

The First Two Pages of “Schemes in the Dark” by Jennifer Berg

From *California Schemin’: The 2020 Bouchercon Anthology*,

Edited by Art Taylor (Wildside Press)

An Essay by Jennifer Berg

“Schemes in the Dark” is similar to my other mysteries, but it did present a unique challenge in that the reader is not the only person who begins the story “in the dark.” The main character, Alice, is also in the dark—both literally and figuratively.

The narrative style is fully established in the first seven paragraphs, and I will analyze those closely at the end.

Alice wasn’t sure her eyes were open.

Everything around her was dark and something hurt.

She tried to think. Images floated through her mind like scenes in a dark movie theater; the insurance office where she worked, Mr. Blackwood from advertising, a party in a huge house with a jazz quartet, a crime ring, and dry—very dry—champagne.

Alice woke up again.

Everything was still dark, and it was her head that was hurting; definitely her head. But this was too quiet for a movie theater. And the smells were wrong. It smelled like California Roses and maybe, yes, Chanel No 5. Alice must be in her own apartment. She opened her eyes and searched for the tell tale glow of the streetlight behind her curtains.

Nothing. And besides, Alice remembered, she didn’t have any Chanel No.5.

She closed her eyes.

Mr. Whittmore’s secretary, Louisa, wore Chanel No.5. Loads of it. Alice suspected that Louisa spent most of her money at the cosmetics counter of Bullocks Wilshire. And Alice spent most of her

money on paperback adventures novels and Saturday matinees. She thought about the insurance office where she and Louisa worked, a nice open office overlooking west Hollywood. It was never this quiet at work. And why was it so dark?

She must be in the supply room. What a funny place to be. Alice took a deep breath. She must be lying on the floor of the supply room. Maybe she had fainted or fallen asleep. *Oh dear, the junior stenographer fell asleep in the supply room.* How embarrassing. Her grandmother had always said Alice shouldn't stay up so late. Now, here she was, sleeping in a supply room smelling Louisa's perfume.

Louisa wore all that perfume because of Mr. Blackwood in advertising. Handsome Mr. Blackwood. On Alice's first day, Louisa informed her that Billy Blackwood was absolutely the most eligible bachelor in the firm. Any girl would be *very lucky* to go out with him. Apparently Louisa had been scheming for months to be lucky. She wore buckets of perfume, and she giggled at all Mr. Blackwood's jokes—even the ones that weren't that funny.

Poor Louisa.

Alice tried to move and realized she was lying flat. The floors at the office were linoleum, but Alice couldn't smell any floor wax or carbon paper. And this floor was soft. She moved her fingers. It felt like carpet, but she couldn't see anything.

Where was she?

The dull ache in her head began to subside. Alice closed her eyes. Breathe. That's what her grandmother had always said. *Don't let your imagination run away with you, Alice, just take a deep breath and relax.* Alice took a deep breath. Relax. Just keep breathing, nice and slow, it'll make things easier. Breathe.

Alice had been at work. But not at night, of course, during the day with everyone else. The metal fan was humming. It was Friday afternoon and Alice was wrapping up her typing for the week. The palm trees were swaying outside the third floor windows. Louisa was sitting on her desk, holding up her little mirror, and applying a fresh pass of ruby red lipstick when Mr. Blackwood had arrived; blue suit, yellow tie, and he was carrying his wool fedora. He must be finished for the day.

Louisa batted her eyelashes but Mr. Blackwood didn't notice. In fact, he barely even said hello to Louisa. And instead of going to Mr. Whittmore's office, Mr. Blackwood had walked right up to

Alice's desk, smiled, and asked her if she'd like to go to a party with him on Saturday night.

Alice was shocked and she could see the disappointment on Louisa's face. She felt so bad for Louisa, she objected because she wouldn't know anyone. But Mr. Blackwood had persisted and he promised to introduce her to everyone at the party. It was at his uncle's house and his uncle always threw fabulous parties.

Alice had never met Mr. Blackwood's uncle, but Louisa had told her that Roger Elliott was very rich and very important, his wife, Eva, was thoroughly glamorous, and they knew lots of movie stars and the mayor.

"And the mayor will be there," Mr. Blackwood explained, "and a jazz band. Mr. Whittmore will be there, but he'll be drinking scotch with the old duffers and we probably won't even see him."

Plain Girl from Santa Rosa gets Invited to Big Beverly Hills Party!

And just like that, Alice's sympathy for Louisa gave way to her own desire to attend a fancy party with Mr. Blackwood from advertising.

So how do you tell a short story from the perspective of a person who has no idea what's going on? Sure, an omniscient narrator could jump in and explain exactly what's happening in the dark, but the price would have been excitement, and I desperately wanted to preserve Alice's adventure for the reader. Without any physical action to draw the reader in, I have to rely solely on the suspense of Alice's uncertain situation.

I played with various points of view in hopes of finding one that would magically click with this format but most of those attempts were abstract at best (and clumsy at worst) and I ended up coming back to a very close third-person narration. By looking at the first seven paragraphs, we find several things.

The first line makes it clear that Alice is not only physically in the dark, but she is also confused and uncertain. Yes, the word “dark” is in the title, but not all titles are literal, and the physical darkness is so important, I wanted to establish it absolutely before the reader had a chance to imagine anything else.

The second paragraph alludes to the fact that Alice is in pain. Naturally, this leads one to wonder *why* she is hurting, but this line is crucial for several other reasons. Firstly, because as that pain diminishes, we get a sense of time passing. Secondly, because it benchmarks the state of Alice’s mental uncertainty—which gradually improves even over the first two pages. And lastly, it lays the groundwork for the narration style.

And what about the narration?

By the end of the 7th paragraph not much has changed. Alice is still lying on the floor, barely conscious. In fact, the only “action” is Alice slipping in and out of semi-consciousness. But the narration moves back and forth with her, and this tiny shift gives the reader more insight than they could have had from a single point of view.

The other advantage of a slightly inconsistent narration is that it is disconcerting, without making the reader distrust Alice. We know that she is not lying. She is just as confused as we are, and like us, she is searching for a reassuring explanation. Although Alice never tells us anything about herself, we

don't need her explanations because her half-awake, uncensored thoughts give us an unadulterated view into her character.

This technique evolves with the story, but the tone is fully established in these initial paragraphs. The slightly shifting perspective enables us to bounce around in Alice's thoughts so that we understand her and her motivations. She is vulnerable and we feel the clock ticking. Perhaps we realize the truth before Alice does—or maybe we will realize it at the same time. Either way, we start out with Alice, confused and in the dark, trying to shake the feeling that something really is desperately wrong.

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Jennifer Berg loves classic whodunits with rich historical settings, colorful characters, and plots that are challenging—but not impossible—to solve. Level Best Books will begin releasing her 1950s Elliott Bay Mystery series with *The Charlatan Murders* in 2021, *The Blue Pearl Murders* in 2022, and *The Hatbox Murders* in 2023. *Schemes in the Dark* is her first published short story.

Jennifer is a member of Sisters in Crime, the Authors Guild, and a board member of the Southern California Chapter of Mystery Writers of America. A Seattle native, Jennifer studied History at the University of Washington. She currently lives in southern California where she is working on the fourth Elliott Bay Mystery as well as a new series set in 1940s San Diego.