

BATTLEGROUND

by

Stephen King

'Mr Renshaw?'

The desk clerk's voice caught him halfway to the elevator, and Renshaw turned back impatiently, shifting his flight bag from one hand to the other. The envelope in his coat pocket, stuffed with twenties and fifties, crackled heavily. The job had gone well and the pay had been excellent - even after the Organization's 15 per cent finder's fee had been skimmed off the top. Now all he wanted was a hot shower and a gin and tonic and sleep.

'What is it?'

'Package, sir. Would you sign the slip?'

One of Stephen King's most entertaining short stories, Battleground, is an action-packed blast of a morality play. As you can see above, he wastes no time in the opening – getting right to the point as hitman John Renshaw returns home after a successful mission...

This time the face had been that of a sallow Miami businessman named Hans Morris, founder and owner of the Morris Toy Company. Someone had wanted Morris out of the way and had gone to the Organization. The Organization, in the person of Calvin Bates, had talked to

John Renshaw. *Pow*. Mourners please submit flowers.

This is some impressive, yet light-hearted, character work. Note the upbeat rhythm in King's sentences and the twinge of self-satisfaction at the end. Even though these are the words of the narrator, we get the impression that Mr. Renshaw has quite the high opinion of himself. Nothing more needs to be said.

Unfortunately for him, the package John Renshaw receives is stuffed full of a well-equipped army of self-ambulatory toy soldiers – who don't waste much time laying siege to the smug hitman in a relentless attack.

Several of the others had recovered. Some were kneeling and firing formally. Others had taken cover. Still others had retreated back into the footlocker.

The bee stings began to pepper his legs and torso, but none reached higher than his rib cage. Perhaps the range was too great. It didn't matter, he had no intention of being turned away. This was it.

He missed with his next shot – they were so goddamn small – but the following one sent another soldier into a broken sprawl. The copters were buzzing towards him ferociously. Now the tiny bullets began to splat into his face, above and below his eyes. He potted the lead copter, then the second. Jagged streaks of pain silvered his vision.

The remaining six split into two retreating wings. His face was wet with blood and he swiped at it with his forearm. He was ready to

start firing again when he paused. The soldiers who had retreated inside the footlocker were trundling something out. Something that looked like...

There was a blinding sizzle of yellow fire, and a sudden gout of wood and plaster exploded from the wall to his left... *a rocket launcher!*

He squeezed off one shot at it, missed, wheeled and ran for the bathroom at the far end of the corridor. He slammed the door and locked it. In the bathroom mirror an Indian was staring back at him with dazed and haunted eyes, a battle-crazed Indian with thin streamers of red paint drawn from holes no bigger than grains of pepper. A ragged flap of skin dangled from one cheek. There was a gouged furrow in his neck.

I'm losing!

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. The front door was cut off. So was the phone and the kitchen extension. They had a god-damn rocket launcher and a direct hit would tear his head off.

Damn it, that wasn't even listed on the box!

This excerpt is primarily intended to demonstrate the high-paced nature of King's action writing. Note the first paragraph, with its quick cluster of similar-length sentences. It's punch, punch, punch.

This continues for much of the action, save for a short piece of respite as Renshaw examines himself in the bathroom mirror.

After shutting down the notion of escape for his main character, King's dark humor adds a lot to the section – acknowledging the absurdity of the situation in a way that feels completely organic.

As you can see, horror doesn't need to be dark and grim all of the time. It can be exciting, and even funny, in the right hands. This humor works because we've come to understand Renshaw's cocky, self-aggrandizing attitude earlier in the story.