

**The First Two Pages: “Let the Sunshine In” by Lynne Murphy**  
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An Essay by Lynne Murphy

In the Fall of 2016, a Canadian nurse, Elizabeth Wettlaufer, confessed to killing eight elderly patients in nursing homes where she had been employed. She had also attacked at least six others. Her weapon was insulin. In 2017 she was sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole for 25 years. I was haunted by the thought of those patients, helpless and bedridden, being attacked by someone they depended on.

When the Mesdames of Mayhem decided on the theme of music for its fourth anthology, I knew the crime I wanted to write about. I already had my main characters from a series of stories I had written about seniors living in a condo building. My protagonist, Charlotte, would sing in a choir, which visited nursing homes and seniors’ residences.

“Let’s try, ‘There’s a Bluebird on Your Windowsill,’” Carol, the seniors’ choir leader announced in her relentlessly cheery voice. One or two members of the audience looked hopefully toward the windows, but only the February snow was swirling down outside. “Join in if you know the words,” Carol called out.

Charlotte Manners sang along with the other altos about rainbows and happy thoughts, but her heart wasn’t in it. Seniors’ residences were always depressing and Sunny Ways Lodge was more depressing than most.

The residents sat slumped in their wheelchairs, heads lolling, eyes vacant. A few of them mouthed the words, others tried to keep

time with slippered feet, but, in general, the choir might as well have been singing to an audience of zombies.

I might have started with a bang, with the sentence that comes two pages in: “Cookie said, ‘I think someone is killing the residents in this place.’” And, as a former journalist, I was tempted to do this.

When I was a very new reporter, one of the old guys told me about a society reporter (we still had them in those days) whose editor ordered her to put more drama into her leads. The next story she handed in began, “Balls! They were held all over the city last night.”

But I wanted a gentler opening, establishing the music theme and the setting. Did I make the right choice? I would welcome my readers’ opinions.

I hoped readers would be unsettled by the contrast—the gloomy atmosphere of the residence and the choir’s cheerful songs—just as Charlotte is unsettled by the sight of someone she recognizes, who is waving at her.

Cookie. Cookie Baker. But this was a much-changed Cookie. Where was the woman she remembered with the ash-blond coiffure and the color coordinated outfits? Now her hair was iron-grey and needed washing. And she was wearing red track pants with a hideous orange paisley top.

Obviously, something is very wrong here!

Cookie insists that she and Charlotte have to talk somewhere private. She needs Charlotte’s help. When Charlotte suggests going to Cookie’s room, the

response is, “They might have it bugged.” Charlotte assumes that Cookie has definitely lost touch with reality but it seems best to humor her.

They retreat to Cookie’s room where Cookie wants the TV turned on in case they are being listened to.

“Sit down.” Cookie gestured to one of the chairs. “Hand me the remote first.”

Charlotte did as she was told and Cookie pressed the button. The TV set was turned to a cooking show and both women studied the screen for a moment.

And then comes that line:

Cookie said, “I think someone is killing the residents in this place.”

If readers get that far in the story, I made the right choice. If they stop after the first few paragraphs, I was wrong. At any rate, it’s too late now to change my mind.

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Lynne Murphy is a retired journalist whose short stories have appeared in a number of anthologies, including all four published by the Mesdames of Mayhem. She lives in Toronto and is a founding member of that city’s chapter of Sisters in Crime.