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At my first of three Conferences, I was able to get to Jackson a day early for the day-long, pre-conference fiction workshop offered by Deborah Turrell Atkinson and Lise McClendon. I am pleased to see they are still at it; it's a great value and warm-up for the days that follow.

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There were ten of us in the workshop and after introducing ourselves, we did an exercise that may have been focused on effective starts (this was back in 2007), using a particular sensory detail – ideally a universally relatable one – as both a story-telling prompt and a method of engaging the reader straight away.

So we took a few moments to list a few such prompts. I still have my list:

- The flicker of a candle in a hurricane globe
- The campfire/fireside sense of well-being/camaraderie
- The smell of wood smoke
- The smell of waxed canvas (Army-style tent, Barbour hunting jacket)
- The feel of crust on the surface of sun-dried sand after a rain shower
- The smell of Coppertone
- The high-lonesome tremolo of a mandolin (or wail of bagpipes) upwind

- The rattling of palms leaves
- The tinkling of sailboat rigging at the marina

We were then asked to use one from our list to start a story, and I wrote the following:

A gust rattles the palm fronds, and he eyes the candle flame. Whenever he sees a candle flicker, he thinks of college summer holidays spent with his grandfather, and nights on the screened porch overlooking the dark Chesapeake, puffs of breeze skipping across the water from the marina, bringing with them the tinkling of halyards against aluminum masts. The two of them drinking this same Portuguese wine, and toward the end, when his grandfather's own flame began to flicker, revelations of intimate stuff – the lessons from the regrets that pecked at his grandfather when sleep wouldn't come.

He recalls the night the old warrior told him about Nana's affair . . .

Of course, I got carried away, using too many from my list in a single paragraph, but the lessons of the exercise have stuck with me. And as I look at that list, there is not a one I haven't used in my short fiction.