sets up a number of story questions. We learn fairly quickly that Preston is offering Cliff, a reporter, information that might destroy the career of another politician.

A man like Preston, whose grandparents had kept pigs in the bathroom, who had climbed the mountain and like so many before him had seen in Washington a promised land, would have been a national danger, Cliff Rowles thought, if he hadn’t been so corruptible. Sitting on the square leather sofa in Senator Preston’s inner office, Cliff Rowles accepted the long tan envelope the Senator held toward him.

“I’m doing you a favor,” Preston said.

Cliff nodded but didn’t want to thank the man for a favor that hadn’t, as yet, yielded him any benefit.

“You destroy a political career that needs destroying,” Preston added, hinting at patriotism.

And which one doesn’t, Cliff wondered.

Cliff opened the envelope and removed the only contents, a memory stick.

“Don’t plug it into just any computer,” the Senator warned. “It could leave a trail.”

“All right.”

“And I don’t want to hear back. Just do what you have to do.”

“That may be nothing,” Cliff said.

Preston nodded. “Then pass it discreetly to Jimmy Burnham on the Intelligence Committee. You’re still friends, aren’t you?”

Cliff let the comment go. Like nation states, people in politics had interests, not friends. He thought that was true in most walks of life. His mother’s friends had all come from outside her professional career. His father had been dead for too long for Cliff to remember what sort of friends he had had. He slipped the memory stick into his jacket pocket and dropped the envelope back on Preston’s desk. He felt a little sick but recognized that the nausea was a byproduct of adrenaline that had been released by excitement. He left the Senate Office Building, walked back to the *Hill Report*’s office on K Street. He had worked for the magazine three years, had promoted the editor’s causes and done his best to undermine the opponents of the causes.

Among the opponents was Senator Warren Preston, who violated the *Hill Report*’s commitment to ethics in public life. Preston mocked the ideal. A promised land had to be awash in milk and honey, and that was why it drew people whether they admitted it or not.

Still, Preston didn’t like people who upset applecarts—or honeywagons, the image he used when he admitted what he really thought of the city.

So Preston was happy to pass along, even to a magazine he detested, information that might take down Jackson Keeler, head of the House Oversight Committee on Security.

By the end of these pages, the environment is established: one of opportunism on the part of all players. There are no friends, only interests, and apparently no allegiances. Cliff has worked to undermine Senator Preston to please his editor, but he is happy to receive information from the senator targeting another member of Congress. And we learn that Preston views the city as a “honeywagon”—a turn on the preceding description of Washington as a land of milk and honey: a “honeywagon” is stuffed with shit.

I’m happy that Art invited me to dissect this opening, in part because it could serve as an instruction on how *not* to write fiction. I had these two pages for years before knowing what to do with them; liked the tone, hadn’t a clue what should come next. This is exceedingly inefficient. Eventually it occurred to me that since the story was set in Washington, my retired case officer Charles Marley would be a natural participant. Senator Preston and Cliff are never on stage again. Jimmy Burnham and Marley take over, in what becomes an odd sort of love story. Nobody with any sense writes stories this way.

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John C. Boland’s short stories have appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* since 1976. He has written about a dozen novels, many set on Wall Street, beginning with *Easy Money* (St. Martin's, 1991) and most recently *Suppose There Is Nothing* (as James L. Ross, Perfect Crime, 2017). His nonfiction appeared regularly over a number of years in *Barron's*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York (Sunday) Times*.