Short Story Beginnings

The author will do well to remember that the reader is under no obligation to read what the author has written. If the writer does not interest the reader within a page or two (even a paragraph or two), the reader will move to something else and be lost forever. In other words, the story must have a “hook” to pull the reader in.

Besides the practical reason for a good beginning, there are artistic ones. As early as 1842, Poe, one of the first good American short story writers, pointed out that, among other things, a story must begin with an initial sentence that at once begins to build toward the unique or single effect the writer is aiming at in the story as a whole.

Now read the following beginning of a short story:

When I woke, I heard my mother coughing, below in the kitchen. She had been coughing for days, but I had paid no attention. We were living on the old Youghal Road at that time, the old hilly coaching road into East Cork. The coughing sounded terrible. I dressed and went downstairs in my stocking feet, and in the clear morning light I saw her, unaware that she was being watched, collapsed into a little wickerwork armchair, holding her side. She had made an attempt to light the fire, but it had gone against her. She looked so tired and helpless that my heart turned over with compassion. I ran to her.

--Frank O’Connor, “The Man of the House”

Now, what does this short passage tell us? First it is obvious that the narrator is a first-person one, “I”, and that it is the son of the sick woman (The story is entitled “The Man of the House”, not the Lady). The son is compassionate but not unnaturally so, “She had been coughing for days, but I had paid no attention.” The title alerts us that the young boy is going to be called upon to take over the management of the house and either succeed or fail at doing so.

Of the mother we know not only that she is sick, but that she is the sort to suffer in silence rather than trouble anyone about her illness. Further, we know that the story is taking place in Ireland—Cork is a Southern Irish county; “Youghal” is an Irish name and the expression, “it had gone against her” is in a dialect other than American.

Thus, a great deal is revealed in the first paragraph of this story.

Now read the following additional beginnings and see how much you are told or how much is implied of the story to come:

1. The twilight of evening. Big flakes of wet snow are whirling lazily about the street lamps, which have just been lighted, and lying in a thin layer on roofs, horses’ backs, shoulders, caps.
Iona Potapov, the sledge driver, is all white like a ghost. He sits on the box without stirring, bent as double as the living body can be bent.

--Anton Chekhov, “Misery”

2. When miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection of a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

--William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily”

3. And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine. As for the roses, you could not help feeling they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people at garden parties; the only flowers that everybody is certain of knowing. Hundreds, yes, literally hundreds, had come out in a single night; the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels.

--Katherine Mansfield, “The Garden Party”

4. The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square between the post office and the back around ten o’clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o’clock in the morning and be through it in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.

--Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery”

5. About fifteen miles below Monterey, on the wild coast, the Torres family had their farm, a few sloping acres above a cliff that dropped to the brown reef and to the hissing white waters of the ocean. Behind the farm the stone mountains stood up against the sky. The farm buildings huddled like aphids on the mountain skirts, crouched low to the ground as though the wind might blow them into the sea.

--John Steinbeck, “Flight”

6. During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a
singly dreary track of the country, and at length found myself, as the shades of everything
drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.

--Edgar Allan Poe, “The fall of the House of Usher”

Now try to write the first paragraphs of a story, not only catching the interest of the
reader, but suggesting as much as you can of the setting, the mood, the tone (author’s attitude
toward himself/herself, the reader, and the story itself), the narrator (point of view), the style
(deliberately overwritten? underwritten? ornate? barren?), the kinds of people the story is about,
the theme.