

Using Dialogue Tags to Define Character

Excerpt from **THIEF! The Gutsy, True Story of an Ex-Con Artist**
by Cherie Rohn

Chapter One

In the middle of a fitful sleep, I grew conscious of Lucio shaking me. “Come on,” **he said**. “We have business.”

“What time is it?” **I asked, trying to focus.**

“About 2:00 a.m.,” **Lucio answered.** “We got a job to do for Dominick. He wants to take your boat.”

I didn’t like the sound of this. It might be a setup. I eased my 25-calibre Beretta into my pants pocket when Lucio wasn’t looking. My mind was made up. If this was it, I was gonna take Lucio along with me and any of the Lucchese thugs that stood in my way.

“I’m low on gas,” I lied, trying to sound matter-of-fact. “Why don’t we take your car?” I figured if Lucio drove, he’d be the easier target.

“Okay,” **he said.** “By the way, does your boat have a full tank?”

“Yeah, it’s full,” **I said, aware this was gonna be more than a short pleasure cruise.**

Rewrite:

In the middle of a fitful sleep, I grew conscious of Lucio shaking me. “Come on.” **His voice was harsher than normal. And normal for Lucio was at least five cigars a day.** “We have business.”

“What time is it?” **I tried to focus my eyes in my bedroom’s dim lighting, finally finding the red glow of my bedside clock. Christ. It was—**

“About 2:00 a.m.” **Lucio released my shoulder and fished a cigar and lighter out of his pants pocket. A short click then a burst of flame. I blinked as he puffed on the stogie, the fumes acrid.** “We got a job to do for Dominick. He wants to take your boat.”

I didn’t like the sound of this. It might be a setup. **Those thoughts swirled in my head as I climbed out of bed and pulled a pair of black pants and a black *South Beach Sucks* T-shirt from my closet. When I was sure Lucio wasn’t looking, I eased my 25-calibre Beretta into my pocket.** My mind was made up. If this was it, I was gonna take Lucio along with me and any of the Lucchese thugs that stood in my way.

“I’m low on gas,” I lied, trying to sound matter-of-fact. “Why don’t we take your car?” I figured if Lucio drove, he’d be the easier target.

He studied me for a long moment. If he guessed what I was planning, I was dead meat. “Okay,” he said finally. “By the way, does your boat have a full tank?”

“Yeah, it’s full.” **Enough for hell and back. This was definitely gonna be more than a short pleasure cruise.**

Remember: VIVIDNESS OUTRANKS BREVITY. YOUR STORY WORLD IS A SENSORY WORLD AND YOUR READER HAS NEVER BEEN THERE.

WORD CHOICE AND SPECIFICITY

HELEN SADLER Sample:

“He is going, Bonnie. I can’t stop him.” Christie was chopping **vegetables** in Bonnie’s kitchen, helping her prepare Saturday dinner. “He’s been leading a double life for a long time, and I really don’t know anything else but to let him go. I don’t know this man.”

“Of course you know him, Christie.” **Bonnie was always so sure of things.** “He’s just confused. You’ll see. He’ll probably change his mind before he goes. It’s not him. He’s meant to marry you. Everyone knows that. And he can’t really be serious about becoming an Episcopalian, let alone one of their *priests!*”

“Oh, he’s serious all right.” Christie **stared out** the kitchen window, wishing Bonnie would just get it already.”

“It just looks good to him now. He’ll be back. No one can seriously leave you or the Church.”

Christie’s felt her throat constrict. She hadn’t really come clean to Bonnie about how this whole thing went down. She treaded that way in a steady voice, stopping her chopping for dramatic effect, [.] “Bonnie, I don’t think so.”

“Well, of course you can’t see it now, but...”

“NO.[No.] It’s not going to happen. You had to see his face. It was in his eyes. Determination. Certainty. It was hopeless. And, well, I just had to...”

Bonnie grabbed **my** [??] arm. **She had her own certainties.** “It is *never* hopeless. Don’t ever say that. Maybe we can have Father O’Connell take to him.”

Christie laughed. “Bonnie, not everything can be solved by a priest. What is a priest going to do – talk a likely candidate out of being a priest?”

“Well, I think so. He’s going to be the wrong kind of priest.”

“Says you.”

Bonnie gave Christie **a steely stare.** “Says the One Holy Roman Catholic Church, Christie. And don’t you forget that.”

Silently, Christie returned to chopping vegetables. When Bonnie pulled out the One Holy Roman Catholic Church she knew the conversation was over.

1. How would the reader’s idea of the story change if Christie was chopping okra instead of just “vegetables?” How would the story change if Christie was chopping bits of pumpkin for a holiday pie?
2. How do we know Bonnie’s sure of things? Who is telling us this?
3. What does Christie see when she stares out the window? How would the story be affected or deepened by what she sees? How would it change if she sees a rusty playground set, long abandoned? Or if she sees a shiny new car?
4. How can we describe the clichéd “steely stare” more accurately and vividly, making it showing and not telling?

Your Story World: **IT’S A SENSORY WORLD, IT’S A SUBJECTIVE WORLD AND YOUR READER HAS NEVER BEEN THERE. DON’T LOCK THEM OUT, DON’T SHORTCHANGE THEM. DON’T OVERWRITE BUT RATHER CHOOSE SPECIFIC WORDS THAT HAVE THE IMAGE AND FLAVOR YOU NEED.**