

Line-Editing Sample, by [Renni Browne](#)

[Much of the editing in this chapter consists of small cuts to tighten it up. It's a great introduction to your main character, but it's your opening, and it needs to move really quickly. The thing about judicious tightening is that you don't lose impact—in fact when you read the chapter with Track Changes turned off I think you'll see the effect is quite the opposite. And the thing about Track Changes is that you can overrule any edit that doesn't feel right to you, just change it the way you want. I'm good at mimicking your voice, but that doesn't mean I always get it right.]

Chapter 1

Wade Riley strummed the final chord of a catchy little blues **tune** and waited for the applause he knew would not come. The chord faded, and someone bellowed over the boiling revelry: “Play some Led Zeppelin!”

Comment [r1]: Instead, name a fairly well-known blues tune with some country flavor. Specifics are nearly always more interesting than generics.

A voice with a heavy drawl weighed in with the inevitable country counter request: “Bocephus!”

Hoots and laughter rose up like a flock of starlings, then dropped back into the roar. Wade half grinned. The requests were always like that--hardcore rock and roll classics or bouncy honky-tonk standards that sounded like Willie Nelson on Quaaludes when sung solo. The Boston Biscuit's owner was too cheap to pay for an entire band.

And so ~~H~~he sat there **alone on,** ~~ignored,~~ the tiny stage surrounded by a sea of cowboy hats and played-out hairstyles. Everyone was liquored down to the lowest common denominator. The windowed foyer bubbled with a jostling crowd waiting for tables. Waitresses in gingham shirts, jeans, and western hats crisscrossed the floor, their arms lined with plates of

food. Chas Martino, the night manager, stood ~~at the door,~~ talking to the doorman, a dangerously quiet man named Lyle. ~~Chas tugged at his moustache and beamed.~~

Comment [r2]: This is a really good thumbnail phrase about Lyle. When you have something that good at the end of a paragraph, don't follow it with anything—especially a sentence that's essentially filler—because it'll keep the good phrase or sentence from resonating as much as it could.

Like the Biscuit's owner, **Chas**he was a transplanted Yankee bitten by the country music bug. Together they'd ~~had~~ come up with the idea ~~of~~— a cross between a redneck roadhouse and a sidewalk café, five thousand square feet ~~of schizophrenic sprawl~~ sporting an all-you-can-eat belly-buster meat buffet, a complete menu of tofu **and other** dishes, beer pitchers shaped like boots, and a pastry bar **whose desserts ranged from death-by-chocolate concoctions to an exquisite, subtle French gate.** ~~that boasted the finest French desserts ever to accompany a full line of espresso drinks.~~ And ~~I~~Live ~~e~~Country ~~m~~Music! All served twenty-four hours a day! On weekends, it was the party monsters' last stand before heading home. Wade had ~~come~~begun to view it as a personal Waterloo, the Bataan death march ~~leg~~portion of his journey to country music stardom.

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The wagon wheel clock behind the cashier read 1:20.

Regina ~~appeared next to the stage,~~ planted one boot against the edge **of the stage,** and pulled herself up by the railing. She hovered **a few seconds**momentarily, grinning in a silly straw hat. A sultry fragrance wafted over him. Gardenias. He grinned back. There was nothing silly about Regina's thick chestnut hair and tight jeans.

"Hey, darlin'," she said. "What say we drive to the lake when I get off and see what's what."

"I know what's what," **Wade**he said. He'd ~~found out~~had discovered she was married after the one time. **And tonight,** ~~T~~the top two buttons free, her blouse yawned open. ~~Temptation gnawed at him.~~

A loud whoop ~~from~~rescued him. ~~A~~ table of four thick-necked men to his right exploded into drunken laughter. One yelled something at Wade ~~that~~he couldn't make out over the roar.

Regina rolled her eyes. “The kids are tight **tonight**.”

~~Her body as sleek as a thoroughbred, she'd joked that it was from growing up on a farm. The stupidity of the crowd hammered him, pushed him to reconsider. Why, he had never even seen her husband. And Regina had some kind of talent, had been a regular country fried geisha—especially after all the abuse he had endured at the Biscuit.~~

“You know, Regina--”

“I said why don't you quit fuckin' off and entertain us!”

~~A hostile bellow muscled through the commotion.~~ One of the drunks had stood **up and**, was **hollering**~~pointing~~ at the stage, the hairy brawn of his forearm stark against his white Izod.

~~“I said why don't you quit fuckin' off and entertain us like you're s'posed to!”~~

His companions let out a round of whoops.

~~He gave them a pleased little smirk.~~

~~When he turned his attention back to Wade,~~ Lyle stepped in front of him. ~~—The drunk~~ arched back, **Lyle**~~his features gathered in an angry frown.~~

~~The doorman~~ moved in closer. **The doorman**~~He~~ was physically shorter ~~than the drunk~~ but a much bigger presence, as though a violent past had left him with a scarred aura snarling out in every ~~direction~~**direction**~~n~~. His face was only inches from the drunk's as he spoke. The man's ~~frown faded as he~~ eased back and sat down.

~~Lyle leaned over and appeared to speak to everyone at the table in turn. They listened attentively. When he finished talking, he nodded once, then ambled back to the front door.~~

“That Lyle's something, ain't he,” Regina said.

Wade started over: “What I was going to say, Regina, **is was**--”

“Come on, girls!” Chas Martino blustered toward them ~~m~~**stage**. “There's ~~re~~ customers waiting.” He pulled Regina down by her waist, ~~and~~ steered her away from the stage, ~~then~~~~—She~~ ~~held her look at Wade as long as she could.~~

Comment [r3]: You need to give her a line with more snap. And the cut is because we need to move. This is your opening, and everything in it has to be seductive.

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~~Chas~~ turned ~~back~~ around. “And I’m hearing a lot of dead air.” ~~he said, his eyes wide with warning.~~

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Dead air? ~~It was anything but dead.~~—It was full of lethal noise—**way too many** decibels of jacked-up sonic trash. Wade ~~sneered and~~ launched into ~~his rendition of~~ “Mexicali Blues,” defying the owner’s country-only mandate, **framing.** ~~He framed~~ as much volume from the **guitar** as he could. When he started singing, he practically shouted. At the last second, he changed the song’s lyrics.

Comment [r4]: Say from the Martin, or whatever kind of guitar Riley plays. Again, specifics connect us, generics don't.

Layin’ back in an old saloon with a peso in my hand, counting all the assholes in the joint...

The improvisation warmed him, made him feel like he was giving back a little for all he had to take.

Nobody noticed.

He surveyed the crowd again. ~~They~~ ~~A~~ ~~all~~ ~~the~~ ~~faces~~ ~~seemed~~ ~~focused~~ ~~were~~ ~~turned~~ ~~in~~ on ~~their~~ ~~drinks~~ ~~each~~ ~~other~~, like beasts on the Serengeti; hunched over the only watering hole for miles, ~~he~~ ~~the~~ ~~one~~ ~~species~~ ~~that~~ ~~wasn't~~ ~~allowed~~ ~~in~~. His energy sputtered. He eased up on the guitar and sang at a normal volume. ~~Now~~ ~~The~~ ~~crash~~ ~~of~~ ~~fumbled~~ ~~plates~~ ~~ignited~~ ~~a~~ ~~round~~ ~~of~~ ~~whoops~~ ~~and~~ ~~cheers~~ ~~so~~ ~~loud~~ ~~that~~ he could barely hear himself.

He finished the song thinking that if he turned off the PA amplifier no one would even notice. He could just go through the motions. A mime musician.

Regina was giving him the eye. Would he meet her tonight? He wanted to. He didn't want to. The one time, after they'd done it, he asked her if she ever felt guilty about stepping out on her old man.

Comment [r5]: You'll see why I moved this section when you read my comment at the end of the chapter.

“Wendell’s too busy selling his damn tractors.” She chuckled. “He’d rather ride a

John Deere than me.”

“But he’s your husband.”

“Yeah, he is.”

Moonlight buttered her skin and cast her perfect nose in shadowy relief. Wendell must be an idiot.

“So why don’t you leave him?”

She looked at him and grinned. “You making an offer, cowboy?”

He gulped. “I mean, what’s the point? Being married, seeing other guys and all. Where’s that going to leave you in ten years?”

She was caressing herself. Damn.

“Not far from where you’ll be, I reckon.”

“What do you mean by that?” He wasn’t so sure he wanted to know.

“You expectin’ to become a doctor or somethin’ working at that nuthouse? And the Biscuit... well, it ain’t exactly the Grand Ole Opry.”

“I’m working on it!” he said. “At least I’ve got a plan.”

“You’ve got the voice and the look, son,” Marty Groll had told him three years ago. “Hell, you’ve even got the name! But you don’t have much of your own material.” Marty was vice president in charge of artists and repertoire for Hog High Records. “It’s 1993! I’m looking for singer-songwriters. Write more country tunes. Get yourself a following!”

Wade had left Nashville determined to do just that, making his way through the South, writing his songs, playing them to whoever would listen. Turned out most folks weren’t particularly interested in the plight of down-home Dixie unless someone already famous was singing about it. Gainesville was the longest he’d lived anywhere in the past three years, and it was the only town where he’d had to get an extra job—lackey at the Butterfield Behavioral Health Unit--to make up for the piss-poor pay he got playing music.

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Comment [r6]: plight of down-home Dixie just isn't Ziebartworthy. Come up with something snappy that sounds like Riley.

He was more like Regina than he was willing to admit: married to a career that cared little for him, taking pleasure where he could find it....

Now Regina **had** ~~angled in front of the stage, gave him a furtive wink, and wove through the carnival of tables.~~ She stopped **to take orders** at a ~~large~~ table of sorority types **near the stage** ~~and started taking orders.~~ One of the girls, ~~a blonde,~~ ~~appeared to ask a question,~~ pointed ~~ing~~ toward **Wade** ~~the stage~~ as she **said something** ~~spoke.~~ Regina paused, ~~then~~ nodded, and continued taking orders.

Wade ~~tried to keep the tempo of the set on the bright side and~~ played “Friends in Low Places.”

When he finished the song, the blonde stood up and made her way ~~to~~ **ward** the stage, her denim miniskirt **showing a whole lot** ~~mumbling the articulation of her thighs. The closer she got, the more apparent the jewelry store quality of her skin and hair became.~~ She ~~rested her forearms on the railing and smiled.~~

She said, “Hi **there!**,” as though it were **a brilliant conversational gambit** ~~the primeval utterance, the inception of the universe.~~

“What can I do for you?”

~~“I really like Garth Brooks.”~~

~~—— Wade relaxed a little. “You want to hear another Garth Brooks tune?”~~

—— “My girlfriend Missy just broke up with a guy,” she said. “He was married!” She held the sneer for a second, then said, “Can you play Jo Dee Messina’s ‘Bye-Bye’?”

“I do happen to know that tune,” he said. **Well,** ~~it was not entirely truthful.~~ ~~H~~he liked it and knew the lyrics from singing along with the radio.

“And say it’s for Missy?”

“No problem.”

“That’d be super.” ~~sShe said and~~ smiled at him as though he had just offered her a modeling contract, ~~—She~~ slowly backed away, then turned.

~~Wade~~He suddenly felt good, expansive.

“Hey, excuse me!”

~~She~~The girl wheeled back around.

“I wrote a song about that very situation,” he said. “Married man, good-hearted woman who gets fed up. Maybe your friend would appreciate it.”

The girl frowned. “Who are you?”

“My name’s ~~Riley~~Wade.— Wade Riley.”

~~She gave him a look, half smile, half smirk.—~~“I’ve never heard of you,” she said. “Are you famous or something?”

~~Of course that made him think of~~ Baby Sams’s ~~had once asked him a similar~~ question.

~~Boy, what you want with famous? He hadn’t had much of an answer for the old bluesman then,~~ either. The girl turned and walked away, dragging his mood behind her.

He was right about the Jo Dee Messina song, ~~—he~~ played **“Bye-Bye”** ~~it~~ without a hitch.

~~Missy didn’t even turn around until —~~The blonde **looked** ~~jostled her and pointed~~ at him **once, said something to her friend—Missy?—who turned around for two seconds, then** ~~—W~~without even a change of expression, ~~—she tossed her hair over her shoulder and~~ rejoined the huddle.

The room was a hive of distorted faces, honking and hooting, stuffing themselves with food. He was about to slink into another upbeat ditty--more cheating hearts and sassy flip-offs--when Regina rounded the corner of the stage and stopped. Steam rose off the heaped plates of food cradled in her arm. ~~She was flustered, unwilling to flirt.—~~He had to lean forward to hear what she was saying.

“Folks in the far corner booth asked if you could play some James Taylor.”

Across the room, a woman ~~with, late thirties,~~ her hair in a ponytail, **steeped her fingers**

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and made a **little bow**~~praying gesture at him~~. Next to her ~~;~~ a girl who looked to be twelve or so, with black bangs and **big**~~large~~ glasses, sat ~~straight,~~ clutching a tumbler of water in both hands. He could see nothing of the man **with them** but the back of his head.

“Kind **of** late for kids, isn’t it?”

“They’re on the road,” Regina said and left.

He sighed **and, then,** without a word of introduction, launched into “Sweet Baby James.”

The woman watched the whole time.

When he finished, her hands fluttered in silent applause. He felt lighter. There was someone to play to.

He sang every James Taylor song he knew, each one winning some sign of approval from the woman--a smile, a nod of enthusiasm, once even audible applause. ~~All the while, the line of waiting customers grew and shrank. Tables were abandoned to scraps and clutter, cleared off, then filled by the next group of waiting inebriates.~~

—Finally, there was nothing left on the woman’s table but two coffee cups and a glass. He checked the clock--~~;~~ he hadn’t taken a break in over an hour.

It was time. Her attention had wound him up, encouraged him to do it. If she liked James Taylor, why wouldn’t she like him?

He adjusted the guitar’s tuning, then ~~looked up and~~ spoke softly into the microphone.

“Here’s one I wrote called ~~“~~“Compromise.””

—~~It was a simple shifting bass/strum pattern—a tragic tale of one woman’s sacrifice. Considering how uptight the man at the table seemed, he hoped it might strike a chord. After two bars of introduction, he started singing.~~

Mary stares at the wall

And wonders if the mirror there really tells it all.

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All the lines on her face

Make her wonder how she ever wound up in this place.

The woman ~~elbowed up to the table,~~ never ~~took~~ taking her eyes off him as he descended into the somber tones of the relative minor.

She longed to be a dancer

Ever since she don't know when

But she's married to a man

Who has to know just where she's been.

During the turn-around, the woman strained forward ~~and spoke to the man, her eyes cutting to Wade, then back, her smile, pleasant surprise. The man didn't move. She deflated slightly, then turned and said something to the girl, who nodded enthusiastically. Then she was back,~~ swaying slightly, her expression dreamy. The guitar's vibration drove deep into **Wade's** ~~his~~ viscera, then spread, his entire body humming a note only she could hear. It was all him now. And her. *Find one and sing like they's your woman walking out the door on you for the last time,* Maybe Baby was right. He had his one.

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He sang the second verse, ~~then~~ closed his eyes for the chorus. ~~With the voice of one desperate for meaning, he begged the microphone for it.~~

Compromise, see the tears fall from her eyes

As the dreams that filled her youth

just slip away.

Realize, as she sits and wonders why

And tomorrow dances off with yesterday

The woman cradled her face in her hands now--looked as though she might weep--and all the honky-tonks and ~~drunks~~~~obnoxious drunks~~ he'd ever played for suddenly seemed worth it.

He sang the next verse, ~~then~~ attacked the strings harder to announce the lead-in to the bridge. He clenched his eyes tight and nearly cried the lyrics, his chest tight with the swell of emotion.

Up before the audience she dances gracefully,
The people sigh amazement, ooh! she moves so
fancy free.

But somewhere in the final act
The bell begins to ring.
She wakes up next to Harry
And life's the same old thing.

He began to replay the intro leading into the last verse and opened his eyes.

The table was empty.

The family stood at the cashier's counter, the man's back still turned, the woman **still** watching Wade, ~~then speaking to the child.~~ The man finished paying the bill, ~~then~~ rolled a toothpick from the dispenser, and walked out.

The woman and girl followed. Across the chaos, she offered a tight smile and a quick wave, then turned and left.

He ~~watched them exit the foyer,~~ followed them through the pane glass **of the foyer** until they disappeared into the parking lot.

Something in him began to shrink, and when it had shrunk to nothing, kept on shrinking until his flesh felt like it was sucked in by the force of the vacuum against which he had to strain to keep from collapsing. The guitar sounded thin and tinny, as though far away. ~~It came to him again, suddenly, clearly.~~

~~*—Sing like they's your woman walkin' out the door on you.*~~

Then what? What about after they're gone? Baby never said anything about **that**.

~~He felt numb, betrayed.~~

~~Regina was wiping down the table where the family had sat. She noticed him looking at her and flashed a wooden smile.~~

He **launched into**~~moped through~~ the song's last verse.

Mary sits all alone
In the terminal, her suitcase packed,
quiet as a stone
She contemplates one more time
Her life of crowded solitude
Not a reason, not a rhyme
The note she left for Harry
summed it up so carefully
I could've been a dancer after all
If you'd only danced with me.

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Comment [r7]: You have written this scene so wonderfully that the reader will know he feels numb and betrayed. Whenever readers put this kind of thing together from your cues they're more deeply involved in the story—because they've invested a little piece of themselves in it.

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[This is the perfect place to close your opening chapter. Trust me when I say I know what agents are looking for in a first chapter—it has to be seductive beginning to end, has to move swiftly, and it has to end, not just stop. Ending here, the song line “I could’ve been a dancer if you’d only danced with me” is poignant, kind of epitomizes Wade’s state of mind.

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One final suggestion: I think even as you used to refer to your protagonist as Mills, you should refer to him now as Riley throughout. (Though other characters might call him Wade in dialogue.) Riley is a great name, and homage to a great blues singer. (Many readers will know B.B. King’s real name is Riley B. King.) If you agree, I’ll do a search-and-replace, then accept the change before I continue the line-edit.]

~~—— He sang the final chorus, pulling as hard as he could away from the drag of disappointment, then slowed the strumming, ended the tune with a brooding hammer on. The note faded, and he faded with it, feeling as though he were drifting farther and farther into the vastness of an indifferent universe.~~

~~—— After he sat motionless for longer than he should have, a shout rose up over the din and drew him back: “Lynyrd Skynyrd!” Whooping and hollering.~~

~~—— “Play Free Bird!”~~

~~The crowd suddenly resembled a medieval vision of hell—a frenzied mass of demonic faces, gnawing, cackling. He just watched them, wondering about the woman—if she liked the song, if she related to it—wondering if he might not suddenly wake up from a similar nightmare.~~

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~~—— Away from the chaos of the Boston Biscuit, the silence of the surrounding woods seemed in some way suspect—as though deafness had set in and what seemed like a pleasure was, in~~

~~reality, a curse. Shreds of fog hung over the lake's surface, barely obscuring the reflection of a gibbous moon. Regina lay on the blanket next to him, lightly caressing the bare skin of her waist, gazing dreamily at the sky. Maybe her husband really was screwing someone else.~~

~~—— “You ever feel guilty?” he said, propped on one elbow.~~

~~—— Regina kept caressing herself, smiling as though she had not heard him.~~

~~—— “About stepping out on your old man, I mean.”~~

~~—— Her hands went still and she looked at him severely. “You mean Wendell?”~~

~~—— “Is that his name?”~~

~~—— “Wendell's too busy selling his damn tractors.” She chuckled. “He'd rather ride a John Deere than me.”~~

~~—— “But he's your husband.”~~

~~—— “Yeah, he is.” She said nothing more and went on caressing herself.~~

~~—— Moonlight buttered her skin and cast her perfect nose in shadowy relief. Wendell must be an idiot.~~

~~—— “So why don't you leave him?”~~

~~—— She looked at him and grinned. “You making an offer, cowboy?”~~

~~—— He gulped. “I mean, what's the point?” he said. “Being married, seeing other guys and all. Where's that going to leave you in ten years?”~~

~~—— She turned back to the sky and blinked lazily. “Not far from where you'll be, I reckon.”~~

~~—— His face went numb. “What do you mean by that?”~~

~~She didn't answer.~~

~~—— “What?” he said.~~

~~—— She sighed. “Oh, nothing.”~~

~~—— “No, come on. What did you mean?” He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know.~~

~~—— “You expectin' to become a doctor or somethin' working at that nuthouse? And the~~

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Biscuit... well, it ain't exactly the Grand Ole Opry."

—— It was true. The Boston Biscuit was just another of the countless dives he had played in the past five years. It was worse in many ways, paying so little it forced him to get the job as a lackey at the Butterfield Behavioral Health Unit.

Still, he hadn't given up.

"I'm working on it!" he said. "At least I've got a plan!"

Or did he? It had taken someone else to set it in motion. Marty Groll had told him three years earlier:

"You've got the voice and the look, son. Hell, you've even got the name! But you don't have your own material." Marty was vice president in charge of artists and repertoire for Hog High Records. "It's 1993! I'm looking for singer songwriters! Write more country tunes. Get yourself a following!"

Wade had left Nashville determined to do just that, making his way through the south, playing his songs to whomever would listen. It turned out that most folks weren't particularly interested in the plight of down-home Dixie unless someone already famous was singing about it. Gainesville was the longest he had lived anywhere in the past three years; and it was the only town where he had had to get an extra job to make up for the piss-poor pay he got playing music. The situation seemed to be deteriorating. He was more like Regina than he was willing to admit: married to an ambition that cared little for him, taking pleasure wherever he could find it.

—— Regina was stargazing and caressing herself again.

"Besides," he said, "it takes time to get a record contract."

—— "Sure it does, sugar," she said. "Sure it does." With that, she rose up in one smooth motion and straddled him. She pulled her hair over one shoulder and smiled sleepily. "But there's nothing says you can't have a little fun in the meantime now, is there?"

—— He tried to resist, tried to dig in his heels and keep her from dragging him back into the

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~~corral where she would surely ride his petulance out of him.~~

~~It wasn't any use. Her slow gyrations left his mood rising, his hands automatically sliding up and cupping her breasts.~~

~~——“Is there now?” she said.~~

~~——He sighed. “Come to think of it, I guess there isn't.”~~



